

The Idea of Covenant

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Now there's a great deal of confusion among students of the Bible over the idea of covenant. We have a problem with three things. In fact, we have a problem with these three things in a lot of Bible study. The three things are language, culture and dogma. Language is a problem because any time you translate from one language to another, there's always the possibility of losing nuances. There are slangy things in English that used to be – a friend of mine in Paris that used to translate stuff for other religious organizations would write me every once in a while or call me and ask me “How do you deal with this English phrase? I mean what does this mean?” He would see a phrase and he would say “I don't understand it.” And the man was really quite fluent. He spoke English about like Maurice Chevalier did. A very charming gentleman. But when you start trying to get nuances from one language to another, that's not at all easy to do. And so consequently, little nuances are lost.

Culture is always a problem because there are certain things that people in old times did, there were types of relationships in society that differed in ways are completely lost to us. We have only the vaguest notion of what marriage involved, for example, in the days of Abraham. Was there a ceremony? Was there something like a rabbi that stood in front of people? Did they break a glass on a floor? Did they make oaths and swear oaths and promises, or did they just move in together? What did they do? Well, the Bible doesn't tell us very much. And there's not a great deal of information coming from ancient times about these things because – and even if there were, we might learn about what one culture did and not know about what another culture did. Because the world in the 20th century is more homogenized than it has been at any time in its history. You might go through life living in your little town and not know that. But if you travel very much, you're going to be in for a jolt. You'll turn into a drag of a strange town, somewhere way off, a thousand miles away from home, and what will you find there in terms of restaurants? You'll find an Outback Steakhouse, you'll find an Olive Garden Restaurant, you'll find a McDonald's down the road, Chik-Fil-A, you'll find down the road in almost any town in this country, the same things you'll find right down the road here in our town.

And I'll tell you what really comes as a shock. When you go to England, you fly in there, you catch the train from Gatwick Airport into London, you get off the

train, walk into Victoria Station, this ancient, old railway station, and what do you find, but a Burger King. You go into Piccadilly Circus or these places around England that you've heard of all your life, what do you find but McDonald's and so on it goes with all these things. I don't know if you'll find some of the American restaurants there yet, but as time goes on, the world is becoming increasingly homogenized. Speech patterns which used to be remarkably different are beginning to fade because the world is this way. But if you'll go back – when I used to visit in England, I remember once I was visiting with a gentleman who lived about twenty miles or so south of Birmingham in England, and we were chatting about accents. I had to ask him to repeat a couple of things that he had said because I wasn't sure what he had said. And he said "Oh don't worry about that, I'm English and I don't often understand the people who live fifteen to twenty miles away in the next village, and I have to ask them to repeat things."

This was twenty-five years ago, maybe thirty years ago, and that was the way it was in England at that time. It will be much less that way today because of television which has this incredible homogenizing affect, not only in our language, but also on our industry, our marketing and everything. The reason I'm mentioning all this is so you will understand that when you go back to the ancient world, identifying the culture attire may not help you at all with the culture of Gaza, or with the culture of Babylon, or of Hebron, or some other place in the Middle East because these people had no means of staying as homogenized as we do today. The dominating things in their culture would have been the lack of technology which reduced all of them to doing things the same way. But nowadays, people who go back and study these cultures, the way they identify them is by the shards of their pottery. They could tell the little small distinguishing things even in their pottery. They could tell where it came from and in what age it was done and all these things about pottery. I defy you to figure out anything from pottery in Tyler, Texas in the modern world. You'd never know. Somebody might dig down in here and think we were Japanese because of some of the pottery that we've thrown on the trash heap over a period of time. So, we have problem with culture.

Then we have problems with dogma. Now this is a tricky item here because when you start going back and you try to examine what happened in Old Testament times, you are influenced far more than most people realize by the doctrinal structure of the different churches that exist and of what they believe and what they say. And nowhere is this more evident than in the idea of covenant because there is a need many people seem to feel when they come to the New Testament and they find these difficult passages of scripture that they're wrestling with what to do about the law that has been convenient for them – it's kind of a quick and dirty method – they have tied the law to the old covenant, and since the old covenant has passed away, the law went

with it and we don't have to concern ourselves with that anymore. All we have to concern ourselves with they think, is with the – what shall we say – the culture, that is the standards, the values that find expression somewhere in the New Testament. And what they oftentimes don't realize is how many of the Old Testament laws that they still believe should be kept find no expression in the New Testament. But that's another subject for another day, but that's an illustration of the way in which dogma confuses the issue on many of our bible studies. It goes without saying then, that the ancient Hebrew culture was profoundly different from ours and the meaning of words is more than a language problem; it's a cultural problem as well. I've already discussed Christian dogma so we can go on beyond that.

