

God's Covenants in Christological Perspective

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Preamble

Most Christians have a 'high-altitude' overview of God's dispensations (a divinely ordained system prevailing at a particular period in history), providing for a rapid impression of His Covenants. That, however, is not enough to get a holistic view of God's dispensations and the basis for His Covenants. We will look at it a little bit more in depth as we unfold Biblical narratives on Covenants, taking a much more deliberate step by step unfolding of the history of God's promises (Covenants) and His preparation for the preservation of His creation and the final restoration of His economy through God the Son, Jesus Christ, taking humanity back to the Heaven on earth.

The unfolding of the Covenants through the dispensations, especially as they relate to the ultimate fulfilment of God's Will, emphasise the continuum between the dispensations as periods of time during which God did certain things or caused the created world to function in specific ways. In other words, God's administration tends to dominate the scenes of Biblical history. This dispensation involves mandates and responsibilities for ruling or governing and preserving humanity as history moves towards the gift of the perfect rule of Christ. Therefore, the Covenants involve a promise of fulfilment that moves the elect closer to the final fulfilment of all promises through Christ. We see the unfolding of dispensations for the preservation and governance of humanity, holding us together, keeping us from destroying each other. God is found working out His redemptive plan, moving us towards restoration through these Covenants. What we need to understand is that if we have nothing preserved, there will be nothing to redeem. Preservation is, therefore, necessary for ultimate redemption and restoration. The Biblical Covenants, when understood in the proper perspective, lead us to see the 'New Heaven' in the 'New Earth' as the New Creation of Jesus, as promised in His New Covenant.

The Covenants, seen from an academic perspective, will progressively emphasise the Heaven on earth (the Garden of Eden) in an untainted creation, and the Adamic Covenant blessing humans to subdue the entire earth, progressively establishing Heaven on earth as the whole. But that was not to be, as man allowed sin to enter his life and disobeyed his Creator. Not only was the man thrown out of the Garden of Eden, but this Heaven on earth was also taken away from humanity. The disconnect between God and His people grew wider and wider.

Man became steeped in all forms of sin and became subject to Satan. But God continued to be merciful and grieved the disconnect. He wanted the reconciliation with His people at any cost and give back the Heaven taken away from them when the redemption takes place, provided they give up their sinful ways and remain obedient to Him. Sadly, His people did not heed. From time to time, warnings of destruction came to people, but, being a benevolent Father, He entered into covenants for preservation. We see this unfolding in the Covenants He made with Abraham, Moses, Noah and David. All these Covenants culminate in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

Adamic Covenant is a promise of a 'heaven on earth' (garden of Eden filling the earth?) which Adam was blessed with to safeguard, work on, multiply and expand to 'fill the earth.' The Abrahamic Covenant, akin to the Adamic Covenant, is a promise of a 'land-nation' blessing passed down through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and then to the twelve tribes through the 12 patriarchs. The Mosaic Covenant is also a land-centric blessing. If the elect reciprocates, do all the stipulations of the commandments and statutes, they will receive all the lost blessings in the land promised, Heaven on earth. God's Covenant with Noah, however, was about the preservation of Creation towards its final restoration as a New Creation. It was a commitment to maintain the inherent relationship between Creator and His creation; His relationship with the natural order, implicit in the act of creation, whereby He promised never again to destroy the earth with a flood. The Davidic Covenant promises a line of anointed kings that points towards the Messiah. However, Biblical narratives, beginning with Adam, tell us that if the elect fail to keep their end of the commitment, they will progressively be disciplined. The curse will come upon them, and eventually they will not inherit or be able to live in a 'Heaven on Earth.'

We can understand this through a study of eschatology, which means the study of last things or ultimate things where the world is headed. But we cannot begin this study through eschatology, which is used to describe the critical nature of human decisions, the fate of the individual believer's soul after death, the termination of this world order and the setting up of another, events like the last judgment and the resurrection of the dead, and a convenient way of referring to future hopes. I would rather use the term Christology in place of eschatology, as the study cannot begin by asking what the next event on God's timetable is and then proceed to put the end-time events together. We will not be able to

put that in any proper context or understanding, or have any inclination of what God is doing, just studying eschatology. We have to go back to Adam and start from there.

Lesson 1

Adamic Covenant

Let us look at Genesis chapter one. “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. 28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” - Genesis 1:26-28. Much discussion has taken place throughout church history on this passage. What does it mean to be created according to the image of God or in the likeness of God? We find no meeting ground on what it implies, especially in relation to Trinity. Is the image of God just related to our bodies or physical aspects? Most people abandon that thought quickly and conclude that what really matters are intellectual, spiritual, and non-physical aspects, and this is where most churches gravitate. We were created as psychosomatic embodied beings in flesh. That is what humanity is intended to be: the separation of the soul from the material body.

So, the image of God has to relate to the inner person, and it has an essential aspect: there is something about our fundamental human nature that reflects, in some way, God’s image; there is something about our relationship with God and creation that reflects that image of God. There is something about the calling itself of the functional aspect of the image of God. We are called to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over all the creation on behalf of God. It is interesting to examine this more closely in verse 28. God blessed them and said to them be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. The task itself is a blessing. Work is a blessing. Laziness is not, as God did not say, “I have worked out all for you. Just sit around and do nothing.”

God gets up, makes things happen on earth, forms it, fills it and stops on the sixth day. After day six, He creates humanity and then tells humanity to continue with the work He started. Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, tend on and keep the garden. For humanity, there is more to be done. God blessing them implies that God is not merely giving them a task to accomplish, but also enabling them to do it. I don’t think we were ever intended to be independent of God and do everything in our own power. God is not making a bunch of immortal beings that are entirely independent of Him. Our entire internal life, forever and ever, will depend on God and His grace. In Isaiah 44:3-4, we read, “For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring: 4 And they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses.” The parallel here is that the Spirit Himself is the blessing.

