



The Covenant: God's Eternal Contract

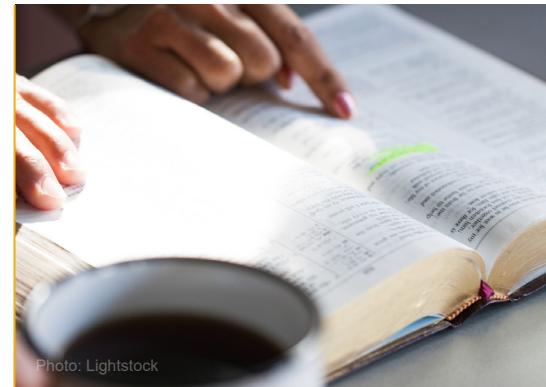
In both the Jewish and Christian faiths, the *brit*, Hebrew for “covenant,” plays a central role, defining the events of the past and assuring us of promises for the future. But to appreciate the significance and meaning of God’s covenants with humanity, we must understand their context. While the idea of God entering into a covenantal relationship with mankind seems natural to us, it was a radical idea in ancient times.

The ancient world was pagan. Even if an individual believed in one Creator-God, that person most likely believed that God created the world and left it to its own devices. God was “up there,” while people were left to fight for survival “down here.”

The thought that one God initiated a relationship with man shattered this worldview. The idea of one universal God suggested all people came from the same source, shared a destiny, and were made to exist in harmony.

Jews affirm this basic principle when we recite the *Shema*, the centerpiece of our daily morning and prayer service, from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

In this month’s Fellowship Study, we will explore the most momentous covenants ever made—God’s covenants with humanity. Like other covenants, these divine covenants are legal and binding contracts that apply even today. As we explore the covenants made for all the world through Noah, with Abraham and the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai, and with David for his eternal dynasty, we will see how these covenants are echoed in the Christian Bible, as well (Luke 1:55; Galatians 3:16).



You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the LORD your God, a covenant the LORD is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

— DEUTERONOMY 29:12-13



A Promise for Humanity

The word *brit*, בְּרִית, “covenant,” is first used in the Bible in Genesis 9, when God promises: *“Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”*

At its basic level, a covenant is a contract between two parties. Here, God makes a commitment to every living being that He will never destroy the world by flood again. In return, He requires basic morality from man.

If Genesis 1 is the story of Creation, then Genesis 6 is the story of de-creation, as God saw *“that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time”* (Genesis 6:5). Genesis 8 and 9 are the story of the re-creation of a world fundamentally different from the first.

In our world, God knows that *“every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood”* (8:21), but accepts flawed humans as we are. Yet this new world needed to be governed by a different system—one founded upon a covenantal relationship between man and God, so the world would not descend to the depravity that brought about the flood in the first place.

According to Jewish tradition, there are seven laws, known as the Noahide Laws, that every human—every descendant of Noah—must abide by even today. God said in Genesis 9:12, *“This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come.”* Under the Noahic Covenant, the laws are: Do not murder; do not steal; do not worship false gods; do not be sexually immoral; do not be cruel to animals; do not blaspheme God; and an affirmative command to set up a system of justice. In return, God would keep His side of the deal to protect the world from destruction.

Moreover, according to Jewish tradition, any non-Jew who abides by these seven laws of basic morality, will be considered a righteous Gentile. From the Jewish perspective, abiding by these seven laws is what is required for any Gentile to walk with God and enjoy a meaningful relationship with Him.

The Noahic Covenant is a reminder that our God is a faithful partner of His covenant with us. In Isaiah 54:9, we read, *“To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again.”* What God extended to Noah and his descendants and sealed with His rainbow is given to us today.

After the flood in the times of Noah, God created a world in partnership with all humanity. That means that every human being alive today is part of that covenant. As Paul wrote in the Christian Bible in Romans 8:31, *“If God is for us, who can be against us?”* God is not against us. He wants a relationship with us. God offers us His hand; it is up to each of us to take hold of it and walk with Him in peace.



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“I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

— GENESIS 9:11

A National Commitment

From the broad stroke of the Noachic Covenant given to all humanity, we come to God's next covenant given to one man, Abraham, which culminated in God's covenant with one nation, Israel. At first, God promised Abraham to bless him and all the world through him (Genesis 12:3); to give Abraham descendants too numerous to count (Genesis 15:5); to make him the father of a great nation and to make his name great (Genesis 12:2).

As Abraham's relationship with God progressed, God initiated a covenant with him, creating an official partnership with Abraham, the first Jew, and all his offspring. In the covenant, God promised Abraham that He would give his offspring the land of Canaan as an eternal inheritance: *"On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land . . .'"* (Genesis 15:18).

God elaborated upon this covenant in Genesis 17, promising Abraham that He would make him the father of many nations (v. 4), that He would be his God and the God of his descendants, and that they would be given the land of Canaan as an eternal possession for the generations to come. (Read Genesis 17:7-8.)