To solve the problems we have and to find clarity, we have to solve these problems to find clarity on the issue of many things we want to study in the bible, and one of the things that this is a problem with are the biblical covenants. The problems are not insoluble, but they do require us to study a bit and also to engage in another unfamiliar activity: thinking. So, what we're looking for is meaning. What did God mean when he used the word 'covenant?' And I'm sure that all of us would agree that this is where the issue actually lies. And, I think, what is just as important as this, as in trying to get at a meaning, is how did the people who heard him speak to them, how did the people who received the message, how did they understand, and how did they use the word that is translated in your bible as 'covenant.' For, it's not much help if God meant one thing and the people understood something totally different. Like so many problems we encounter interpreting the bible, we start with semantics, that is the study of meaning, and that's what we're talking about here: what did it mean? And the first problem we have to deal with is English because that's what we all speak. And we all carry with us to the study of the bible, our language, and in the process of reading it, we oftentimes misunderstand things that are said in English (by English I mean translated in England a translation of the bible, like the King James Version; especially one that was translated in 1611) when the meaning of words as they were used then in society is different from the meaning of these words which are used in our society today. Some of the words are no longer even used in our society and we have to go somewhere to find out where they are.

So our first problem is English and we use the word commonly in the English language 'covenant.' But what it means in the English language, the first definition of it, you'll find if you look in the dictionary is "an agreement, usually formal, between two or more persons to do or not do something specified." That's the basic meaning of the English word 'covenant.' But it just won't handle all the nuances of the word b'rith, which you find commonly used throughout the Old Testament which is translated 'covenant.' There are places where this definition doesn't fit. The words

aren't static and everybody knows that words have different meanings, at least different nuances in different context. So it is often helpful when a word has become troublesome in understanding, to throw it out and to try to find a better way of saying, what it's saying. In other words, as you come to the word 'covenant' in the Old Testament, you sort of take it out of there and try to find a word that fits better there that carries the same generalized meaning as covenant. This does not necessarily mean finding one word you can use everywhere. I mean, it's tempting. You get your concordance out, you start looking all the way through and try to find the one word that you can translate everywhere in the place of this word. But life isn't that simple. It's not a word we're looking for. It's understanding that we're looking for.

Now with that in mind, let's do a little bible study on this topic. First scripture I'm going to take you to is Genesis 6:17. Now the passage in question is very familiar to us all. God speaks to Noah and says I'm fed up with man; I'm going to destroy him. And he considers that maybe he'd like to save Noah and his family alive so he instructs him to build an ark and he going to put animals on it two by two, seven by seven, so that all the animal species are protected and saved. In Genesis 6:17 he says this "And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die. But with you will I establish my covenant; and you shall come into the ark, you, and your sons, and your wife, and your sons' wives with you."

Now the definition I read to you from the dictionary doesn't work real well here. This isn't an agreement between two parties about what they're going to do or not going to do. This is something different. What word would you substitute here to try to retain the general meaning of what God is saying without using the word 'covenant?' Any ideas? Promise. What else? Agreement. Pact. Oath. Any others? A decree. How do they fit? "Behold I will establish my decree that you should come into the ark." That works, I guess. "I will establish my promise, and you shall come into the ark." "I will establish my pact and you will come into the ark." Right? This kind of convey an idea of something. One word that none of you used here that I find is interesting, and just to point out something, a lot of times the meaning of a word changes by the verb that applies to it. If you'll notice the word 'establish' here. This is different from the words you're going to find later about 'covenant.' Later on you'll find God says "I will make a covenant.." or "I have made a covenant." or "I make a covenant..." and in that situation the word for 'make' is a Hebrew word for 'cut.' "I'm going to cut a covenant with you..." on this occasion. Here that's not the word that's used. Actually, this is a good translation "I'm going to establish a covenant." I tell you the word that I think makes the best sense here — well, in just looking at it, one thing this is not a conditional promise as one of the meanings actually of a covenant is. And

