

THE MYSTERY OF GOD

Part 7

This morning, it is my hope to clear up for you something that may have been confusing, or at least fuzzy to you all of your life. I am going to be looking at the matter of the covenants; the old and the new covenants. In doing that I am going to try to help you understand that those are not the same thing as what we call the Old and New Testaments. That has been confusing to a lot of people and has led to a lot of misunderstanding.

I am still pursuing the study of what in the New Testament is called *the mystery of God*, but this morning we are going to be looking specifically at the matter of the *covenants*.

The premise with which I have been working throughout this study is that on almost every page of this book we call the Holy Bible, even in that part we call the Old Testament, we find things that were intended to direct attention to coming of Christ; His crucifixion and His kingdom. We have looked at some of the early history of mankind and saw how some of the things at the very dawn of creation pointed us towards Christ. We have looked at several prophecies that spoke about the Savior who would come. We took note of how even a number of characters in the Old Testament foreshadowed the person and work of Christ—men such as Moses, and Isaac, and David. For the past couple of weeks, we have also looked at some of the things, or institutions that God used in order to point men to Christ. For example we talked about the Ark of the Covenant with its Mercy Seat. We looked briefly at the concept of blood sacrifices; even that of the bulls and goats and how that foreshadowed the ultimate sacrifice made on our behalf when Christ gave His life for us on the cross. Last week, we looked at the institution of the priesthood; how in several ways and several instances, that too was meant to point people to the work that Christ came to do.

This morning I want us to look at the matter of the covenants, and we will see how this too points us to Christ.

Covenants is not something we may know very much about unless we are an attorney or talking to someone who is. It isn't all that complicated, even so, it is not something we talk or think very much about.

Let's begin by reading together from the Gospel according to **Luke, chapter 22:14-20**: *And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. 15) And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.* [What do you think brethren? That Passover feast which began the night before the Israelites were delivered from their slavery in Egypt, did it foreshadow the coming and sacrifice of Christ in any way?]

Jesus went on to say:

16) For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." 17) And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among

yourselves. 18) For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." 19) And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 20) And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

A little while ago, we participated in the Lord's Supper. We ate the bread that represented Christ's body, and we drank the wine that represented Christ's blood. Jesus said, "**This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.**" What was Jesus saying? There are three things that ought to command our attention. One, that a new covenant was about to be established. If you have a new covenant, then that points to an old covenant. The second thing that we should not miss is that this new covenant was going to be based upon or made effective by the offering of His body on the cross, in which Christ's blood would be shed. The third thing that we need to see is that the cup is a symbol, or a reminder, not just of Jesus' death on the cross, but that by that death a new covenant between God and sinful men was established! You know all of that, I know that, but what I want you to see is how the stage for all of that was set by some covenants we read about in the Old Testament.

It is important for you to see and understand that the old, or first covenant is not the same thing as what we call the Old Testament. You also need to see and understand that the new covenant is not the same thing as what we call the New Testament. There us a lot of confusion about that, and it is fairly obvious why.

We say this book [the Bible] has two major divisions: the Old Testament, and the New Testament. Many people have grown up hearing that and thinking that. For that reason, when we hear or read the expression, old testament, we naturally think of those books found in the first major division of our Bibles. When we hear or read the expression, new testament, we naturally think of those books found in the second major division of our Bibles.

Please listen to me! Because we tend to do that, to think that way, we end up getting confused about those scriptures we call the Old Testament. On the one hand, we know that a new testament, or covenant, has been established. We know that the old testament, or covenant has been done away with. We know that the old law was nailed to the cross, taken out of the way. And so because we are confused about these terms, testament and covenant, we end up thinking that the Old Testament has been taken away, that it was those thirty-nine books that were nailed to the cross. NO! NO! NO!

The scriptures—whether you are talking about the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, or the twenty-seven books of the New Testament—are not the covenants themselves. They tell us about the covenants, but they aren't the covenants themselves. I want to show you why that is true, but do you understand what I am saying?

The thirty-nine books of what we call the Old Testament is not what was nailed to the cross. What was nailed to the cross was the covenant God made with the Israelites at Mt Sinai, a

covenant based on law and the keeping of that law. Now we learn about that covenant in what we call the Old Testament, but the Old Testament was not the covenant itself.