Christ redeemed us from the curse. Through Christ Jesus, the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. So, the Spirit, the enabling Spirit, the regenerating Spirit, the refreshing Spirit, the encouraging Spirit, the one that comes

Alongside us, who teaches us is the manifestation of God’s presence. We have to look to Christ, who is the image of God. He becomes the model for us, especially in anticipation as we look at eschatology. He paid a price through His death on the cross to accomplish and redeem humanity conformed to His image, an image humanity lost due to the fall. God obviously knew that Christ would incarnate and be the second Adam, bringing not just redemption but also a model for humanity to imitate.

We believe that we go to heaven. When we die, we enter into the heavenly realm, the realm of what is proper to ‘gods.’ Christians obviously don’t believe, nor have they ever thought to, that you become ‘gods’, but they do believe that you enter into the realm or the state or condition that properly only belongs to God. We are invited into the experience of graced immortality. There is an overlap of heaven and earth in terms of dimensions and history, and Christians are called to live right in this tension. We are physically here, and spiritually, in terms of our true destiny, there. Jesus is physically there, and presently, by His Spirit, here. We can see a clue of this in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1--8). Recall how it works. Jesus does not take Peter, James, and John to a faraway galaxy light-years out of sight. They walked up a mountain, and here on this earth, Moses and Elijah stepped in to talk to Jesus in His glorified form. For that moment, the curtain was pulled back, as it were, and the heavenly dimension that overlaps with our reality was briefly presented.

New Testament passages elevate Jesus Christ as the image of God, then by extension, the believing community shares in this new Christ-centric graphology. As the image of God, the Son became Incarnate in a humanity created according to the image of God. If you think about this in the plan and purpose of God, we were created humans in such a way that Christ, God the Son, could and would become Incarnate as one of us.

When the Word became flesh and moved into our ‘dimension’ (John 1:14), God climatically stepped foot into our ‘reality’ as we understand. He humbled Himself to a body like ours and to the little three dimensions we call ‘normal.’ God, in the person of Jesus, came into our world, and when He rose from the dead, He sparked the beginning of the day when our world will become His own. That resurrection morning dawned the new creation light that will overcome everything as we know it. The question before us is, when Jesus unveils His New Creation, will the different dimensions of heaven and earth merge?

In the meantime, there is you and me!

Scripture references: Genesis 1, 2, 3 and 1 John 3 (recommended)

Lesson Points:

The Covenants of the Bible involve promises that move the people of God closer to the fulfilment of all promises through Christ.

When we understand God’s purposes for humanity from the beginning, we will be able to understand the purpose behind End Times events.

Christ is our model for understanding the image of God.

There is controversy around our state in heaven.

Some think the terms refer to the false idea that humans become gods. A better word for this concept is Christification, the process by which redeemed humans become more Christlike.

Through progressive glorification, we are ever growing towards—but never fully attaining—the complete likeness of Christ.

Discussion Points:

Eschatology is the study of the End Times. Why spend all this time on covenants in an Eschatology class? Why go back to the beginning?

Do you feel like you’re growing as a reflector of God’s image? Are you growing in your knowledge of God and your relationship with Him? Are you growing in your relationships with other believers?

Some people play down the supernatural when they talk about Jesus. They don’t like talking about His resurrection. They’re uncomfortable with the idea that He is both God and man, and they reduce Jesus to a mere moral example. What’s dangerous about this kind of thinking?

Lesson 1 Quiz

Question #1: Which of the following best explains why this study of the Covenants begins with Adam rather than with the events of the end times?

Because Christology, not eschatology, must be our starting point if we are to understand God’s redemptive purpose for humanity.

Because Adam’s story has no real bearing on how the end times will unfold.

Because the Covenants have nothing to do with the fulfilment of God’s promises through Christ.

Because the dispensations exist independently of God’s covenantal plan.

Question #2: When all things are fulfilled, redeemed humanity will be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Which is the first event in Scripture that points to this as the purpose of humanity?

Creation

Noah’s flood

The calling of Abraham

The giving of the Law

Question #3: Which of the following statements about the image of God is FALSE?

Humans fulfil a functional aspect of the image of God when we create other human beings, through procreation.

Humans reflect the image of God by ruling over His physical creation.

The image of God is reflected only in the spiritual part of our being; our physical bodies do not reflect the image of God.

Humans reflect the image of God through our intellectual capacity, spiritual capacity, and moral sense.

Prayer Moment

Closing prayer incorporating the topic studied.

Lesson 2

God's Covenant with Noah

Let us read Genesis 1:20-25: "And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth. And the evening and the morning were the fifth day. And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so. And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good."

Interestingly, we are not told what substances God used to create everything else, except that God brought all those things into existence. However, Genesis 2:7 tells us that "the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." Do you find a qualitative difference between the life of humans and other creatures? God blessed the other creatures only by saying, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth." After creating everything, God put the Garden of Eden in it and placed Adam and Eve in it. When He blessed man, He added one additional blessing, subdue it. Obviously, there was a divine difference between the Garden of Eden and the world outside of it. Just think about it. Had Adam and Eve not fallen, they would have been fruitful, multiplied, tended the Garden, filled the earth and also subdued it. All of us would have been sharing the morning and evening walk with Jesus, chatting away with Him. As we have seen in our last session, that was not to be, but God, from time to time, promised and assured us that one day there will be a New Creation by Jesus, and we will live in it. Not just Christians, but all people of God.

The Adamic covenant we have talked about in detail. It emphasises humans ruling as the image of God, or exercising dominion over all that is on the earth. Other Covenants, coming up, reaffirm the Adamic promise of preservation. Covenant is one of the most important theological ideas in Biblical Theology. It is reflected in the traditional labels of the Old and New Testaments. The concept exists at significant points in the Bible's

storyline, and it is the theological glue that binds 'promise to fulfilment.' So the Biblical history of salvation and the unfolding of God's Covenants are almost synonymous.

