

THE COVENANT UNDERSTOOD

I've spoken before on a couple of occasions about a particular subject. I want to revisit it again today from another perspective. I want to look at the aspect of the covenants again. If we, as people, were asked about the covenant, we would be very quick to know a Scripture and a critical condition that we could go to, to discuss the problem with the Old Covenant. We well appreciate that the problem, in fact, was the people, the people who were brought into the Old Covenant relationship with the Eternal, and their lack of appreciation of the covenant.

The book of Hebrews describes them in various ways, and it describes them in various ways in relationship to the covenant. It talks of them being stiff-necked and hardhearted. The writer of Hebrews says:

Hebrews 8:7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.

There was a problem with the first ...

8 Because finding fault with them ...

Ah! For a covenant to exist, there has to be two parties. The Eternal is saying, "The problem is not with the covenant itself. It was a problem with one of the parties to the covenant."

8 Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—

9 "not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant ...

"They didn't keep it." He is quoting from Jeremiah 31.

9 ... and I disregarded them, says the LORD.

10 "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

This state of knowing and appreciation of God will be such where it was prophesied:

11 "None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.

He is talking about a problem that existed in ancient Israel in that they didn't really come to KNOW, and have the right relationship with God. We can understand why. There was something wrong with their hearts. They couldn't have God's Holy Spirit. That was not available to them, so they acted out this role within the covenant, never accomplishing the high points that God desired them to have.

12 "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their

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lawless deeds I will remember no more.”

Their sins will be wiped away!

13 In that He says, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

When we talk about the covenant, we find a lot of misunderstanding. Those of you who may have been following along in the King James Version will probably have noticed that these verses don't talk about “covenants.” They talk about “testaments.”

We talk about the “New Testament” but in reality, it is a misnomer, as is the “Old Testament.” They were translated that way because people didn't understand what they were translating. So in the older translations of the New Testament, we find many references to “testaments.”

More modern translations tend to correctly use the term, “covenant.” There's an essential difference. They are not the same thing in any way whatsoever. A testament only becomes effective with death. Once the person who is the testator has deceased then the testament comes into effect. Up until that point in time, they can change it, they can rewrite it, they can do what they like with it. But once they die, then the testament becomes effective.

On the other hand, a covenant is marginally to do with death – but most importantly it exists in terms of LIFE! Both parties to the covenant have got to be alive for the covenant to exist! So when we look at testaments and covenants, we are talking about two totally different time frames in which they exist.

The problem whereby “covenant” was translated as “testament” in terms of “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” boils down to the fact that the Greek language has no suitable word for “covenant.” It's as pure and simple as that. Anyone who is involved in translations realises the difficulty of being able to transfer the nuances of one language into another. It's not always easy, because not all languages have the same words or the same concepts inherent to them. The Greek language has no word for “covenant.”

If we look at the Greek language, it has no proper term for “covenant.” It has terms for “agreement.” It has terms that relate to “treaty,” but in reality, those words are not adequate to convey the element of a covenant.

Why then, did the apostles and the writers of the New Testament use the Greek word that we would translate as “testament”? Why do we end up in this situation where we are not quite sure what we are translating?

They used the word “testament” advisedly, because the word “testament” contains two elements that are essential to a covenant. One is that a testament, once it has been established, is inalterable. And the same is true of a covenant. A covenant cannot be altered by the parties.

The second element that is very important in terms of the testament is the fact that both

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parties to a testament are unequal. Someone has got everything, and the other person has got nothing – and the person who has got everything is giving something to the person who has got nothing. And it is the role of the giver to decide that they are going to give to the other person.

Now the other person might have been nice to them. They might have been horrible to them. They may have been a great neighbour. They may have been a poor relative. It ultimately ends up being a decision totally dependent on the good will of the testator, the person writing the testament. And it doesn't matter how good the person who is hoping to get something out of it might be, if the person doesn't feel obligated, or doesn't feel motivated to do something, there's nothing they can do about it whatsoever.

The Greek word for “testament” was used by the apostles and writers of the apostolic works, because of those two elements: because they relate to the inalterability of a covenant, and the inequality of the parties; two elements that are common to both covenant and testament, despite the fact that one has to do with the living, and one has to do with the dead.

In a recent issue of the *Church of God News*, where we were discussing covenants, we included a section that may help you understand this a little better, where it talks about how the writers of the New Testament were drawing on the inviolability aspect of the will to highlight the nature of a covenant. It can't be changed. You can't get up one morning and say, “I don't like it the way it is. Let's re-negotiate it.”

