

THE GOD WHO PURSUES (1)

The Covenant at Creation

"I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God."

A. Introduction

1. Covenant is a key theme in the Bible.

It's central to many of the famous stories in the Bible – Noah's ark, Abraham, 10 Commandments, King David, the Last Supper.

"Many Christians would agree that covenants are very important without being able to put their finger on what exactly a covenant is." (BN Howard)

But we need to, because God reveals Himself as a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God.

2. What is a covenant?

A covenant is an agreement or deal between two parties.

In the Bible, covenants are made between people and nations, but also between God and people.

A covenant does not necessarily begin or initiate a relationship.

In case where there is a pre-existing relationship, a covenant confirms the relationship with agreed terms and serious (life or death) consequences if they are broken.

3. The phrase "to cut a covenant" is used when a covenant between the two parties begins.

When a covenant is established there was usually a pretty gruesome ceremony.

Animals are killed and cut in two and the two halves are laid facing each other.

The parties of the covenant then walk between the halves of the dead animal(s).

What is expressed through the action of walking is that each party is saying, "If I fail to keep my commitment, may I be cut in two like the dead animals."

"The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, I will hand over to their enemies who seek their lives. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth." (Jeremiah 34:18-20)

4. In the Bible there are 5 major covenants God makes with people.

A covenant at Creation with Adam, and then with Noah and his family (Genesis 1-3; 6-9).

A covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12; 15; 17).

A covenant with Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 19:3b-8; 20-24).

A covenant with David and the kingdom of Israel (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89).

A new covenant of Jesus with the church (Jeremiah 31-34; Ezekiel 33:29-39:29).

5. These covenants together show God's desire is to be in relationship with people He has created in His image.

God's willingness to make covenants with mankind shows that he wants to be in relationship with us.

Each of the 5 covenants has the same heartbeat: "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

God is absolutely determined to set apart a people for Himself and He won't let anything stop Him.

God's relationship towards His people is characterised by *hesed*.

"Hesed is God's lovingkindness – the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, one-way love of God." (Mark Driscoll)

"God loves us with a Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love." (The Jesus Storybook Bible)

Because it is God who makes covenants with people, it is God who decides how they should relate to Him.

6. Summary

God is a God who pursues a relationship with people He has made in His image through covenants.

"A covenant is a relationship, initiated and imposed by a superior, with life or death consequences." (David Murray)

B. The Covenant at Creation

1. The first occurrence of the word 'covenant' appears in the flood narrative.

"But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark – you and your sons and with your wife and your sons' wives with you." (Genesis 6:18)

On four occasions, God speaks of confirming or establishing a covenant with Noah.

"I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you." (Genesis 9:9)

"I establish my covenant with you." (Genesis 9:11)

"So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth." (Genesis 9:17)

Nowhere do we read about God cutting a covenant.

It seems then that "to establish a covenant" refers to God keeping a promise or commitment from an already established covenant.

2. There was already a covenant that God made with people at creation in effect.

Although the word 'covenant' is absent in Genesis 1-5 it does not mean that there was no covenant made.

"Like Adam, they have broken the covenant – they were unfaithful to me there." (Hosea 6:7)

"The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt." (Isaiah 24:5-6)

The presence of a covenant at creation is indicated in Genesis 1-3.

"Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be

fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:26-28)

3. God made a covenant with people He created in His image and likeness.

This speaks of both the special relationship people have with God – "God blessed them" – and also the special responsibility people have to the world – "Rule over all the earth."

We see this special relationship in action as God comes to the Garden of Eden to enjoy Adam and Eve's company and in return they were to love, trust and obey God as they exercised this special responsibility they were given.

"Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day..." (Genesis 3:8)

We see Adam exercises this special responsibility as works the Garden of Eden and names the animals.

"The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Genesis 2:15)

"So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field." (Genesis 2:20)

Carrying out this special responsibility requires more than one person; in fact it requires a lot more than two people to do this.

"The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (Genesis 2:18)

"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." (Genesis 1:28)

4. Within this covenant were serious life or death consequences if it was broken.

"And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (Genesis 2:17-18)

If Adam disobeyed this command he will die. If he keeps it, he will live.

