

Becoming God's People II: Relationship and Responsibility

*You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. **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. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. – Exodus 19:4-6*

Setting a Proper Foundation

Israel was in a time of intense transition. As much as they appreciated seeing their oppressors hit with the plagues and eventually drowned in the waters of the Red Sea, their new found freedom brought with it a whole new set of challenges. After 430 years living in Egypt, Israel did not know how to live free. Furthermore, they were never in a position to have to defend themselves against an enemy.

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle. – Exodus 13:17-18

Armed for battle, and yet the signs of battle would have sent them right back into the bondage they had grown accustomed to. Today, prisoners who leave prison very often intentionally go back, because the *known* life inside prison is, at least perceived to be better than the *unknown* life on the outside. Similarly for us the two lessons we can take from this are:

1. **We can prefer the limiting life of the familiar when God is calling us to the uncomfortable and unfamiliar to grow us.** Habits surface during times of ease and times of extreme pressure, and when we are either not used to the new life God is bringing, or if we are challenged in our ability to be successful, we will tend to go back to what we know [*Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish", Simon Peter told them. – John 21:2-3a*]
2. **Our deliverance can both take time and a path we would not have chosen**– There was a shorter distance God could have chosen to get the Israelites to the promised land sooner, but he knew what was facing them if they took that path: a situation that would have destroyed their faith. God chose rather to go the long way, and He will do the same with us if the longer path will be a better guarantee of getting us to His desired destination.

Israel got through the first hurdle – getting out of Egypt. They had another journey, and foes to face just getting to the Promised Land, and once inside, there would still be things to face. For this, Israel needed a basis upon which to enter the land and

succeed. A basis upon which to understand the things they would face, and upon which they would make their decisions. That basis was what God provided in **bringing them into covenant.**

Understanding Covenant

Although the term “covenant” gets loosely used in modern society, real covenant is hardly understood. Covenant is used as a replacement for a contract, a promise or an agreement, but it is so much more than that. The benefits to understanding covenant are many, not the least of which is understanding some of the more difficult language in scripture. Taken outside of covenant the language can seem harsh, judgmental or exclusive, but in the context of covenant has a completely different meaning.

One of the best ways to understand covenant is to look at a covenant ceremony

Step	Description	Scripture Example
1	Exchange Robes – the robe represented the “skin” or the person. By putting on the other person’s robe, you were effectively saying that you were “in” the other person, and they in you.	And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt – I Samuel 18:3-4
2	Exchange Belts – The belt was both the covering for the core of the person (the spirit) and the holder for any weapon the person had. In exchanging the belt (and weapons included) you were giving your protection to the person, covering them in every area	See above
3	Cut the covenant – an animal is sacrificed, cut into pieces and laid on the ground. All covenants are made with a sacrifice, and no covenant is made without blood. Blood represents life, and covenants are only made through the full dedication (giving) of one’s life	Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other. The birds however he did not cut in half – Genesis 15:10 In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it because a will is in force only when somebody has died. It never takes effect while the one who made it is living. That is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood – Hebrews 9:16-18

Step	Description	Scripture Example
4	<p>Mingling of blood – this can occur with either the blood of the animal, each other’s blood, or both. In the case of the animal, the pieces that have been cut and placed on the ground have the blood flowing from them, and the covenant parties walk between the pieces in figure 8 fashion. Doing so, they not only go in and out of the pieces, but they stand in the blood of the mingled pieces, so there is a blending of the blood. In the case of the individuals, they would cut either hand or arm and clasp them together to mingle the blood. This represented the oneness of the two individuals</p>	<p>When the sun had set and darkness fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces – Genesis 15:17</p>
5	<p>Terms of the Covenant – the parties, usually the stronger party would state the history that brought them to the place of covenant and/or speak of the character of the parties coming into covenant. Then while walking through the pieces each party would state the responsibilities, or terms of the covenant, and would declare the penalty for breaking the covenant. The penalty was usually something like “may God do to me what was done to this animal if I break this covenant</p>	<p>But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates me from you.” – Ruth 1:16-17</p> <p>Also look at Deuteronomy chapters 5-8</p>
6	<p>Exchanging Names – Each individual would take part of each other’s name. In most situations the lesser party in the covenant would “wear” the name of the greater more prominently, but the greater would also be known by the individual</p>	<p>Then He said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. – Exodus 3:6</p> <p>I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. – Leviticus 26:12</p>