Covenants don't operate that way! In the Hellenistic world, a valid will could not be challenged or disputed. It was unchangeable. The Greek language had no other word that conveyed the intensity of meaning that God intended with the term “covenant.” Greek terms existed for treaties, but God's covenant should never be reduced to a level of a treaty between nations or parties. It means a lot more than that.

There's a lot more at stake in terms of a covenant than just a treaty, a pact or agreement, or any one of the myriad words we might want to use as synonyms for such words.

So I return to the question, do we understand the terms of the covenant any better than the translators into English of the New Testament, even probably the church fathers who first used the terms, “New Testament,” and “Old Testament”? Do we understand it any better? As I have pointed out, the translators of the Bible into English had a hard time understanding this. It was really not until the 20th century that they came to understand the difference and why things should be called a covenant.

Martin Luther didn't understand anything about covenants. If Martin Luther had understood about covenants, he could never have juxtaposed law against grace. The very fact that he came to the decisions he did, says that he does not understand covenants.

Evangelicals today don't understand covenants. If evangelicals understood covenants, they would never come to the point of accusing people of trying to “earn” their own salvation. The very fact that people come to conclusions and make accusations such as this, is an indication that they DON'T understand the whole basis of a covenant. And so I ask the question then: do WE understand covenants?

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I would like to spend some time today going through what we might call the “elements” of a covenant. What goes into a covenant and how do we know this?

Covenants existed in the world of ancient Egypt, the Hittites, the Syrians and various nations like that. They entered into covenant relationships: still with the same elements that I have addressed so far: inviolability, inequality of the parties. We’re not going to look at their covenants today, but people have looked at the covenants that they have entered into with other nations, and they have identified a number of elements that go into them.

Then people look into God’s Word, and, surprise, surprise, the same things are there! God uses things that are known to people so that they can relate to Him. And so in establishing a covenant with Israel, God used a form of arrangement, or covenant, because there’s really no other term we can use for it, that the people would have some understanding of. They could understand and appreciate the type of relationship they were supposed to have with their God.

If we look at the covenants of the nations, they have basically identified six different elements. We’re going to look at those – and two other elements that God required of His people, and that God still does require of His people.

The first element was a preamble. It started off by identifying who it was who was entering into the covenant. That was then quickly followed by a historical antecedent as to why this covenant was being entered into. Having got the history out of the way, they then got down to the heart of the covenant, as to what the people were to do: the stipulations.

And having laid out the stipulations, where the text of this covenant was to be deposited, where it could be referred to and set out.

Added to which was a list of witnesses, and it concluded with a list of blessings and curses! Let’s have a look at each of these.

Preamble

Let’s start with the preamble. The preamble identifies the being that is entering into the covenant, establishing the covenant. In looking at preambles, there are two sections of Scripture that people have come to realise speak very much to the covenant relationship. The book of Exodus is one.

The second area that we will look at today is the last chapter of Joshua. Joshua 24 is set out as a classic covenant document. It is all found in that one chapter. If we go to the book of Exodus, we have to play a little bit of hop-skip-and-jump around to get things, but they are all there – simply because they are mentioned so many times, and in particular ways.

Let’s have a look at the way in which the Eternal identifies Himself. It is the Eternal’s covenant. It’s not Israel’s covenant. It’s not humankind’s covenant. The Eternal was the one who was establishing the covenant. So firstly let’s look at:

***Exodus 20:1 And God spoke all these words, saying:
2 “I am the LORD your God ...***

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We've already identified who it is who is involved in this. The "I Am" is already identified in greater detail in Exodus 3. And He is identified then not just in terms of "I Am," and all that "I Am" means, but He is identified as being the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

So by the time the children of Israel got to Mount Sinai, they had an understanding of who "I Am" was. And they had a very clear vision in their mind of who "I Am" was and what "I Am" could do – because they had been through ten plagues in Egypt. They had seen the waters of the Red Sea opened. They had had bitter water turned to sweet. They had had water come out of rocks. They had had manna every morning which could only last one day, except on the sixth day when it could last for two days.

The last 50+ days for them, had been a constant reminder of who "I Am" was. This was a God who could take on any other god, and beat them in the first round. There never had to be a second round. It was never a "points" decision. By the time the children of Israel got to Mount Sinai, all He had to say is, "I Am the Eternal Your God," and they knew who it was who was speaking.

