

Covenant God

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[0 : 0 0] Now just for a few minutes I want to just say a few things about this chap, not directly, but more about the wider situation that the Old Testament believers find themselves in.

If you remember God is coming back here to the same place that he met with Moses and the burning bush. And he said, I'm coming back here because I fulfilled my promise.

I've said what I was going to do. I've redeemed the people, the people have been set free. And there's a lot of physical, visual pictures that, you know, we talked about with the kids, because that was very important.

And even the geography is important in these stories because we find that God is going back to places where he has made promises for these promises to be known to be fulfilled.

And he's going on to then give them the 10 words. He knows the 10 commandments. And as I said earlier from January onwards, we're going to look at each of these 10 commandments and apply them with our New Testament eyes to our lives.

[1 : 1 2] But I just want to ask two questions briefly. The first is, well, what was it like for Old Testament believers? Because I think I may be unfair in saying this, but it may be for a lot of us the Old Testament is a closed book.

We find it difficult and we're not sure if we understand and what their relationship with God to His people is in the Old Testament and how Christ has changed that. Do we need the Old Testament anymore?

What was it like for Old Testament believers? And then briefly, what has changed for us? Because what we want to know and remember is God hasn't changed and people haven't changed.

OK, cultures are different, time is different, society is different, spiritual realities are different and a lot of things have happened since then.

But people don't change and their need before God isn't different and God doesn't change. So there's principles we can always take and remember. But we also need to remember that the Bible is God's word and we need to understand it in its own context.

[2 : 2 4] There is one Bible, we know that, from Genesis to Revelation and there's also one covenant, one covenant of grace. There's only one way that people can be made right with God.

It wasn't a different way in the Old Testament. They weren't saved by being good people and then Jesus came along and we're saved by grace and the new. Everyone is saved by God's grace, one covenant.

It's just a different outworking of that covenant. And though we believe that and believe that strongly, we also recognize there's discontinuity.

OK, big word that I usually get wrong. But there's discontinuity between the New Testament and the Old. There's things that are different about it and we need to remember that as well.

We need to remember that it's kind of a bit like the picture we had of the clouds. There's a lot of things in the Old Testament that meant that the people were kind of seeing through a glass darkly, as the New Testament says.

[3 : 21] They were seeing through the clouds. They couldn't see that clearly and God was progressively revealing himself to them. But it was a preparatory stage as well.

God was making things ready but they couldn't see. For example, they didn't know about Jesus. They didn't know who Jesus was. They didn't know about the Holy Spirit really and they didn't realize that God was a triune God, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

That hadn't been revealed so there's lots of things that they didn't necessarily know. So unlike us, they didn't have Jesus Christ. Yes, they were saved by God's grace.

We're told here that it was God who took them, carried them on eagle's wings and brought them to himself. It was God's grace that saved them. And yet they didn't know and understand fully that God would need to send one Savior for all people after Jesus and also for those before Jesus.

So all they had was this yearly animal sacrifice that pointed towards the need for a perfect sacrifice to atone for their sins.

[4 : 32] And they had this outward religion that pointed towards that. So they didn't have Jesus. They weren't like that. They also didn't have the Holy Spirit in the way we have the Holy Spirit.

And that must have been hugely difficult for them. They didn't have the Holy Spirit in their hearts in the way that we all have the Holy Spirit in our hearts as believers. The Holy Spirit was given out in various ways in the Old Testament to various people for various tasks, for various times, for various work that they had to do.

But they didn't really have this internal power and strength. And so their faith was very external.

And can I say incomplete? It was in many ways, from a human point of view, it was kind of an, even as God looked down on it, it was a preparatory faith.

It was very physical, as we've said in its emphasis. The physical slavery did speak to them of spiritual slavery, but maybe they didn't understand that fully.

[5 : 39] They didn't think so much about heaven as much about Canaan, about this promised land they were going to have. They didn't understand Christ, but they did understand the ritual animal sacrifices.

