

This past Sabbath we heard an excellent message on what it means to be 'in covenant'. The teacher gave a number of examples of ancient covenants and even played a movie clip of how a covenant would be made back in the 1860s. During the Q & A session after the message, a number of questions were asked and comments made, and after hearing some of those comments, it became clear to me that some did not quite understand one of the key purposes of a covenant and how it applies to God's people and the Torah walk.

In the title of this message, I preceded the words "Before Covenant" with the letters "B.C." using an image that resembles that of the BC Comic book series. I did that because the BC comics would be somewhat hard to understand if a person was not familiar with the American culture from which they were written. This is the same with the Bible. It is a book written by Hebrews, and written within the context of the Hebrew culture. Without an understanding of that culture, it's difficult – if not impossible – to clearly understand what it is saying. So it is with covenants.

The key purpose of a covenant is to bind the parties of the covenant to certain obligations, Obligations that that they would not have had if they had not entered the covenant. Let me give you an example via this simple story -

Every day for lunch Johnny brings a nickel bag of potato chips in his lunch box – but he never eats them. Noticing that Johnny never eats his potato chips, Sarah asks if she can have them. Johnny's reply is "not this bag, since I promised it to my friend; but if you promise to bring me a nickel tomorrow, I promise to bring a bag of chips tomorrow for you. Sarah agrees. At this point, Sarah and Johnny are bound together in a covenant. Johnny is obligated to bring a bag of chips, and Sarah is obligated to bring a nickel.

When you consider that example, before the covenant was made, was Johnny obligated to bring a bag of potato chips? Was Sarah obligated to bring a nickel? Obviously, the answer is 'NO', but now that they are in covenant, they are both obligated to fulfill their part in the covenant.

Let me give you another example.

We are all aware of the story of Noah and the Ark. Because mankind had become so corrupt, YHVH determined that he would remove all mankind from the earth except for Noah and his family. And so He did. He caused a flood to encompass the earth so that no flesh would be saved alive except that those who were in the Ark.

After a certain number of days the flood receded and all the occupants of the Ark were able to exit it onto dry land. At that point YHVH said –

NKJ Gen. 9:9-16 - "And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you ... ^{11b} Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹² And God said: "This *is* the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you ... for perpetual generations: ¹³ "I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. ¹⁴ "It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; ¹⁵ "and I will remember My covenant which *is* between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ... ¹⁶ "The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that *is* on the earth."

So God had just destroyed practically every breathing being on the earth via a flood, but then made a covenant that He would never do it again. Does that mean that He was wrong for doing it before the covenant? Certainly not. BUT – if He were to do it again, then He would be guilty of SINNING against the covenant!



So what does that have to do with our covenant relationship with YHVH? Simply this –

In God's eyes, after a person comes into covenant with Him, that person's status is different than what it was before he came into covenant. In the case of a earth-encompassing flood, God is now BOUND BY THE COVENANT to never do it again.

What does that mean for us? It means that the ramifications of failing to comply with God's law are different for those who are in covenant with YHVH than for those who are not.

Let me explain ...

The Hebrew word for 'sin' is 'chattah' (חַטָּה – 2403) which comes from the root word 'chata' (חָטָא - 2398) which means 'to miss the mark'. When you think about the phrase 'missing the mark', it implies that you were at least 'aiming for the mark' - and if you were 'aiming for the mark', then you were at least knowledgeable about the target. But if you did not know there was a target, can you be blamed because you missed it? Paul states it this way –

^{NIV} **Romans 5:13** ... before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law.

Here's an example to show what I mean -

God established the 7th day of the week as a day of rest in the 2nd chapter of Genesis, but there is no indication that He codified the observance of it until He gave it to the people of Israel at the story of the manna.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 16:23** Then he said to them, "This *is what* the LORD has said: 'Tomorrow *is* a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. Bake what you will bake *today*, and boil what you will boil; and lay up for yourselves all that remains to be kept until morning.' "

As far as I can tell, this is the first time the Hebrews had been made aware of the Sabbath day. But notice something. The Israelites had already been traveling for a month, during which time YHVH apparently made no mention of the Sabbath -

^{NKJ} **Exodus 16:1** And they journeyed from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they departed from the land of Egypt.

So this is a full month after they were kicked out of their homes in Egypt. At least three Sabbaths had passed, and this was probably the fourth, yet YHVH had not revealed the Sabbath to them. Instead, He chose this particular time to introduce the Sabbath to them, and He did it for a specific purpose –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 16:4** Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not.

So YHVH used the manna to test them to see if they were anywhere near the point of honoring Him enough that He would want to enter into covenant with them. It appears that many of the people were, but others were obviously not since we see that some of them disregarded Moses' instruction and searched for the manna on the Sabbath day (vs.27-28).

The point is - at that time it appears that many of the Israelites were somewhat aware of God's Torah instructions, but YHVH waited at least four weeks to reveal the specifics of the instructions to them. It would be another 20 or so days before they would enter into covenant with YHVH, and then weeks later before they would be held accountable for failure to observe the Sabbath (Ex. 31:14).

Now compare this with what YHVH told Isaac when conferring the blessing of Abraham on Him –



^{NKJ} **Genesis 26:4-5** "And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; ⁵because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws."

What was the difference between the Israelites and Abraham? Simply this – Abraham had chosen to be under a covenant with YHVH, but the Israelites had not yet chosen to do so. Why? YHVH had not yet offered His covenant to them. But that changed just days later.

Binding the Covenant

God established His covenant with Israel in Exodus 19-24 where He told them what He would do for them if they would follow His instructions –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 24:3** So Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the LORD has said we will do."