Although the word 'covenant' itself is not used in the Bible until Genesis 6:18, when God tells Noah of His intention to establish one with him, God's dealings with Adam are still widely regarded as a covenant of a kind, even without the word itself being used, since a covenant in its fuller sense usually carries a sworn or formally enacted pledge. Taken in that fuller sense, the covenant with Noah is the first properly so called between God and man. God recalls it again through the prophet Isaiah: "For this is as the waters of Noah unto me: for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth; so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee" (Isaiah 54:9). That covenant, then, is God's own pledge to preserve His creation after the flood.

Even though the word itself waits until after the flood to appear, each of the covenants that follow, Noah's, Abraham's, Moses', David's, and finally the New Covenant, carries forward the same divine commitment: that God will not abandon His purpose for creation, and for humanity within it, until His Kingdom is fully and finally established on earth.

God speaks of this covenant with all creation before the flood comes (Genesis 6:18), but it is only sealed once the waters have receded (Read Genesis 8:20 to 9:17). Its first mention centres on God's plan to keep Noah and his family safe within the Ark. In it, God returns His creation to the same purpose Adam was first given, and gives His word that no flood will ever again be allowed to break in on that purpose before it is complete (Read Genesis 9:1--7).

The flood Noah witnessed could not have been a localised event. It can be argued that it covered the entire earth. The reason was widespread wickedness and resultant destruction of the natural order of creation. If you and I could bring forth a flood of such magnitude, we would have finished off the original creation at that point itself. Nothing was stopping God from doing that and bringing in a new creation. Why did God not do that? Instead, He made elaborate plans to preserve the creation through Noah. We read in Genesis 9:1-5, "after the flood receded and the earth became normal." Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. 2

The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the world and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. 3 Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now provide you with everything. 4 “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. 5 And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.” Do you hear Jesus say, “love your neighbour as yourself?”

The further commands given here (Genesis 9:4-6) place a particular weight on the value of human life. Together, they make plain why this covenant was given: so that life on earth might continue, undisturbed by any further judgement of that kind, until God’s wider purpose of redemption reaches everyone and everything He made. That same wide reach, first seen in Genesis 1 to 11, does not disappear as the story narrows to one family, and then one nation, in the chapters that follow.

Noah’s flood, and the covenant that followed it, do not stand as an isolated Old Testament episode. Jesus Himself reached back to it when describing His own return: “But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (Matthew 24:37-39). Jesus therefore treats Noah’s flood not merely as ancient history, but as a pattern for how His own coming, and the judgement that accompanies it, will be received by an unprepared world.

The Apostle Peter takes the flood further still, and draws it directly into the New Covenant. He writes of those in Noah’s day “which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:20-21). The very waters that carried judgement upon a sinful world became, for Noah’s household, the means of their deliverance into a preserved and renewed earth. Peter reads this as a figure of what happens in Christ: the waters that stand for judgement are also, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the means of salvation. Noah was preserved through water; we are saved through the One who was raised from among the dead. In this sense, Jesus is a better Noah. He does not merely preserve a fallen world so that history may continue, as God did through Noah; He brings a world through judgement into an entirely new creation, one no longer merely spared but truly renewed.

This is the distinction we noted at the very outset of this study: preservation makes redemption possible, but it is not redemption itself. Noah’s covenant preserved humanity so that there would be a world left to redeem. The New Covenant of Jesus Christ is that redemption itself, accomplished once and for all.

Scripture references: Genesis 1, 2, 8 and 9, Luke 23:43, 2 Corinthians 12:2--4, Revelation 2:7, Matthew 24:37-39, and 1 Peter 3:20-21

Lesson Points

Before Adam and Eve fell, they were given the job to subdue the earth.

It was intended that the glory and knowledge of God would fill the earth in a process of Progressive Edenification.

After the fall, God took Eden away from the earth; when everything is renewed, Eden will be returned to the planet.

Each covenant provides further divine assurance that God will achieve His purpose for creation in general and humanity in particular by fully establishing His Kingdom on earth.

God’s Covenant with Noah returns creation to the purpose Adam was first given, and guards that purpose from ever being broken in on again in the same way.

Do you see any similarity between God’s blessing of Adam and the blessing He gave to Noah and his family? What do you think is God’s purpose in doing so?

There are additional commands in God’s Covenant with Noah that emphasise the value of human life in particular.

Discussion Questions

How did the early church use Luke 23:43, 2 Corinthians 12:2--4, and Revelation 2:7 to support the idea that Eden has been transformed into Paradise? What do you think of this interpretation?

Why is it said that we are not smart enough to know whether a particular tragedy is God’s wrath due to the sin of an individual or common wrath that affects all of humanity and creation itself? Wouldn’t God want us to figure out if our behaviour is bringing specific wrath so that we can get back to obeying Him?

Why did God not destroy the earth and everything in it and create everything afresh after the flood?

Why do you think God promised Noah that He would never again send a flood to interrupt humanity's calling to fill and steward the earth?

Lesson 2 Quiz

Question #1: According to Genesis 8:20 to 9:17, what sign did God give as the token of His covenant never again to destroy the earth by flood?

The Ark itself

A rainbow set in the clouds

An altar built by Noah

A dove bearing an olive leaf

Question #2: When God blessed Noah and his sons after the flood, what did He add that had not been part of His original blessing on Adam?

Nothing at all; the blessing was word for word identical.

The provision of every living creature as food, together with the prohibition on eating flesh with its lifeblood still in it.

The command to be fruitful and multiply.

The command to fill the earth.

Question #3: Fill in the blank. The purpose of humanity, as this lesson presents it, is the progressive expression of _____.

Kindness and gentleness

Praise

Care for creation

The image of God

Question #4: Which of the following best states why God's covenant with Noah is of universal significance?

It concerned only the nation of Israel and its future.

It bound God to the whole of creation, guaranteeing that a suspension of the natural order will never again interrupt the fulfilment of His purpose.

It replaced the Adamic Covenant entirely and set it aside.

Its fulfilment depended entirely on Noah's own obedience and that of his descendants.

Prayer Moment:

Closing prayer, which should include the topic discussed.