Step	Description	Scripture Example
7	Covenant sign – a mark or scar made in the body that would not be removed. This mark forever identified you as a person in covenant. The stronger the covenant, the bigger the scar. Some tribes have been known to make a cut along their entire torso and fill the cut with gunpowder so it would never fully heal, and display the wound proudly as a sign they were in covenant with a powerful king	I have set a rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. – Genesis 9:13 You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. – Genesis 17:11
8	Witness – Covenants were always made in the presence of witnesses, so there was accountability for the covenant. The witness could be other people, or a monument set up.	“See!” he said to all the people. “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the Lord has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God. – Joshua 24:27

**the entire chapter of Joshua 24 is a great example of a covenant ceremony*

No Not Negative

Why so graphic? Why so much blood, so many harsh conditions? Why would anyone enter a covenant that could be considered so scary? Believe it or not, the covenant was not negative. It was completely symbolic of **how strongly each party was willing to commit to each other**. While the conditions for breaking the covenant were horrendous, they only served to show that the individuals had no intent of breaking it, and would do everything in their power, up to and including death before the covenant would be broken. **Covenants are about enduring relationship, about commitment to each other that is enforced with everything each person has.** Henry Clay Trumbull in his book, *The Blood Covenant: A Primitive Rite and its Bearing on Scripture* writes of the Dayaks of Borneo:

Yet again, this covenant of blood friendship is found in different parts of Borneo. In the days of Mr. Ellis, the Rev. W. Medhurst, a missionary of the London Missionary Society, in Java described it in reporting a visit to the Dayaks of Borneo, by one of his assistants together with a missionary of the Rhenish Missionary Society.

Telling of the kindly greeting given to these visitors at a place called Golong he says that the natives wished to establish a fraternal agreement with the missionaries, on condition that the latter should teach them the ways of God. The travelers replied that if the Dayaks became disciples of Christ they would be constituted the brethren of Christ without any formal compact. The Dayaks however insisted that the travelers should enter a

compact with them according to the custom of the country, by means of blood. The missionaries were startled by this thinking that the Dayaks meant to murder them and committed themselves to their Heavenly Father, praying that whether living or dying, they might lie at the feet of their savior. It appears, however that it is the custom of the Dayaks, **when they enter into a covenant to draw a little blood from the arms of the covenanting parties and having mixed it with water, each to drink in this way the blood of the other.** Mr. Barenstein [one of the missionaries] having consented [for both] to the ceremony, they all took off their coats and the two officers came forward with small knives to take a little blood out of the arm of each of them. This being mixed together in 4 glasses of water, they drank severally each from the glass of the other, after which they joined hands and kissed. The people then came forward and made obeisance (bowed) to the missionaries as the friends of the Dayak king crying out with loud voices “let us be friends and brethren forever, and may God help the Dayaks to obtain the knowledge of God from the missionaries!” The two chiefs then said, “Brethren, **be not afraid to dwell with us** for we will do you no harm; **and if others wish to hurt you we will defend you with our life’s blood and die ourselves ere you be slain.** God be witness and this whole assembly be witness that this is true. “ Whereupon the whole company shouted, “Balaak!” or “Good, Be it so!”

Dwelling, protection, strength, sacrifice, and giving all – this is what a covenant is all about. It is for this reason that **the stronger party almost always initiates the covenant.** The lesser party can enter into the covenant and has responsibility within the covenant, but the **life within the covenant** is maintained by the stronger party. In the case of the missionaries to Borneo, they offered what they could, which was a means to God, but they could not offer protection from the enemies of the Dayaks. The Dayaks on the other hand were able to ensure safety and life for the missionaries, and because of this initiated the covenant.