the word 'law' makes no sense at all, does it? None of you used it as a substitute for covenant; the word 'law.' It doesn't work and it makes no sense here at all. It may be an arrangement, for example. "The flood is coming, but here is the arrangement that I'm going to make with you and your family." "The flood is coming, and here's the deal for you and your family." I think, by the way, that the word 'deal' often works fairly well in place of covenant. "The flood is coming, but with you I will establish a relationship and you will come into the ark." The word that I like here is 'relationship' because it connects well with the 'establish' and with what is actually going on. God says I'm going to destroy everybody, but I'm going to have a relationship with you and your family. And I'm going to put you in the ark, you and your wife and your sons and your sons' wives beside you.

Now let's try another one. This one is Genesis 9. It has not less than seven occurrences of the word 'covenant,' the word b'rith. "And God spoke to Noah, and to his sons with him, saying, And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you." Now the word is 'establish' again. Now you can try a number of different words, but just for the fun of it, let's stay with mine, relationship, and see how it works. " And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you; And with every living creature that is with you, of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth."

Now what's funny about this one, it seems to be talking not merely about a relationship between two people, but between God and everybody and every thing. He says "I And I will establish my covenant with you, neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth. And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make [or the promise, or the relationship that I make] between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant—" No, "a token of a relationship," or he could say "This shall be a token of the deal..." Now what's interesting about the conceptualization of 'covenant' is, that it is a formalizing of a relationship that exists. And to formalize something, something needs to happen. There needs to be like, you hold up your right hand, you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The holding up of the hand and the making of the oath are...they formalize what's going on here so that you can be prosecuted if you lie. Without the formalization of what's going on here, without the agreement as it were, because when you hold up your right hand and you swear, or if you don't hold up your right hand and you swear, you actually are committed to the law.

You say, "Yeah, fine; I'm going along with the law in this case that what I'm going to tell you is the truth and under the understanding if I'm not telling you the truth, I'm probably going to go to jail for what I'm doing here." Alright, he goes on to say "And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: And I will remember my covenant," Now 'promise' will work very well there. But there are other places where promise doesn't work so well. He could, though, be saying "I will remember the relationship that I have with you. It could be the word 'pact,' you know, might be usable. "I will remember the agreement..." Although in this case, this isn't really an agreement. Because agreements are two-sided. And there's no pact in that sense, or no agreement in that sense, there's no treaty here. It's just simply a promise. But, as I said, there are so many other places where promise doesn't want to work in quite the same way. The implications of this – and you'll see this more as we go along though – are of the creation and the formalizing of a relationship. "And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look on it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." It could also be "the everlasting promise." "And God said to Noah, This is the token of the covenant, which I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

So we have, not an agreement exactly; we have a promise, but we also have an arrangement if you will, which is another word which kind of fits in this. "This is the token of the arrangement I now have..." or "the disposition that I now have." That's another word that you should kind of put into your vocabulary in this area because it is one word that works in some context. "It is the disposition that I have made of things..." This is the way it's going to work. You know, this is the description of what's going to happen.

Now, we've worked with promise, we worked with relationship, the word 'deal' kind of works in here. Sometimes the mean of the word, I've already said, is influenced by the operative verb with it. And so when you see the word, "I'm going to establish a covenant/deal/relationship..." you're talking about some new relationship between the parties concerned. In this case, it's a relationship which prohibits, doesn't allow, for the destruction of the earth by water again. I like the word relationship here. It is a formalized relationship. Formalized with a token. In many ways the word 'covenant' in the Old Testament involves a confirmed relationship.

Now if you'll turn back with me to the 15th chapter of Genesis. This entire chapter is highly relevant because this is the covenant that we often look back to as

Christians even. The covenant that God made with Abraham in the 15th chapter of Genesis: “After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision saying Fear not Abraham, I am your shield and your exceeding great reward.” Now what follows seems almost like a digression. Abraham knows that God is promising these things. He’s already talked with God, but God says “Fear not, Abram: I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward. And Abram said, LORD God, what will you give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus?”

