

Sharing in God's covenant

Promises are easily broken.

That is why very important ones are almost always formally confirmed by a contract or covenant. A covenant clearly defines what each party promises to do and under what conditions. Often a course of action is specified in case one party fails to live up to its obligations.

When you buy a home, a mortgage contract with the bank confirms your promise to repay the money you have borrowed. Your down payment is proof of your intent and ability to fulfil your promise. In the event you die before the mortgage is paid off, the conditions apply to your heirs. Because this contract is legally binding, both you and the bank seriously consider your commitment and its implications.

A covenant may take the form of a vow, such as the traditional marriage vow. "I, John, take thee, Jane, to be my wedded wife, and I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses..." The wedding ring signifies your intent to fulfil your vow.

Promises which must last over a long period of time are confirmed in writing, by a solemn vow or through some other sign providing assurance the agreement will not be broken.

Why Would God Make a Covenant?

Bible promises have an impressive record of reliability. Some promises have taken the form of prophecies about then-future events. One of the most convincing forms of evidence to show the Bible is true is to trace how these prophecies have been fulfilled throughout history.

But, God's final purpose is not yet complete.

It rests on His promise that Jesus Christ will come back to set up God's kingdom—the kingdom described by the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, when the whole earth will be at peace and will be filled with God's glory. This promise still awaits fulfillment.

The apostle Peter foresaw that people would lose their faith in the coming of Jesus.

"They will say, 'Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.'"

II Peter 3, verse 4

The reason for God's apparent delay, Peter goes on, is that He wants to give as many people as possible the chance to come to Him. To the human mind, He may appear to be taking His time or even forgetting about His promise. But the Almighty's frame of reference is eternity, not one human lifetime. To Him, a thousand years are

like a day!

"With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day.

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

II Peter 3, verses 8 and 9

The Almighty knew that His time frame would be too long for human beings to accept without firm assurance. That is why His promise is in the form of a covenant - a confirmed long-term agreement that cannot be broken.

The Eternal Covenant

The word "testament" means "covenant". Thus, the Bible itself is structured around two major covenants: the Old and the New.

The covenant God made through Moses on Mount Sinai was the Old Covenant, also called the Law.

The New Covenant, despite its name, spans the entire Bible. Sometimes called the eternal or everlasting covenant it was given in the Old Testament through two men— Abraham and David— and confirmed in the New Testament by Jesus Christ. Here are two of the promises God made in this covenant:

- To set up His kingdom on earth, headed by Jesus Christ

- For the faithful, resurrection from death and eternal life in this kingdom.

The Promise to Abraham

The teaching of Jesus Christ and the apostles in the New Testament is based on promises given in the Old Testament.

Indeed the Bible states that God revealed His gospel to Abraham (some 1900 years before Christ). And classifies the faithful of all times as "children of Abraham"; that is, as the family to be included in the promises God made to him.

"Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scriptures foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.'

So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

Galatians 3, verses 7 to 9

It is no accident that Abraham is the Old Testament person mentioned most frequently in the New Testament!

God made some far-reaching promises to him in the covenant which is the basis of the true Christian hope.

Sharing in God's covenant

The Land— Forever

The Almighty made a very specific promise to Abraham.

He told him to look over the plain of the Jordan River, the area now known as Israel; this land was to belong to him and his offspring forever.

“Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west.

All the land that you see I will give you and your offspring forever.”

Genesis 13, Verse 14 and 15

Abraham's ancestors, the Israelites, did occupy the land. They were driven out by the Romans shortly after the time of Christ. In recent times, the Jews have returned to that same land to establish the modern state of Israel. Today, many Jews base their historical right to the land on the promise God made to Abraham.

The final fulfillment, however, applies to people from all nations who have the same hope as Abraham.

God said He would give the land to Abraham and his offspring forever. It was to be their “everlasting possession”. (Genesis 17, verse 8)

Yet, Abraham is dead. Besides, he never actually owned any of the land while he was alive.

Before the disciple Stephen was martyred he explained to his accusers the basis for his faith. He started by talking about the still-to-be-fulfilled covenant to Abraham.

