

Of God's Covenant with Man (Part 1)

Gen 15:1-21 & WCF 7.1

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 14 April 2019, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Here's a question: Seeing that God has *made* us and that *we are dependent upon Him* for our very existence, does it then not make sense that we are morally obligated to obey Him, the Author of our very lives?

Of course, it's logic! *His authorship gives Him authority to command whatever He wishes from that which He has made!*²

But look, although God has all the right to keep a long distance from us, look what He did – He took a very kind & gracious step towards mankind; yes, in order that we could experience Him as our blessing and reward, He, out of His own will, condescended (stooped to our level) by entering into an agreement (or contract) with us – yes into a *covenant* with mankind!³

You ask, “But what is a covenant?” “And, what does God's covenant with us look like?”

Well, firstly then...

What is a Covenant?

My brother & sister, our lives are filled with covenants!

Yes, we may not always *call* them *covenants*. Instead, we may call them *contracts* or even *pacts* or *treaties*! However, they all refer to *agreements* – mostly *written* agreements between two or more persons, or groups of persons, or even between one country and another!

Take e.g. the *marriage covenant*. It's a formal agreement between the groom and bride, and it involves promises, stipulations, witnesses, vows and oaths! Yes, he & she promise before God and human witnesses that they will love & respect one another, be faithful to one another, care for one another in sickness and in health. But they don't make these promises just with their mouths. No, they also give their signatures in writing!

Well, what a vivid example of a formal agreement – yes, a covenant!

Well, here is the beauty! You see, although the Creator of the universe owes nothing to any of His creatures, the Bible shows us how He, out of His own will, kindly & graciously, binds Himself into a legal covenant with human beings!

Here, briefly, are a few examples:

- God's covenant with Noah

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. I (chapters 1-8 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² Well-said words of Sproul (ibid)

³ WCF 7.1 *The distance between God and the creature is so great that, even though rational creatures are responsible to obey him as their Creator, yet they could never experience any enjoyment of him as their blessing and reward except by way of some voluntary condescension on his part, which he has been pleased to express by way of covenant.*

- His covenant with Abraham
- His covenant with His people through Moses at Sinai
- Then, in the days of Jeremiah, God promises that He would make a *new covenant* with them – one which He would write not on stone, but on their hearts, i.e. the New Covenant in & through Jesus Christ!

So, God Almighty – the Creator of the universe – stoops down to the level of tiny human beings and, out of grace, enters into formal agreement (covenant) with them!

But look, great was the joy of Bible scholars when, in the middle of the last century, they discovered that *such was the level of God's stooping down* that, in making His covenant with us, He even used the written *covenant format* which ancient Middle-Easterners were used to! Yes, God used the same seven basic parts found in the written treaties of the kings of the Ancient Near East!⁴

So here then is the second part of this sermon...

The Seven Parts of God's Covenant

Well, these seven parts are most clearly seen in the covenant which we all know as the *Ten Commandments*

So, here is the first of seven parts...

- **The Preamble**

An ancient overlord, whether he was a Hittite king or a Syrian or Assyrian or Babylonian king, would first name himself, e.g. "*This is the treaty of Esarhaddon (king of the world, king of Assyria, son of Sennacherib, likewise king of the world, king of Assyria) with king so & so...*"⁵

Well, hear now how *God* writes the preamble to the Ten-Commandments Covenant (in Ex 20:2), "***I am the LORD your God...***" – literally, "***I am Yahweh your God...***"⁶

Now, on the surface, these words might seem insignificant, but look, whereas other covenants stipulated a *human* king's name – powerful overlord as he might have been, the Ten Commandments stipulates the Name of *the One who made us* – the One who, therefore, has the right to a personal relationship with us.

And so, right at the beginning of this covenant, you & I see that this covenant is not going to merely be ruled by cold law, but by *God* who, being the Author of our lives, is personally attached to us!

⁴ Scholars who wrote on these were at first:

- Mendenhall, George E. 1955. Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East
- Kline, Meredith G. 1968 (first edition). By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism
- Then followed lots of research on the same topic, done by numerous scholars from various countries, among these is my former head of the department Semitic Languages, HF van Rooy, at the North West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.
Van Rooy, HF. 1977. 'n Vergelyking van die struktuur van die buite-Bybelse staatsverdrae, met besondere aandag aan die Sefire-verdrae, met die struktuur van Deuteronomium.

⁵ Literally, "*This is the treaty of Esarhaddon, king of the world, king of Assyria, son of Sennacherib, likewise king of the world, king of Assyria, with Ramataya, city-ruler of Urakazabanu...*" For this vassal treaty of Esarhaddon, cf. Pritchard, JB. 1969. Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament. 3rd ed. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press. p.534)

⁶ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

Well, that's the first part – the *Preamble*. Here's the second part of an ancient treaty...