Joshua 24 starts in very much the same way.

Joshua 24:2 And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel ...

These are the people who were under 20 years of age when they left Egypt. They had seen the miracles throughout the Exodus. They had seen what God had done. They had seen the waters of the River Jordan back up and allow them to go through on dry land. They had seen the walls of Jericho fall. They had seen what else God had done: the sun stand still.

They had seen miracle after miracle undertaken by the Eternal God as they inherited the land. They really didn't need much more in the way of understanding who God was.

In fact, the preamble was normally fairly short in terms of a covenant because by the time you start to enter into a covenant, you know who the "top dog" is. A nation entering into a covenant with another nation knew who was the strongest. They had probably just been beaten by them in a battle. You might say the part that waxed eloquent in a physical covenant was the next element: the historical antecedent.

Historical Antecedent

In an historical antecedent, the person establishing the covenant, set out the reasons why they had come to this point. In terms of the kings of the world, they were oftentimes egotistical statements. To see a good example of the way in which the kings of the world looked upon themselves, read Daniel chapter 4. Read the way in which Nebuchadnezzar looked upon himself. "I am the Great."

They would go through and list all the people and nations that they had destroyed. "And now you are my latest prey, and as a result of this, you are going to do whatever I tell you to." In terms of the nations of the land, they were very egotistical statements.

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In terms of the Eternal God, they were not egotistical. Yes, they showed the POWER of God ...

Exodus 20:2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

... that is a historical antecedent.

Exodus 19:3 And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel:

4 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself.

"Look at what I have DONE for you!"

It's not, "Look at what I've TAKEN from you."

It's "Look at the blessings that I have provided for you in this first instance. Look at what I have done for you." It's a very different viewpoint to that of many of the kings of that day and age.

We find a somewhat longer statement in Joshua, where he sets out and recounts for the children of Israel the whole history of God's relationship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Joshua 24:2 And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods.

They were pagans.

3 'Then I took your father Abraham from the other side of the River, led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac.

4 'To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. To Esau I gave the mountains of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt.

He talks about the plagues in Egypt, and bringing them out of Egypt, and then says:

8 'And I brought you into the land of the Amorites, who dwelt on the other side of the Jordan, and they fought with you. But I gave them into your hand, that you might possess their land, and I destroyed them from before you.

9 'Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose to make war against Israel, and sent and called Balaam the son of Beor to curse you.

10 'But I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he continued to bless you. So I delivered you out of his hand.

11 'Then you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho. And the men of Jericho

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fought against you—also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. But I delivered them into your hand.

12 'I sent the hornet before you which drove them out from before you, also the two kings of the Amorites, but not with your sword or with your bow.

“It didn’t happen because of YOUR strength!”

13 'I have given you a land for which you did not labor, and cities which you did not build, and you dwell in them; you eat of the vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.'

The Eternal set out the historical antecedent of why we are at this point. “Look at what I’ve done to you. Look at what I’ve given you. Look at the calling that I’ve given to you!”

Because one of the things that we understand from a covenant, is the fact that it is God’s calling that brings us into a relationship with Him. There was no difference in terms of ancient Israel as today in terms of us. We have to be called into that relationship to have that type of covenant relationship that God desires.

What have we just read in Joshua 24? What did we read in Exodus 19? Have we not read a statement about God’s unending grace? God’s good favour is an essential part of the covenant: God calling us to Himself, God calling Abraham from beyond the river and bringing him into the land of Canaan, allowing his descendants to go down into Egypt, calling them out of there, is all part of God’s good favour and of God’s plan. It’s all part of graciousness towards His people, just as much as our calling and our relationship with God is based on His graciousness as well.

As I said earlier, Martin Luther didn’t understand covenants. If he had understood, he could never have opposed law to grace. He wrote off the Old Testament as being “law,” and the New Testament as all “grace.” He didn’t understand in any way whatsoever.

So the historical antecedent is all about grace, about what God has done for us, the benefit that God has provided, the benefit that God wishes to provide.

Stipulations, Conditions

Let’s move on to the next element: the stipulations, or, for a better title, the conditions. A covenant was very much a conditional arrangement. The people accepting the covenant had to live according to conditions.

Exodus 20:2 through to Exodus 23:33 sets out, in summary, the stipulations that God required of His people as being part of that covenant relationship (the Ten Commandments, the statutes, the judgments, all that went with it).