In the same way, the twenty-seven books of what we call the New Testament is not the covenant by which men can be justified before God today. We read and learn about that covenant in the New Testament, but the new covenant should not be thought of as the same thing as the New Testament. The plan by which Christ would offer himself upon the cross as a sacrifice to atone for our sins, and which when we by the obedience of faith entrust and commit ourselves to God and Christ based on that sacrifice, that's the covenant by which men are justified before God today.

I hope that makes some sense to you, I hope that you will study and investigate this further on your own.

Well, what do we mean by covenant? The *New Century Dictionary* defines this word as,

“An agreement between two or more persons to do or refrain from doing some act; a compact; a contract; in Biblical usage, the agreement or engagement of God with man as set for the in the Old and New Testament.”

A covenant is like a contract, a binding agreement, except that in the case of the covenants we read about in the Scriptures, they are agreements always initiated by the Lord. He makes a proposal, or determines that something will happen; He sets any and all conditions for those for whom the covenant is intended.

Actually, in the Old Testament, we learn about a number of covenants made by the Lord. Speaking about the Jewish people or Israelites in **Romans 9:4**, Paul says, “*They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.*” In **Ephesians 2:12**, he said that the Gentiles had been “*strangers to the covenants of promise.*” Brother David Lusk was with our congregation in a special series of lessons on Covenants a number of years ago. Brother Lusk did an extended, special study of this subject, which resulted in a book entitled, *God of the Covenant*. I would highly recommend this book for your reading if you wish to pursue this subject further. In that book, brother Lusk identified a number of covenants in the Old Testament scriptures.

- First of all there is the covenant of the rainbow made at the time of flood.
- There was the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants.
- There was the covenant made with Israel at Mt. Sinai when Moses led the Israelites out of their Egyptian slavery.
- There was another covenant God made with David, and possibly several others.

So indeed, to the Jews belonged the right of adoption, the glory, *the covenants*, the law, worship and promises.

For the purpose of our lesson this morning, I really want to focus on just two of those covenants that we read about in the Old Testament:

- the covenant God made with Abraham, and which was repeated with Abraham's son Isaac, and his son, Jacob.
- I also want to look at the covenant that was made with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, the one we usually refer to as the Law of Moses.

In **Genesis 12:1-3** we first read about the covenant of promise made to Abraham. Moses wrote,

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2) And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3) I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

At the time that promise was made, Abraham was 75 years old. Perhaps Abraham wondered how God was going to make a great nation out of him. Sometime later, God repeats this promise, which is related to us in chapter 15. God appears to Abraham in a vision and tells him not to worry, that He will protect him, and that he will enjoy a great reward. Abraham questions God, saying, "what will you give me seeing that I am still childless?" Abraham proposed that God allow a child born to one of his servants be the one through whom God's promise would be granted. God told him, "No, it won't be that man, but a child from your own son will be the heir." **Verse 5** says, "And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be. **Verse 6** says, "And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." After that, Abraham wanted God to give him some sign that this would happen, and so God told him to bring him a heifer, three years old; a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. Abraham did so, and the heifer, goat and ram were each cut in half and laid out in the sun. **Verse 12** says, as the sun began to go down that day, a deep sleep came upon Abraham, and it became very dark. The Lord said to him—**verses 13**—"know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years." **Verses 17 & 18** tell us, "When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham...."

At a still later time, when Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him again and repeated the covenant once more. This is related for us in chapter 17. **Verse 4** says God told Abraham, "Behold my covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations...." It was at that time, that God gave to Abraham the command for him and every male in his family to be circumcised. This was given as a sign that Abraham and his descendants accepted the covenant.

God then renewed the covenant with Abraham's son Isaac, in chapter 26:2-5, and again with Jacob, the son of Isaac, in chapters 28 and 35. This covenant was called the covenant of promise for God had made a promise to Abraham and his descendants. It did not contain any stipulations for Abraham and his descendants to keep, it was a covenant of promise; that God would bless Abraham and his descendants in such a way that through them, the One who was the reason why the world would be blessed would come. They would be God's "chosen people," that He might display His wisdom power and glory through them.

However, for the first number of generations, it was mainly just family. I think by the time Jacob and all of the sons and their families migrated to Egypt during the time of famine, there was something like 72 people or so. But then the years began to roll by, one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred, more years than this United States of American has been in existence. The Israelites multiplied, and multiplied until the Egyptians were afraid they were about to be overrun, which is why Israel ended up in slavery in Egypt.

