

Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

LESSON
THREE

THE NEW COVENANT



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Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament

Lesson Three

The New Covenant

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how followers of Christ use a lot of familiar expressions in different ways? This was certainly the case with the words “new covenant.” We repeat what Jesus said — “This cup is the new covenant” — every time we observe the Lord’s Supper. And all over the world, local churches have names with the words “new covenant” in them. But if you ask most Christians, “What is the new covenant?” you get about as many answers as the number of people you ask. Sometimes differences like this don’t matter much. But as we’ll see in this lesson, the concept of the new covenant influenced New Testament authors so much that we may speak of their theology as “new covenant theology.” And for this reason, we need to do all we can to understand what the new covenant is.

This is the third lesson in our series *Kingdom and Covenant in the New Testament*. We’ve entitled this lesson, “The New Covenant.” And in this lesson we’ll explore how New Testament authors relied on the concept of the new covenant to shape some of their most significant theological perspectives.

Our lesson will divide into two main parts. First, we’ll see how the new covenant characterized God’s kingdom administration. Second, we’ll explore how the new covenant reveals certain dynamics of interaction between God and his people. Let’s look first at God’s kingdom administration through the new covenant.

KINGDOM ADMINISTRATION

The Hebrew term we normally translate as “covenant” is “*berith*.” In the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, this Hebrew word is translated “*diatheke*.” “*Diatheke*” also appears for “covenant” in the New Testament. Both *berith* and *diatheke* have connotations of “a solemn agreement or pact.” In the Bible, we see covenants between peers. We also see covenants between kings and their citizens and between kings and other kings. And God covenanted with nations and people. In this lesson, we’re particularly interested in God’s covenants with people, especially his new covenant in Christ.

It’s important to know that one of the most significant breakthroughs in our understanding of God’s biblical covenants took place in the second half of the twentieth century. At this time, many scholars began to compare biblical covenants with a group of ancient Near Eastern documents usually called “suzerain-vassal treaties.” These documents were international treaties among nations in Old Testament times. In these treaties, suzerains, or great kings, administered their kingdoms through treaties with vassals, or lesser kings under their authority. As we’ll see, the similarities between

biblical covenants and these suzerain-vassal treaties make it clear that God's covenants in Scripture were his primary means for administering the affairs of his kingdom.

We see in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Genesis, two different types of treaties exhibited in Scripture. First, we see what we call a "parity treaty" between two people of equal ability, equal authority in which they make an agreement that is mutually beneficial to both. So take for example Abraham and Abimelech... The second kind of treaty that we see is actually between what some people in the ancient Near Eastern called the "suzerainty-vassal treaty," and that's usually between unequal powers, one who is stronger and greater, who most likely has already overtaken you and conquered you and would now like to be in a relationship in which the greater person, the suzerain, receives all the benefits from the vassal. So most often it requires allegiance from the vassal to continue to pledge their allegiance to the suzerain... But there is a benefit for the vassal and that is the suzerain will in turn come to its rescue whenever there is any conquering army or invading army that is in their presence, and so they had that kind of mutual protective relationship there as well.

— Dr. Daniel L. Kim

You know, we think in terms of kings as being oftentimes tyrants and wealthy overlords who oppress their citizens. But in reality, kingship in the ancient Near Eastern context of the time of Jesus and before was largely grounded in the concept of covenant. So we have evidence of treaties, ancient treaties, in which a king, or an overlord, or what's called suzerain would then enter into an agreement with some people who become essentially his servants or his vassals, and they define the relationship such that the overlord, the suzerain, defines a set of terms by which a relationship can be maintained, and he'd say something like this: "I will offer you protection, I will offer you prosperity, I will offer you identity in exchange for your participation with me by sharing a portion of your crops, by giving me your allegiance and by not forming allegiances with other kings or overlords." And so it tended to be a very mutual sort of a circumstance in one sense. And if we begin to think about kingship and the nature of covenant in terms of this kind of an agreement, then what we find is that various portions of the Old Testament seem to conform very precisely with the exact elements of these suzerain treaties.

— Mr. Bradley T. Johnson

We'll look at God's kingdom administration in three main ways. First, we'll note the significance of covenant representatives. Second, we'll see how God's covenants

focused on appropriate policies for God's kingdom. And third, we'll point out how God administered his kingdom through the organic development of his covenant policies. Let's look first at God's covenant representatives.

COVENANT REPRESENTATIVES

As we've already noted, ancient suzerains administered their kingdoms by making treaties with lesser kings or vassals. These vassal kings represented their nations and managed their kingdoms in submission to the suzerain. In a similar way, God administers his kingdom by making covenants through men whom he chose to represent his covenant people.

To see what we mean, we'll see first how God chose covenant representatives in the Old Testament. And then we'll look at the new covenant. Let's begin with the Old Testament.

Old Testament

It isn't difficult to see that God chose covenant representatives in Old Testament times. Genesis 1–3 and Hosea 6:7 both indicate that God made the first biblical covenant with Adam. Genesis 6:18 and Genesis 9:9-17 refer to God's covenant with Noah. And in Genesis 15–17, God made a covenant with Abraham. Exodus 19–24 indicate that God chose Moses as his covenant representative. And finally, passages like Psalms 89 and 132 refer to God's covenant with David.