One of the things that is very much worthwhile appreciating in terms of stipulations, especially in terms of God’s requirements or conditions, is that they are very personal compared with the law codes that exist today which are very impersonal and detached.

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God's instructions were very personal. "You shall not ..." It is spoken very directly to the hearers.

In Joshua 24, we looked at the historical antecedents. He had nice, long historical antecedents. He has the opposite in terms of the stipulations. Joshua summarises the stipulations, the conditions, down into a kernel, a nutshell. It is something that is very easy to remember:

Joshua 24:14 "Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD!"

One short verse summarises all the conditions! But notice what he says in this that is essential to a covenant. Where does a covenant relationship on our part start? It starts with one ingredient: "fear of God." Now this is not the fear that gets you to hide under your seat when something is happening. We are talking about respect, the respect that is going to allow us to see God for whom and what He is, and will lead us to obey Him and respect Him.

The term "fear" is perhaps best used in Genesis 22 where Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac. The Eternal said to him, "Now I KNOW that you fear Me." It was a fear that led to obedience, to respect. "Whatever God says, I am willing to do." It has to be based on faith as Hebrews says:

Hebrews 11:6 But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is (that He exists), and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

That's what fear is all about. It is coupled with faith! So the conditions, the stipulations that the Eternal established in terms of a covenant had to be understood on a basis of a right fear of the Eternal. If you don't have a right view of the Eternal in your mind, if you don't have a right relationship with the Eternal, you can never keep the covenant relationship. It's as simple as that. So essential to a covenant is that right fear of the Eternal.

What else does Joshua include for us that should ring alarm bells for us? He says that we are to serve God with fear in sincerity and truth.

Joshua 24:14 "Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth ..."

Have you heard that phrase before? The apostle Paul uses it too in terms of the way in which we are to live our lives – in sincerity and truth. I wonder where the apostle Paul got the expression from? The reality is that the apostle Paul's writings are loaded with covenantal terminology! The apostle Paul understood the covenants.

Scholars have only just come to realise in the last 20-25 years the fact that the apostle Paul understood about covenants. "Poor man, he's been ignorant for so long." Of course it's the scholars who have been ignorant for a long period of time of what the apostle Paul understood and appreciated!

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Notice an interesting Scripture which deals with this:

Psalm 111:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom ...

Do you want to be wise? You've got to have the right fear of God.

And it doesn't finish there, because what does wisdom produce?

10 ... A good understanding have all those who do His commandments ...

So it all works together!

10 ... His praise endures forever.

If we want to have understanding and wisdom, the very first place we have to start is with the fear of the Eternal, understanding who it is who is requiring a particular way of life of us. It's very important.

Deposited in a Safe Place

Having written out the text, the text was to be deposited. It was to be recorded. It was to be kept in a place of safety for reference, for understanding. Ignorance of the covenant was never an excuse for breaking it. The Eternal instructed that the covenant was to be reiterated. The people were to come together at the Feast of Tabernacles and the Sabbatical year, and they were to read through the entirety of the covenant so that they would remember it.

How were they able to remember it? There were texts of the covenant.

Exodus 34:27 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel."

"Make a note of it. Set out the details."

Deuteronomy speaks of the covenant as well as does Leviticus and Numbers. It's very difficult to get away from it.

Deuteronomy 31:9 So Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel.

... this rewriting and reiterating of the covenant and the terms of the covenant. It was a constant practice. It wasn't just Moses who did it. The king who sat on the throne had to write out a copy of the book of the law:

Deuteronomy 17:18 "Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites.

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What was he writing out? He was writing out the covenant relationship! And he had to understand his **ROLE** within that covenant relationship between God and the people. He had to make a copy of it, and it had to be there right by him in his throne. Why? So that he could consult it! He could see what God's Word said! He could see what God required.

Joshua 24:26 Then Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God ...

It was a summary of the covenant.

26 ... And he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.

It was written down. Ignorance was no excuse. People had to know. People had to be aware.

Witnesses

What about the next element, that of witnesses? Pagans called upon their gods as witnesses. But Israel couldn't call upon other gods as witnesses. They might like to think that they were there, but they weren't. They were just stone.

The Eternal calls Israel to be a witness. How many witnesses do you need? How many people of Israel were there at that point in time? Probably in excess of three million! Three million witnesses!

22 So Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves ...

"Each and every one of you are part and parcel of this agreement. You are witnesses to it ..."

