

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

Experiencing God's love



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.



Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

What has helped you experience God's love?

When you think of God's love, what story or image do you think of?



Understanding the information (15 minutes)

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

The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and then to love your neighbour as yourself. So before we say anything else about God or ourselves we start here: it's about love. Note that lots of people believe in God. But the way of discipleship is to grow in being loved by God, and in loving God. God has made you for the kind of relationship that St Augustine described, when he wrote, "you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." John wrote, "We love because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19). So before we can begin to love God, we need to begin to experience the depths of His love. If you think about it, how would we know about love in the first place if God didn't reveal it?



While there are many things we can say to describe God, the most defining statement about God is in 1 John 4: God IS love. In other words, love is not something God chooses to do. He is love itself – He cannot do anything else except love. God puts aside everything else about Him – His complete power, His complete knowledge, His Lordship – compared to loving His creation, including us. His love always shapes everything else. His love can be defined as self-giving love – love which will always give to others at cost to Himself, even if they don't receive or want it. For Christians the supreme way we know and see this love reaching out to us is through the self-giving coming as a human, death and resurrection of Jesus.

God's love is revealed more and more through the story of the Bible. For example, in the book of Hosea, God reveals His self-giving love with these words, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them....My people are determined to turn from me....How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?...My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused." (Hosea 11)

Julian of Norwich was a medieval Christian who had a vision of the security of God's love. She wrote, "And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marvelled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God....In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it." (Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love)

Discuss: what difference does it make to say that "God IS love", as opposed to "God loves"?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read 1 John 4: 16a-19 in which John describes the depths of God's love.

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://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbWECP5f31o>

What struck you as important in the video?



Optional further material and questions

Share these thoughts or read them together:

Why do we love God? Very simply – because He is God, and God is love. The more we can love God for who He is, rather than how He answers our prayers or what He does, the more we will be genuinely loving Him. St Bernard put it like this: "The reason for our loving God is God. God is the initiator of our love and its final goal. He is himself the occasion of human love; he gives us the power to love, and brings our desire to its consummation."

God is loveable in himself, and gives himself to us as the object of our love.” Bernard Of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

Throughout the Bible this love-relationship is described by the word Covenant. Throughout the Old Testament, God makes covenants again and again – with Noah, with Abraham, with David. Each covenant is God taking the initiative to restore the love relationship with His people. In a covenant, God offers Himself completely in love to His people, in a way that nothing can break, and He invites them to offer themselves to Him. “You will be my people, and I will be your God.” Even when people turn away from Him, God keeps His covenant with them. This defines the relationship He wants with us. It is the deepest relationship of self-giving love, and God always initiates it with us. It’s like a marriage (in which people say to each other, “All that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you.”) In fact, as we read the Bible we find that we are called “God’s Bride”.

As the Bible progresses, there is a pattern. God makes a covenant with His people and gives reminders of the relationship through, for example, temple worship...the people break it...God restores it...until eventually He promises through a prophet, Jeremiah, “The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel.. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them...This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest...” (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

When Jesus came, He lived fully in this covenant relationship with God, and invites disciples into exactly the same relationship: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (John 14:23) This loving covenant relationship was revealed fully and achieved by Jesus’s death and rising again. God's commitment to us is forever – it is written in the blood of Jesus. As we share in the “Covenant” meal that Jesus gave, we are reminded of this - the bread and the wine help us remember who He is, and who we are.

Discuss: Why is covenant such an important theme in the Bible? How is our relationship with God like marriage?

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)

Take Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will, all that I have and possess.

You have given all to me.

To You, O Lord, I return it.

All is Yours, dispose of it wholly according to your will.

Give me your love and your grace,
for this is sufficient for me.

Amen.





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Additional notes:

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As a resource for those who want to go deeper into understanding Covenant in the Bible, the next three pages can be offered.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT THE KIND OF RELATIONSHIP GOD WANTS WITH US?

The relationship God wants with human beings is the same throughout the Bible story – it is the same God in Old and New Testaments - and is best described by the word **covenant**.



IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Whenever God makes a promise it is always sealed with a covenant, an agreement between two parties that brings the two into an experience of oneness. Marriage is our most familiar existing covenant. It is most frequently expressed with the words: "I will be your God and you will be my people".

Covenant is the way in which God will be with His people so that He can faithfully restore His world.



A COVENANT WITH THE WORLD

The first mention of covenant is in the story of Noah and is with all living things: "I now establish my covenant with you and...every living creature on earth..." (Genesis 9:8-11) God gives the rainbow as a sign of protection (like a bow) as a sign of the covenant – He will always be faithful to His creation.