God dealt with each of these men differently as he made his covenants. But all of them represented others before God in the judgments of God's heavenly royal court. The covenants with Adam and Noah may be called "universal covenants" because Adam and Noah represented all human beings as God's covenant people. The covenants with Abraham, Moses and David may be described as "national covenants." In these covenants, these men represented the nation of Israel and the Gentiles adopted into Israel as covenant people.

Keeping the covenant representatives of the Old Testament in mind, let's see how God administered the new covenant through a covenant representative.

New Covenant

The New Testament repeatedly identifies Christ as the new covenant representative. God engaged him in special ways on behalf of his church — every Jew and Gentile that God identifies with Christ. As we read in Hebrews 9:15:

Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance (Hebrews 9:15).

Similar teachings appear in passages like Romans 8:34 and 1 Timothy 2:5-6.

The fact that Christ is God's chosen covenant representative for the church helps us understand one of the most important characteristics of New Testament theology. As many biblical interpreters have noted, New Testament theology is "Christocentric." In other words, every facet of New Testament theology is closely tied to the person and work of Christ. But why is this true? For instance, why does the New Testament teach that we must believe in Jesus for salvation? Why pray and show kindness in the name of Jesus? Why is the church called "the body of Christ"? The answer is clear. Christ plays this central role in New Testament theology because God administers every dimension of life in the new covenant through Christ as the representative of the church. To overlook this feature of New Testament theology is to miss one of its most crucial characteristics.

Having seen that God administered his kingdom through covenant representatives, and specifically through Christ in the new covenant, we should turn to a second feature of God's kingdom administration: the appropriate policies that biblical covenants established for different periods of biblical history.

APPROPRIATE POLICIES

All ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties had elements in common, but they were also different in many ways. This was because each individual treaty addressed specific issues that were pertinent for each international relationship. In much the same way, all of God's covenants had much in common, but each covenant's policies were designed for specific issues that were important at different stages of biblical history.

To see how the policies of God's covenants were appropriate for different historical stages, we'll look once again at Old Testament covenants, and then at the policies of the new covenant. Let's consider first Old Testament covenant policies.

Old Testament

A cursory reading of the terms of Old Testament covenants reveals a focus on policies that were relevant for particular stages of God's kingdom.

God's covenant with Adam may rightly be called the "covenant of foundations." It emphasized the goals of God's kingdom and the role of human beings in his kingdom before and after sin entered the world.

After the flood, God made a covenant with Noah that we may call the "covenant of stability." This covenant focused on nature's stability as the secure environment within which sinful humanity could serve God's kingdom purposes.

We may refer to Abraham's covenant as the "covenant of Israel's election." It focused on the privileges and responsibilities of Israel as God's chosen people.

The covenant with Moses is often called the "covenant of law" because it focused on God's law as he unified the tribes of Israel into a nation. With this covenant, God led the people of Israel toward their promised homeland.

And finally, we can regard David's covenant as the "covenant of kingship." This covenant established Israel as a bona fide kingdom and emphasized how David's royal dynasty was to lead Israel in kingdom service.

When we consider the appropriate policies established by covenants in the Old Testament, it shouldn't surprise us to find that the new covenant also established kingdom policies that were appropriate for the new covenant age.

New Covenant

The new covenant comes in the last period of biblical history — after God's covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. And for this reason, the new covenant may be described as the "covenant of fulfillment." As such, it established policies that were designed to reverse the failures of the past and complete or fulfill God's kingdom purposes in Christ.

The new covenant is mentioned in Scripture for the first time in Jeremiah 31:31 where we read these words:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31).

In the larger context of this verse, the phrase "The days are coming" refers to the time after the end of Israel's exile. As we saw in a previous lesson, the message of the Christian good news — or "gospel" — was that God's kingdom would reach its final, worldwide victory after Israel's exile had ended. So, from the first mention of the new covenant, we see its association with the victorious fulfillment of God's kingdom.

For this reason, in Jeremiah 31:33-34 God revealed the policies of the new covenant, policies that were appropriate for this last stage of the kingdom in Christ. Listen to what God said:

This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time ... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest ... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (Jeremiah 31:33-34).

Notice in this passage that the new covenant will bring God's kingdom to its ultimate end when "[God] will forgive [his people's] wickedness and will remember their sins no more." In this time of final, eternal blessings for God's people, "[He] will put [his] law in their minds and write it on their hearts." In fact, God promised to make this true for *every* person in the new covenant. As he put it, "they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

Now in passages like Deuteronomy 10:16 and Jeremiah 4:4, God frequently called the nation of Israel to move beyond their outward association with his covenants and to circumcise their hearts. In other words, they were to love him deeply by writing his law on their hearts. But in the policies of the new covenant age, God promised to intervene in such a way that this would be a reality for *all* of his covenant people.