And that is when Moses enters the scene. He was sent by the Lord to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and to the land that God had earlier promised Abraham. You may remember how God worked ten great plagues upon the Egyptians until finally, the Israelites were allowed to leave. And when they left, they found themselves in a place called the wilderness of Sin. And there, upon a mountain called Sinai, God made another covenant with the people of Israel. You can read about this in the **19th chapter of Exodus**. Beginning in **verse 2**, we read:

*They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, 3) while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: 4) You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5) Now therefore, **if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6) and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.**"*

This was the covenant God established that was based upon law keeping. He would give them His commandments, His "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not." If they would keep those commandments, he said, "they would be his treasured possession among all peoples. They would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." And all the people said, "*all that the Lord has spoken we will do.*"

But of course, saying it was easier than doing it, and it wasn't long until the people found themselves again and again at odds with the Lord. And for almost the next one thousand years, the people continued to NOT DO ALL THAT THE LORD HAD SPOKEN! During those long, terrible years, the Lord sent prophet after prophet unto them, to rebuke them for their sins and to call on them to repent. Many of those prophets foretold of the time when they would be punished, when they would have to suffer for their sins. They also spoke about a time when God would

bring them back into their promised land, and establish a new kingdom, and a new covenant. One such prophet was a man named Jeremiah

In **Jeremiah 30, beginning in verse 18**, for example, we find Jeremiah prophesying the following words:

*"Thus says the LORD: Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob and have compassion on his dwellings; the city shall be rebuilt on its mound, and the palace shall stand where it used to be. 19) Out of them shall come songs of thanksgiving, and the voices of those who celebrate. I will multiply them, and they shall not be few; I will make them honored, and they shall not be small. 20) Their children shall be as they were of old, and their congregation shall be established before me, and I will punish all who oppress them. 21) **Their prince shall be one of themselves; their ruler shall come out from their midst**; I will make him draw near, and he shall approach me, for who would dare of himself to approach me? declares the LORD. 22) And you shall be my people, and I will be your God."*

Well obviously, that is a prophetic reference to the coming of Christ, and notice, once again God is wanting to create for Himself a people who will delight in being His children.

A little later, in **chapter 31**, Jeremiah continues to speak about that day when God will re-establish for Himself a people uniquely His. **Beginning in verse 31, [thru 34]** speaking through the prophet, God says,

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32) not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. 33) But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34) And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

That scripture, of course, is cited by the Hebrew writer in chapter 8, in which the writer was seeking to show that Christ's high priesthood led Him to a ministry that was greater than the ministry of any high priest. In **verses 6 & 7**, he says,

"But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. 7) For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second."

Notice, the writer speaks about a new covenant, a second covenant. He also speaks about that first covenant, which is obviously a reference to the covenant made at Mt Sinai, which was that covenant based on Law. A new covenant was to be established, and it would not like the one made at Sinai. It would be a covenant in which forgiveness would be given to people, not on the basis of if they keep some law, but on the basis of their faith—which must always be understood as faith that shows itself in obedience. In **John 1:17**, we learn: *“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”* This new covenant was going to be a covenant of grace made possible through Jesus shedding His blood on the cross. That is why, in instituting the Lord’s Supper, Jesus said, *“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”*

That is the sum and substance of what in scripture is called the gospel. It is the good news that salvation is possible; forgiveness of sins is possible, redemption is possible, freedom from sin’s slavery is possible, everlasting life is possible. Actually being righteous in the sight of God is now possible, not based upon our being able to live sinlessly every minute of every hour of every day, or even by our being perfectly obedient. Our forgiveness is possible because Christ came to offer himself upon the cross as a sinless sacrifice for our sins! **2 Corinthians 5:21** says, *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

But do you see what God was doing in that Old Covenant? He was wanting to establish for Himself a people—a people of faith, a people who would live obedient to His will. They wanted to do that, they even promised that they would do that, but because of the weakness of their flesh, they failed to do it. And so, they were hopelessly lost. They were in need of help, desperate need of help, and help was given.

That’s where I will leave it this morning, but the Lord willing, next Lord’s Day we will continue to unravel this great mystery, the mystery of God.

Invitation