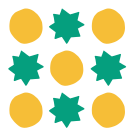


Christians have the most profound reason for caring for this earth because not only do we believe it is a creation, but we believe God has bound himself to the animals, the fish, the birds in loving relationship.

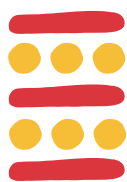


GOD COVENANTS WITH US SO THAT WE CAN BE A BLESSING TO THE WORLD, JOINING IN WITH GOD IN ITS RESTORATION.

The meaning of God's calling and covenant with human beings becomes established through Abraham and the whole Bible is an outworking of the promises and calling made to Abraham. "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.

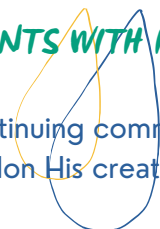


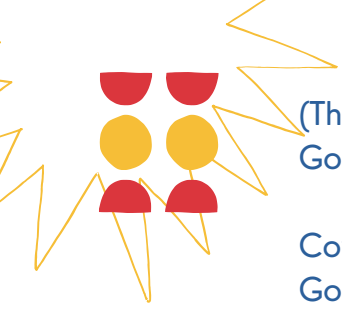
For Christians, Jesus does not change God's original covenant but fulfils it – enabling us to be a people who continue the call to bless and restore God's world, in the same way that Abram was called by God to do. God intends to fix creation through a covenant people who will be a blessing, so that ultimately 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 REVEALS THE KIND OF RELATIONSHIP GOD WANTS WITH HUMAN BEINGS.

Covenant begins with being chosen. The Bible shows God's continuing commitment to working in human-divine partnership – just as He does not abandon His creation, so He does not let go of the calling on people to image Him in the world.





(This "chosenness" is never portrayed as favouritism – in a sense everyone is a child of God – but as Peter writes, we are chosen for a purpose – to be a blessing.)

Covenant is relationship in which God binds Himself to us. Throughout the Bible it is God who initiates the restoring relationship.



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, God confers rights on human beings. But it is still a relationship of oneness.

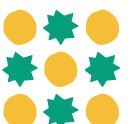


In the Old Testament when a covenant was made it was always sealed in blood. It was a serious affair – it meant that life was going to change.

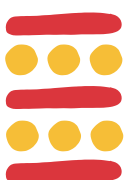
It usually involved the exchange of property, and often included a change of name and the scarring of the person's flesh.



The two parties would kill animals and create 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.



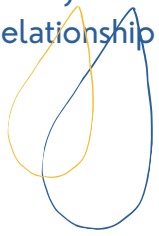
For example, if a tribe of cattle keepers and sheep keepers changed places they would be signifying this: "We who once looked after cattle, now look after cattle and sheep," and vice versa. We possess everything of each other. We two have become one. When God makes a covenant with Abram He tells him to count the stars in the sky, and then bring Him a heffer, and a goat, and a ram. Abram splits them in half, and lays out the pieces to create a corridor of blood. Then...



"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.




Later God 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). And God gives a **personal, private scar**, signifying a private and personal relationship - a sign of the covenant: "Every male shall be circumcised".






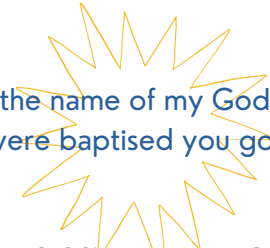
FOR CHRISTIANS WHO ARE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM, HOW DOES UNDERSTANDING COVENANT SHAPE US?




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.



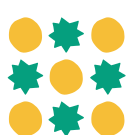
Sign/scar/seal. "Circumcision is of the heart by the Spirit." (Romans 2:29). The Holy Spirit makes a "scar" which is so intimate it is not on our bodies but within us –on the heart – the inner person.

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,



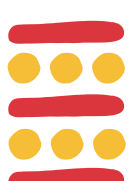
"This is a covenant. Not only is it ratified in blood, but it's an everlasting covenant...These scars are precious tokens of the covenant I have with you."

COVENANT REVEALS THE KIND OF RELATIONSHIP GOD WANTS WITH HUMAN BEINGS.




Covenant shapes how we see God's character throughout the Bible. Understanding covenant can help us to avoid having a split view of the God of the Bible.

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 promises a covenant with all 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).



QUESTIONS

Why is being a Christian a covenant relationship?
Why does God's covenant with me help me be a blessing?