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the shape of the kingdom of God remained the same in that God rules over his people in his place, but what that looked like changed entirely. The most significant thing from Jesus sitting at God's right hand is — as the apostle Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 — he has poured out his Holy Spirit upon his people as was prophesied in the book of Joel. And the indwelling of the Spirit in Jews, *and* — to their surprise and, at first, kind of shock — also Gentiles, is indication that God's kingdom is no longer going to be constituted of the people of Israel, the human descendants of Abraham, but those who are descendants of Abraham by faith, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 4. So, God's kingdom is constituted of people from every tribe, nation and language; whoever has faith in Christ will receive the Spirit, and whoever has the Spirit has God living and ruling in their lives.

— Dr. Constantine R. Campbell

As we saw in our preceding lesson, Jesus taught that the new covenant age would unfold over time in three stages. First, its inauguration came with Christ's first advent. In this stage, Christ fulfilled many, but not all of the expectations of the new covenant. Then, in the continuation, the new covenant age will continue for an indefinite period of time through the history of the church. In this stage, Jesus fulfills many more, but still not all of the expectations of the new covenant. And finally, the new covenant age will reach its consummation at Christ's second advent when every expectation will be completely fulfilled.

This threefold fulfillment of the new covenant helps us recognize a second basic characteristic of New Testament theology. Not only was it Christocentric; New Testament theology was also devoted to explaining the policies of the new covenant as it unfolded in these three stages.

In effect, New Testament authors had to spend their time adjusting expectations for life in the new covenant. For instance, unlike the expectations created by Jeremiah 31, passages like Matthew 6:12 and 1 John 1:9 explain that followers of Christ still need to ask for forgiveness because they still violate the law of God. We also see in passages like 2 Corinthians 11:13 and Galatians 2:4 that false believers remain among true believers in the new covenant church. How were these and other factors affected by the unfolding of new covenant policies? In one way or another, every dimension of New Testament theology was devoted to answering this question.

Now that we've seen how God administered his kingdom through covenant representatives and historically appropriate policies, we should explore the organic development of policies in biblical covenants.

ORGANIC DEVELOPMENT

When we speak of covenant policies developing organically, we have in mind something like the growth of a tree. A tree changes as it grows from seed to full maturity, but it still remains the same organism. We can look at Old Testament covenants in much the same way. Each Old Testament covenant had different covenant representatives and focused on policies that were appropriate for a particular time in history. But like a tree, there was organic unity despite these changes.

We'll look at the organic development of God's covenants, first in the Old Testament. Then we'll consider the organic development from the Old Testament to the new covenant. Let's begin with the Old Testament covenants.

Old Testament

We can see the organic development of Old Testament covenants when we keep in mind how the policies of covenants continued in force throughout Old Testament history. For example, from the time of Adam, God established that the human race, as his image, would spread his kingdom throughout the earth. This policy developed over time, but it was never utterly discarded.

From the time of Noah, God established the stability of nature as a secure place for God's fallen images to serve his kingdom purposes. This administrative policy changed in various ways with later covenants, but God never cast it aside.

From the time of Abraham, Israel was given special privileges and responsibilities as God's chosen people. This special role in history developed with the addition of more covenants, but it never disappeared from God's kingdom administration.

From the time of Moses, the Law served as the guide for Israel. This Law was to be applied differently as other covenants were added, but it was never nullified.

And from the time of David, David's royal dynasty has led God's people in their kingdom service. Although this leadership changed with the new covenant and the kingship of Jesus, it was not set aside.

The pattern of organic development that we see in the Old Testament continued with the new covenant in Christ. It too developed organically from earlier covenants.

New Covenant

Let's look again at Jeremiah 31:31 where God said:

I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31).

All too often, Christians have taken the expression “new covenant” to mean that the new covenant is *entirely* new, disconnected from earlier covenants in the Bible. It’s important to know, however, that the word “new” translates the Hebrew term *châdash*. Passages like Isaiah 61:4, Ezekiel 36:26 and Job 29:20 make it clear that this term, and its associated verbal forms, did not mean “utterly new.” Rather, this family of terms meant “renewed,” “renovated,” “rebuilt,” or “refreshed.”

This outlook is supported by the fact that God said the new covenant will be made “with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.” In other words, the new covenant is a renewed national covenant with the descendants of Abraham and the Gentiles adopted into his family after Israel’s exile ended.

Of course, like each Old Testament covenant before it, the new covenant established policies that were appropriate for its place in history. These new policies were revealed through Christ and through his apostles and prophets. But like each Old Testament covenant, the new covenant renewed, rebuilt, renovated or refreshed the policies that God had established in previous covenant administrations.