The implication of this was that if he died, had no children, that the steward of his house would wind up with all of Abraham’s property. And Abraham said, you know, “Behold to me you have given no seed: and somebody who has been born in my house –” What he means, you know, you’re children are born in your house, but the expression “someone born in my house” is talking about a servant who is born in his own household, reared in his own household, and, therefore, had a relationship with Abraham. “ And, behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, This shall not be your heir; but he that shall come forth out of your own bowels shall be your heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if you be able to number them: and he said to him, So shall your seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness” The simple “I believe you; I trust you; I’ll put my confidence in this.” was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

“And he said to him, I am the LORD that brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land to inherit it. And he said, LORD God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? And he said to him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” This particular set. He took all these and he divided them in the midst. Each one of these animals were split except for the birds. He divided them right down the middle, and he laid one half of the animal on one side and the other half of the animal on the other side. Now there is not one word in the bible to tell you why he did that. Nothing to explain it, nothing to give you much of a clue, except that here we are going to come to the first use in the bible of the expression ‘to cut a covenant.’ Generally speaking, covenants were confirmed with blood. Something or somebody had to be cut to make a covenant. And this is what’s going on in this particular case. These animals are split and divided apart. “ And when the fowls came down on the carcasses [they’re out there in the sun] And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram; and, see, an horror of great darkness fell on him. And he said to Abram, Know of a surety that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; [this is talking about the captivity of Israel in Egypt] And also that nation, whom they shall serve,

will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come here again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.”

Strange expression. What he seems to be saying is the Israelites are going to go into captivity in Egypt because at this time the Amorites who inhabited much of this land had not become bad enough for warrant the judgement that was going to come upon the Amorites when the Israelites came back. He said, they will come back here later; the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. “And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. In the same day the LORD made [cut] a covenant with Abram.” Now, ‘covenant’ in this case...when he introduces the word ‘cut,’ at that point in time, it almost sounds like he’s saying “I’m going to cut a deal with you.” And the word ‘deal’ works extremely well in the context of what Abraham and God are talking about here. You could say “that, that day the Lord cut a deal with Abraham.” Or you could say ‘in that day the Lord cut a relationship with Abraham.’ He formalized and established a particular relationship saying “To your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates: The Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims, And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.” Now what follows is other parts of the story that are of considerable interest as you make your way through it. Now this is, as I said, the first time the expression ‘to cut a covenant’ is used and it’s the first time a cutting was actually involved in it.

Among Semitic peoples, the oldest blood covenant involved cutting, often themselves as a matter of fact, and drinking one another’s blood. Now it’s gruesome to us, but the symbolism is obvious. If two men cut themselves and put a little of their blood in a cup and switched them back and forth and drink it, what I have done symbolically is to take your blood into me, which means we are now blood kin. We have taken on all the obligations of kinship. We have created a relationship where no relationship existed before. This was the idea of the ancient covenant among Semitic peoples. At other times, they would cut an animal, take the animal’s blood and each of them would drink of the animal’s blood so that they shared the same blood symbolically. We share the same blood, we are kinsmen, we are family. As time went by, it changed over to where they would not necessarily drink the blood of the animal – especially among Israelites – but that they would kill the animal, pour the blood on the ground, they would share the flesh of the same animal, but it was still a blood sacrifice, it was still the shedding of blood and consequently the idea of blood kinship was what came from it. A blood covenant has to do with the creation of a new relationship between two people who were previously unrelated. And it creates a

relationship with obligations, rites, privileges and so forth, that come along with it. It's the idea, in a way, of blood brotherhood that somehow made its way to the North American continent among North American natives, the Indians, that were here. And later, as I said, among Semites it became the blood of an animal that was shared.

Now, you should already be hearing in the back of your mind echoes of the New Testament. Anything come to your mind, New Testament-wise, when you start hearing this discussion about blood covenants and what they were like in old times? Well, in John 6 there's an interesting passage. John 6:53: "Then Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, has eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, dwells in me, and I in him." What's that about? That's about the creation of a new relationship. And as in Old Testament times, there had to be a token, there had to be a sign, a symbol, an act, there had to be some formalizing of this covenant relationship. There was in this case.