Lesson 3

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

The promises given to the patriarchal line, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are first recorded in Genesis 12:1--3: "Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." Two distinct blessings are bound up together here: Abraham himself would become a great nation, with a name to match; and through him, God would carry His blessing out to everyone else besides.

Significantly, each of these two promises is later ratified by its own covenant. The first is sealed in Genesis 15:18--21: "In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates: The Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims, And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites." The wider promise, to bless all nations, is not yet spoken of there, but it is taken up in Genesis 17:4--6: "As for me,

behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.” The same promise is given again of Sarah in Genesis 17:16: “And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.” And in Genesis 17:7, God calls it what it is: “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.”

It would be easy to read Genesis 17 as simply restating what Genesis 15 had already promised, but the circumstances are different enough, and the emphasis has shifted enough, that something more seems to be happening: a second stage in God’s dealings with Abraham, building on the first rather than repeating it. Read alongside Genesis 22, these two chapters together look like a second, distinct covenant, related to the one already made in Genesis 15 but not identical to it. The first covenant, in Genesis 15, made good on the promise that Abraham would become a “great nation” (Genesis 12:2); its focus is on how that would happen through his own physical descendants, later identified as the sons of Jacob, that is, Israel.

But Genesis 15 was only ever the first stage of God’s unfolding plan of redemption. The second stage concerns how Abraham, through that great nation descended from him,

would carry that blessing out to “all peoples on earth” (Read Genesis 12:3). This seems to be the primary focus in Genesis 17 and 22. Having said that, one factor is found missing in all subsequent Covenants, as compared to the Adamic Covenant, ‘subdue’ the earth. I see this as an affirmation that the Kingdom of God or Heaven on Earth is no longer accessible to the generations that have come. The earth is therefore to be ruled by the patriarchs and the kings, normal human beings. Establishing the Kingdom of God can be done only by Divine intervention, and this New Creation, or re-creation of the garden lost, will be accomplished by Jesus Christ, God the Son.

Even though the promise of nationhood is not altogether absent in Genesis 17, stress is placed on “nations,” “kings,” and a perpetual divine-human relationship with Abraham’s “offspring” (Genesis 17:4--8,16--21). Significantly, focus is placed on Isaac (Read Genesis 17:21; Genesis 21:12) as the one through whom this Covenant will be perpetuated, highlighting what was at stake in the Divine test of Genesis 22. There, Abraham’s obedient faith (Read Genesis 22:16b,18b) met the demands of Genesis 17:1: “walk before me, and be thou perfect.” The entire narrative about Abraham can be summarised in one word: ‘obedience.’ When he was asked to leave everything and go, he obeyed; when he was told of a son when he was 100 years old, he believed; when he was asked to sacrifice his only son, he almost killed his son. God abundantly blessed him for his faith and obedience. I see this as a precursor lesson for generations to be obedient to God’s Will, His law, which came through Moses.

So we can say that God made two related but distinct covenants with Abraham. The first, in Genesis 15, secured the promise that he would become a great nation. The second, anticipated in Genesis 17 and sealed by God’s own oath in Genesis 22, secured the promise that all nations would be blessed through him and his offspring.

The offering of Isaac in Genesis 22 carries a further significance beyond Abraham’s obedience alone. As father and son went up the mountain together, Isaac himself asked the question that hangs over the whole scene: “My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” And Abraham answered, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together” (Genesis 22:7-8). Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice up the mountain, and in the end a substitute, a ram caught in a thicket, was offered in his place. The mountain itself lay in “the land of Moriah” (Genesis 22:2), later identified as the very site in Jerusalem upon which the Temple would be built (2 Chronicles 3:1). Long before the Law was given through Moses, then, God had already given Abraham a picture, on that same ground, of a father offering his only son, a son who would himself carry the wood of his own sacrifice, and a substitute provided by God Himself in the place of the one who was to die. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham reasoned his way through this ordeal by trusting that God was able to raise Isaac even from the dead, “from whence also he received him in a figure” (Hebrews 11:17-19), a figure, many have long read, of the greater resurrection still to come.

Paul takes the same episode, and the promises surrounding it, further still. The promise that “in thee shall all nations be blessed” was, he says, the gospel preached beforehand to Abraham (Galatians 3:8-9), and the singular word used throughout these promises, ‘seed,’ points in the end to one person alone: “He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ” (Galatians 3:16), a promise we shall return to in our next lesson. It is little wonder, then, that Jesus could say of this same Abraham, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad” (John 8:56). Abraham was given, on Mount Moriah and in the promises that followed, more than a nation and more than a land; he was given a glimpse of the very Son through whom all these Covenants would one day be fulfilled.

Scripture references: Genesis 15, 17, 22, Acts 7:5-8, 2 Chronicles 3:1, Hebrews 11:17-19, Galatians 3:8-9 and 16, and John 8:56

Lesson points:

God’s Covenant with Abraham was the first of patriarchal covenants.

In the backdrop, the Covenant was a command and assurance (Genesis 12:1-3).

God’s promise to Abraham held two blessings together: a great nation bearing a great name, and, through that nation, blessing carried out to every other people on earth.

Chapters 17 and 22 of Genesis present a second covenant—one distinct from but related to the earlier covenant established in Genesis 15.

Abraham’s faith was not perfect. Sometimes he despaired or made wrong choices. For example, when he married his servant Hagar to have a child by her, or when he told that his wife was just his sister, so that Pharaoh took her for his wife (Genesis 12:10-20). But the summary of his life is: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3).

Abraham and his descendants would rule the earth they lived in, but were not to subdue something divinely of a higher order.

Jesus Christ, God the Son, will establish a New Creation, and there will be a new heaven and earth.

Discussion questions:

Did God see any sustained qualities in Abraham that God decided to pick up Abraham and bless him?

What were the Covenants God established with Abraham?

In view of the Adamic Covenant and the Covenant with Noah, what, in your view, was the purpose of the Abrahamic Covenants?

What element do you observe as missing in these Covenants in comparison to the Adamic Covenant, and what reason would you attribute to this omission?

