

God's act of saving Noah and his children through the ark in a time of judgement led into a 'covenant'. *'I will establish my covenant'*, said God. ¹

¹ 6:18

The idea of a covenant is an important theme in the Bible and we must consider it in more detail.

1. More than an agreement

- *A promise with an oath*

1. Consider first of all **faulty definitions of 'covenant'**. It is not enough to think covenant is simply an agreement. 'Covenant' is sometimes defined as though it were some kind of bargain but the subject must be understood more precisely than that. **A covenant is a promise which has an oath added to it.**

Take what happens in Nehemiah chapter 5, where the difference between promise and oath is made clear. Nehemiah complains that the Jews are ill-treating their poorer fellow-Jews. He is angry ¹ and calls a meeting in which he condemns them sharply for what they have done. The upper classes of Judea promise to restore the heavy interest they have taken when giving loans to their poorer brothers and sisters. Notice: they give a promise. *'We will restore everything and we shall demand nothing more from them'*. ² But Nehemiah wants something more. He sends for the priests and makes the people take an oath. This is a covenant! A covenant is a promise that has been made secure by the taking of an oath. He leads them through a ceremony ³ and gets them to swear that they will do as they have said. Once you have taken an oath you are legally committed.

¹
Nehemiah 5:6

²
Nehemiah 5:12

³
Nehemiah 5:13

2. Three kinds of covenant

- *Obligation to a senior*
- *Generosity to a junior*
- *Two way between equals*

2. We must realise that **there are three kinds of covenant:** covenants of obligation to a senior, covenants of generosity towards a junior, and two-way covenants between equals. In Genesis the word 'covenant' comes 27 times. On 22 occasions it is connected with divine generosity to the world through Noah ¹; or to Abraham's seed through Abraham. ² In five references ³ people who are equal make oaths to each other. Another kind of covenant, a covenant where a junior swears obedience to a senior, is not mentioned in Genesis; the first reference to such a covenant is in Exodus 19:5 (where people are to swear allegiance to God) and Exodus 23:32 (where the law forbade Canaanites to escape judgement by swearing allegiance to Israel).

¹ 6:18;
9:9, 11, 12,
13, 15, 16,
17
² 15:18;
17:2, 4, 7,
9, 10, 11,
13, 14, 19,
21
³ 14:13;
21:27, 32;
26:28;
31:44

Noah's covenant was a covenant of generosity. The covenant made with Israel via Moses on Mount Sinai was a law-covenant and we are not under it.

There are other covenants of generosity as well as that through Noah. Later in the Bible we have mention of covenants with Abraham, with David, and with Jesus and His people.

Ingredients of Covenants

Thirdly, let us consider some of **the ingredients of covenants.**

- A covenant has a promise.
- A covenant has an oath.
- A covenant may have a beneficiary, someone who is receiving the

blessing of the oath. Or it may have an victim, a target, a person who is obliged to swear allegiance.

iv. A covenant of generosity is unconditional, after it has been given, although it might be given as a reward.

v. A covenant may take time to take place because it is not settled until the oath is given.

vi. A covenant may have attached to it a sign or symbol of some kind.

vii. A covenant involved the shedding of blood in some kind of sacrifice.

viii. All of these ingredients are to be found in God's covenant with and through Noah.

Three examples

• Covenant with Noah

The promise was that God said he would not destroy the world by water.

i. Because it was a covenant God is in fact swearing an unbreakable oath. There are 'two unchangeable things'¹, promise and oath.

¹
Hebrews 6:18

ii. The 'beneficiary' was the entire world, Noah, his children, the animals, the very land itself.

iii. Once the covenant was given it could never be reversed. The sworn promises of Genesis 8:22 and 9:11 will never be cancelled.

v. The unconditional covenant was given as a reward. It was after Noah's obedience¹ that it was implemented.

¹ 6:22

vi. The covenant took some time. God made a proposal first¹ and then the covenant ceremony was after the flood.²

¹ 6:13-21
² 8:22

vii. Attached to the covenant with Noah was the sign of the rainbow. The rainbow was a sign that God would keep his oath.

viii. The covenant with Noah was established upon the basis of sacrifice and the shedding of blood.¹

¹ 8:20

• Covenant with Abraham

We can see many of these things in other covenants. God made a covenant with Abraham.

i. God gave promises to Abraham.¹

¹ 12:2-3

ii. Later He started making a covenant.¹ God was preparing to take an oath.

¹ 15:1-21

iii. The one to receive the covenant-blessings was Abraham and his seed, his physical seed the Jews, his spiritual seed all believers.

iv. There came a point where the covenant could not be lost¹

¹ it was after 22

v. It was a reward for obedience.

vi. The covenant took time. The promises were given in Genesis 12 and 15; the oath was taken in Genesis 22.

vii. The covenant sign was circumcision.

viii. It involved sacrifice.¹

¹ 15:9-10

• The New Covenant

The new covenant is parallel.

i. The covenant has a promise. The promise is the blessings of the Holy Spirit.

ii. We are in a relationship where God is offering to take an oath about these blessings. In Hebrews it is called 'entering into rest'.

iii. The beneficiaries are believers and their seed on condition that they are saved. ¹

iv. The blood of the covenant is the blood of Jesus Christ.

v. It takes time to enter rest.

vi. When God swears to us, the promise concerned will not be lost.

vii. The covenant-signs are baptism and the Lord's Supper.

viii. It takes effect by our depending on the blood of Jesus Christ.

These themes must be developed as we consider Genesis but we have them here in embryo. Genesis 6:18 announces a theme that will be taken up by the rest of the Bible.

¹ Acts
2:39



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