- **The Historic Formula**

In this part, the ancient overlord/king would briefly summarise the history of his relationship with his treaty-partner, mostly a weaker king, e.g. *“I, King X, I am the king who defended your borders when you were attacked by the enemy. Yes, I am the king who filled your barns with an abundance of grain... I am the one who looked after you in times of famine...”*

In other words, in the historic formula, the overlord would remind his vassal (minor treaty partner) of his good track record toward him. So, the historical prologue's function was to prompt the vassal into answering the question, *“What has my lord done for me lately!?”*

Well, here's the historic formula which *God* wrote into the Ten-Commandments Covenant (in Ex 20:2), *“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”*

In other words, *“My people Israel, in light of who I am (your Maker) and what I have already done for you (the salvation I have worked for you), I now expect your hearts to be moved into obeying My covenant stipulations!”*

My brother & sister, the neat thing is that, every time when God renewed His covenant with Israel, this Historic Formula had grown more & more with more gracious deeds of kindness which God had done for His people!

In fact, is it not fair to say that the entire Old Testament – filled with God's lovingkindness to His people – forms a “historic formula” – or prologue to the coming of Christ?

Yes, what else but God's good deeds of the past do we hear in Mary's song of praise, when she sings...

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..., for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.... He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty.

*He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”*⁷

For all practical purposes, you & I might look at all the blessings God has given to you & me on a personal level – salvation in Jesus Christ, good health, families, work & income, answers to prayer... the list goes on!

Well, so far, re the Historic Formula.

Here's the third part of an ancient treaty...

- **Promises & Stipulations**

In this part of the treaty the ancient overlord used to stipulate all his promises to his vassal king, as well as listing all the things he expected this vassal to do in return!

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Lk 1:46–55). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

As for the Ten Commandments, this is the part where God has listed all ten of them as well as the promise that He would show *steadfast love to thousands of those who love Him and keep His commandments*.⁸

So, God gives ten commandments with all their width and depth – rules & regulations which He expects us to keep!

Now here's something important: How often have you & I heard, "Rules & regulations belong to the *Old Testament*, for Christianity is not about rules & regulations, but about a personal relationship!"?

Well, that's not altogether right!

You see, Christianity is indeed not about rules and regulations *alone*! At its heart, it is indeed about a personal relationship! But, that relationship, because it is a *covenant* relationship, must contain rules and regulations! And these stipulations only receive their rightful place when God's people – His covenant partners (you & I) – obey His commandments because we have been *moved in our hearts* by 1) who He is and 2) what He has done (and is still doing) for us!

Well, so far, re the Stipulation part of a covenant.

Here's the fourth part...

- **Blessings & Curses**

The Ancient Near Eastern overlord's treaty also included blessings and punishments – a section in which the overlord promised that he would do good things for his vassal (minor king & treaty partner) if the vassal would meet all the conditions stipulated in the treaty. But if the vassal king did not meet those conditions, then he would experience the overlord's wrath/anger!

Well, Deut 28 gives a whole list of blessings which God would bestow upon His people if they would obey Him. But how frightening – the list of curses which would come upon them if they would disobey Him is nearly four times longer than the list of blessings!

Well, the blessings & curses are a vital part of a covenant – any covenant! I mean, even in our day & age, are there not *penalties* listed in any rental contract!

Besides, did God not already give Adam & Eve a list of curses and blessings – even in His covenant with them before their Fall!? Yes, did God not *promise* them the tree of life if they were obedient to His law in Eden; and if they were disobedient, that a *curse* would come upon them!?

So far re the Blessings-&-Curses part of a covenant.

Here is the fifth part...

- **Oaths of Allegiance**

When the whole contract/treaty was drawn up, the Ancient Near Eastern kings used to swear oaths of allegiance to that treaty.

Each king would swear by the names of his gods!

Well, here is something mind-bending! You see, when God entered into a covenant with Abraham – that He would make Abraham great by giving him a son through whom all nations would be blessed – God, as the major party in that covenant (Yes,

⁸ Cf. Ex 20:5-6 (especially v.6) ***You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.***
(Emphasis mine)

the Almighty God), then swore an oath to guarantee that He would do as He had promised!

Well, *by whose name* would God swear? I mean, there is no one higher than God by whom He could take an oath! Well, the Bible tells us, God then swore by Himself,⁹ yes, by His own Name – a Name that cannot lie and is forever the same! My brother & sister, all covenants/treaties are concluded by oaths – even today; yes, even if it comes in the form of your signature alongside that of your boss at work! But, strangely enough, that’s not what most young couples do today.

Yes, since the Cultural Revolution (of the Sixties & Seventies), they have gotten into the habit of saying, “But why do we have to get married!?” “What’s the significance of a piece of paper!?” “Why can’t we just live together and have our own private agreement?”

Well, they clearly don’t understand the sacred nature of the marriage *covenant!*

You see, *because marriage is a covenant between him and her, this couple – especially the Christian couple – needs to stand publicly in front of friends, family, the church, the government, and ultimately God, and vow before all these witnesses that, no matter what comes their way, they are committed to each other!*¹⁰

My brother & sister (and dear young people), hear again the introductory words to the Christian marriage ceremony. It says, “Dearly beloved, we are assembled here today in the presence of God and of these witnesses to join this man and this woman in the holy bonds of matrimony.”¹¹

Well, if some of you are planning to get married soon, I urge you to take *this* to heart: When someone breaks the marriage vow, committing adultery or deserting his/her spouse, he/she violates that sacred oath. Then that contract/covenant is destroyed. You see, there have been witnesses at your wedding (One of them was God who heard all that was vowed). There have been stipulations read out. Oaths and vows were taken to swear allegiance to the terms of the covenant!