... that you have chosen the LORD for yourselves, to serve Him." And they said, "We are witnesses!"

"We agree."

A little later, Joshua set up a rock as a witness (often another form of common witness). In Genesis, Isaac and Abimelech set up a rock as a witness to a covenant that they entered into.

26 ... And he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.

27 And Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be a witness to us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD which He spoke to us. It shall therefore be a witness to you, lest you deny your God."

You might think that that is strange. Here is an inanimate object called a stone, hearing the words of the Eternal. Is that a strange concept for God to establish in terms of the people? No. Moses records:

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Deuteronomy 30:19 “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you ...

In many ways, the WHOLE CREATION is a witness of this covenant relationship that is being established. In other words, there’s no dodging from it! There’s no getting around it saying, “We couldn’t find the terms of it,” or, “We can’t find a witness to it,” because the Eternal is saying, “My whole creation, and everything I am doing, is a witness to this covenant relationship – and you can’t avoid it!”

19 ... I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live;

God instructed the whole of heaven and earth to be witnesses to what was being entered into between Him and His people! Here was something that couldn’t be changed. People say, “Oh no, it couldn’t be that way; He didn’t mean that,” but everything stood in witness to what was said. It was recorded. It was witnessed.

Blessings and Curses

Perhaps this is a part of the covenant that we understand more. We’ve probably heard more about it in days gone by. For a start, let me show you something that comes from Assyria. In some ways, we might say that it relates to a covenant.



This is a stele, a black basalt stele of Shalmaneser, one of the kings of Assyria who invaded Israel and entered into a covenant relationship with Jehu, or maybe Ahab before Jehu. We are not quite sure. The Bible doesn’t necessarily speak about this in any direct way. But on this stele is a portrayal of Jehu presenting tribute to Shalmaneser (see below). The cuneiform between the pictures describes what is happening.

I present this to you because the Assyrians had a very clear approach to blessings and curses. “If you do what we say, which is, ‘Don’t enter into treaties with other nations. Pay your tax tribute. Be good boys. Keep your nose clean, etc, etc,’ then we will fight your enemies for you. So you are going to have peace and safety.



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“We will trade with you and you will get the benefit of trade. But, on the other hand, if we find you courting the Egyptians, we are going to come down on you like a ton of bricks. In fact, if you don’t pay your tribute, we are going to come down and remove the leadership and we are going to establish a NEW leadership in the land who will then do what we want done. They will pay their tribute, their taxes.”

When we talk about taxes today, we have no idea of just how rapacious some of these nations could be in terms of the tribute they demanded. People sit around over the last century and have opined about the difficulties of Germany paying reparations after the First World War. They were so onerous that they led to the Second World War.

Forget it! Get real! Just go back and deal with the Assyrians, or the Romans and see what THEY did in terms of reparations. The nation didn’t EXIST once they had finished with them, because if you weren’t prepared to tow the line of a covenant, after the leadership had been replaced, and the next level of leadership thought that they could get around the Assyrians, they literally removed the whole lot.

“You think you can be smart in your land. We’ll put you in another land you don’t know.” That is exactly what happened to the northern kingdom of Israel. In 721 B.C., the Assyrians came in, removed them out from there into the upper reaches of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers in what is Syria and northern Iraq today. They had a very clearly demarcated outline of what would happen.

So the Eternal also set out very clearly what was going to happen in terms of the people. The very first Scripture we can look at in terms of blessings and curses is:

Exodus 23:22 “But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

23 “For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off.

24 “You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their works; but you shall utterly overthrow them and completely break down their sacred pillars.

25 “So you shall serve the LORD your God, and He will bless your bread and your water. And I will take sickness away from the midst of you.

26 “No one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.

27 “I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you.

28 “And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you.

29 “I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beast of the field become too numerous for you.

30 “Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land.

31 “And I will set your bounds from the Red Sea to the sea, Philistia, and from the desert to the River. For I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your

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hand, and you shall drive them out before you.

... but ...

32 *“You shall make no covenant with them, nor with their gods.*

33 *“They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”*

God set out very clearly the blessings He was going to give. He was going to protect them from their enemies. In fact, their enemies were going to turn their backs to them. They were going to cower before Israel in quite a remarkable way.

Most of us are very much aware of Leviticus 26 which sets out the blessings and the curses – as does Deuteronomy 28. The whole chapter is dealing with the blessings and the curses that are part of the covenant. Moses is able to expand upon what the Eternal intended in those few verses of Exodus 23.