Abraham, as his part of the agreement, promised to obey God's command to *"walk before me faithfully and be blameless"* (Genesis 17:1). He committed to faithfulness, obedience, and righteousness. Abraham's incredible obedience was demonstrated when he offered his only son, Isaac, on the altar — not to earn God's favor, but because of his complete confidence and faith in God's promise of descendants through Isaac (Genesis 21:12, Hebrews 11:17-19).

Judaism teaches that the culmination of the Abrahamic Covenant was made at the foot of Mt. Sinai when God extended His covenant with Abraham to the people of Israel to be *"my treasured possession"* (Exodus 19:5). As their part of the agreement, Israel promised to obey God's *Torah* and commandments, while God promised to bless them. Both the *Torah* and the Tablets of the Ten Commandments are symbols of the covenant, referred to as *"The Book of the Covenant"* (Exodus 24:7) and the *"Tablets of the Covenant"* (Deuteronomy 9:9), respectively.

However, while the covenant is essentially a formalized, legal agreement, the relationship between God and Israel is rooted in love and cannot be reduced to mere legalism. God's love for Israel was so great that He gave them the *Torah*, while Israel's love for God was so overwhelming that they wholeheartedly agreed to follow His law.

The Jewish people were to serve as witnesses to the One God and as a light to the nations through their actions, ethics, and morality. (See Isaiah 42:6, 49:6.) Israel, as an extension of Abraham's covenant, is meant to bring blessings to the world. As partners with God, the nation of Israel is charged with building His Kingdom and declaring His glory to all.

Christians, too, have been given this call of bringing light to the world (Ephesians 5:8) and the mission of kingdom-building (Luke 9:1-2; Acts 28:23). Together, as Christians and Jews, we have fulfilled this call through the lifesaving work of The Fellowship. It has been true for more than four decades, and God willing, it will be true in the years ahead because of faithful partners like you.



Photo: Jan Victors 1642

"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

— EXODUS 19:5-6

A Personal Partnership

Through the covenant with Noah, God entered into covenant with all humanity. With the covenant established with Abraham, and later with Israel, we witnessed a covenant made between God and a specific people. Now, we will look at one more covenant that's perhaps more relevant today than ever before—the covenant God made with David.

This covenant was made between God and one individual, yet it would apply to each individual who succeeded him, throughout the generations. God promised David that all Kings of Israel would descend from him forever. Today, both Jews and Christians await the day when the descendant of David will reign as the Messiah and King.

God first established His covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7:16 when He promised David: *"Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."* Although the word *brit*, "covenant," does not appear here, both David and God refer to this promise later on as a covenant.

In 2 Samuel 23:5, David said, *"If my house were not right with God, surely he would not have made with me an ever-lasting covenant."* And in Jeremiah 33:20-21, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, said: *"If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, then my covenant with David my servant – can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne."*

Both David and God affirm that the promise of eternal kingship is indeed an everlasting covenant. Christians, of course, believe that this covenant was fulfilled in Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 1:1 and Luke 1:31-33, while Jews continue to wait for the "son of David," who will usher in the messianic era.

Just as God made a personal covenant with David, He offers each of us the ability to create our own partnership with Him, using our particular talents, abilities, and the opportunities He places before us. Listen to the invitation given to us through the prophet Isaiah: *"Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David"* (Isaiah 55:3).

Each of us has the ability to participate in God's covenantal promises when we follow Him in faith, obedience, and humility. In Micah 6:8, the prophet teaches: *"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. In addition, what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."* If we can do that, then we enter into our own, unique, covenant with God and rejoice in His everlasting promises passed down from the legacy of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.



"If my house were not right with God, surely he would not have made with me an everlasting covenant..."

— 2 SAMUEL 23:5

Think About It

1. Why do you think God chose to enter into covenant with man?
2. Why do you think God restates and renews His covenant with Abraham and his descendants numerous times in the Bible? (For example, see Genesis 26:3, Genesis 28:13, Leviticus 26:45, Deuteronomy 29:12-13, Joshua 24:25, Jeremiah 34:13)
3. What do we gain as a people and as individuals when we restate and renew our covenant with God?
4. Which of God's covenants inspires you the most, and why?



Apply It

1. **Reflect upon the rainbow.** Next time you see a rainbow, take some time to consider God's love, mercy, and relationship with all humanity and to remember the seven Noahide Laws. (Genesis 9:16, Revelation 4:3)
2. **Reaffirm your part of the covenant.** Rededicate yourself to your covenant with God. Remember your role, remind yourself of God's promises, and be inspired by the covenantal relationship you have with Him. (Isaiah 54:10, 1 John 2:17)
3. **Create an OHT, a sign.** Designate an item, a quote, a verse, or a weekly ritual as your own personal *oht* of your relationship with God. (Exodus 3:12; John 2:11)
4. **Believe God's promises.** Commit to trusting in God's promises in good times and challenging moments. (Proverbs 3:5-6; John 14:1)
5. **Read and reread your contract.** The Bible is our contract. By consistently reading the Bible, we are ever aware of what we must do, what God has done, and what He has promised to do in the future. (Isaiah 55:11; Hebrews 4:12)