Well, that was the *marriage* covenant.

But now we talk about God’s covenant *with us, His people* – His covenant with/through Abraham and Moses and David, and Christ. And this we have to say: “Thank God that He is a covenant Keeper, for if He was not, then Christ would never have come to earth; then He would never have made it to Golgotha; then He would never have risen from the grave!”

⁹ Cf. Heb 6:13-14 ***For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself,*** ¹⁴ *saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.”* (Emphasis mine)

Also cf. Gen 22:15-18 ***And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven*** ¹⁶ *and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,* ¹⁷ *I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies,* ¹⁸ *and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”* (Emphasis mine)

¹⁰ My slight adaptation of the well-said words of Sproul (ibid:212)

¹¹ Words quoted from Sproul (ibid:212) – words which I find better than those in the liturgical forms for marriage ceremonies of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. The last-mentioned ones read, “*Dear friends, we gather in God’s presence to witness the marriage of _____name and _____name, to share their joy on this occasion, and to pray God’s blessing on them, both now and in the years to come.*”

But, having seen God’s track record of sticking to His oaths, you and I now have the certain hope that He will also bring all things to that end He has promised, i.e. the return of Jesus Christ and the finishing of our salvation!

Well, so far re the Oaths section of the covenant.

Here is the sixth part...

- **Rite (Covenant Rite/Ceremony)**

In Bible times, when two kings entered into a treaty with one another, ending all the formalities, they would then slaughter animals, cut the carcasses in pieces and lay these in two rows opposite each other.

Then the two treaty partners would take hands and walk through these chopped-up carcasses.

The symbolism of that was to say to each other: “If you, my treaty partner, would break the oaths you have just made, then may your gods and I myself turn your body into chopped-up meat – just like these carcasses!”¹²

My brother & sister, here’s the beautiful thing! Have you noticed in our OT passage (Gn 15) that, after God had made His covenant with Abraham, it became dark and Abraham fell asleep!

Then? What happened next?

Well, who walked through the carcasses this time?

Verse 17 tells us: “*When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.* ¹⁸ *On that day the Lord made (in Hebrew, literally “cut”) a covenant with Abram...*”¹³

See?

God *alone* walked through the carcasses saying by that very action, “Abraham, you cannot perfectly keep this covenant!” “You will become a carcass yourself if you were to do this covenant rite/custom with Me.” “But *I* will walk through, because I will remain faithful to My oath to you!”

See? See why God’s covenant with us is called a “Covenant of *Grace*”?

My brother & sister, other covenant rites that involved the shedding of blood included...

- **circumcision**, by which God was saying as much as, “Look, Abraham, just as a part of your flesh has been cut off from your body, so have I cut *you* off from this fallen world, and consecrated you to Myself.” “I’ve given you a mark on your body to say that you belong to Me and I to you; and that we are in a covenant together!”¹⁴

But – and here’s the scary part – the same circumcision sign also says, “O God, if I do not keep the terms of this covenant, may I then be cut off from Your presence and grace just as I have cut off the foreskin of my flesh!”

- Then there’s **the cross** on which our Lord bled and died. His bloodshedding was saying two things: 1) I paid for your sins; 2) with My

¹² For a detailed article on this, cf. Jared T. Parker on Cutting Covenants at <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/gospel-jesus-christ-old-testament/7-cutting-covenants>

¹³ Gen 17:18 בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא קָרַת יְהוָה אֶת־אֲבְרָם בְּרִית

¹⁴ My adaptation from the well-phrased words of Sproul (ibid:212).

blood I gave God's signature and seal that He will stick to His promises to His loved ones.

Well, here's the seventh (and last) part of a covenant...

- **Safekeeping of the Treaty Document**

Today, every couple keep their marriage contract in a safe place. *They* do that, and the *NZ government* does that in case some or other institution needs to see that they are legally married.

In Bible times, kings who made a treaty also stipulated where the document had to be kept.

They usually wrote the wording of their treaty in duplicate, and each king had to store his copy safely so that, if a dispute arises, the document could again be examined/scrutinised.

Well, God wrote the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone. Some Bible scholars (differently to Martin Luther) have argued persuasively that it was written on two tablets – one being *God's* copy, and the other one *His people's* copy.¹⁵ And the order was given that both copies be stored in the Ark of the Covenant!

My brother & sister, you & I, too, have our own copies of God's covenant with us! Here it is – the Bible (OT & NT).

The question is: "How often do we scrutinise it?"

Does it live in your/my heart!?

AMEN (2,820 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁵ So Meredith Kline (apud Sproul, *ibid*:213)