Joshua summarises it very nicely for us:

Joshua 24:20 *“If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you ...*

You will be consumed!

20 ... after He has done you good.”

“If you think you can play it both ways, that you can get things from God and that you can do whatever you like, you are going to be consumed. You are going to be destroyed.” And that happened! It happened to both the houses of Israel. History records it for us. They both suffered the consequences of failing to live in harmony with the covenant.

As I said, there were six elements that the nations tended to use in their covenants. We can see them outlined in terms of the covenant with Israel. There were two other elements.

The first of those was the fact that the covenant was confirmed with BLOOD. Blood entered into the covenant relationship. Hebrew has an interesting expression. Not only does Greek not have a term for “covenant,” but the Greeks probably scratched their heads when they got to the whole expression of Hebrew. Because in Hebrew, a covenant was, in fact, CUT. It wasn’t just written! It was cut! In Hebrew, we have the term, *Karat B^erit*. The consequence of cutting was shed blood. The entering into a covenant required the shedding of blood.

So having laid out all the details of the covenant ...

Exodus 24:4 *And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel.*

5 *Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD.*

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7 Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient."

8 And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."

Something was cut. An animal's life was taken. The blood was taken and sprinkled upon the people to become part of the covenant.

There's another aspect to this cutting of the covenant that we need to appreciate. Not only was blood shed, but the party entering the covenant had to WALK THROUGH the offering. We don't find this in Exodus or Joshua, but we find it set out for us in Jeremiah 34. We find a similar occasion in Genesis 15, but Jeremiah adds a piece to our understanding of the covenant:

Jeremiah 34:18 'And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it—

Did these people of Jeremiah's day make a covenant with the Eternal? No, they were the children of those who had made the covenant, many generations removed, yet they still considered themselves a covenant people. They were the sons of the fathers.

So the Eternal said, "This is the consequence of a covenant relationship."

19 'the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf—

20 'I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth.

So the aspect of blood was not only the confirming of the covenant, but it was adding a level of intensity to the understanding of the covenant; that this covenant had to be kept, "because if we don't keep the covenant, we are dead. We are as dead and as useless as the animal which was slaughtered for the blood in the first instance."

From what Jeremiah was saying, God required the leaders of the people of Israel to walk between the parts of the carcass that had been slaughtered as part of the covenant. People wonder why. Jeremiah tells us. It's as a lesson to remember very, very carefully the importance of a covenant, that this is not some trivial, flippant thing that we do. This is a matter of life and death.

The Eternal doesn't stop there. He raises the ante a little more. What does the Eternal liken the covenant relationship to? He portrays the covenant relationship in terms of something with which we are very familiar, and perhaps don't take as seriously as we should: marriage.

Once again, it's not DIRECTLY referred to in Exodus, in Leviticus, or in Joshua. Maybe

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one of these days we will come to understand the usage of wording, and we will find that it WAS there. That's for the future. But Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all understood the covenant relationship as being a marriage! They spoke of it in those ways. There are some very powerful statements from all of those prophets about marriage.

We must never lose sight of the fact that a covenant was created between two unequal parties. There was no element of equality.

That doesn't rest very well with a Western mentality which believes in democracy and human rights, and all of those things. Here is God DEMANDING obedience of the people, and if they don't obey, they are going to suffer! There was one Being calling the shots, and at the end of the day, the other party could only say "Yes" or "No." That's all they could do.

If they said, "Yes," they were very much bound by it. There was no equality. A covenant relationship is one of total INEQUALITY. "I can't alter the terms of the covenant to suit myself. If I think I can do that, I have forgotten (or perhaps I have never known) the Being with whom I am dealing!" It's as simple as that.

Let's take a bit of a tangent, because people have asked me questions about marriage from time to time. We talk about a "marriage covenant." In fact, in the wedding ceremony, as we have at the present time (I haven't checked the older ceremonies, but I believe this, in fact, goes back to the ceremony that Mr Armstrong established), we state:

"Because marriage is a divine institution, and we are asking God to join you as husband and wife, it is fitting and right that each of you should faithfully promise before God, to accept the sacred marriage covenant according to the divinely ordained conditions established by Almighty God."

When we talk about a marriage covenant, who is the marriage covenant between? Obviously we are talking to two parties, a husband and a wife. But if that's the case, if this is a covenant, who is superior? If you are looking at it from that perspective, you have missed the point. Because a marriage covenant is between two individuals and God!