When we think of the kingdom of God across the canon of Scripture and across redemptive history, there’s changes in the administration of it as you work through the biblical covenants and reach their culmination in Christ. So, for instance, particularly in the Old Testament, as God brings his salvific plan through the nation of Israel into the old covenant, he’s working primarily with a nation, he’s working primarily in terms of a theocracy, a visible representation in terms of that nation where through them they will bring about the coming of the Messiah, the coming of the Lord Jesus. And you see a lot of the administration of that kingdom tied to them in a particular place, location, land, under particular rule and government and so on. And then as you think of its fulfillment in Christ, as you bring the kingdom to pass in the new covenant, there are some changes. Christ obviously is the King. He is the one who fulfills the type and shadows of the Old Testament. He fulfills the role of David and Moses. And he’s the one who in his life and death and resurrection inaugurates the kingdom, brings God’s saving reign to this world, and then brings about an international community — what we call the church, the one new man, Jew and Gentile together — so that he now rules in and through the church... It is the spiritual rule and reign of Christ through his people as men and women and boys and girls come to faith and repentance. As they believe, they enter that kingdom. The saving rule of God comes to them. That kingdom now is international where the rule of God now brings into it a people that come from every tribe, nation, people and tongue. And it shows itself in the local church where there’s a kind of theocracy there where Christ rules his people in the local church, but not exactly the same way as it was under the nation of Israel of old.

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

So, when we think about God's administration of his kingdom and how it might change, we surely don't want to think of him as a kind of ancient bureaucrat trying to think up a new organizational chart because the first one didn't work out, so he kind of has "plan B." It simply can't be that. His purposes have to be consistent. So, it's best, I think, to assume that his operating principles are going to be relatively similar and then discern what changes might have been instituted. In this case, I think that fact that Jesus is no longer there is important so that the Spirit comes, so that the church can be empowered not just to center in on the physical Jesus in a given location but is free to disperse with the Spirit of Jesus to bring his message, to bring his mission to the whole world. Now, there is this shift in covenants where what had previously been operative under the flesh is now empowered by the Spirit so that the goal of the old covenant — loving God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself — the believers are now empowered to do that.

— Dr. Sean McDonough

These organic developments between Old Testament covenants and the new covenant provide us with a third crucial perspective on New Testament theology. In addition to being Christocentric and focused on policies that were appropriate for the threefold unfolding of Christ's kingdom, New Testament theology was *based* on Old Testament theology.

At its core, New Testament theology was not a new faith. Instead, New Testament authors applied the teachings of the Old Testament in the light of God's revelation in Christ. This is why the New Testament is relatively small. It assumed the abiding validity of the Old Testament. This is also why New Testament authors appealed to the Old Testament hundreds of times to support their theological perspectives. So, when we say that New Testament theology is new covenant theology, we don't mean that it's somehow divorced from the Old Testament. On the contrary, every dimension of New Testament theology incorporates and builds on the theology of the Old Testament.

So far in our lesson on the new covenant, we've explored God's kingdom administration. Now we should turn to our second major topic in this lesson: the dynamics of interaction between God and his people in the new covenant.

DYNAMICS OF INTERACTION

New Testament authors described the interactions between God and his covenant people in countless ways. They referred to God's grace as well as his wrath. They

demanded obedience and warned against disobedience. They described how God protects some from harm and how he calls others to suffer. These and many other direct and indirect references to interactions between God and his people raise some important questions. What theological outlooks undergirded this variety? How did New Testament authors make sense of it all? How did they approach the dynamics of divine and human interaction?

Once again, we'll start with the backdrop of ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. In general terms, these treaties focused on three features of the interactions between greater and lesser kings. First, greater kings always claimed that they showed benevolence to their vassals. Second, greater kings also stipulated certain ways in which their vassals were to prove their loyalty. And third, greater kings spelled out the consequences of blessings and curses that vassals could expect for obedience and disobedience. Now, we need to say that greater kings always reserved the right to enforce the terms of their covenants as they saw fit. But in general, benevolence, loyalty and consequences formed the basic principles by which these treaty relationships were governed.

And as we're about to see, the same elements appear in the dynamics of divine and human interactions in biblical covenants. We need to keep in mind that, as the supreme King, God was the one who determined how the dynamics of his covenants would come to fruition. And he did this according to his own incomparable wisdom, not according to the standards of human expectations. This is why the Scriptures explain that God's interactions with his people are often beyond human comprehension. But as passages like Deuteronomy 29:29, Isaiah 55:8-9, a number of Psalms, and whole books like Job and Ecclesiastes remind us, the ways God implemented these covenant dynamics were always good and wise.

We'll explore the dynamics of interaction between God and people by first noting God's divine benevolence to his people. Second, we'll see how biblical covenants involved tests of loyalty for God's covenant people. And third, we'll address the consequences of blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience. Let's begin with divine benevolence.

DIVINE BENEVOLENCE

We'll look at the element of divine benevolence in both Old Testament covenants and in the new covenant. Let's consider first divine benevolence in Old Testament covenants.

Old Testament

The Old Testament makes it abundantly clear that God's benevolence, or kindness, both initiated and sustained the relationships established by his covenants. To begin with, God showed divine benevolence to Adam as his covenant representative in the covenant of foundations. Before Adam's fall into sin, God granted kindness to Adam

by creating the Garden of Eden and placing him there as God's image. And he also poured out saving grace on our first parents, Adam and Eve, after their fall into sin. Additionally, Adam represented all of humanity in the court of God. So, the kindnesses God showed to Adam were passed on to the covenant people he represented. In one way or another God continued to show common grace to all people, including unbelievers. And to true believers, like Abel, Seth and many others, God also showed saving grace.