You find it in Matthew 26:27...you don't need to turn to it...just one verse. It's the Last Supper and Jesus takes the cup and he gives thanks and he gave it to them and said "drink you all of it for this is my blood of the new testament which is shed for many for the remission of sins." So here we are, a little cup of wine, Jesus hands it to you and says "Here, drink this. This is my blood of the new covenant." Notice I used the word 'covenant' here instead of testament? I'll talk about that. But here is where we actually take the blood of Jesus Christ inside us like one of the old Semitic peoples would do in the creation of blood brotherhood. And it is all involved with the creation of a new relationship where no relationship existed before. Now the New Testament is not a good translation here, although the word that is here translated this way, *diethke*, is actually the word for – among classical Greek – for a testament, or Last Will and Testament. A Will that has to do with – and we're coming back to a word – the disposition of one's affairs. In other words, I'm going to dispose of my property and I'm going to make disposition, you know, we're going to put this property here, that piece of property there, this is what people spell out to do in their Wills.

But, and this is very important, the Hebrews did not generally have a custom of Wills. This disposition of estate among this was a matter of law; not a matter of what you want, you know, preference. So, when the Septuagint translators sat down to translate the Old Testament, and they came to the word *b'rith*, which means covenant, they were a little puzzled as to which Greek word they should use to represent this Old Testament word and I gather they didn't find anything quite like the Old Testament idea of covenant. So they chose the Greek word, which is not hardly in any

use at all among Hebrew people, *diethেকে*, which among Greek peoples might have meant a Will, but the idea, the fundamental idea, even before Will is that of a disposition. The idea of how we are going to dispose of things. How things are going to be disposed opposite to one another. What kind of an arrangement are we going to make. So throughout the Old Testament whenever they came to the word 'covenant,' in Greek, they put the word *diethেকে* which meant 'testament' to a Greek, but to a Hebrew it's the word that they came to associate in Greek with the Old Testament word 'covenant.'

So, consequently, what Jesus said to his disciples in that Last Supper "Take this, this is my blood of the new covenant." And really there should not be much question among Christians as to whether or not we have entered into a new covenant relationship with Jesus. I mean, after all, what's this drinking of the blood and eating of his body, what's this all about if it not for the establishment of a new relationship with Jesus Christ where no relationship existed before? This is the point that seems to be being driven home by it here. The New Testament writers made this move because most of them casually, and commonly, read the Septuagint version of the bible. In fact, when you come to the book of Hebrews, most of the Old Testament quotations in there come straight out of the Septuagint version. The Septuagint being the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament which was made, I think, somewhere along about 200 B.C.

Okay, Matthew 26:27, then, could be said to read "He took the cup, he gave thanks and he gave it to them saying, "drink you all of it for this is my blood of the new relationship which is shed for many for the remission of sins." And it fits perfectly with the ancient idea of blood brotherhood that's created by cutting a covenant. Now the 17th chapter of Genesis is rich with references to this sort of thing. There are ten of them, in fact, to the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17. "And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be you perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." What do we say here? The word once again, is to cut a covenant. "I'll cut a deal between you and me." But candidly, I really think the idea, while it may not be perfect, fits better that God says "I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be you perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made you. And I will make you exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you."

Now in his own case, he didn't have that many kids. But, boy, we get down to Jacob, Jacob was a very busy man with twelve sons and then with all the children that were going to follow that would, indeed, be like the sands of sea. "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant." It's going to something that goes on from now on. "To be a God to you and to your seed after you." What's the relationship? I'm going to be your God and you're going to be my people. "And I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land wherein you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. God said to Abraham, You shall keep my covenant therefore." The word is translated 'keep' in the King James Version. I don't know how it's translated in the NIV or others, but I looked it up and the first meaning of this in Hebrew is 'to guard.' It's to actually — it has a lot more to do with more than just kind of holding on to it. It means to — it's an active word; it is to actively guard and to protect the relationship.

