

GOD'S COVENANT, THE INNER DYNAMIC OF CREATION

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A series of four studies on the matter of covenant.

Other titles are:

- **Blood enough for the peace of the world**
- **The one love that endures**
- **A future as sure as God**

What lies at the heart of this world and of our life? Is it evolutionary process? Is it self-generation? Many think that it is. Many can point out that evolutionary thinking has been good for science, helpful to our understanding of the natural world, and so, good for our progress in life.

This may or may not be so. The question is whether our postulations can speak to the depths of what a human being is. Is there nothing but a complex of processes, a mystery of chance and a survival of the fittest behind our life? These ideas do not account for the grandeur of a human being or of the mystery of what takes place between us—or above us.

Rather, the Bible tells us of a covenant in which God is bonded to us. He pursues this actively and specifically and no person or nation or any part of the creation is excluded from his compass.

God has never abandoned what he has made. This creation is his and he loves it. He has never jettisoned his purpose to have creation come to its goal and perfection. With a view to this, he has revealed the nature of his relation to the creation and that relation is revealed to us as a covenant—or, in a series of covenants.

Nothing should take away from the simple majesty of God creating the heaven and the earth. This must constantly bring us to awe and worship and thankfulness. What I am saying is that, by covenant, God has opened himself up to us, and opened us up to himself—and shown us that the creation is to be understood in the way he has come to us covenantally.

Because of our sinfulness and fears, our scepticism and hostility, this bond has been revealed in the context of our sad history and in the midst of great need. It has been sealed or confirmed to us in a particular ways—usually including the spilling of blood.

The covenants are revealed to us—through Israel in particular—to show that God has accepted responsibility for what he has made. They have told us the next stage in his purpose, and have provided for us while things are still unfinished and even chaotic in this world. They have been given so that we can live in the present by the dynamics of the final and perfected age.

They specifically show that responsibility for the relationship between us is borne by God, that he will not allow our sinfulness to foil his purpose for us and that he will bring us to responsible participation in all that he has purposed.

If this is going to quickly, then let me tell more of the story.

A covenant with Noah

Take Noah for a start. In his day, 'the LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.'

Genesis 6:5—6

This was the reason for the great flood that wiped out all human creatures—except Noah and his family. The question for us is: Can we expect to be wiped out every time we pollute the earth with our violence and greed and fear? This question exercises many people today.

God confirmed his covenant with us all after that flood. He said he would never again allow the elements to destroy the earth. Rather, there would always be a cycle of seasons to provide food for the world.

The message God has given is: He will preserve our race even though our violence grieves him to his heart. The rainbow is the sign of this covenant and it is still the basis for God's relating to us.

God's preserving of the creation was not a new thing of course. What God promised was that he would continue to do what a faithful Creator always does. The difference now is that he has promised this to a race which has conclusively demonstrated that it cannot do it of itself.

It appears that God was confirming an existing arrangement when he confirmed this covenant—that is, confirmed rather than made it with them for the first time. God's bondedness to his creation arises from his being Creator. Covenant is the opening up of this relationship. In other words, from the beginning, God has been in covenant relationship with his creation.

From the story of Noah, we begin to see what a covenant is. It is certainly not an agreement or a contract. We had no say in it. We did not need to have any say in it—God was the only one obligated! But we certainly need to know about it and to live in it.

Who can live with the naked results of their own living? Every day we spend some time hoping for a forgiving environment. Even if people live by a stern law, they hope that there will be no discovery of their wrongs. Better to have the covenant which God has made with his creation than to hope for luck or to hope that our sinning will remain unknown.

The whole earth may be full of violence, but it is also full of the loving kindness of the Lord. Loving kindness is what God showed to Israel—but the whole earth is full of it So people in all countries may call on him in their distress—though they have no worthiness to do so.

Psalm 33:5

A covenant with Abraham

The story of God's care for the creation continues with his calling Abraham to travel to a new land where he would know the blessing of God. As a man with no family, God promised to give him a son, and, through him, to build a nation through whom blessing would come to the world.

Again, God made this promise a covenant. 'I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you'

Genesis 17:6—7

This was the beginnings of Israel. If nations acknowledged the truth revealed to that people, and thanked God for them, they would be blessed. If they despised this revelation and the nation through which it came, they would be under a curse of God. It was a covenant with Abraham but it was for all the world.

The promise sustained Abraham and his family after him. It sustained the nation of Israel as they took up their place in the promised land. They had the promise of blessing upon them. But this blessing was so that they could be a light to all the nations—they knew their God, they knew that their relation to him was not of their own making and it was not deserved by their merit.

Through their history, they were taught to look to their God and to a Messiah who would come and who would fulfil the promises of God to them. Their righteousness consisted not in their deeds but in their faith in God concerning this.

When Israel thought that their deeds were worthy of merit, or that their traditional roots in God would save them, God gave them up to disaster and defeat—but still promised them a future and a hope and reaffirmed that everything about their life depended on him. He told them again and again that they could trust in him and in his Messiah to put them in the right.

Adam (and all of us) had wished to be his own legislator and judge. He wished to find the resources of goodness within himself. This went right against the truth that everything—especially goodness—flowed from the Creator. Covenant reveals this centre of created life and casts us back on our Maker. There we find, wonderfully, that he has remained bonded to us.

Human beings cannot truly live without covenant. It is the statement by God, and embedded in Israel's (and our) history that he is God and not us, that he is good and not us, that he is faithful and not us, but, that we are brought to what God has for us through his promise.

Covenant is the true home for our development of a way of life. Without it, culture becomes a hiding place from God, the battlements we erect to make him redundant, the fortresses from which we assert ourselves and destroy our neighbours.

God's covenant relationship to us is the affirmation—in the presence of our stubbornness—that our life flows from our Creator and not from ourselves. In covenant we have continuity with God, life flowing from him—in peace, fruitfulness and joy.

Are any excluded from covenant?

The stories of Noah and Abraham have shown that God relates covenantally with every living creature. Clearly, some are outside of the benefits of covenant. They are children of wrath. But God's covenant remains the way of God for his whole creation. It is the rationale and hope of the creation. It has been this way from the beginning and our sinfulness has only further revealed the unchangeable nature of God's purpose.

Not to be in covenant relation with God—who sustains covenant relation to all things—is to be unknown by the one who knows all things; it is to be 'outside' of him in whom we live and move and have our being; it is a living death. But if covenant has been revealed to a person or people, that knowledge works powerfully to bring them into the good of that truth.

Israel's special history was for the benefit of all peoples—the blessing was for all nations, their temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations, their life was to be a light to the nations and so that they in turn could walk in that light.

In the church, God has a covenant people. But the church is not separated from the world by this privilege. Rather, they are a light to the world, a true exponent of creation, a servant of God for the good of all.

When Jesus rose from the dead, he commanded his disciples to proclaim his good news to the whole creation and to make disciples of all nations. He did not see any culture, or any person, being outside the benefit of what he had done in his life and death and resurrection.

God does not speak to those who are not his. All the nations belong to the Lord. He sent Jesus Christ for all the nations and every person. He sent him for the sake of the whole creation.

When Jesus Christ died, he died for all. He died for the sins of the whole world. He offered himself to make atonement or reconciliation for the whole creation. God's purpose in him was to unite all things in him—things in heaven and things on the earth.

Everything could now take its proper place. Jesus said: 'if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'. The slavery to which people submitted would be abolished and they could live to God as they were created to do.