Throughout his lifetime, Noah also received divine benevolence — both common grace and saving grace — as God's covenant representative in the covenant of stability. And, just as in Adam's covenant, the kindnesses God showed Noah were also passed on to the covenant people Noah represented: all human beings. In a variety of ways, God showed all people his common grace. And to true believers, especially in the lineage of Shem, God also displayed saving grace.

Abraham also experienced the divine benevolence of common and saving grace as God's covenant representative in the covenant of Israel's election. The kindnesses God showed Abraham were also shown to the covenant people he represented: Israelites, and Gentiles who would be adopted into Israel. As he saw fit, God displayed common grace to the people of this covenant, including unbelievers like Esau. But God also poured out his saving grace on faithful figures like Jacob, Joseph and many others.

As the stories of Moses' life tell us, God showed the divine benevolence of common and saving grace in unique ways to Moses himself as the covenant representative of the covenant of law. And the kindnesses God showed to Moses were passed on to those he represented: the nation of Israel and those adopted into Israel. All Israelites benefited from God's common grace, even those who did not have saving faith. And God also showed his saving grace to many who were in Israel and adopted into Israel.

Last of all, David received the divine benevolence of common and saving grace in special ways as God's chosen covenant representative in the covenant of kingship. And the kindnesses God showed to David were passed on to the covenant people he represented: his royal sons, the nation of Israel and all Gentiles adopted into Israel. According to God's inscrutable wisdom, they all experienced common grace, including unbelievers in Israel. But true believers in Israel also received God's saving grace.

God's divine benevolence to his people through the Old Testament covenants set the stage for the ways God's benevolence influenced the dynamics of the new covenant as well.

New Covenant

In the first place, the New Testament draws attention to God's benevolence toward Christ, the new covenant representative. We should be clear that, like Adam before the fall into sin, Jesus never needed mercy, forgiveness or saving grace from God. Even so, passages like Matthew 3:16-17; Matthew 12:18; and Luke 3:22 indicate that during the inauguration of his kingdom, the Father anointed Jesus with his Spirit to empower him in his service. In fact, according to Romans 8:11, it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that the Father raised Jesus from the dead. Moreover, according to Psalm 2:4-6; Matthew 28:18; and Acts 2:31-33, the Father's benevolence toward Jesus lifted

him to his current position of authority and power during the continuation of his kingdom. And this kindness will lead to the privileges and glory Christ will receive at the consummation of his kingdom.

In the second place, the New Testament also focuses on what Christian theologians often call “union with Christ.” This teaching makes it clear that God’s benevolence to Christ also impacts the church, the covenant people he represents.

Believers’ union with Christ is twofold. On the one side, we are “in Christ.” This means that because Christ is our covenant representative, the people of the new covenant are identified with Christ in God’s heavenly court. So, in many ways, what is true of Christ is counted as true for all those he represents in the court of God. This is what Paul had in mind when he said in Ephesians 1:13:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation (Ephesians 1:13).

But on the other side, the New Testament doesn’t just speak about believers being “in Christ.” It also speaks of “Christ in us.” That is, Christ is present and at work within believers through the Holy Spirit in our day-to-day experiences on earth. Listen to Romans 8:10-11:

If Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he ... will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you (Romans 8:10-11).

As this passage indicates, although New Testament authors acknowledged that the church is identified with Christ in heaven, they also knew that the new covenant age had not yet reached its consummation. As a result, life in the new covenant now is different from what it will be when Christ returns. For instance, now God’s new covenant people continue to sin. Moreover, false believers — those without saving faith — remain in the visible church alongside true believers. Only at the consummation will the work of Christ in us be completed.

For this reason, the New Testament teaches that, prior to Christ’s return, God shows common grace to all people in the visible church, including false believers. In fact, passages like John 15:1-6 and Hebrews 6:4-6 illustrate that although unbelievers often experience great temporary mercies from God, they don’t receive saving grace. But at the same time, God has shown saving grace to true believers even now. It’s no wonder, then, that every facet of New Testament theology is cast in terms of divine benevolence.

In both the Old and the New Testaments we see that the Lord declares that he is kind to all mankind, to both the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, to those who are his children and those who are not. The Lord is kind in the following way: In the first place, he does not destroy us immediately despite all of us being sinners. He allows us to live by his grace. In the second place, he gives us the blessing of rain, and rain falls on both the farms of the wicked and the righteous. We

are also told that the sun makes the plants grow and gives life to the righteous and the unrighteous. This means that God is kind to all creatures, good and bad. And that he gives us all the opportunity to recognize who he is. He tells us that through his mercy, the Lord gives those who do not follow him or even deny him the opportunity to listen to his message, to study his Word and to be saved. So the Lord is kind even to those who deny his existence. And to those who are his, he promises to always be there and to bless them forever.

— Dr. Alvin Padilla, translation

As Paul put it in Ephesians 2:8:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8).

