

## LESSON 10:

# Rediscovering Redeeming Love

## *The Structure of Covenant*

### Getting Started

We have already established that in Reformed theology God is considered the *theme* of the Bible. The Bible was written by God for man. It is the story of God's desire to have a relationship with the man He created. God's plan for the redemption of man is the *red thread* running through the entire Bible—from Genesis 3, where man falls out of relationship with God, until the end of Revelation, where God's people begin eternity in His presence. It is called the *red thread* because God's redemption always involved the shedding of blood through covenant.

God's relationship with man has been defined by specific requirements and promises. God tells people how He wants them to act and also makes promises about how he will act toward them in various circumstances. The Bible contains several summaries of the provisions that define the different relationships between God and man that occur in Scripture. These summaries are called *covenants*. Every written document has a structure or format by which it is organized. Paragraphs have subjects and chapters have central points. God chose covenant around which to structure His relationship with man. The Bible is *structured* around these covenant relationships. Covenant is the structure by which the entire history of redemption is worked out in the Bible.

A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship. The words divinely imposed means that man can never negotiate with God or change the terms of the covenant: he can only accept the covenant obligations or reject them. Probably for this reason the Greek translators of the Old Testament, and following them the New Testament authors, did not use the ordinary Greek word for contracts or agreements in which both parties were equal (*syntheke*), but rather chose a less common word, *diatheke*, which emphasized that the provisions of the covenant were laid down by one of the parties only. This definition notes that covenants are unchangeable. They may be superseded or replaced by a different covenant, but they may not be changed once they are established.

A covenant is usually thought of as a contract, but there are important differences. Contracts are made from somewhat equal bargaining positions, and both parties are free not to sign the contract. But the covenants between God and man are not between equals. Rather, they follow a pattern common to ancient Near East suzerain-vassal treaties. Suzerain-vassal treaties (as seen among the Hittite kings) were made between a conquering king, or sovereign, and those he conquered. There was *no negotiation* between the parties. In the mid-twentieth century, a small monograph was published by George Mendenhall of the University of Michigan entitled *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. In it, Mendenhall

Historical evidence reveals that the practice of covenant was found among all three primitive divisions of the human race descending from Noah's three sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Evidence of covenant is found in all five modern divisions of the human race—Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, Malay, and American. Where did all these people scattered throughout the world learn the practice of covenant? Why are the customs so similar? The only reasonable answer is that covenant was given by God as an example when the race of man was in its earliest days—before they were dispersed throughout the earth.

describes archeological finds of ancient treaties of Hittite kings and other Near East nations which revealed a common structure with the covenants found in Scripture.

Actually the entire structure of the Bible is divided into the two main covenants between God and man—the Old covenant of the Law (Old Testament) and the New Covenant of Christ (New Testament). The word *testament is diatheke* (mentioned above), which means *covenant*. The two testaments are interlocked by Christ. The Old Testament of the Law points toward what Christ will do in the New Testament. Jesus holds the two testaments together. He said in Matthew 5:17:

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*

One of the hallmarks of Reformed Theology is to understand the connection between the Old and New Testaments. There is a saying: “The New Testament is in the Old concealed, the Old Testament is in the New revealed.” It is impossible to have a full understanding of the New Testament without studying the Old Testament.

In this week’s lesson, we will consider the *structure* of the ancient covenant. Most ancient treaties that have been discovered, including those in the Bible, have five basic elements:

- **Preamble**—Identified the sovereign or *king* forming or initiating the treaty.
- **Historical Prologue**—A brief history of the relationship between the king and his vassals which described the benefits the king had bestowed on his people
- **Stipulations and Sanctions**—the terms and agreement between the king and his vassal. They spelled out the responsibilities of both parties in meeting the agreement.
- **Oaths and Vows**—Ancient treaties were enacted by swearing oaths and vows which was witnessed by various authority structures: family, friends, and the state.
- **Ratification and Deposit**—Ancient covenants were ratified by a cutting rite. Animals were cut in half. Sometimes wrists were cut and then hands shook to mingle the blood together. Then the copies of the treaty were deposited in public places for safe keeping.

The thoughts for this week are:

*Preamble and Historical Prologue*

*Stipulations, Sanctions, Oaths, and Vows*

*Ratification and Deposit*

# Preamble and Historical Prologue

## Preamble

The first element of ancient covenant was the *preamble*. Like the Constitution of the United States, ancient covenant treaties began with a preamble. The preamble identifies the sovereign or king of the treaty. When God spoke to Moses in the burning bush, He identified himself as “I Am.” (Ex. 3:14) Then He referred to Himself as *the Lord* in verse 15, which He describes as His name forever. The sacred name *Yahweh* is introduced here and is God’s *covenant* name. The name was so sacred to the Jews they would not even pronounce it. Orthodox Jews today still will not pronounce the name, Yahweh. God is the *suzerain* (the conquering sovereign) and the people are the vassals (his newly acquired subjects).