“He (God) gave him (Abraham) no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child.”

Acts 7, verse 5

The Promise of Resurrection

What is the meaning of God's apparent failure to keep His promise?

You can be sure He did not forget! The promise is that Abraham will be raised from the dead in order to have the land.

Abraham will possess the land forever, as God promised. He will be resurrected to receive eternal life and to see his land of covenant, present-day Israel, become the center of God's kingdom on earth.

God's Blessing on all Nations

First, God promised to make His blessing of eternal life available to all nations on earth through His covenant with Abraham.

“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Genesis 12, verse 3

This means that, no matter who you are, you personally have the opportunity to benefit from God's special care here and now, and to share in His future blessing of eternal life.

There are no arbitrary criteria, such as race or social status. No conditions except a true and active faith in God's promises, confirmed by your commitment to Christ through baptism.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Galatians 3, verses 28 and 29

Abraham, Jesus and You

The resurrection of Jesus is the link between Abraham and you.

Abraham's descendant, Jesus Christ, lay dead in a tomb for three days. Then God raised him from the dead and gave him eternal life.

This is what God will do for Abraham. And this is what He can do for you.

Jesus' resurrection is God's proof

that He can and will fulfil His promise.

“For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

Acts 17, verse 31

God's Covenant in Today's World

Almost twenty centuries have passed since the time of Christ; twice that since Abraham.

A lot of things have changed.

In the days of the early apostles, to become a Christian was a tremendous commitment. Often the value of God's covenant had to be weighed against suffering, imprisonment or even death as it does now in some totalitarian countries.

Today there are hundreds of millions of “Christians” all over the world. However, being a Christian often merely implies you were christened as a baby.

The meaning of God's covenant has been lost to many of today's Christians.

But the Creator's purpose has not changed. His promised blessing is needed just as much today as it was in Abraham's day.

The New Testament is full of references to the Old. The New Testament clarifies much that was hard to understand in the Old, because the true Christian hope is based on covenant promises made in the Old Testament and confirmed by Christ.

The ultimate fulfillment of the eternal covenant will come when Jesus Christ returns to put things right on this earth and to demonstrate to the world the real meaning of God's glory and His promise of eternal life.

How You Make a Covenant With God

No contract is valid without the mutual consent of those who make it. Both

Sharing in God's covenant

parties have to understand the agreement before they sign on the dotted line. Both must promise to fulfil their part.

The same principle applies to God's covenant.

In order to benefit from it you have to understand it and make a personal decision to fulfil its conditions.

When you join in God's covenant you become an adopted member of His family.

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise."

Galatians 3, verses 26, 27 and 29

But there is no dotted line for you to sign on, nor are there adoption papers to confirm your acceptance into the spiritual family of Abraham.

Instead, your covenant promise is in the form of a vow. The physical act of baptism is your "dotted line", your public demonstration that you understand the covenant and that your decision is sincere and serious.

"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

Romans 6, verse 4

Biblical baptism is by immersion in water. Unlike baby sprinkling, it involves a conscious decision of the believer. It stands for symbolic death and burial, and the washing away of past sins. The old person dies and a new person rises from the water.

This act confirms your desire to live your life to the glory of God, now and forever.

Why Should you Make a Covenant With God?

Eternal life is a gift only God has the power to give.

Through faith and baptism you

can make a covenant with God which provides the way for you to share in His blessings. The benefits are many:

- In this life, contentment, peace, joy, direction and purpose in your life, to name a few.
- After the resurrection, eternal life in the glorious kingdom Jesus will set up on this earth.

The greatest book in the world offers you a sure and wonderful hope, the opportunity to be in covenant relationship with the Almighty Himself.

Recap

God's covenant, confirmed by his son Jesus Christ, is the heart of Bible teaching in both the Old and new Testaments.

Through faith and baptism you can share in the blessings promised in God's covenant: a better life, now and forever.

Recommended Bible Readings

Some key chapters from the life of Abraham: Genesis 12, 13, 15, 17 and 22.

New Testament references to Abraham: Romans 4, Galatians 3, James 2.