

Wonderful Words of Eternal Life

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May you allow God to guide you in your study of His Holy Word, the Bible.

Covenant

One of the most precious and encouraging words in the English language, or any language for that matter, is the word "covenant." Covenant, it's precious. It's not just precious, it's prevalent. Would it surprise you to know that the word covenant is used hundreds of times in the Bible? It is imperative that we understand its meaning.

1. Covenants were a permanent enduring bond between two parties that were not to be broken. Now notice those words I used, permanent, enduring, not broken. We're talking about real cement. Covenants were pledges of undeniable trust. What is a covenant? Is it akin to a contract? Or, like one teenager said "A covenant is a super glue contract." But a covenant is not like a contract. The difference goes back into the very reason for their inception. A contract is built upon mutual distrust. That's why you have a contract. But a covenant is built upon mutual trust. So in that sense they are exactly opposite.

If you or your business sells a house or something else you write up a contract. You make sure you've got all these ramifications just in case the other party fails to come through with their end of the bargain. That's a contract. But a covenant doesn't have those stipulations. The only real ramification of a broken covenant is just that, brokenness, and all of the hurt that goes with that. So a contract is that enduring bond formed by undeniable trust.

2. A covenant as seen in the Bible is often symbolized by an exchange of gifts. For example, the Bible gives a number of instances where men would make covenants with each other and they exchanged certain parts of their garments in order to solidify and to symbolize the covenant. The men would often trade tunics. They would trade their coats. As one of them walked down the way, and you saw Bill wearing Bob's coat, you'd probably think, "Well, look Bill must be in covenant with Bob because he has on his outer garment." Often times when two men would enter into a covenant in the old days, they would swap belts, and they would even place a weapon on that belt. It was a way of saying, if I'm in covenant with another individual and if you try to harm him, you'll have to deal with me also. We're in covenant.

By the way, there is one form of covenant that most adult people that I know enter into today in this world. It's marriage. That's a covenant, so says Malachi. It was also quoted in the 13th chapter of Hebrews. Even in marriage today they exchange rings and have done that for centuries as a symbol to solidify the covenant. There's often the exchange of gifts.

3. A covenant is designed to transcend time. You don't wear out a covenant. Oh, it can be fulfilled. An example of that is discussed below, but as long as it's meant to be enforced, it will keep going. Even death may not stop a covenant and that will be discussed later also.

So a covenant is a permanent, enduring, undeniable bond of trust and is often symbolized by gifts and transcends time.

What does the Bible tell us about covenants? For the sake of discussion they will be combined into three types of covenants. There are covenants between two people, men making covenants with God and God making covenants with men.

1. Covenants between two people. Abraham made a covenant with Abimelech. (Genesis 21) Laban made a covenant with Jacob. (Genesis 31) Ahab and Ben-Hadad made a covenant in 1 Kings 20:34. The covenant in the Bible between people most of us would probably think of was between David and Jonathan, King Saul's son. These two were closer than physical brothers. "After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house." (1 Samuel 18:1-2) Now look at verse 3. "And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow, and his belt." You see those symbols, those gifts, they were in covenant. They loved each other beyond description and they said nothing will ever keep us apart. Incidentally, in two chapters later in 1 Samuel 20, the covenant is affirmed.

What may be one of the most touching scenes in the Bible that I can remember was years later, after Jonathan and his father, Saul, had been killed by the Philistines. David had become king over all Israel. One day David summoned his guard around him and said, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (2 Samuel 9:1) There was a little boy, or if he had been little, he was grown now. His name was Mephibosheth. When the city was being sacked, the nurse had dropped him, he had become crippled and now he was in hiding in a

little wilderness outpost called Lo Debar. David sent for him and put him at the king's table and gave him all of Jonathan's possessions. David told Mephibosheth "the reason I'm doing this is because I have been in covenant with your father." Now do you get a picture of the strength of covenants?