"What I want, what she wants, whatever the case may be, is not an issue."

Let me read that comment from the marriage ceremony to you again:

"... it is fitting and right that each of you should faithfully promise before God, to accept the sacred marriage covenant according to the divinely ordained conditions established by Almighty God."

The person who is calling the shots in marriage, is not the husband or the wife. They are both unequal parties to the marriage. The Individual who calls the shots in the marriage is the Father. He is the One who created marriage. He is the One who ordained marriage. He is the One who established the relationship of marriage.

So a marriage covenant is certainly between the two individuals that we see, but there is a Superior Party. The couple place themselves under the authority of the Father.

Let's see what Ephesians says about a covenant relationship:

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Ephesians 5:21 submitting to one another in ...

... your good selves? No, it doesn't say that!

21 ... submitting to one another in the fear of God.

Submit to one another in the fear of the Eternal. We are back to this respect for God, and of appreciating who and what God is, and His role in our lives. The starting point of marriage is having a fear of God! Nothing else. That's the beginning of it. And because we have the fear of God, then we respect what He says ...

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

24 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

If the Church isn't subject to Christ, how can we ever expect a wife to be subject to her husband? This example is given to a wife to demonstrate how she must respect her husband – in the same way that the Church is supposed to be subject to Christ in everything!

So we collectively have a responsibility. It's not just the wives who have to be subject. Each and every one of us, married and unmarried, male and female, adult and child, have to be subject to Christ if we are going to be part of the Church!

That learning that we have as individuals to be subject to Christ has to be transferred into the marriage relationship on the part of a wife to her husband.

And the husbands don't escape, because husbands are told:

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,

You might say that the responsibility and the challenge placed on a husband's shoulders is even greater than a wife's responsibility because he is being asked to emulate Jesus Christ, and His care for the Church. That's a very great challenge, but it starts with the fear of the Eternal.

It's a covenant, a covenant in which the Superior Party has set all the rules, and you and I don't have a choice as to whether we follow them or not, other than to say, "Yes," or "No!" We can't change them. We can't modify them, although people love to.

There are implications for this, because in 1st Corinthians 7, Paul addresses the subject of marriage. He addresses the aspect of potential problems in marriage. He addresses two particular areas of marriage problems:

- **1.** Where both parties are in the Church, where both the husband and the wife are in a covenant relationship, or claim to be in a covenant relationship.

If both parties are in a covenant relationship, he tells us:

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1 Corinthians 7:10 Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband.

11 But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.

It's a very stringent, very rigid requirement for people who are part of the covenant, who consider themselves to have a covenant relationship with God. He said, "You are to reconcile. You are not allowed to divorce. You are not allowed to break that covenant."

Now God is also a God of understanding. He realises that, maybe because of background or circumstances, there may be difficulties that make it almost impossible for people to reconcile. The apostle Paul understood that. He said that people CAN live apart, and still be part of the covenant.

But he said they can't divorce, and they can't remarry. Where both people are in the covenant, what Paul has said is a very direct comparison with Christ's statement in Matthew 19, when He was asked about divorce and remarriage. He gave a response to the Pharisees and the religious leaders that astounded them. It burned their ears. The apostles said, "If that's the condition in terms of marriage, it's better not to marry." They didn't have God's Holy Spirit at that point in time.

In Matthew 19, Jesus Christ was addressing a situation where both parties consider themselves to be part of God's covenant people. He said that in God's covenant, there should be no divorce. That should not be a solution for people who both consider themselves to be part of a covenant relationship with God. And what He said to the people at that point in time was so overwhelming, that:

Matthew 19:11 (Jewish New Testament) He said to them, "Not everyone grasps this teaching, only those for whom it is meant."

Only people who really understand what a covenant relationship truly is can appreciate that, and be willing to live by it. It's a very demanding challenge that God puts before us.

● **2.** Paul addresses the aspect of only one party being in a covenant relationship, something that we are very much aware of.

Somebody comes into the Church by themselves and their mate doesn't come into the Church. They can receive a whole spectrum of views from hostility to support. I know people who have come into the Church whose mates have supported them 100% all the way, although they, themselves, never wanted to be part of the Church.

And there are others who have gone even further and said, "If you are going to go there, then I am going to come too," and they have sat in Church for years, but have never become a Church member. You see them in the congregation, and you just think they are part of the Church.

On the other hand, we have had those who have packed their bags and walked out. The apostle Paul was addressing those people:

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1 Corinthians 7:12 But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her.