Now that we've seen how the dynamics of interaction between God and people involves the display of divine benevolence, we should look at how life in covenant with God also entails tests of loyalty. These requirements of obedience reveal the condition of the hearts of those in covenant with God.

TESTS OF LOYALTY

We should mention here that in the twentieth century many scholars began to compare biblical covenants with another group of ancient Near Eastern texts, often called “royal grants.” In these grants, a suzerain granted benefits to a vassal or a subject. Early research led many to conclude that there were no obligations or requirements, no tests of loyalty, for the one who received the grant. And, as a result, a number of biblical interpreters suggested that some biblical covenants did not require loyalty from God's people. But, more recent research has pointed in the opposite direction. We now know that even royal grants required loyal service from the recipients. So, we shouldn't be surprised when Scripture tells us that God tested the loyalty of his people in *every* biblical covenant, including the new covenant.

When we say that God tests our loyalty as part of life in the new covenant, we need to avoid some serious misunderstandings. First, throughout the Bible, no sinner has ever earned salvation by good works. We'll never reach the perfection needed to receive God's eternal blessings by our own efforts. Secondly, every good work that we perform is made possible by the grace of God at work within us. We don't accomplish any good work apart from the mercy of God and the power of his Spirit. And thirdly, we still need to realize that God has always called his covenant people to obedience. In both the Old and New Testaments, God tested or proved the true condition of his peoples' hearts through their responses to his commands.

What I want all believers in Christ to know is that the personal relationship with God did not begin in the New Testament. It was a

fulfilling of a longtime “I will be their God and they will be my people.” That is a formula from the very beginning, you know, from the Garden of Eden, from Genesis 12, from the making of a covenant people. And so, inward devotion is the genesis of obedience. It is not the result of obedience. It is not aside from obedience... We obey God because he has loved us, because he has engaged us, because he has formed us, because he has been with us through every valley, through every wilderness, through every victory. And so, obedience is out of a relationship and not out of a regulation.

— Dr. Joel C. Hunter

To see what we mean, we'll summarize how tests of loyalty appear in Old Testament covenants. Then we'll look at tests of loyalty in the new covenant. Let's begin with the Old Testament.

Old Testament

Everyone familiar with the Bible knows that God tested Adam as God's covenant representative through his directives in the Garden of Eden. And we also know that God called for the loyalty of his covenant people in Adam: the entire human race.

Noah also was tested by God's directives as his covenant representative both before and after the flood. And the Scriptures indicate that God continued to test the hearts of his covenant people in Noah — again, the entire human race.

The stories of Abraham's life illustrate how God tested the patriarch's loyalty in a number of ways as his covenant representative. As just one example, Genesis 22:1-19 tells us explicitly that God tested Abraham when he commanded him to sacrifice his son Isaac. In Genesis 22:12, the angel of the Lord said to Abraham:

Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son (Genesis 22:12).

We can see in this passage why God commanded Abraham. He tested him to prove the true condition of his heart.

In a similar way, the Scriptures teach that God tested the loyalty of his covenant people in Abraham: the people of Israel and Gentiles adopted into Israel.

Moses was tested by God's commands throughout his life as the covenant representative of Israel. And God explicitly explained that he gave his covenant people of Israel the Law to test them. Listen to Deuteronomy 8:2 where Moses told the people:

The Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands (Deuteronomy 8:2).

In much the same way, the stories of David's life indicate that God tested David's loyalty as the royal covenant representative of Israel. And as the rest of the Old Testament illustrates repeatedly, God continued to test his covenant people, the sons of David and the nation of Israel, throughout their generations.

Having mentioned God's tests of loyalty in Old Testament covenants, now let's explore the way God tests his people's loyalty in the new covenant.

New Covenant

Now, as we've seen, God's grace has been poured out in the new covenant as never before in biblical history. Yet, it's also apparent that the New Testament has countless commands and directives from God. Why is this true? Well, just as in the Old Testament covenants, the new covenant also requires tests of loyalty.

For this reason, the New Testament gives a great deal of attention to Christ's loyalty as the new covenant representative. It tells us that during the inauguration of the kingdom, Jesus passed every test of loyalty that God required of him. In Hebrews 4:15 we read:

We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

And listen to Philippians 2:8 where Paul referred to Christ's remarkable obedience:

Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:8).

In New Testament theology, the height of Jesus' loyal service to God was his voluntary death on the cross. But why was this act of obedience so significant?

From the time sin entered the world, God made temporary provisions for the sins of his covenant people through the blood of animal sacrifices. But as Hebrews 10:1-14 teaches, these sacrifices were unable to secure the final, permanent forgiveness of God's victorious kingdom. And so, as Israel's exile approached, God revealed in Isaiah 53:1-12, that he required the voluntary death of the servant of the Lord, the Messiah, as atonement for the sins of his people. By his death, the royal covenant representative would bring God's people into the glories of his eternal victorious kingdom. Jesus fulfilled this role in the inauguration when he voluntarily submitted to death on the cross. We see this in passages like Matthew 8:17; Acts 8:32-33; Romans 6:10; and 1 Peter 2:22-25. By passing this test of loyalty as the new covenant representative, Jesus provided permanent atonement and eternal forgiveness to all who believe in him.