1. Read Exodus 3:14. Why did God refer to Himself as “I Am?” How was this an example of a preamble in ancient covenants?

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## Historical Prologue

After the suzerain or *king* was introduced in the preamble of a Hittite treaty, a brief history of the relationship between him and his subjects was given. In this *prologue*, the benefits offered by the relationship with the king or sovereign were laid out. In the Old Testament when God enacted a covenant with his people or when the covenants were renewed, He mentioned His previous works among them. In theological terms, this could be called the section of *grace*.

2. Read Exodus 20:2. What benefits of being in relationship with Him did God give in this verse before He extended the conditions of the covenant?

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There are two important things that should be noted about the preambles and prologues to the covenants God made with His people. First, God has a name. He is personal, not an abstract force or elusive *higher power*. He is not only a sovereign ruler but a personal being who enters into a personal relationship with his people. Second, he acts for the benefit of His people. Just as He states in the prologue that He liberated Israel from slavery at the time of their exodus. The God of covenant is active in history and he historically has a relationship with His people who benefit from that relationship.

3. Review the two points above concerning the preambles and prologues of covenants. On the lines below describe how full understanding of these two aspects of being in covenant with God should be of comfort to you. How have they been a comfort, even this week?

*Preamble* \_\_\_\_\_

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The word **covenant** is used 298 times in the Word of God.

*Reformed Theology is nicknamed **Covenant Theology** because it sees the structure of the Bible being centered around covenants. This distinguishes it from **Dispensational Theology** which sees the structure of the Bible centered around seven dispensations (specific testing periods in redemptive history) defined originally in the **Scofield Reference Bible**.*

–R.C. Sproul

**What is Reformed Theology?**

*Prologue* \_\_\_\_\_  
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- The preamble identifies the sovereign or king of the treaty.
- The historical prologue tells what the sovereign has done for the other party in the past.
- God is a personal God, not an abstract being, who historically has benefited those who come into covenant with Him.

**Truth for Today:** *He is the Lord our God; his judgments are in all the earth. He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations...*

Psalm 105:7-8

# Stipulations, Sanctions, Oaths, and Vows

## Stipulations and Sanctions

In the next section of a covenant, the king lists everything he will require of those he rules. These are the *terms* of the agreement. In the covenant of the Law in the Old Testament, these terms are the Ten Commandments listed in Exodus 20. In ancient covenants, once the definite terms between the two parties were agreed upon, declarations were publicly announced, and in many cases written down in duplicate—one copy for each party. The copies of the covenant were then signed by friends and several witnesses. In the Hittite treaties that were discovered, the Hittite king promised to use his army to protect his subjects, and the subjects agreed to pay him tribute money.

1. (a) God's covenant with us is rooted in love much like the covenant of marriage. What does John 14:15 say about our covenant relationship with God?

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- (b) How should remembering all He has done for us (prologue) make this easier?

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Ancient Near Eastern treaties contained dual sanctions: benefits were promised to those who kept the treaty's terms or stipulations, and penalties were prescribed for those who violated these terms. The sanctions of Old Testament covenants were expressed as blessings and curses.

2. (a) Blessings for obeying God covenant of the Law are given in Deuteronomy 28:1-8. What are some of these blessings? Would you say you have experienced some of these blessings because you are in covenant with God?

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- (b) The curses for not obeying the covenant are listed in Deuteronomy 28:15-68. Do you believe that not obeying the terms of God's covenant today causes penalties. If so, name some of them.

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And whenever one decides to be a friend, we (who are joined in covenant) make the greatest of all oaths, to live with one another, and to die, if need be, the one for the other... There is nothing which can loose us from another after that.

—Clay Trumbull

*A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserteth, or promiseth, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he sweareth.*

*The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear, and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence. Therefore, to swear vainly, or rashly, by that glorious and dreadful Name; or, to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred.*

—The Westminster  
Confession

## Oaths and Vows

Treaties in the ancient world were enacted by swearing oaths and vows. Again, we see similarities in the marriage ceremony. These vows are witnessed by various authority structures, such as family, friends, and the state. Sometimes a meal was eaten together afterward.

In biblical covenants, vows are especially important. They are to be made by appealing to God as the witness. Jesus said in Matthew 5:33:

*Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'*

However, swearing to anything less than God Himself is prohibited as an act of idolatry

3. What do Matthew 5:34-37 and James 5:12 say about swearing to anything or anyone other than God?

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The *Westminster Confession* views vows as so important to true religion that it devotes an entire chapter to the matter. Scripture takes vowing seriously because it takes covenants so seriously. The very basis of our relationship with God is a covenant. We live with hope and confidence because God has made promises to us that he has sealed with His own vow. As we will see in the next part of this lesson, the penalty for breaking a covenant was *death*. You were willing to die for a person with whom you made a covenant. Bells should be going off as to why Jesus came to die for us!