They didn't know God's presence in the way we know God's presence, but they did have the Holy of Holies in the temple and they did have the Ark of the Covenant and all these very physical things which were signs of God's presence, symbols of God's presence with them.

They had lost of ceremonial laws and rules and regulations, which told them that God was a very kind of precious God and God that needed to be obeyed and God that was very holy.

But that's all they had in many ways. They had sounds and smells and certain foods that spoke to them about who God was, but their faith was incomplete at that level, yet they were redeemed by what Jesus would do and they were still God's treasured possession and he still wanted a relationship of love with them.

So do you think of the Old Testament people as an oppressed people who only knew a harsh and brutal God, the Old Testament fiery angry God, to spell these notions?

[7 : 00] God was a God who loved them, there are some amazing tender pictures of God in the Old Testament, amazing pictures of a God who is a great king who would scoop up a dying baby in the wilderness in the desert and clean it and take it to be his own, look after a king, a sovereign, a suzerain who would never do that and an eagle who would look after its young in that precious and caring way, wonderful pictures of God in the Old Testament.

But what has changed in the second question briefly, what has changed for us because we need to read the Old Testament recognising that it is pointing forward, that it does tell us and unfold certain things about God for us and is preparing us for the coming of Jesus.

But we do recognise that in Christ all things are new, we have a new and living way to God through Christ.

So we don't need Moses or anyone else to go into a cloud in order to see God. God isn't covered by that cloud, he isn't unknown, he has been revealed who, he has been revealed in Jesus.

So when you see God, see Jesus, see God. So God has been revealed, we see him in the person of Jesus and that changes absolutely everything.

[8 : 30] I think sometimes in our theological tradition we don't mark the discontinuity between the Old and the New quite enough. It is one covenant, it is a renewed covenant but it is hugely discontinued in the sense that all things because of Jesus are new, because the cross changes everything.

And so we look at the Old Testament through the eyes of what God has, God nailed to a tree on the cross, we have that, where Jesus says, it is finished, it is done, I have completed the work and now this people that have been my people and this people who will be my people will be my people and the nature of faith changes and it moves from this ritualistic outward ceremonial visual faith to a spiritual faith where it is internalised, where we are gifted God's presence in our hearts, I want to say a little bit about that, where we are not heading for a physical promised land, a country within it here in Scotland, but a spiritual one, a kingdom that we belong to and that is spiritual, we are not fighting physical battles against the Amalekites and the Philistines and all these people but we are fighting against the sin in our hearts, the flesh that reacts against Christ and the devil in this spiritual battle.

And so we have this amazing reality that if you have time to read Hebrews 10 and read all of Hebrews, you will find a great wonderful teaching that brings the Old Testament and applies it to the New Testament through Jesus Christ and the continuity and the discontinuity.

So we have this amazing reality of God, there is still mystery, God nailed to a cross, God is still holy and God is still a judge, remember that, sometimes you are lightning and you are like, oh harsh God, the Old Testament, nice, loving, gentle God in the New, but God in the cross says that not one sin will go unpunished, either it takes the just punishment for our sin on himself unbelievably or you will take it on your own because he is a just God and sin is an offence and because justice is hugely important to us, he will judge, the cross speaks of outstanding love but outstanding justice.

And we see that all of the picture of God in the Old Testament is just molded beautifully onto the cross because there we have his love and his justice meeting together.

[11 : 41] So in Christ all things are new and in the New Testament from Christ onwards, since the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is given out to all of God's people, Joel prophesied that, he said afterwards he said, I will pour out my spirit on all people and everyone who believes and Jesus says in John before his crucifixion, I will give you another counsellor, someone who will be with you forever.

So we have not just the laws of God, not just the rituals like they did in the Old Testament, we have the Holy Spirit in our hearts, he has given us his treasured possession in Christ and he has also given us his treasured possession in his spirit so that we can be children of God.

So we are empowered from the inside out to love him, empowered to change, empowered to be, empowered to love and that internal life we are given is absolutely life changing.

And the other aspect of that which is very important and there is a loud band outside, you hear that?

