

INTRODUCTION TO GOD'S COVENANT STORY

According to Webster, a covenant is “a binding agreement between two or more persons or parties.” Synonyms are “a contract” or “a compact.” There are many examples of human covenants in the Bible. For example:

- International treaties (Josh. 9:6; 1 Kings 5:12; 15:19)
- Tribal alliances (Gen. 14:13)
- Personal agreements (Gen. 31:44)
- Loyalty agreements, as in the friendship between David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:3; 23:18)
- Marriage (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14)
- Legal agreements (Jer. 34:8-10)

These same kinds of covenants are common today also.

“Covenant” is one of the main concepts used in the Bible to define the relationship between God and man. In the case of the human covenants listed above, the parties are more or less equal. In the case of God's covenants with man, however, God is by far the superior party and man the inferior. Consequently, in the covenants that God makes with people, the terms of the covenant are determined and imposed by God alone. He is the Lord, and we are his servants. Therefore, a good definition of a biblical covenant between God and man is as follows: “A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship.”¹

The whole framework of Scripture consists of a series of covenants that God establishes with people, beginning in Genesis and extending through Revelation. (In fact, our Bibles are divided into two main parts: (1) the Old Testament or Covenant and (2) the New Testament or Covenant.) Over the next year in Sunday school and in our home Bible readings, we will study the six main covenants between God and man:

1. God's “covenant” with Adam (and the whole human race)
2. God's covenant with Noah (and all living things)
3. God's covenant with Abraham (and his seed)
4. God's covenant with Israel (established through Moses and sometimes called “the old covenant”)
5. God's covenant with David
6. God's new covenant (established through the Mediator, Jesus Christ, and consummating all the earlier covenants)

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 515.

You might think of this series of covenants like a staircase, one covenant building upon another until we reach the climactic top step: God's new covenant through Jesus Christ. The Bible is truly God's covenant story.

Although these covenants are imposed by God, he is a gracious Lord, and the covenants are always for the good of the people involved. The covenants include gracious divine promises by which God binds himself to bless his people. The main oft-repeated promise of the covenants is simply: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (e.g., Gen. 17:7; Ex. 6:7; 2 Sam. 7:24; Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10; Rev. 21:7). The proper response of God's people to his promises is commitment to the Lord, a commitment that is expressed first of all by faith in him and then by the fruit of that faith, obedience. Our yearlong study of "The Covenants of God" will give us ample opportunity, therefore, to renew our commitment to our gracious Lord.

GOD'S "COVENANT" WITH ADAM **Genesis 1–3**

Memory Verse: *For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive* (1 Cor. 15:22 ESV).

Background Helps:

In the case of God's "covenant" with Adam, "covenant" is placed in quotations because the term "covenant" is not actually used in the immediate context of Genesis 1–3 to describe this relationship. (The first use of the term "covenant" in the Bible occurs in Genesis 6:18, referring to God's covenant with Noah.) However, in Hosea 6:7, the prophet implies that Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden was indeed the breaking of a covenant: "But like Adam they [the people of Israel] transgressed the covenant . . ."

In addition, the relationship between God and Adam is of the nature of a covenant. There are two parties: God and Adam. God sets the terms of the relationship. He makes man in his image, male and female, and gives them the mandate, as his representative, to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it . . ." (Gen. 1:28). God also commands Adam not to eat "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil . . . for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). God also placed "the tree of life . . . in the midst of the garden" (Gen. 2:9) which gave Adam and Eve the opportunity, by their obedience to God, to eat of it "and live forever" (Gen. 3:22). These are the terms of their relationship.

Paul's juxtaposition of Adam and Christ in the New Testament (Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:21-22, 45-49) shows that these two men are representative heads of two humanities. As in the case of many human covenants where the head of a group acts on behalf of the rest (e.g., in a peace treaty between two nations, the presidents may sign on behalf of their citizens), so Adam and Christ represent two humanities: Adam's disobedience resulted in sin and death to all those who belong to him, and Christ's obedience results in righteousness and life to all those who belong to him.

Lesson Helps:

Your lesson this week covers familiar territory: the creation and fall of man in the Garden of Eden. However, make sure that your emphasis this time is on the covenant relationship between

God and Adam and, through him, to the whole human race. Your lesson aim might be: My students will learn about Adam's transgression of the "covenant" God made with him, so that they will believe in Christ and thereby restore their relationship to God.