In addition to Jesus' death on the cross, passages like Hebrews 8:1-2 also point out that Christ, as the son of David, serves obediently in heaven throughout the continuation of his kingdom. And 1 Corinthians 15:24 teaches that when Christ returns in glory at the consummation, he will hand the kingdom to God the Father as an act of humble service.

Now, as much as New Testament theology emphasizes Christ's perfect loyalty as the new covenant representative, it also stresses that tests of loyalty are still in effect for the church, the people of the new covenant.

Once again, it helps to understand tests of loyalty for the church in terms of the church's union with Christ. On the one side, the church is "in Christ" in the sense that we're identified with him before God in his heavenly court. And according to 1 Timothy 3:16, Christ was the one who passed the test of loyalty perfectly and was vindicated when the Holy Spirit raised him from the dead. For this reason, as passages like Romans 4:23-25 teach, this legal vindication of Christ in the court of heaven is imputed to all who have saving faith in him. In Christ, true believers are judged as those who have passed the test because Christ has passed the test on our behalf. This wondrous truth about Christ in God's heavenly court is the basis for the New Testament theological perspective that protestant theologians have called "*sola fide*," or justification by faith alone.

On the other side, however, union with Christ also refers to the day-to-day experience of "Christ in us." While the church still exists on earth prior to Christ's return in glory, people within the church experience tests of loyalty that prove the condition of their hearts. And Christ's Spirit works within true believers to make us holy. This side of our union with Christ corresponds to the traditional protestant doctrine of sanctification, or the progressive pursuit of holiness. And Scripture teaches that testing is the way God moves us forward in sanctification. As James 1:2-3 puts it:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance (James 1:2-3).

Now, once again, we must remember that during the inauguration and continuation of Christ's kingdom, the visible church, consists of both false believers and true believers. And it's through the test of loyalty that both groups reveal whether or not they have saving faith. False believers fail the test of loyalty and turn from serving Christ. By contrast, true believers, although not perfect in this life, will persevere in their loyalty to Christ through the power of the Spirit. As we read in 1 John 2:19 regarding false believers:

They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us (1 John 2:19).

As this passage indicates, New Testament theology contains many commands from God as tests of loyalty to prove those who really belong to the body of true believers.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus Christ launched a new covenant. And like all covenants, this one is one that involves reciprocating commitments and reciprocal obligations. And one of our chief commitments in this wonderful covenant is a commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ, to obedience to his will and his ways, to

surrender up our swords to his true lordship, and to live that out in authentic ways, both in the disposition of our hearts and our willingness to follow the heart of God into the world. But one of the things that's certainly necessary to add here is that the fulfillment of our covenant obligations today are fulfillments we live out in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit alters the disposition of that obedience and upgrades it well above grinding duty so that it becomes, in the language of Scripture, this covenant becomes a covenant of reciprocating delight. The one who looks over us delights in us and we in him. And it gives you some idea of why the apostle could say that the kingdom of God is not grinding duty, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Some of the greatest saints have told us that this obligation that exists to be faithful and loyal to our Lord is one that we fulfill not reluctantly, but eagerly, and with all of our hearts because he has won us over. And we find him and his ways delightful.

— Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

Now that we've seen the dynamics of interaction in the new covenant in relation to God's divine benevolence and tests of loyalty, we should turn to a third element. Let's examine the consequences of blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience.

CONSEQUENCES

We'll look at the consequences for obedience and disobedience in covenant with God along the lines of our earlier discussions. We'll briefly survey the Old Testament covenants and then turn to the new covenant. Let's first see the consequences of blessings and curses in the Old Testament covenants.

Old Testament

Prior to the new covenant, the consequences of both blessings and curses were crucial dimensions of God's interactions with his covenant representatives, and with his covenant people as a whole. Now, as we've already mentioned, God often implemented the terms of his covenants in ways that were beyond human understanding. So, in Scripture God often hastened, increased, lessened, delayed and even cancelled the blessings and curses of his covenants at times in ways that were beyond human comprehension. But he always did so according to his perfect wisdom and goodness.

In the covenant of foundations, God cursed Adam, his covenant representative, with suffering and death in response to his disobedience. But, we also see God's blessings to Adam. In Genesis 3:15, God promised humanity's victory over the seed of

the serpent. And both this curse of death and hope of victory were passed on, as God saw fit, to the covenant people Adam represented, the human race.

In the covenant of nature's stability, the covenant representative, Noah, received blessings for his faithful service. But he also continued to face curses, such as troubles in his family after the flood. Similar blessings and curses came to future generations of humanity, the covenant people Noah represented.

In the covenant of Israel's election, Abraham also received the consequences of blessings and curses as God's covenant representative. These consequences were passed down to the covenant people of Israel and those adopted into Israel in subsequent generations.