So what changed when Israel accepted the Covenant and its terms? In the simplest of terms, Israel became bound to YHVH. In exchange for Israel's commitment to follow and submit to Him, YHVH promised a life of blessings, freedom, and security – a much different life than the life of slavery they had just been rescued from.

Notice that God did not force them to follow Him – they did so willingly. They could have chosen not to bind themselves to YHVH. They could have said "no deal, we're going back to Egypt". They could have chosen to become an independent nation, much like their relatives Edom and Moab. They could have told Moses that YHVH's blessings were not worth having to live under all those strict and archaic 'rules'. Of course, if they had done so, they would have been a nation of slaves without a king - at the mercy of the nations surrounding them. But at least in their minds, they would have been 'free'.

Thankfully, they chose YHVH, and by doing so, they became bound to Him – subject to His 'rules', the Torah. And what's more, YHVH became bound to them. When they said "All the words which the LORD has said we will do", the Israelites and YHVH became bound to each other with specific responsibilities to each other. It's just like what was explained last week.

Road Kill

With that in mind, it's important to realize that the Torah – the 'rules' YHVH gave to Israel - were not given to the nations. This is clearly stated in Deuteronomy as Israel was preparing to go into the Promised Land where the intent was for them to become a 'light' to the nations.

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 4:5-8** "Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. ⁶ "Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' ⁷ "For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? ⁸ "And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?"

God's law was given to the Israelites so that they could be an example of what a nation could be if they were to bind themselves to YHVH and His ways. But if a nation chose not to do so, they would not be in covenant with YHVH and subsequently not subject to His law. A good example of this has to do with what I call 'the road kill law'. Speaking to the Israelites, Moses said -



^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 14:21** "You shall not eat anything that dies of itself; you may give it to the alien who is within your gates, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner; for you are a holy people to the LORD your God ..."

In this instruction, Moses made a clear distinction between the Israelites and everyone else. The Israelites were forbidden to eat any animal that had not been slaughtered – even if it was a clean animal. But if there was a non-Israelite living nearby, or a stranger just passing through, it could be given to him and he could eat it.

The reason Moses gave the Israelites for this distinction was simply because “you are a holy people to YHVH”. Israel was ‘holy’ because they were in covenant with YHVH, and the others were not.

Being ‘holy’ sets you apart to YHVH and makes you special in His eyes – but it comes with responsibilities and restrictions that do not apply to everyone else UNLESS ‘everyone else’ chooses to follow YHVH and enter into covenant with Him – something that YHVH certainly allows and hopes for as is shown in part of the instructions pertaining to Passover –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 12:48** "... when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land"

Passover is the first step in God’s plan of salvation. It pictures a people who were slaves without hope being cast out of an ungodly culture into a YHVH-centered culture of hope and promise. In order for a person to be a part of that culture, they have to symbolically ‘ingest’ the flesh of the being that was going to save them. But before they could do that, they had to enter into covenant with that same being through the act of circumcision – a blood ritual that clearly left a mark on the circumcised person and was therefore a sign to that person of his covenant relationship with the God of Israel.

When a non-Israelite person made that choice, it implied that he wanted to live like the Israelites – submitting himself to Israel’s god and His laws. In essence, he would become a “Hebrew” – crossing over into YHVH’s way of life. This opportunity was, and still is available to all who wish to do so.

So let’s summarize what we’ve seen so far:

1. A covenant binds persons together via obligations
2. A person is not bound to a covenant until he accepts the terms of the covenant
3. One of the terms of God’s covenant is the obligation to observe the entire Torah
4. Those outside of the covenant have no such obligation and therefore no consequences

So this poses a question for all of us -

When Did I Put Myself Under the Covenant?

This might better be said like this – “When did I accept the terms of the covenant”?

For most of us, the answer would probably be “when we agreed to observe all of God’s law”.

And when was that? You will have to answer that yourself, but for me it was not until about 1997 when I came to see these three things:

1. A person may not add to or take away from the Torah (Deut. 4:2; 12:32)
2. God does not change (Mal. 3:6)
3. God’s covenant and His promises to Israel have not changed (Jer. 31:31-34)

Though I had been raised in the “torah walk” and diligently tried to observe what I had been taught, it was not until I decided to search the scriptures for myself that I began to see the love of God in the Bible and the commitment He had for His people.

It was then that I wanted to be a part of His covenant people, and God opened my eyes to see.



So – What about you? Could you have been in covenant with YHVH at a time when you believed that God's law had been “nailed to the cross”; when you believed that a person who observed the Sabbath was trying to win salvation by works; when in your mind, the words of Jesus superseded the words of YHVH?

I submit that you probably were not in covenant with Him, and therefore you were not subject to the obligations of the covenant, nor were you subject to the penalties of the covenant.

I say all that to say this –

Most, if not all of our most grievous mistakes were probably made before we were in covenant with YHVH. I call it 'BC – Before Covenant', and though we likely bear financial and emotional consequences for those mistakes, God does not hold us spiritually accountable for those mistakes. Let me repeat what Paul said –

^{NIV} **Romans 5:13** ... before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law.

Nevertheless, we must strive to learn from our mistakes, right any wrongs that we may have caused, and begin to move on.

Before YHVH brought Israel to Mount Sinai, he had them all dip themselves in the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:1-2). It might be good for us to find a river, a lake, or a cattle trough and dip ourselves as well so that we can put the past behind us and move on in the newness of life that is a part of being in covenant with YHVH.

^{NKJ} **Romans 6:4** Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Shalom Aleichem