Your lesson would consist of three parts:

1. God's original relationship with Adam and Eve in Genesis 1–2. Include:
 - a. The mandate that the Lord gave to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28. This mandate is still in effect, a fact indicated by Psalm 8:3-8 and Hebrews 2:5-9.
 - b. The command that God gave to Adam in Genesis 2:17 not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil on penalty of death.
 - c. Consider this question: What kind of relationship do Adam and Eve have originally to God, to each other, and to the world?
2. Adam's breaking of God's command in Genesis 3. You might consider:
 - a. What were the consequences of Adam's sin on his relationship to God, to his wife, and to the world?
 - b. Also, what was the impact of Adam's sin on the whole human race (see Rom. 5:12-19 and 1 Cor. 15:21-22)?
 - c. But see the implied promise of future restoration in Genesis 3:15.
3. Christ's reversal of the fall and restoration of our relationship to God.
 - a. In adult classes, you could give attention to Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 45-49; and/or Hebrews 2:5-9. In children's classes, you probably will want to focus on 1 Cor. 15:21-22, which includes our memory verse.
 - b. Notice also the complete reversal of the fall indicated in Revelation 22:2, 14, where access to the tree of life is restored. Also, the restored reign of mankind over God's creation is indicated in Revelation 22:5.
 - c. Consider: How has Christ reversed the effects of Adam's disobedience? Have you believed in Jesus Christ to restore your own personal covenant-relationship with God?

As to methods: begin our new yearlong study of God's covenants as a storyteller. After all, we will be telling God's covenant story. Here is a review of how to tell a good story:

Storytelling²

Storytelling is one of the most effective teaching methods, for children and adults alike. It is true: Everybody loves a story. But good storytelling is an art that follows some time-tested principles. How can you tell a good story? Here are some suggestions:

- Use picturesque, vivid, descriptive, dramatic language.
- Use dialogue between the characters.
- Leave out extraneous details (but sometimes details that seem extraneous at the beginning of a story turn out to be important later on). Be as concise as possible.

² Jay Adams, *Pulpit Speech* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 21-40.

- Make sure the story is clearly and logically presented in a manner appropriate to the age level of your audience.
- Arouse interest at the beginning of the story.
- Use questions from time to time to hold the attention of your audience.
- Use visual aids, if appropriate.
- Make sure your story has a point and conveys that point to the audience.
- *Above all, do not merely report the story, but relive the story by dramatic use of both voice and body.* (To achieve this effect, the teacher must know the story thoroughly and enter into the plot through the use of imagination.)
- Use the basic narrative plan as portrayed in the following diagram:

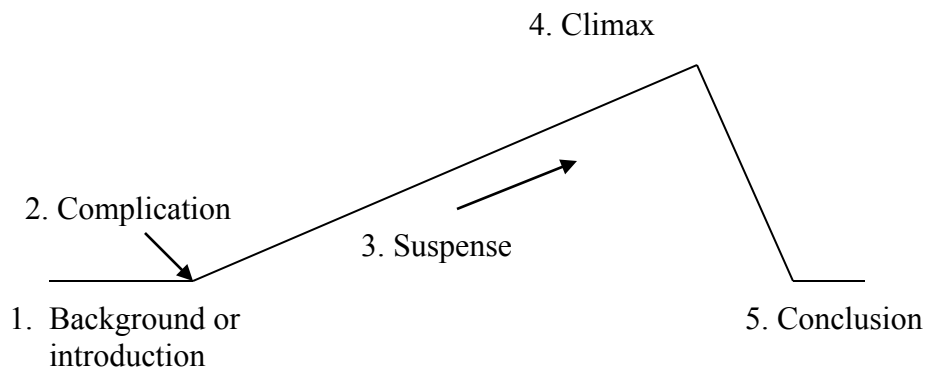


Fig. 1

There are five elements to the basic narrative plan: (1) the background or introductory material; (2) the introduction of some complication or problem; (3) suspense which builds through new complications, failures to solve the original problem, or new insights into the problem; (4) a climax or solution to the problem or problems; and (5) if necessary, a brief conclusion. The teacher is advised to read through the story of Esther in the Bible to see an example of masterful use of this narrative plan and a truly great story.

Home Assignment:

📖 Read Genesis 6–9.

📖 Memorize Genesis 8:22.