In a similar way, in the covenant of law, Moses received God's blessings and curses in his life as the covenant representative. Additionally, Moses' law spelled out many specific blessings and curses that would come to the covenant people of Israel and Gentiles adopted into Israel.

In the covenant of kingship, David himself, as the covenant representative, received the consequences of blessings and curses as he was faithful and unfaithful. The same was true for the covenant people he represented, his royal descendants and the people of Israel and Gentiles adopted into Israel.

We've touched briefly on the consequences of blessings and curses in Old Testament covenants. These set the stage for what New Testament authors taught about the consequences of obedience and disobedience associated with the new covenant in Christ.

New Covenant

New Testament theology emphasizes that Christ, as the representative of the new covenant, experienced both God's curses and God's blessings. As Paul pointed out in Galatians 3:13, Jesus endured the curse of God for the sins of all who believe in him as he suffered death on the cross.

Now, Jesus didn't come under God's curses because of his own personal failures. He had no personal sins. But in fulfillment of Isaiah 53:1-12, he bore the judgment of God as an innocent royal substitute for the people of God in every age. By contrast, however, because of his own personal righteousness, Christ also received God's blessings. Jesus is the only human being who served God perfectly and deserved the reward of God's eternal blessings.

Listen to the connection between Christ's obedience and God's blessing in Philippians 2:8-9:

[Christ] became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name (Philippians 2:8-9).

In New Testament theology, Jesus' resurrection and ascension at the inauguration of the kingdom were the just reward for his perfect obedience to God. Jesus enjoys the blessing of God throughout the continuation of his kingdom as he reigns over all of

creation at the right hand of the Father. And he will be blessed even more at the consummation of his kingdom when he receives his eternal inheritance of ruling over the new creation.

Now, as much as New Testament theology praises Jesus for gaining the blessing of ruling over all creation, we know that the consequences of the new covenant also impact the church, the people of the new covenant.

Once again, the New Testament doctrine of union with Christ points out two sides of this reality. On the one side, because we are "in Christ," every eternal blessing of God has already been assigned to true believers. True believers can rest confidently in the fact that they will never experience the eternal curse of God. Their eternal blessings are secure because Christ is their covenant representative.

Paul had this concept in mind when he wrote his well-known doxology in Ephesians 1:3:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).

Because we are identified with Christ in heaven, true believers have already received "every spiritual blessing." Just as Christ bore the eternal curses of God on our behalf, he also received the reward of eternal blessings from the Father on our behalf.

On the other side, however, our union with Christ means that Christ is in us. That is to say, he is at work in true believers so that they experience the consequences of obedience and disobedience in their daily lives.

Now, once again, we must remember that until Christ returns in glory, the visible church consists of both false believers and true believers. And New Testament theology explains how the consequences of blessings and curses, in this life and in eternity, apply to both of these groups.

Passages like Luke 12:45-46 and Romans 2:4-5 explain that, as false believers continue to rebel against God, the blessings they receive in this life increase God's eternal curses against them at the final judgment. And the hardships and curses they endure in this life are but foretastes of the eternal curses they will receive when Christ returns.

By contrast, true believers also receive both blessings and curses in this life. But the blessings that true believers receive in this life are foretastes of the eternal blessings that will come at the consummation of the kingdom. And for true believers, as passages like Hebrews 12:1-11 tell us, temporary hardships, or curses, are God's loving, fatherly discipline. These difficulties sanctify us and increase the eternal blessings we'll receive when Christ returns. As we read in Revelation 21:6-8, God says:

To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Revelation 21:6-8).

On that day, false believers in the new covenant church will be condemned to eternal judgment. But true believers will receive their eternal inheritance in the glorious new creation.

If we want to see the blessings that God's people receive after final judgment, we would go to Revelation 21 and 22, this amazing image of the new creation at the end of the world. And I love this description of the new creation in Revelation 21 and 22, because it's not just a recapitulation of Genesis, of the Garden, it's not just a return to the Garden. It's really an escalation of the Garden. It's dynamic. It's better than Eden was. So, in Eden, Adam and Eve had a responsibility to rule under God, to tend the Garden and steward the earth. In the new creation we will too, and that's our blessing. But we will never sin. Adam and Eve had the potential to sin. In the new creation, God's people will never fall away. In Eden, Jesus wasn't there, wasn't there physically, bodily. In the new creation Jesus will be. So, the blessing that we inherit as people of God, people of the new covenant is really a new creation that's better than anything the world has ever known.

— Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the new covenant in Christ, we've considered God's kingdom administration and seen how God administered his kingdom through his covenant representatives, and how he established appropriate policies as his covenants developed organically. We've also explored how the dynamics of interaction between God and his covenant people involved his divine benevolence, his tests of loyalty, and the consequences for obedience and disobedience.

As we seek to understand the New Testament more fully, we must keep in mind that the new covenant in Christ wasn't just one small part of New Testament theology. As the last of God's covenants with his people, the new covenant deeply influenced everything New Testament authors wrote. God made a solemn pact with his people in Christ through the new covenant. And the more we understand about this new covenant, the better we will be able to see the most important features of New Testament theology.

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