Notice the language of the Dayaks, and think about the language God uses for us: *if others wish to hurt you, we will defend you with our life’s blood, and die ourselves ere you be slain.* This is standard language in covenant, allowing us to understand the sacrifice of Jesus. For the Israelites coming out of Egypt God’s covenant to them would have ensured them of safe passage, protection, and provision as they went through the wilderness and settled in the Promised Land.

Understanding Obedience

Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.” – Luke 22:25-26

Obedience is a dirty word in modern society. It conjures up images of bondage, restriction, denial and oppression. People use commands of obedience for their own benefit (*you have to obey me because I am ____*). The commandments of God are

seen as irrelevant because we see them in light of a “Pharaoh complex”, not a covenant reality. Therefore, we hold loosely to anything having to do with obedience, preferring a language of grace. Obedience and grace, however, are not mutually exclusive, nor are they polar opposites, when seen in light of covenant.

When reciting the terms of the covenant, **both parties** had responsibility to each other

Therefore take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today. If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep his covenant of love with you as he swore to your ancestors. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land – your grain, new wine and olive oil – the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you. – Deuteronomy 7:11-13

Obedience then is wrapped up in the life of the covenant – it is an outflow of the covenant, and the lesser party’s means of realizing the continued blessing of the covenant. Consider the athlete who is under the tutelage of a coach. The better the coach, the more the coach can demand obedience from the athlete, not because the coach wants to limit the athlete, but **so the athlete can optimize their performance**. The athlete willingly submits to the requirements of the coach, knowing that it is for the athlete’s benefit. Similarly, God promises life and blessing for those who obey – not a limited restricted life, but an optimized life.

The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. – John 10:10

*Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us that we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; **then you will live and increase**, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. – Deuteronomy 30:11-16*

God was in effect telling Israel, *I know what it takes to get you to the Promised Land and to give you the life you deserve, but you have to trust me in this. Let me take the lead and do what I say, for I won’t steer you wrong.*

Mingled Blood, Mingled Language, Mingled Life

Obedience and keeping covenant are not separate. They are both part of covenant life that is held together by our trust in God who keeps covenant. God reestablished his covenant with Israel after they left Egypt, but before they got to their destination, as he wanted a people who could live in relationship with Him, regardless of their situation or surroundings.

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. – Philippians 4:12-13

Paul could say this not just because he had experienced things and gotten through them, but because he knew where his strength came from – a God who keeps, or *keeps watch over* (guards) his covenant. This is what God wanted for Israel as they prepared to go into their new life: a people fully identifying with God, resting in His power and commitment to them, and fully believing in the life of promise He desired to give. This would be the foundation to Israel being a sign to the rest of the world, not of their goodness or righteousness, but of God’s desire for all to come to him. God’s desire for us is the same: for us to walk in covenant with Him, and thus to experience “life to the full”, having that life to be a witness to the world of a God who loves and desires relationship with all people.

Introspection

- Where have you chosen the “familiar and comfortable” instead of the unfamiliar and uncomfortable path? What caused you to go back? Is there fear about choosing the unfamiliar?
- Has the Bible and/or Christianity seemed to be more “law-based” than “life-based”? Have you felt pressured to follow the commands for fear of punishment or curse?
- What does understanding covenant do to your understanding of God’s heart for you? Do you believe that God has a positive destiny for you?
- Have you felt that you were doing the “following God thing” in your own strength? Does following God sometimes feel like more of a burden than it’s worth?
- Do you think the dreams/desires you have are actually achievable? What would it take to make them happen? Is God strong enough and dedicated enough to fulfill those dreams / desires?
- Does your path to destiny seem to be taking too long? How do you feel about God who is taking you down a path that others don’t seem to have to take?

Call to Action

- Look at a relationship you have in your life that should be a covenant relationship. Reach out to that person and reestablish it as a covenant, understanding the commitment it will take to maintain that covenant.
- Spend time with God regarding the path He has you on. Confess your heart about where He has you and commit yourself to trust His direction
- Ask God to reveal one area where you have rejected obedience, and repent of that rejection. Ask God to help you bring that area under the life of His covenant so you can follow it with joy.

Study for Next Week

Luke 15:11-32, the parable of the prodigal children