

Covenants

and their conditions

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June 2, 2021

A binding contract with severe terms

God's covenants are legally binding contracts. They obligate God to fulfill the promises He made to a person/group if they can fulfill the terms and conditions set forth by Him. When they obey, He does what He promised. When they disobey, He is free to remove His blessings and punish them instead.

A covenant can therefore be broken, rendering it inactive or nullified. However, God Himself will never be the one who breaks it; this is what we mean when we say that God is faithful. The troubled history of Israel is a perfect illustration.

The Lord was furious with Israel. He said, "This nation has **violated the terms of the agreement** I made with their ancestors by disobeying me. So I will no longer remove before them any of the nations that Joshua left unconquered when he died. Joshua left those nations to test Israel. I wanted to see whether or not the people would carefully walk in the path marked out by the Lord, as their ancestors were careful to do."

Judges 2:20-22

But in the same way every faithful promise the Lord your God made to you has been realized, it is just as certain, if you disobey, that the Lord will bring on you every judgment until he destroys you from this good land which the Lord your God gave you. If you violate the covenantal laws of the Lord your God which he commanded you to keep, and follow, worship, and bow down to other gods, the Lord will be very angry with you and you will disappear quickly from the good land which he gave to you.

Joshua 23:15-16

The king of Assyria deported the people of Israel to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, along the Habor (the river of Gozan), and in the cities of the Medes. This happened because they did not obey the Lord their God and broke his agreement with them. They did not pay attention to and obey all that Moses, the Lord's servant, had commanded.

2 Kings 18:11-12

Sound the alarm! An eagle looms over the temple of the Lord! For they have broken their covenant with me, and have rebelled against my law. Israel cries out to me, "My God, we acknowledge you!" But Israel has rejected what is morally good; so an enemy will pursue him.

Hosea 8:1-3

The Lord said to Jeremiah: "Hear the terms of the covenant I made with Israel and pass them on to the people of Judah and the citizens of Jerusalem. Tell them that the Lord, the God of Israel, says, '**Anyone who does not keep the terms of the covenant will be under a curse.** Those are the terms that I charged your ancestors to keep when I brought them out of Egypt, that place which was like an iron-smelting furnace. I said at that time, "Obey me and carry out the terms of the agreement exactly as I commanded you. If you do, you will be my people and I will be your God. **Then I will keep the promise I swore on oath to your ancestors to give them a land flowing with milk and honey.**" That is the very land that you still live in today.'" And I responded, "Amen! Let it be so, Lord!"

The Lord said to me, "Announce all the following words in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem: 'Listen to the terms of my covenant with you and carry them out! For I solemnly warned your ancestors to obey me. I warned them again and again, ever since I delivered them out of Egypt until this very day. But they did not listen to me or pay any attention to me! Each one of them followed the stubborn inclinations of his own wicked heart. So I brought on them all the punishments threatened in the covenant because they did not carry out its terms as I commanded them to do."

The Lord said to me, "The people of Judah and the citizens of Jerusalem have plotted rebellion against me! They have gone back to the evil ways of their ancestors of old who refused to obey what I told them. They, too, have paid allegiance to other gods and worshiped them. Both the nation of Israel and the nation of Judah have violated the covenant I made with their ancestors.

Jeremiah 11:1-10

Abraham obligates the Lord

God's original primary covenant was with Abraham, who was the grandfather of Jacob (Israel). The fact that Abraham stayed true to their covenant and fulfilled his obligations means that God is also legally bound to keep His promises to Abraham despite the disobedience of Abraham's descendants (the tribes of Israel) later on. This creates a strange situation.

God promised to make Abraham into a great nation, that his name would be great, and that the whole world would be blessed through him.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go out from your country, your relatives, and your father's household to the land that I will show you. Then I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great, so that you will exemplify divine blessing. I will bless those who bless you, but the one who treats you lightly I must curse, and all the families of the earth will bless one another by your name."

Genesis 12:1-3

The Lord took him outside and said, "Gaze into the sky and count the stars – if you are able to count them!" Then he said to him, "So will your descendants be." Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord credited it as righteousness to him.

Then God said to Abraham, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer will your name be Abram. Instead, your name will be Abraham because I will make you the father of a multitude of nations. ... "As for you, you must keep the covenantal requirement I am imposing on you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my requirement that you and your descendants after you must keep: Every male among you must be circumcised."

Israel's unique terms

God's covenant with Abraham's descendants greatly changed over time. As the tribe of Israel's history unfolded in dramatic ways, more obligations were created to keep them mindful of their history and duties. Before the events in Exodus—during their Egyptian captivity—Israel simply confirmed their covenant by circumcision as Abraham instituted, and had no unique laws or holy days.