Now you know, this is not a hard concept to understand. If you've been married for any period of time, you realize that you have got to guard your relationship. You've got to protect that relationship from certain encroachments that might take place upon it. And to maintain a relationship in a marriage requires work, it requires thought, it requires looking ahead to things so that the marriage — anybody can understand that the marriage relationship is to be guarded and maintained. Now what God says to Abraham is "you shall guard and maintain my relationship. Therefore you and your seed after you and all your generations." You let the relationship deteriorate and bad things are going to ensue from it. You let the relationship deteriorate in a marriage and a lot of bad stuff is going to ensure as a result of it. "This is my covenant" he says "You shall keep [guard] my covenant therefore, you, and your seed after you in their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your seed after you; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant between me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of your seed." Even though they are not of your family. I mean, what was being created around Abraham was his family and extended family (or community as it were) all of whom are going to be in the relationship with God and therefore they were going to be circumcised.

"He that is born in your house, and he that is bought with your money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not

circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give you a son also of her: yes, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell on his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born to him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? And Abraham said to God, O that Ishmael might live before you!" He just didn't want to have to face the possibility of having another little rug rat in the house, I guess. Or just didn't believe it could happen. He said "I really wish Ishmael could do it." "And God said, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son indeed; and you shall call his name Isaac: [because he laughed]. and I will establish my covenant with him. " Notice? " I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear to you at this set time in the next year. And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham."

Now when you understand what's going on here, that God rejected the ongoing relationship with Ishmael. Now he didn't reject Ishmael as a people, he's going to bless them, but the relationship he was talking about, the relationship with Abraham and his seed was not to continue through him. That's not where that relationship was going to be. And so, somehow or other, oh yeah — I almost lost my place in my notes — this is why, when you understand this little thing here, this is why circumcision was not required of the Gentiles when it comes to the New Testament Church. Remember the big issue that came up and was discussed in the 15th chapter of Acts? As to whether or not Gentiles would have to be circumcised? Well, they went down and discussed it, and they all decided that no they didn't have to. The reason why is that the Gentiles were not a part of the family, even the extended family, of Abraham in the flesh, and therefore the circumcision, which was the token 'in the flesh' of that relationship was not expected of them. Note the words in verse 13 "and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting relationship."

Now it's my impression that in the early Christian church, Jewish Christians continued to circumcise their children while Gentile Christians did not. I think if you can understand this, and walk your way back through the 15th chapter of Acts, I think you'll begin to understand why the decision came down the way it was. I think you can easily understand, though, having read what we just read about Abraham, how that everyone that is going to have a relationship with God should be circumcised, wouldn't you? I mean it's not an unreasonable assumption to make. And so when it

came right down to it, the Apostles had to get together and had to deal with this question. And in the end they concluded, no, no, these people are not a part of the physical descendants of Abraham and therefore there is no reason why these people should be circumcised because that's a physical part of the covenant and of the relationship with God.

Now, there is more in the Old Testament about this, but I think this gives you a interesting insight into the way in which the word was used and what it is that God was doing with the idea of covenant. That he is creating new relationships so that in new ongoing relationships with families of people and with individuals so that these relationships would carry on and that certain things would be carried out.

Now Genesis 21 has an entirely different use – quite different use of the word 'covenant.' In Genesis 21, "And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son that was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him. And Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, God has made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me." And that goes all the way back to Sarah laughing the first time she heard God promise this boy, Abraham laughing when God promised him, nobody would believe it, they all thought it was the funniest thing they ever heard and God says, fine; let's call him 'laughter' or however you would say that in Hebrew. "Who would ever thought that I would give children suck. I have bore him a son in his old age."

And in the process of time, the separation had to take place between Ishmael and Isaac, between Sarah and Hagar. And in coming down to verse 22, "And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phichol the chief captain of his host spoke to Abraham, saying, God is with you in all that you do: Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: but according to the kindness that I have done to you, you shall do to me, and to the land wherein you have sojourned. And Abraham said, I will swear." And Abraham, though, at this point in time reproved Abimelech. He said "And Abraham said, I will swear. And Abraham reproved Abimelech because of a well of water, which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away. And Abimelech said, I know not who has done this thing; neither did you tell me, neither yet heard I of it, but to day." You know, we can almost hear the argument that was beginning to build, the tension that was beginning to build between them. He says "I want you to promise me that you'll do this concerning me and my son, I don't want war between our houses."

