

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

Bible Themes 4: Covenant: the relationship God wants with us.



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Introduction: This session is one of several on great themes that run through the Bible. In the book 'The Drama of Scripture' the authors write this: "Imagine that the Bible, with its 66 books, written by dozens of human authors over the course of more than 1000 years, is a grand cathedral with many rooms and levels and a variety of entrances....You can, for example, enter the Bible through one of the gospels....If you want to gather a sense of the cathedral as a whole, you face an important question: where is the main entrance, the place from which you can orient yourself to the whole? The cathedral of the Bible has many themes." By looking at its themes we can begin to get a sense of how to "enter" the Bible.

Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

What do you think is the closest possible relationship? Why?



Understanding the information (25 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

The relationship God wants with human beings is always the same throughout the Bible story and is best described by the word covenant.

Covenant describes God's faithfulness to creation. "But I will establish my covenant with you: and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you." (Genesis 6:18) The first mention of covenant is in the story of Noah. The Flood story is written as God's wanting to restore the world through saving Noah, not to destroy it. God's covenant includes the animals. "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you— the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you— every living creature on earth...." (Genesis 9:8-11). God has bound himself to the animals, the fish, the birds in loving relationship.



God's covenant with us is so that we can be a blessing to the world, joining in with God in its restoration. "The Lord had said to Abram, 'I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'" (Genesis 12: 1-3) Abram is blessed by God in order to bless the world.

For Christians, Jesus does not change God's original covenant but fulfils it – enabling us to be a people who continue the call to bless and restore God's world. God intends to fix creation through a covenant people who will be a blessing, so that ultimately everything will be renewed (Revelation 21:5), "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay..." (Romans 8: 21) and human beings can be "new creations". (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Covenant means the closest possible relationship in which God binds Himself to us.

Throughout the Bible it is God who always initiates restoring relationship. A covenant is an agreement between two parties that brings the two into an experience of oneness. Marriage is our most familiar existing covenant. In the Old Testament covenant was the fabric of society.

There are two ways to have a covenant. In the first, two equal parties agree to become one. In the second, two unequal parties become one. In this, the one who is greater and stronger confers upon the weaker the right to come into an equal relationship.

In the Bible, the type of covenant is usually the stronger to the weaker because usually it is between God and people. God confers rights on human beings. But it is still a relationship of oneness.

Having called Abram in Genesis 12, in chapter 15 of Genesis God is ready to ratify His promise to him. At that time when a covenant was made it was always ratified in blood.

It usually involved the exchange of property, and often included a change of name and the scarring of the person's flesh. It was a serious affair – it meant that life was going to change. If two tribes entered into a covenant together they slaughtered their animals – a precious possession. The old life ends, a new begins. The life of the animal symbolised this death.

They took part in a blood covenant by creating a corridor of blood. At each end of the corridor stood the representatives of the tribes – the chief or groom. They exchanged places by walking along the corridor of blood. They were saying, "We possess everything of each other. We two have become one." They changed their names and to indicate it was a lifelong covenant. Two representatives would cut the heel of a hand and rub mud in it to keep the scar there forever. There was a new 'oneness' between what had been a 'twoness'.

Abram has received the promise – that he would become a great nation, a blessing. But in Genesis 15 he worries that has no heir who would make this promise possible and he questions God about it. In response God tells him to count the stars in the sky, and then bring Him a heifer, and a goat, and a ram. Abram splits them in half and lays out the pieces to create a corridor of blood. "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land..." (Genesis 15: 17,18)

Abram is now one with God in a way that's never been known before. Everything that belongs to God is now available to Abram. The land belongs to God but is now available to Abram. However, this is not an exchange of property – Abram gives nothing to God in return.

The further two parts of the covenant are given in Genesis 17 when Abram is ninety-nine years old, with no children. God graciously says, “I will confirm my covenant between me and you...” He gives Abram a new covenantal name, to remind him of his new identity. “No longer will you be called Abram (exalted father); your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a “father of many nations.” (Genesis 17: 5) To do this, in Hebrew God took from his name YHWH one of the pieces of his name and included it in Abram to become Abraham.

He gives a sign of the covenant: “Every male shall be circumcised”. Crucially, in the days of Abraham, a man who walked along the street with a visible scar was to be feared – you didn't know who he was in covenant with. But God institutes a personal, private scar, signifying a private and personal relationship.

Discuss: In covenant God binds Himself to creation, animals, and people in the closest way possible? He exchanges identity with us. What difference could this make?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read Genesis 15 which describes God's promise and covenant.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:
What does this passage teach me about God?
What does this passage teach me about people?
How does this passage call me to obey God?
What might I do in response to this this week?

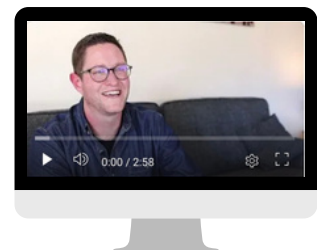


Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

Watch the video at:

<https://youtu.be/KzKc3IWml1c>

What struck you as important in the video?



Optional further material and questions

Share these thoughts or read them together:

For Christians who are children of Abraham, how does understanding covenant shape us?

Exchange of identity: “This is my new covenant, sealed in my blood.” (Luke 22:20) In the same way that a covenant was established through blood, to be in Christ means we have passed through a corridor of blood - His.

And through the cross we exchange identities: He takes our rebellious identity – our sin – and we take His - His righteousness.

Inheritance: Just as in Abram’s covenant God shared His ‘property’, so through Christ we receive the same identity and relationship that Christ has with His father. “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...” (Romans 8: 16-17)

Change of names. “...to him who overcomes...I will write on him the name of my God and my new name.” (Revelation 3:12). In the early church when you were baptised you got a new name – your Christian name.

Sign/scar/seal. “Circumcision is of the heart by the Spirit.” (Romans 2:29) Paul’s teaching is that the Holy Spirit has made a scar which is so intimate it is not on our bodies but within us –on the heart – the inner person. “Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance...” (Ephesians 1: 13-14)

Incredibly God continues to bear the scars of His covenant with us, taking them into His resurrection. In Luke 24, when the resurrected Jesus appears and shows his disciples his scars first of all he is saying, “This is a covenant. Not only is it ratified in blood, but it’s an everlasting covenant...These scars are precious tokens of the covenant I have with you.”

Covenant shapes how we see God’s character throughout the Bible. Some may read the New Testament God as loving and kind, but the Old Testament as angry and vengeful – as if there are two gods. But at the heart of it is the story of a covenant God who does not abandon His people despite their faithlessness.

God makes a number of covenants throughout the Old Testament – with Noah, Abram, Moses (Genesis 19: 1-6) and David (2 Samuel 7: 12-13). To the Jews in Egypt He promises, “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.” (Exodus 6:7) He will renew His covenant with His people so that “...they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” because “It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors...because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them...This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.” (Jeremiah 31: 31-34)

Discuss: How does the theme of covenant help you love God?

Responding to God’s leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, “What might God be showing me and how might I respond?” They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, “Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?”



Group prayer (5 minutes)

Lord,
Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for your love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot sweep it away.

Amen.

From Song of Songs 8 - a poem of God's covenant love.





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Additional notes:

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