The ten commandments were therefore a major change to God's covenant; or, in a sense, a second covenant only related to the first one with Abraham. Things like the Ark of the

Covenant, a special priestly tabernacle, and so on. Instead of merely being circumcised and having God's representatives making judgments about what needs to happen next, the people who followed Moses all expressly agreed to more advanced terms that came with a bigger promise. Thus the contract evolved. Israel was now offered a chance to become a holy kingdom of priests, but only if they could fulfill all the laws and commands God gave them.

Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, "Thus you will tell the house of Jacob, and declare to the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I lifted you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. And now, if you will diligently listen to me and keep my covenant, then you will be my special possession out of all the nations, for all the earth is mine, and you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you will speak to the Israelites."

Exodus 19:3-6

Moses came and told the people all the Lord's words and all the decisions. All the people answered together, "We are willing to do all the words that the Lord has said,"

Exodus 24:3

“Three times in the year you must make a pilgrim feast to me. You are to observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread; seven days you must eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you, at the appointed time of the month of Abib, for at that time you came out of Egypt. No one may appear before me empty-handed.

Exodus 23:14-15

Israel’s failure and Messiah

Over the course of Israel’s long history, they broke God’s covenant many times, leading to downfalls, exiles, destruction, and increasing promises of God’s judgment against them. However, His faithfulness to Abraham meant a hope of their restoration. This became the central role of Israel’s promised Messiah, or God’s Anointed One. He would permanently rectify their estrangement from God, deliver them from foreign occupation, atone for their sins, establish the Kingdom, and more.

Meanwhile the Israelite covenant and its contractual laws were never meant to be a universal religion or creed. Israel was set apart from the other nations, and its unique set of laws were born out of its own history with God. And yet the Messiah was also tasked with reaching beyond Israel and creating a new

covenant that would even include select Gentiles whom God considered to be “lost sheep” belonging to Him. Through this act of generosity, “all nations” would be blessed through Abraham, just as the original covenant guaranteed.

“For this is what the sovereign Lord says: I will deal with you according to what you have done when you despised your oath by breaking your covenant. Yet I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth [with Abraham?], and I will establish a lasting [new?] covenant with you. Then you will remember your conduct, and be ashamed when you receive your older and younger sisters [Gentile believers?]. I will give them to you as daughters, but not on account of my covenant with you. I will establish my covenant with you, and then you will know that I am the Lord. Then you will remember, be ashamed, and remain silent when I make atonement for all you have done [via Jesus Christ], declares the sovereign Lord.”

Ezekiel 18:59-63

“For this is what the sovereign Lord says: Look, I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will seek out my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a cloudy, dark day. I will bring them out from among the peoples and gather them from foreign countries; I will bring them to their own land. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams and all the inhabited places of the land. In a good pasture I will feed them; the mountain heights of Israel will be their pasture. There they will lie down in a lush pasture, and they will feed on rich grass on the mountains of Israel. I myself will feed my sheep and I myself will make them lie down, declares the sovereign Lord. I will seek the lost

and bring back the strays; I will bandage the injured and strengthen the sick, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them – with judgment! ...

“I will set one shepherd over them, and he will feed them – namely, my servant David [Jesus Christ]. He will feed them and will be their shepherd. I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken! I will make a covenant of peace [a new covenant] with them and will rid the land of wild beasts, so that they can live securely in the wilderness and even sleep in the woods.

Ezekiel 34:11-16 and 23-25

New covenant, new people, new rules

Jesus Christ not only fulfilled God’s promise to Abraham, but also the requirements of the Moses Law. God promised to bless the nations through Abraham, and He promised Israel that they would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation if they fulfilled the law. That’s exactly what Jesus accomplished.

That’s why John the Baptist and Jesus boldly announced the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus clarified that he did not abolish the laws or the old covenants, but rather, by completing their terms, he personally received their rewards and satisfied their requirements on behalf of everyone who would become part of his Kingdom. Israel was the first to hear the offer since they were God’s chosen people, and Jesus

performed miracles and fulfilled prophecies in order to prove he was legitimate.

The Kingdom is still spreading across the whole world, led by the Holy Spirit and the Word, recruiting more lost sheep. The old contract is finished, while the new contract stipulates that rebirth in the Spirit is the key to entering the Kingdom and receiving salvation, resurrection, and a future inheritance with Christ when he returns to govern this earth.