4. Read Hebrews 6:13-20. This passage refers to the covenant between God and Abraham that we will look at in the next section. What does it say about how seriously God sees covenant and why should we be *greatly encouraged* by this fact?

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- Stipulations and sanctions described the terms of the agreement.
- Oaths and vows were sworn by the participating parties before witnesses.
- The Bible takes covenant so seriously it warns against swearing to anything other than God.

**Truth for Today:** *O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands.* Nehemiah 1:4-5

# Ratification and Deposit

## Ratification

In biblical times, covenants were ratified in blood. It was customary for both parties making a covenant to pass between dismembered animals, signifying their agreement to the terms of the covenant. It was a declaration: "If I break this promise, may what happened to these animals happen to me." A covenant was binding until death. It also signified that one party was willing to give his life for the other.

We have an example of this kind of covenant in Genesis 15:7-21. Here, God made certain promises to Abraham, which were ratified by the sacrificing of animals. However, in this case, only God passed through the animals, indicating that He is binding Himself by a solemn oath to fulfill the covenant. There were no terms other than faith for Abraham to fulfill. (In the covenant, which we will look at in next week's lesson, the New Covenant was ratified by the blood of Christ.)

1. Read Genesis 15:6-21. In this passage God is manifested in the *smoking firepot*.

(a) What did God vow to Abraham that He was going to do for him?

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(b) What did Abraham have to do as his part of the agreement?

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(c) What did God do in verse 17 to ratify the covenant?

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The cutting rite of circumcision was used as a *sign* of the covenant between God and Abraham. The foreskin of every male was *cut*, shedding blood in the process. Both the positive and negative aspects of the covenant were symbolized by circumcision. It symbolized the blessing of Abraham and his descendants being consecrated, set apart from the mass of fallen humanity to be God's chosen people. It also dramatized the penalty for covenant breaking. "If I fail to keep my covenant oath," the Jew was saying, "may I be separated from God's blessings even as my foreskin has been separated from my body." (Gen. 17:9-14)

The ultimate rite of covenant ratification was the ratification of the New Covenant by the blood of Christ. Jesus initiated this covenant in the Upper Room during the Last Supper, and then *ratified* it the next day by pouring out his blood on the cross. He was willing to *die* for His covenant partners. (Heb. 9:14-15)

## Deposit

Just as copies of Hittite suzerainty treaties were deposited in a public place for safekeeping, so God instructed Israel to place the tablets of stone in the mercy seat, which was housed first in the tabernacle and later in the temple in the Holy of Holies behind the veil. The ark of the covenant where the tablets were kept was also called the *ark of the testimony*. Exodus 25:21-22:

The Hebrew word for **made** (Genesis 15:18) is **karath**, which means **to cut off, cut down, fell, cut, or make**.

The Hebrew word for **covenant** is **beriyth (ber-eeh)**, which means a compact (made by passing between pieces of flesh), a confederacy, covenant, league.

Therefore, **to make a covenant** in Hebrew actually means **to cut a covenant**.

Henry M. Stanley who went to Africa to join David Livingston, the missionary explorer, in 1871 relates many instances of cutting covenants with African chiefs. In his book, **The Congo**, he writes:

"I had become united forever to my fiftieth brother; to whom I was under the obligation of defending (him) against all foes until death."

*Place the cover on top of the ark and put in the ark the Testimony, which I will give you. There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.*

From time to time, God’s covenant with Israel was renewed, such as at Moab with the death of Moses and at Shechem with the passing of Joshua. On these occasions, the historical prologue was brought up to date, reminding Israel of God’s latest redemptive acts on behalf of His people.

Blood covenants have been documented in ancient cultures all over the world. In many instances, the copies of the terms, often marked by the blood of the covenant partner, were folded and sewn into an inch-square, small leather case called an *amulet*. These were worn by each covenant brother for the rest of his life, either suspended around the neck or bound on the arm. It has been the custom of Jews to wear parts of the Jewish Law in leather cases called *phylacteries* attached to their forehead or arms to openly display their covenant agreement with God.

2. Before doing this lesson had you thought of your relationship to God in terms of a *covenant*? Does it give you any added degree of certainty or sense of security in your relationship to God to know that he governs that relationship by a set of promises that he will never change? Why or why not?

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- Ancient covenants all over the world were ratified by blood and binding until death.
- The covenant promises were displayed in a place of prominence as a permanent reminder.
- The New Covenant was ratified by the blood of Christ.

**Truth for Today:** *Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,’ says the Lord, who has compassion on you. Isaiah 54:10-11*

**Notes:**

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