That is very off putting. We do not only have the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we have the law of God in our hearts and I want to finish it with this but I want to read something from the Bible, this is very important from Jeremiah chapter 31 because we are just coming into the giving of the Ten Commandments, the Tablets of Stone, you know the story well and Jeremiah verse 31 and in verse 31, easy to remember, Jeremiah 31, 31, time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant or I will renew the covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, I will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them out of the hand and led them out of Egypt, which they broke the covenant and so on.

[13 : 47] Then he goes on to say verse 33, after that time I will put my law on their minds, I will write it on their hearts, I will be their God, they will be my people, no longer will a man teach his neighbour or brother as you know the Lord because they will not know me from the greatest to the least.

There is this internalising of God's law in our hearts and in second Corinthians 3 verse 3 it says, you show that you are a letter from Christ, this is to the New Testament church, to you and me, the result of our ministry written not with ink but with the spirit of the living God, not with tablets of stone, not with tablets of stone Moses, but with a tablet on the human heart, we have the law of God in our hearts.

Can I say that so important because there is so much of a people like to say that we don't believe in the law anymore because we believe in grace and we believe in serving Jesus and loving him and following him and the law doesn't matter anymore.

Jesus says the law is fulfilled in Christ but it becomes internalised into our own hearts, we are bound to the law of God, not to save us, not to make us right with God but to know the blessing of serving God and living the way he wants us to.

Grace makes us the people of God, the law marks us as the people of God. The grace makes us the people of God, it's God's grace by which we are redeemed.

[15 : 19] But when we are redeemed in the spirits in our hearts then so the law of God is written in our hearts and that's what marks us out as his because we reflect him because he is the Holy God isn't he?

So we become his holy children not because we are self righteous, not because we want to be better than other people for trying to make ourselves better before God, but because he's made us to be like that and it's the best way to be and it's the way to live.

Holiness today is a dirty word, it's not talked about, it's not preached about, it's not believed in but we are clean, you know the washed clothes picture, we've been cleaned by him, we've been made clean, we're not to go back into the gutters, we're to live holy lives not because we think somehow God will be impressed with that but because we love him and because it's the way to live, beware of returning to a kind of Old Testament type thinking of Christianity which is in the shadows, which is ritualistic religion, which is outward, which is where you're maybe even externally obeying things for an external world to see you, maybe even a minister or the people you sit beside in church on a Sunday or you say the right things but you lose sight of this heart obedience and this heart law and this heart relationship with the Holy Spirit and this heart truth so that we come today to church not because we're doing anything to earn God's favour but because we love him and we want to be with his people and we want to praise him and we want to worship him and want to serve him because this law, what is it, what is this law?

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself, that's what Christ has done for us and that's what's internalised and that is what is so glorious about being a Christian in the New Testament era where we are children of God in a way that the Old Testament people couldn't see in the same way but with that privilege comes great responsibility.

We don't really have an excuse to return to rebelliousness and sin. The Old Testament church didn't either but they had more, I guess, temptation to do that.

[17 : 56] We have had so much, we've been given so much and we don't want to return to a life of slavery because we've been set free so may that be our experience.

Let's bow our heads briefly in prayer. Lord teach us to look after our hearts. We thank you for the pictures of the Bible, the pictures that speak about so many different things.

We thank you that it isn't only in the Old Testament that God uses for his people pictures but in the New Testament lots of pictures that are so helpful to us about being fruitful vines or about being a seed that's sown in good ground or buildings that are well founded and lots of pictures, lots of parables just to help us to know what it means to belong to the Lord God and to know about His holiness and to know about Jesus finished work.

May we all be followers of Jesus and for any today who are in church who as yet are not followers of Jesus may they bow their knee and confess their sins and repent and come to the only one who is able to forgive them and to give them a new heart and a new life and a new way forward.

Again we thank you for the children and we ask for your blessing on them and for the way they've been so great here today even in church to sit and listen to this sermon. So bless them and bless us as we sing together a parting song of praise to the glory of God.

[19 : 24] We ask these things. Amen.