Abraham says "You've got a deal, however, there is this well that your servants have taken away from us. And he says this is the first time I have heard a word about it; I haven't heard about it from you; I didn't hear about it from anybody else. And Abraham took sheep and oxen and he gave them to Abimelech and both of them cut a covenant."

Now here we have a different use — it really is not an entirely different use — they're defining the relationship that's going to exist between them in the years to come over certain issues. Abraham set seven ewe lambs off by themselves. First of all, is the overall deal that these men are making. They are cutting a deal between the two of them, creating and defining a new relationship and formalizing it with gifts that were given back and forth. Then right over here to one side, there were seven ewe lambs of the flock standing all by themselves. "And Abimelech said to Abraham, What mean these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves? And he said, For these seven ewe lambs shall you take of my hand, that they may be a witness to me, that I have dig this well." This is really interesting watching the customs and the cultures at work. It was not enough for them just to say yeah, you dug the well and go wandering off because later on somebody is going to come back and, you know, cause a problem. I want the fact that you've set these seven ewe lambs here to be a testimony, you're agreeing to the fact by taking them, that I dug this well. Not merely that I'm buying it from you. I don't want to just buy this well. I want you to agree that I dug it therefore he called that place Beer-sheba. One of those names that crops up again and again through the bible. It's the well, Beer-sheba, because there they swear, both of them. And they cut a covenant, they cut a deal at Beer-sheba and "then Abimelech rose up, and Phichol the chief captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines. And Abraham planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned in the Philistines' land many days.

So it's just another interesting thing – we're reaching back into an old culture and trying to understand the way in which they used the terms. They used the term to talk about creating a relationship, making a new relationship where one never existed before. It may be a blood brotherhood type of relationship, or it may be, in another circumstance, a cutting of a deal – a formalizing of a deal whereby we have an understanding between us. Our relationship includes the fact that this is the border between us: that's my well; it is not yours. And so on it goes with the different things they do.

Now let's turn back to another example in Genesis 26. It's wells again. "There was a famine in the land" By the way, just in passing, I heard someone years ago speculate that the land of Palestine back in ancient times was a verdant plain with lots of rain and lots of trees and all well-watered and everything else. And you read the Old Testament and you know better than that. There's far too much concern about wells. I mean these people fight over wells, they dig wells, they're looking for wells, wells are a big deal among these people. I think you'll find the climate in Palestine in the time of Abraham was not a lot different than what it is right now today. Where water is crucial to anything you want to do. "And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines to Gerar. And the LORD appeared to him, and said, Go not down into Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell you of: Sojourn in this land." Well, the story goes on at some length, you know, his relationship with God is reconfirmed and that part of the covenant. And later on in verse 26 of this chapter "Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, and Ahuzzath one of his friends, and Phichol the chief captain of his army."

He was there before. He must be getting to be a rather old man by then. But Phichol was there and he says — you know, in verse 25 it says that Isaac had built an altar, called on the name of the Lord, pitched his tent and his servants dug a well. "And Isaac said to them, Why come you to me, seeing you hate me, and have sent me away from you?" Now, what has happened up until this time is, that Isaac's family was getting a whole lot bigger than Abimelech's. In fact, they were beginning to be very worrisome because there were so many of them and they were much stronger. And so Abimelech is wanting him to get away. He goes away, he digs a well and they fight about that well. He goes away a little further and he digs as well and they fight about that well. And then finally he gets way out and he digs one and everybody leaves him alone and so he says okay, fine, I'll settle down in this place. That's what's behind this thing of saying "Why come you to me, seeing you hate me, and have sent me away from you? And they said, We saw certainly that the LORD was with you: and we said, Let there be now an oath between us, even between us and you, [let's cut a deal with you. Let's create a relationship here] That you will do us no hurt, as we have not touched you, and as we have done to you nothing but good, and have sent you away in peace: you are now the blessed of the LORD."