So if a person comes into the Church, and their mate is quite happy about it, there should be no consideration of divorce. The other party may not be part of the covenant relationship with God, but they can reap the benefits.

13 And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.

14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband ...

They receive blessings as a result of the converted mate's relationship with the Eternal. Why should a person be denied blessings?

14 ... otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

15 But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart ...

If the unbeliever doesn't want to remain part of the marriage relationship, let him depart.

15 ... a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.

16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

You can be instrumental in that person being called into a relationship with God. If the unbeliever departs, if they are not prepared to dwell in peace with the believer, then that person is free to remarry. Why? Because only one person is in a covenant relationship with God.

When this change was brought about in 1974, I remember some of the discussion that took place at that time. I repeat it to you today, because I think it helps us appreciate how little we really understood the importance of a covenant relationship. When these changes in terms of divorce and remarriage were discussed in 1974, people were saying:

“What about a person doing this ...”

“What if a person wants to get rid of his wife, so he leaves the Church, divorces her and then wants to come back in? He is divorced.”

All I can say is that if a person thinks they can play that type of game with God, they are not part of the covenant relationship to begin with. That's how little they understand of the God they serve. And if people think that they can play games with God, they need to wake up! They need to wake up to who it is they serve! Each and every one of us do.

Paul said:

Romans 3:18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

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He was quoting from:

Psalm 36:1 ... There is no fear of God before his eyes.

It's a problem that humanity suffers from. It doesn't fear God. They don't see God involved in their lives on a day by day, hour by hour, basis. God doesn't enter into their thinking.

Does He enter into OUR thinking? Do we understand the enormity of the covenant relationship that we have entered into?

I would like you to rehearse those elements again, the elements that go into a covenant. We will go through all eight of them this time;

1. The Preamble
2. Historical Antecedents
3. Stipulations
4. Deposition of texts
5. List of witnesses
6. Blessings and curses
7. Confirmed with blood

... and, above all else:

8. It heralds a marriage relationship!

A covenant is between superior and inferior parties. We, collectively, are the inferior party. It's also inviolable. It can't be changed.

We have been talking about the Old Covenant. What about the New Covenant? What is the basis of the New Covenant? I put it to you that it is the exact same eight premises. God hasn't changed. God does not change. As He says, "It's just as well I don't, or you would be consumed." We wouldn't be here today!

Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

He doesn't change. His plan and purpose is exactly the same. Where does the New Covenant end up? In a marriage, a very great marriage!

What is the basis? There are better promises. This covenant offers eternal life! It offers the opportunity of understanding the mind of God through the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit!

As a result of God's Holy Spirit, there is a heart that can remain in a covenant relationship, a heart that is willing to remain in a covenant relationship, a heart upon which the very stipulations of God can be written, and can become internalised within the person. They become integral to them.

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The same elements that went into the Old Covenant – all eight of them – are part of the New Covenant as well, come what may:

1. The preamble
2. The historical antecedents
3. Stipulations
4. Deposition of texts
5. List of witnesses
6. Blessings and curses
7. Sealed with blood
8. Marriage

I give you those again because I want you to make sure you've got a note of them. I am going to give you a homework assignment!

Mr Meakin loves to talk about the Passover and how John chapters 13 through to 17 is really a restatement of the covenant. I'd like to up the ante on Mr Meakin, because I would like you to read the ENTIRE book of John in terms of the New Covenant. Just to give you a little bit of help, how does the book start?

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

What could that be labelled as? Could that be a preamble by any chance?

Then it goes on and tells us the whole historical antecedent! It's not just coming out of Egypt this time. This isn't the God who just rescues from Egypt (which He was well able to do). This was the Being who created EVERYTHING! In other words, the ante has been raised. We are not lessening anything. We are not taking anything away. We are starting to see things in an even greater perspective – a godly perspective.

So you can read through the book of John. It starts with a preamble. But don't stop there. Read the ENTIRE BIBLE – as a statement about the covenant – because ultimately speaking, that's what God's Word is about! It is about the covenant relationship that God desires to have with you and me, that He has called us into, that He wants to share with us!

But it is a relationship that He determines, not me, not you and not anyone else. It is very unequal, and very unpopular in the 21st century – yet very godly! It is a relationship that is inviolable. I can't change it. You can't change it. The Eternal has established it. He has established it for our best interest, and for His ultimate goal. ❖