

Introduction to Covenant

What is a covenant?

Malcolm Smith defines covenant as "a binding, unbreakable obligation between two parties, based on unconditional love sealed by blood and sacred oath, that creates a relationship in which each party is bound by specific undertakings on each other's behalf. The parties to the covenant place themselves under the penalty of divine retribution should they later attempt to avoid these undertakings. It is a relationship that can only be broken by death."

There are certain ingredients that were always present when clans, tribes or people made a covenant.

The Representative

When a group of people prepared to enter into covenant with another party, they selected a man from among themselves to represent them in the covenant-making. The representative had to be of the same blood and family as those he represented. The representative is also known as the guarantor of the covenant, the one in and through whom the covenant is made and who is the guarantee that its terms and promises will be kept.

In the West we think of the "individual". The Bible introduces us to a different way of thinking in which people are "in" a representative person whose actions and achievements become the actions and achievements of the whole family, clan or tribe.

Read 1 Samuel 17:8-10

David summed Israel in himself, embodying its people; what happened to him this day happened to the entire nation. His victory or defeat would be felt not only by the army, but also in every village and city of Israel in the lives of people who were not there at the battle. At that moment, the history of an Israelite as yet unborn was being decided. In David, present and future Israel went forth to face Goliath.

Read 1 Samuel 17:45-47

After the victory, men who had stood silent for six weeks shouted the victory. They had been "in" David and shared his victory as if it was their own.

The Covenant Oath

A covenant is not a contract. A contract is a vehicle whereby properties and goods are conveyed from one person to another. They are negotiable and can be changed or canceled. They are only as good as the character of the contracting and, therefore, easily broken.

Covenants are totally different. It is far above the exchange of properties and things. It is the giving of one's whole person and life to another and the wholehearted receiving of that other person and his or her life. Covenants are made with an oath. A solemn affirmation, binding oneself to the fulfillment of the words while appealing to God. By calling on God while making an oath, the two parties made God the third party. This makes the covenant nonnegotiable and unalterable.

The Covenant Blessing or Promises

Every covenant of OT times contained the promises of each party made to the other and the responsibilities each took with the benefit of the other party in view.

Read 1 Samuel 20:14-15
Then read 2 Samuel 9:7

Such promises, terms, and responsibilities were often written down and read at certain specified times in remembrance of the covenant being made.

The Covenant Sacrifice

At the making of a covenant, there was always the shedding of blood. An animal was slain and its carcass split down the middle into two halves. The parties passed between the pieces in vivid symbolism that they were entering into a death and were journeying into a new life. They were dying to their self-interests alone and into a new relationship of union with another.

They might also shed their own blood, drawn from their right arm or hand. Implying that they would keep the covenant even if it cost them their own blood.

Read Genesis 15

The Covenant Seal

The scars from the wounds in their arms were the seals in their bodies of the participants' declaring that they were parties to the covenant. They were carried in pride, identifying them as covenant partners. Often the names of the covenant makers were joined to make a new name announcing that they were joined as one.

Covenant Friends

From the making of the covenant, the two parties would be described as friends. In the West this word is cheapened. In societies that practice covenants there is no higher honor than to be called a person's friend.

Read 2 Chronicles 20:7

Also, remember when Jesus called his disciples "friends"?

Covenant Meal

Every covenant ended in a meal that declared the covenant now valid and in effect, functioning in the lives of the parties to it. They would eat the same bread and the same wine telling the world they were one.

Read Genesis 26:28-31

Read Genesis 31:44-46

What part of your marriage day does this remind you of?

The Memorial or Place of the Covenant-Making

The place the covenant was made was hallowed as the memorial site of the two parties' becoming one. Sometimes a memorial was setup or the name was changed as a reminder.

Lovingkindness

To become part of a covenant was to enter into a new situation, becoming part of a relationship that is best understood as a family - not based on birth ties, but on a commitment of love freely given and bound with a sacred oath. Hesed is the Hebrew word used to describe the ongoing relationship of the parties in covenant who worked out the commitment made in covenant, the keeping of its promises and responsibilities.

Hesed is a difficult word to define. In various places it is translated as mercy, goodness, steadfast love, loyal love, covenant love, lovingkindness, or kindness.