Now I know for Isaac that was probably kind of a tough pill to swallow because of all the headaches and the aggravations that are discussed in the earlier parts of the chapter, but he takes it. They just said, look we want a peaceful relationship to exist between us. Let's cut a deal on this or let's create a relationship. And, you know, in a sense, this is the sort of thing that when you really think of a treaty between nations — when you create a treaty between nations, you cut a deal as it were, but what you are doing is you are creating a new relationship between ourselves and Taiwan, ourselves and China, ourselves and France, ourselves and England, ourselves and let's say Latin America with the trade treaty we made with Mexico and other nations so that we can trade more freely. It redefines the relationships

that exist between two countries. You do this with a treaty; you could call it a covenant; it defines a new relationship in that sense. "And he made them a feast, and they did eat and drink. And they rose up betimes in the morning, and swore one to another: and Isaac sent them away, and they departed from him in peace." Now what is often involved in the establishment of these new relationships are oaths, gifts, cuttings, sacrifices, some token, some formalization, of the relationship has to be made in order for it to be considered official. And so, in this case, they swore an oath after they had a meal which was probably some form of sacrificial meat.

And finally, for this bible study, turn back to Genesis 31. Now here we have Jacob who has gone off to work for Laban and he decides that he wants to marry one of Laban's daughters. You're probably very familiar with this story. And Laban makes him work seven years for this girl. And when he marries her, it turns out that Laban didn't give him the girl he had bargained for, but gave him the older sister, Leah, who was a nice enough gal, but it was Rachel who Jacob was in love with. So he goes to Laban and says look this isn't going to work. Laban says look at it this way, that's our custom over here. Remember what I said earlier about cultures? Cultures aren't the same from one place to another. Our culture says no, you've got to marry this older daughter off first. He didn't want to get stuck with her forever. So he says you've got to marry the older daughter first. Work for me another seven years, and I'll give you Rachel. So, even though he played falsely with Jacob, Jacob worked another seven years and married Rachel. And when all this is said and done, Jacob working with Laban had gotten himself to where he was filthy, nasty rich. He had more stuff than Laban had. And the time finally came when he decided that it was time for him to go home.

Well, when he was on his way home, it turns out that one of his daughters had stolen something and Laban went chasing after Jacob and there came a moment of great tension when Laban caught up with him. In Genesis 31:43 "And Laban answered and said to Jacob, These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children." You know, he's a grandpa, he wants to see his grandbabies. "and these cattle are my cattle, and all that you see is mine: and what can I do this day to these my daughters, or to their children which they have born?" Basically, he felt that the cattle that Jacob had bred — remember the deal was Jacob got to keep as his share cattle that were certain kinds, ringstraked, spotted and so forth, and Laban was to get the other kind. And Jacob probably wasn't entirely honest with him in the way he handled the cattle. I don't have any doubt that Laban got richer too, but at the same time, it seemed like every time you turned around, the cattle being born were the right color, shape and what have you for them to go to Jacob instead of to Laban.

And Laban says Those are my cows. You do understand that? And these are my daughters and those are my grandchildren that I see here. He says however, I'm not going to do anything about that. You come with me and let's cut a deal. Let's define our relationship, you and I, "let it be for a witness between me and you. And Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a pillar. And Jacob said to his brothers, Gather stones; and they took stones, and made an heap: and they did eat there on the heap." [They made a covenant and made a deal.] And

Laban called it Jegarsahadutha: but Jacob called it Galeed. And Laban said, This heap is a witness between me and you this day." We all piled these stones up. From now on out, we can point to this pile of stones right here because they define the relationship that exists between us. Pretty simple. And he said at that point "If you shall afflict my daughters, or if you shall take other wives beside my daughters, no man is with us; see, God is witness [nobody is going to protect you if you do that] God is witness between me and you. And Laban said to Jacob, Behold this heap, and behold this pillar, which I have cast between me and you."

In other words, if we cross this, it's going to be in peace; it's not going to be for harm. And right there they cut a deal. A deal which defined the relationship that was to exist between them, even to the point of a geographical location that they would not pass with any view to doing harm to the other person. Now this is basically the idea of covenant as it comes to us down through the book of Genesis, which is — you know, once you establish the origins and the ideas behind certain ideas in the bible, they tend to carry on through and affect everything that comes following this. And so, on another occasion I'd like to talk to you about the covenant in a much more crucial to understanding certain things. The one that we call the Old Covenant. But that will have to wait for another bible study.

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