Lesson 3 Quiz

Question #1: Whose name was changed to “Abraham”?

Ham

Rahab

Abram

Abel

Question #2: What was the token of the covenant between Abraham and God?

Burnt sacrifice

Tithes

Circumcision

Sacraments

Question #3: When the LORD told Abraham that his wife Sarah would bear a son, what was his reaction?

He cried

He ran to his wife and told her

He fainted

He laughed

Question #4: Through which of Abraham’s sons would the LORD establish His covenant?

Jacob

Ishmael

Joseph

Isaac

Question #5: According to this lesson, what did the covenant confirmed in Genesis 17 and 22 add to the earlier covenant of Genesis 15?

Nothing; the two covenants say exactly the same thing.

The promise that all nations on earth would be blessed through Abraham's offspring, and not merely that his descendants would become a great nation.

The command to subdue the earth, first given to Adam.

The promise of the land of Canaan, which is entirely absent from Genesis 15.

Prayer moment:

Closing prayer incorporating the Covenant theme studied.

Lesson 4

THE MOSAIC COVENANT

God established the Mosaic covenant just after a significant development anticipated in Genesis 15 occurred: the emancipation of Abraham's descendants from oppression in a foreign land. We read in Genesis 15:13-14: "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance." Much later, after their exodus from Egyptian slavery, God opened His Holy heart to Moses and told him, "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Exodus 19:4-6). The question at Sinai, then, is not chiefly what Abraham's descendants must do to receive the land, since that promise already stands; it is how they are to live once they are in it, as the unique nation God intended them to be.

If Israel were to be, in the LORD's own words, "a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), keeping His covenant was not optional, but the very condition of becoming what they had been called to be (Read Exodus 20--23). Doing so would set them apart from every other nation, a visible sign to the watching world of God's own wisdom, as Moses himself told them: "Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Deuteronomy 4:6). And what mattered still more to Israel's own self-understanding is this, from Deuteronomy 7:6-7: "For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people."

Our God is not a majoritarian God. He picked a small population from the world of large kingdoms, nations and mighty people, as His preferred people and just wanted them to believe in Him as the one and the only God and live by His Covenants and commandments. Israel failed to keep their side of the bargain. This takes us straight to the teaching of Jesus Christ: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets"

(Matthew 22:37-40). We see Him repeating and dealing with the Ten Commandments Moses received from God on Mount Sinai. Jesus made it easy to understand, by gathering the first four of the Ten Commandments, those concerned with our duty to God, into the one Commandment to love God, and the remaining six, those concerned with our duty to one another, into the second Commandment to love our neighbour. We have seen how God picked Israel and tasked them with His covenants and Commandments. Now we see how Jesus, God the Son, wants another small group of people He picked up, who are now the community of Christians, to fulfil His Will. Jesus has laid out the mandate for the Christians very clearly. He has given Christians the Great Commission: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15), and in order that they may live reflecting His values, He also said, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34-35).

Going back to the Old Testament, Abraham's descendants would not only follow in the footsteps of their ancestor but

also carry forward the fulfilment of God’s promises: “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him” (Genesis 18:19). Thus, like Abraham, Israel was called to “walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Genesis 17:1). Failing to do so would undermine the very reason for Israel’s existence, a failure the golden calf incident illustrates all too clearly (Read Exodus 32--34). God did renew the covenant afterwards (Exodus 34), but this was His own grace at work, not anything Israel had earned (Exodus 34:6--7); and by restating the same obligations once the incident had passed, God made plain that Israel’s responsibility remained exactly what it had been before.

Israel had to obey God in order to fulfil His purpose for delivering them from Egypt and subsequently giving them the promised land. They were to be His priestly kingdom and holy nation. By reflecting God’s holiness, Israel would showcase true theocracy and thus serve as God’s witnesses to the world. This is what we read in Leviticus 19:2-3: “Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy. Ye shall fear every man his mother, and his father, and keep my sabbaths: I am the LORD your God.”

Moreover, human rebellion had already shown itself capable of jeopardising God’s larger purpose, that is, the blessing of all nations promised through Abraham’s offspring. So the Mosaic covenant also provided the means by which the relationship between God and Israel could be kept alive: sacrificial worship, and above all the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), by which Israel’s sin was atoned for and God’s forgiveness given tangible expression. Where the Noahic covenant had guaranteed the preservation of human life on the earth, the Mosaic covenant now guaranteed the preservation of Israel, Abraham’s great nation, within the land God had promised it. So

crucial was this preservation, in fact, for the next stage of God’s promise: the establishing of a royal line through which Abraham’s own ultimate offspring, the heir of the covenant, would at last come. That the word used throughout is the singular ‘seed,’ and not the plural, is no accident. Paul draws out exactly this point in Galatians 3:16: “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.”

Scripture references: Genesis 15, Exodus 32--34, Deuteronomy 4, 6, Matthew 22

Lesson points:

God established the Mosaic covenant soon after the emancipation of Abraham’s descendants from oppression in a foreign land.

At Sinai, the question was not chiefly what Abraham’s descendants had to do to inherit the land, but how they were to live once they were in it.

Israel must keep God’s covenant by submitting to its requirements by adhering to these and the subsequent covenant obligations given at Sinai.

By reflecting God’s holiness, Israel would showcase true theocracy and thus serve as God’s witnesses to the world.

Our God is not a majoritarian God.

Israel failed to keep their side of the covenant leading to the need for a New Covenant by Jesus Christ.

Though God renewed His covenant with Israel after this failure, it was a renewal owing entirely to grace, not to anything Israel had done to deserve it.

Because human rebellion threatened God’s larger purpose, the Mosaic covenant also provided the means, sacrifice and atonement, by which Israel’s relationship with God could be kept alive despite its failures.

Discussion questions:

Why do you think God had to enter a Covenant through Moses?

What difference do you perceive between God’s Covenant with Noah, His Covenant with Abraham, and His Covenant with Moses?