"And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever." (Genesis 3:22)

5. Summary

God wants to be in a relationship with the people He has made.

A covenant was put in place at creation outlining the terms of this relationship with life or death consequences.

In response Adam was to love, trust and obey God and if they did they would enjoy eternal life in the presence of God.

C. The Covenant is Broken by Humanity

1. The covenant God made with mankind at creation was broken when Adam ate from the forbidden tree.

This resulted in death and separation from God.

"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:19)

“So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:22-24)

2. But God is a God who pursues and He provides a way to have a relationship with people outside of Eden.

Through trusting in the promise of a coming Saviour.

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

Through a blood sacrifice that receives the penalty for sin and covers their shame.

“The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” (Genesis 3:21)

Eve (and future descendants) must give birth to ensure the arrival of this Saviour.

“Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.” Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.” (Genesis 4:1-2)

Blood sacrifices must be offered for covenant breakers so that they can be in relationship with God.

“But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering.” (Genesis 4:4)

3. In Genesis 4-5 we see that some people accept God’s provision while others continue to rebel against God.

“At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.” (Genesis 4:26)

“Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.” (Genesis 5:24)

“[Lamech] named him Noah and said, “He will comfort us in the labour and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.” (Genesis 5:29)

4. By the time of Noah there were very few people who were interested in having a relationship with God.

“The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” (Genesis 6:5)

“Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence.” (Genesis 6:11)

The beautiful and good earth was ruined.

5. God cannot allow sin to go unpunished and so judges it by destroying all life upon the earth by sending a flood.

“The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth – men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air – for I am grieved that I have made them.” (Genesis 6:6-7)

6. Summary.

God wants to be in a relationship with the people He has made and makes a covenant with them.

Adam broke the terms of the covenant and this resulted in death and separation from God.

God pursues and provides a way to have a relationship with people outside the Garden of Eden by promising a Saviour who would undo the curse of sin and through sacrifice that takes the penalty of death instead of them.

God's people are those who accept and trust in God's Saviour.

D. The Covenant is Kept by God

1. God shows that He is the God who pursues before the Flood.

"But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD." (Genesis 6:8)

Noah already had a relationship with God.

"Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God." (Genesis 6:9)

God pursues by telling Noah what He is about to do.

"God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth." (Genesis 6:13)

God pursues by telling Noah how to be kept safe.

"So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out." (Genesis 6:14)

"But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark – you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you." (Genesis 6:18-19)

Noah trusted the God who saves and obeyed His Word.

"Noah did everything just as God commanded him." (Genesis 6:22)

2. God shows that He is the God who pursues after the Flood.

Noah knew that he should have died like everyone else.

"Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it." (Genesis 8:20)

God reaffirms the covenant made at creation with Noah.

"The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." (Genesis 8:22)

"Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you – the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you – every living creature on earth. I will establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." (Genesis 9:8-11)

There is still the possibility of relationship with God.

"Then God blessed Noah and his sons..." (Genesis 9:1)

People still have this special responsibility of ruling over the world.

"The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands." (Genesis 9:2)

"And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." (Genesis 9:6)

"As for you, be fruitful and increase in number, multiply on the earth and increase upon it." (Genesis 9:7)

3. Even after the fresh start of the flood, God's people are still covenant breakers.

"Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent." (Genesis 9:20-21)

"Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:4)

No human is able to keep the covenant God made with people at creation.

God would be perfectly right to wipe out every generation of humanity.

4. The only way God can pursue and remain in a relationship with people is if He takes the penalty of death covenant breakers deserves.

The promised Saviour will have his heel struck.

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:15)

The arrow of the covenant curse is pointed up towards heaven not down towards earth.

"And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind of the earth." (Genesis 9:12-16)

5. The only way people can be in relationship with God is through faith in God's Saviour who takes the penalty of death they deserve.

Christ is preached to Adam and Eve.

Abel offered sacrifices that pointed to Jesus' sacrifice and was declared righteous.

Seth knew life because he called on the name of the Lord.

Enoch doesn't see death because he walked with God.

Lamech believes that one will come who will reverse the curse of creation.

Noah is saved by grace.

"Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'" (John 14:6)