2. Covenants between men and God. Sometimes covenants were made between men and God, where men initiated it. Jacob made one to God in Genesis 28. Josiah made another in 2 Kings 23. Joshua made a covenant to God in Joshua 24:25.
3. Covenants between God and man. God initiates and makes a covenant with man. Would you rather have a promise from God or a promise from a fellow human being? The answer to that is rather obvious. Why would we rather have a covenant from God? They are the most important covenants for the following reasons:
 - a. God has the power to make greater covenants. God can do things for us that we never could if He chooses to. We have a sin problem. There's nothing you or I can do for that, nothing you can do for me for that but if God chose to make a covenant, He could take care of it.
 - b. God will never break a covenant. He is all faithful. There is no question of the trust in him. It is absolutely permanent.

Well, what are some of God's covenants?

Let's look at four or five examples of God initiating a covenant with man.

- a. After God had destroyed the earth by water and saved Noah and his family and that whole host of animals in the ark, God said, "I 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. 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." (Genesis 9:11-12) That is a promise of trust from God. Write it down and put it in stone, it will never change. Every time we get a nice rain and the rays of sunshine come through those beads of water and we look up and see that multi-colored rainbow in the sky, we're reminded that our God's keeping his word. The rain didn't stop in those days. It stops for us, doesn't it? There's the promise. Oh, that's just the first.
- b. After God sent Moses back to Egypt to deliver the children of Israel out of their captivity, Moses said "The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. The Lord spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. ... At that time I stood between the Lord and you to declare to you the word of the Lord because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up to the mountain." (Deuteronomy 5:2, 4) Then Moses recounts what we call today the Ten Commandments, the very foundation of that old covenant with the people of Israel. God said, "I'm going to be your God, I'm going to lead you. I'm going to bless you as I promised Abraham." That was the covenant. God stayed faithful to it. But that covenant with the Israelites wasn't designed to be God's final, most comprehensive, and best covenant.
- c. God had something to say through the prophet Jeremiah about that old covenant with Israel. "'The time is coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant.'" (Jeremiah 31:31-32) Now see what happens. Sometimes human beings break that pledge of trust. "Though I was a husband to them,' declares the Lord.' This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the Lord.' I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts, I will be their God and they will be my people'.'" (Jeremiah 31:32-34) Oh, what a beautiful promise. It still took a few hundred years, but finally as stated in Romans 5 at just the right time, Jesus Christ came and as he was about to die, he was preparing his people and all the people of the world, for what was going to be that new covenant.
- d. Listen to what Jesus said to the apostles in the Upper Room just hours before he would die. "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, 'Take and eat, this is my body.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them saying, 'Drink from it all of you, this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin.'" (Matthew 26:26-27) "The new covenant is starting right now, just in a matter of hours, as my blood is poured out, the forgiveness of all sins, Jews, Gentiles, everybody who comes to me, it's going to be there for the offering and it will never go away as long as the earth is allowed to stand."

The whole Hebrew letter is a great treatise about the superiority of this new covenant over the old. But look at the Hebrew writer's commentary on the covenant Jesus set up. It says, "But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs (talking about the old) as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, (that was the covenant under Moses) no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord" (Hebrews 8:6-9 with verses 8 and 9 quoted from Jeremiah 31) "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete." (Hebrews 8:13) I've got good news for you. If you've never understood the Bible, the Old Testament was the Old Covenant, the New Testament is the new covenant. We don't have to observe all the rituals, regulations and ordinances of the Old. Why? Colossians 2:14 tells us it is because Jesus came and fulfilled the Old Covenant. The death of the testator, Jesus being nailed to the cross, ended the Old Covenant and ushered in a new and better covenant. It's founded on better promises and it's got a better solution. It's not my and your keeping every letter of the law perfectly. Our new covenant is founded on a Savior whose blood will take away our sins, because we can't take it away ourselves. Every Lord's Day, when we gather and we break unleavened bread, we're reminded of that covenant. There's the symbol like the wedding ring. Whenever we take that fruit of the vine, we think about, "this is the blood of My covenant." (Matthew 26:28) Remember God pledged goodness to us and He's asking us now to return to His covenant. We must pledge that goodness back to Him and offer our lives as sacrifices to Him. Covenant is a great word.

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