How would you define holiness in the light of God’s own pronouncement, ‘Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy’ (Leviticus 19:2)?

Do you agree that the six Commandments of the Ten concerned with our neighbour are encapsulated in the one Commandment to ‘love your neighbour’ that Jesus Christ Himself emphasised?

Would you agree that there is similarity between Israelites and Christians? If you do, how and why?

Lesson 4 Quiz

Question #1: In which book of the Bible are the Ten Commandments first given to Moses?

Exodus

Genesis

Psalms

Job

Question #2: According to Exodus 19:4-6, what three titles did God give Israel on condition that they kept His covenant?

A peculiar treasure, a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation

A great nation, a mighty people, and a chosen race

Servants, subjects, and slaves

None of the above

Question #3: What does this lesson identify as the reason God re-established His covenant with Israel after the golden calf incident?

Israel's own repentance and merit before God

An act of God's grace rather than of justice

A demand made by Moses on Israel's behalf

A change in the covenant's underlying obligations

Question #4: The word "seed" or "offspring" in Genesis 3:15, read in the light of Galatians 3:16, unambiguously refers to a plural number of descendants.

True

False

Question #5: The Mosaic Covenant, as this lesson presents it, is unconditional.

True

False

Prayer moment:

Closing prayer incorporating the theme of the session.

Lesson 5

THE DAVIDIC COVENANT

After Sinai, the next significant covenantal development comes with Nathan's message to David (Read 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17). It arose when David, having found rest at last from his enemies, wanted to do something for the God who had stood by him: in present-day terms, David wanted to make a thanksgiving offering. So he opens his heart to Nathan the prophet and mentor: "the king said unto Nathan the prophet, See now, I dwell in an house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains" (2 Samuel 7:2). David means to build God a 'house,' a Temple; God, in turn, promises to build David a 'house,' a dynasty. Neither 2 Samuel 7 nor 1 Chronicles 17 actually uses the word 'covenant' for what God promises here, but other passages of the Old Testament do not hesitate to call it exactly that. David himself says so in 2 Samuel 23:5: "Although my house be not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although he make it not to grow." So does 2 Chronicles 7:18: "Then will I stablish the throne of thy kingdom, according as I have covenanted with David thy father, saying, There shall not fail thee a man to be ruler in Israel." So does 2 Chronicles 13:5: "Ought ye not to know that the LORD God of Israel gave the kingdom over Israel to David for ever, even to him and to his sons by a covenant of salt?" And so does Psalm 89:3: "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant."

Ironically, things have not changed much. We make promises and pledges to God when we face trouble or when we are

in a happy state. Our promises and commitments are materialistic. We are hasty and think, at our worldly level, about what would please us. Money, possessions, property, and the like, make us happy. Therefore, we take the easy route and make substantial monetary contributions, and if we are super-rich, even go ahead and build a church or make significant contributions to such projects. We fail to consider what would please God. David's thoughts, though honourable, remained at that level, seasoned by a tinge of guilt that while he lived in a large palace, God lived in a tent, at least so he thought. God steps in and makes His Will clear by making a Covenant with David. He conveys to David through Nathan: "Go and tell my servant David, Thus saith the LORD, Shalt thou build me an house for me to dwell in? Whereas I have not dwelt in any house since the time that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle. In all the places wherein I have walked with all the children of Israel spake I a word with any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to feed my people Israel, saying, Why build ye not me an house of cedar? Now therefore so shalt thou say unto my servant David, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I took thee from the sheepcote, from following the sheep, to be ruler over my people, over Israel: And I was with thee whithersoever thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight, and have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great men that are in the earth" (2 Samuel 7:5-9).

Then comes the second part of God's Covenant with David. Let us read 1 Chronicles 17:11-14: "And it shall come to pass, when thy days be expired that thou must go to be with thy fathers, that I will raise up thy seed after thee, which shall be of thy sons; and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build me an house, and I will stablish his throne for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son: and I will not take my mercy away from him, as I took it from him that was before thee: But I will settle him in mine house and in my kingdom for ever: and his throne shall be established for evermore." Through this, God promises David and Israel that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, would come from the lineage of David and the tribe of Judah, and would establish a kingdom that endures forever. This part of the Covenant is unconditional: God places no requirement of obedience upon its fulfilment. Its surety rests on God's own faithfulness alone, not on anything David or Israel would or would not do.

God's trajectory is far beyond human comprehension. The building and the later destruction of the Temple did not, in the end, matter to Him; He knew that none of it could bridge the disconnect between Himself and His people. What was needed was for Him to come in the Person of Jesus Christ, to offer Himself as a sacrifice, and so release people from the curse of eternal death and redeem them from the grip of Satan and sin. He Himself would then become the Temple in which His people live forever. "He shall build me an house, and I will stablish his throne for ever" (1 Chronicles 17:12) turns out, then, to mean far more than a building: it is the promise of an everlasting kingdom. A Son through the line of David would rule forever and raise up a lasting House, and that Son is the Messiah, Jesus Christ, called the Son of David in Matthew 21:9.

The Davidic Covenant does not stand apart from the covenants that came before it; it carries forward the same thread running through the Mosaic and Abrahamic Covenants. Several clear parallels link what God promised David to what He had earlier promised Abraham:

A great name is promised to both (Genesis 12:2; 2 Samuel 7:9).

Both are promised victory over their enemies (Genesis 22:17; 2 Samuel 7:11).

Both stand in a uniquely close relationship with God (Genesis 17:7--8; 2 Samuel 7:24).

For both, a chosen line of offspring carries their name forward (Genesis 21:12; 2 Samuel 7:12--16).

The descendants of both are bound to keep God's laws (Genesis 18:19; 2 Samuel 7:14).

Through the offspring of both, blessing was to reach every nation (Genesis 22:18; Psalm 72:17).

Something has shifted, though, in where the emphasis now falls. The great nation promised to Abraham is, by this point, an established fact (2 Samuel 7:1); what comes into view now is David's own royal line (compare Genesis 17:6,16). Four words carry the weight of this covenant between them: a 'house,' the dynasty descended from David; a 'kingdom,' the people that dynasty would govern; a 'throne,' the authority by which it would govern them; and, running through all three, 'forever,' the word that marks this promise as both everlasting and unconditional.

Scripture references: 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17, Psalm 89,

Lesson points:

David wanted to make a Thanksgiving offering and build a House for God

God diplomatically countered, stating that He never asked to be housed in a Temple

We fail to consider what would please God.

God reiterated His faithfulness, stating that, Temple or no Temple, He will always be with those who honour Him.

The Davidic Covenant came in two parts: God reaffirmed the promise of the land He made in the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants, and He established His Kingdom on earth through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Discussion questions:

What are the main aspects of the Davidic covenant?

What similarities do you find in the Davidic Covenant and God's earlier Covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses?

Though Temples were built, none remained for long. How will you reason God's apparent disinterest in Temples?

While the Davidic Covenant also assures the preservation of God's creation and the rule of the earth, as in the previous Covenants, in the face of universal human wickedness, the story of David seems a bit different, revolving around his personal sins. What are your views on this?

Lesson 5 Quiz

Question #1: What did David originally intend to do for God, prompting Nathan's initial encouragement in 2 Samuel 7?

Build God a house of cedar, a Temple

Conquer Israel's remaining enemies

Compose a book of psalms

Appoint priests over the tabernacle

Question #2: Instead of allowing David to build Him a house, what did God promise to build for David?

A palace of cedar

A dynasty, a "house," that would endure forever

A new Ark of the Covenant

A second Temple in his own lifetime

Question #3: According to this lesson, the promise that David's offspring would reign on an everlasting throne ultimately points to whom?

Solomon alone

The Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of David

The prophet Nathan

The nation of Israel collectively

Question #4: Which of the following was NOT a promise God made to David?

David's son would build a house for God

God would not take His love away from a future son of David

One of David's daughters would be the first queen of Israel

God would be a father to one of David's sons

Prayer moment:

Closing prayer incorporating the theme of the session.

Lesson 6

THE NEW COVENANT OF JESUS CHRIST

After navigating through five Covenants of God in the Old Testament, we have now reached the concluding session on God's Covenants. As we meditate on the New Covenant of Christ, we must keep in mind that it is the culmination of all the Old Testament Covenants; as such, it warrants much reflection on all five Covenants we have meditated on thus far. Having said that, the most pertinent factor about the New Covenant of Jesus Christ, though in part fulfilled so far, will be consummated in full on His return to take us to His New Creation. This was the reason why we stopped at a basic

level of discussion on eschatology in our Lesson 1. It is about the end-time events.

Persistent failure to live according to God's covenant requirements led to inevitable disaster for both the nation and its monarchy, culminating in judgment: the destroyed temple and Babylonian exile. This might have spelt the end, had God's plans for Israel not been crucial for fulfilling His covenant promises. Israel's exile and the demise of the monarchy had to be overcome for God's creation plan to be realised. Covenant history thus continued through the prospect of a "New Covenant," one that would be both continuous and discontinuous with those of the past. One way of looking at it is to know that the Covenants of the Old Testament are not seen to have concluded in a logical sense. The fulfilment, therefore, of these five covenants happens in the establishment of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, both Jews and Christians see themselves as God's chosen people of the Covenant. But what links them also divides them! The Christian tradition distinguishes between the Old and the New Covenants. By claiming to be the people of the New Covenant, Christians have often called into dispute the Jewish claim to be God's chosen people and have claimed for themselves the title of sole heirs of the Covenant. So, in the past, the issue of the Covenant has often sparked bitter conflict. Today, it is an essential issue in Jewish-Christian dialogue, of course, without yet achieving any clear result. But it has risen above the category of an unresolvable dispute.

God's Covenant with His people are the expression of God's free election and therefore of His unmerited love for His people. The covenant is therefore not legally actionable; its guarantee consists solely in God's faithfulness to His covenant. In the Deuteronomic writings and the prophets, the Covenant is described as a marriage covenant and as a passionate, loving relationship. In Hosea 2 and 11, and in Ezekiel 16, the whole drama of God's love and faithfulness persevering in the face of unfaithfulness is described very movingly. It is therefore impossible to speak of a relationship between God and humanity as one in which partners of equal status have equal rights. Still, God's passionate love responds again and again.

graciously and mercifully to the faithless behaviour of His people with divinely unconditional fidelity, and thus graciously makes room for reciprocity and for a unique form of community. The covenant relationship is given concise expression in God's own words to Jeremiah: "I will be your God, and ye shall be my people" (Jeremiah 7:23; compare Leviticus 26:12). That was the first point of view.

A second viewpoint is that the Covenant has its concrete historical reference point in the people of Israel. These people exist in history and make their way through history. Correspondingly, we repeatedly find New Covenants sealed throughout the Old Testament: the Covenant with Noah, guaranteeing the perpetual existence of the order of creation, the Covenant with Abraham containing the pledge of the Promised Land and numerous posterities, the Covenant with the people of Israel on Mt Sinai and their commitment to the "Ten Commandments." Further references include the renewal of this Covenant after the entry into the Promised Land, the Covenant with David, and the promise that his throne will be established forever. Also necessary, lastly, is the renewal of the Covenant after the Babylonian exile, and the promise of an everlasting covenant through the prophets is of particular significance because there the New Covenant is expressly mentioned. These Covenants do not stand in isolation; they are interconnected. Each new covenant that is concluded refers to the preceding one and restates it in current terms. Thus, tradition and interpretation are interconnected in each instance.

The study of covenants now brings us to the ultimate covenant in all of Scripture, that Covenant which is the fulfilment and extension of all prior Covenants between God and His people, expanding the benefits to people from all the nations of the earth. Jeremiah 31:31--34 promised the new covenant thus:

"Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: 32 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: 33 But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Many years after Jeremiah prophesied, as Passover approached, Jesus Christ sat down with his disciples to celebrate the Mosaic covenant by partaking of the Passover meal. For over a millennium, God's covenant people had partaken of the Passover by following a strict order with sacred statements of promise interspersed throughout the meal. Keenly aware of the

magnitude of the moment, Jesus did not speak the words tradition had dictated. Instead, Matthew 26:26--29 reports: "And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. 27 And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; 28 For this is

my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. 29 But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

The new covenant is not God merely giving us a human mediator, but the second Member of the Trinity Himself, coming into human history in the person of Jesus Christ. This time, rather than taking life as He did when He flooded the earth in the days of Noah or requiring sacrifices for sin in the Mosaic covenant, He offered Himself as the sacrificial substitute for sinners on the cross, where He shed His blood in their place, ushering His people into the grace of His New Covenant.

Commenting on one of the innumerable blessings enjoyed in the New Covenant, 2 Corinthians 3:5--6 says:

"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; 6 Who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament; not of the letter, but of the Spirit: for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life." In the New Covenant, God comes to be with each of His people as He did with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. He also places the Holy Spirit in them, making them a Temple where worship occurs. (Recall our earlier discussion that God does not live in buildings made of hands) The Spirit makes them new creations as the dawning and first fruits of the finality of the New Creation that will dawn with Jesus' second coming. The Spirit's work includes transfiguring us into Jesus' image bearers.

Perhaps the lengthiest treatment of the New Covenant and its superiority to all preceding covenants is found in the book of Hebrews. In light of our study of covenants, the most helpful passage would be Hebrews 8:6--9.

Taken together, then, all five Old Testament Covenants find their fulfilment in Christ. Where Noah brought a remnant safely through judgement into a world spared and renewed, Christ brings His people through judgement into a new creation altogether. Where Abraham was promised that blessing would reach every nation through his offspring, Christ is that blessing, reaching every nation without exception. Where Moses gave God's people His Law, His deliverance from bondage, and a sacrifice that covered sin, Christ fulfils the Law in Himself, delivers us from a bondage deeper than Egypt's, and offers a sacrifice that does not need repeating. And where David was promised a throne and a kingdom without end, Christ now sits upon that throne, King of Kings, and will come again to establish that kingdom, eternal and worldwide, in peace.

Jesus does not only exercise a permanent, perfect, and heavenly priesthood; the Covenant of which He is the mediator is itself, in the words of Hebrews, "established upon better promises," secured through His own blood, His 'eternal redemption' and our 'eternal inheritance,' later called simply 'the blood of the everlasting covenant.' The contrast Hebrews draws, then, is not between something bad and something good. It is between something good, but temporary, and something better still, because it cannot be broken and does not end.

The theologian Martin Luther called the contrast between the two covenants "Law versus Gospel." A more familiar name is Works versus Grace. While God's Grace frequently broke through in the Old Testament, its presence in the New Testament is overwhelming. Grace, the gift of Salvation through Christ, is available to any person, not just Jews, and asks only that a person repent of their sins and believe in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

Scripture references: Leviticus 26:12, Jeremiah 7:23, Hosea 2 and 11, Ezekiel 16, Jeremiah 31:31--34, Matthew 26:26--29, 2 Corinthians 3:5--6, Hebrews 8:6--9

Lesson points:

The New Covenant of Jesus Christ will be consummated in full on His return to take us to His New Creation.

Persistent failure to live according to God's covenant requirements led to inevitable disaster for both the nation and its monarchy.

This might have spelt the end had God's plans for His people and creation not prevailed.

Covenant history, therefore, continued through the prospect of a "New Covenant."

Each new covenant that is concluded refers to the preceding one and restates it in current terms.

God promised the new covenant through Jeremiah.

Jesus instituted the New Covenant during the Last Supper (over the Passover meal).

He offered Himself as the sacrificial substitute for sinners on the cross, where He shed His blood in their place, fulfilling a part of the New Covenant.

The New Covenant of Jesus is not temporal but eternal.

Martin Luther called the contrast between the two covenants Law versus Gospel -- Works versus Grace.

Discussion questions:

Do you observe any connection or continuity between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant of Jesus Christ?

Did Jesus Christ do away with the Old Testament Covenants? If not, how do you see Him consummating the Old Covenants?

Has the New Covenant of Jesus fulfilled in totality? If not, how do you understand its fulfilment?

Why do both the Jews and the Christians claim to be the people of God?

Hebrews frames the contrast between the Old and New Covenants not as one between something bad and something good, but between something good and something better still. What do you think this distinction is meant to protect us from misunderstanding about the Old Testament and its Covenants?

Why did Martin Luther contrast the Old and the New Covenants as Law versus Gospel or Works versus Grace?

Lesson 6 Quiz

Question #1: Through which prophet did God first promise the New Covenant?

Isaiah

Ezekiel

Jeremiah

Malachi

Question #2: According to Jeremiah's prophecy, what would distinguish the New Covenant from the covenant made at Sinai?

It would be written on tablets of stone once again

God would put His law within His people and write it upon their hearts

It would apply only to the tribe of Judah

It would require animal sacrifice on a still greater scale

Question #3: At the Last Supper, what did Jesus say His shed blood accomplished, according to Matthew 26:26-29?

It is the blood of the new testament, shed for many for the remission of sins

It was a memorial of the Passover alone, with no further meaning

It sealed the Davidic Covenant in place of the Mosaic

It was a sign to be repeated only once a year

Question #4: According to this lesson's reading of Hebrews and 2 Corinthians 3, in what sense is the New Covenant superior to those before it?

It is established on better promises, and gives life by the Spirit rather than by the letter

It is superior because it demands more works from believers

It is superior only in a symbolic, not a real, sense

It replaces grace with a stricter law

Question #5: What did the theologian Martin Luther call the contrast between the Old and New Covenants?

Faith versus works

Law versus Gospel, or Works versus Grace

Promise versus fulfilment

Judgement versus mercy

Prayer moment:

Closing prayer incorporating the theme of the session.