

# GOING FORWARD together LIVING IN GOD'S Covenant



## Week 1 - Covenant: God's Invitation Bible Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34

TEACH - Content to help inform a sermon or small group outline

### Introduction

- The future remains uncertain but we determine to go forward together.
- One thing is certain – God has this, and he has us. He is right in the midst of us – he is Emmanuel – God with us. We have been celebrating that fact throughout Christmas.
- As we enter this new year, we must remind ourselves that God has chosen to invite us into covenant with himself.
- Covenant is not a word or term that we use that frequently, and so we have been in danger of losing the significance and the power that flows from our covenantal relationship with God.
- The Bible is all about covenant. That's what 'testament' means - the old covenant and the new covenant. Covenant itself is not explained in the Bible, yet it is there all the time. It is the backdrop to everything, like the scenery on the stage of a theatre.

### Exploration

#### 1. What is a covenant?

- A contract or agreement between two parties. They may be individuals, families, states, kings, or even God.
- The parties might be on the same level (eg two families, two kings) with mutual obligations agreed upon freely or on different levels (God and human beings; a large empire and a smaller nation) with the stronger party imposing the conditions on the weaker party (obedience, taxes, tribute) in exchange for certain benefits (eg protection).
- There may be promise of specific benefits, rewards, or blessings for people who keep the terms of the covenant; but also the threat of sanctions, punishments or curses for people who break the terms.
- Between the contracting parties, symbols or signs might be exchanged to remind the two parties about the agreement.



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## 2. A hypothetical example of a covenant<sup>1</sup>

- Tribe A of 500 people is approached by a tribe of 1,000 people with a view to make a pact – the covenant. They agree that:
  - they would stand as one against external attacks
  - the resources of one tribe would be available to the other
  - instead of two tribes they will become one - they would share everything they had **in covenant** with each other - one may have been goat herders led by Chief Windsor and the other maybe richer cattle herders, warriors whose leader was called Mountbatten - but now in covenant they are a tribe of 1,500 herding both goats and cows.
- To seal this covenant, they would take a heifer, ram and perhaps a goat and butcher them - cutting them in half and laying the halves of the bodies in a line.
- The two leaders, starting from opposite ends, would walk through the blood, swapping places with each other.
- Once they had swapped, their names might be put together (one became Windsor Mountbatten and the other became known as Mountbatten Windsor) so that everyone would know that they belonged to each other.
- A picture like this is found in Genesis 15, with Abram entering a covenant with God. Although this clearly is not two equal parties, it follows this pattern - symbolic changing of places, sealed with blood, joining together of name.
- Abram becomes Abraham and the sign of covenant was sealed with a cutting - every male was to undergo circumcision 'for this will be the sign of covenant among you'.

## 3. Implications

- Abraham enters into the covenant with God, and as descendants of Abraham we are inheritors of the covenant.
- It is a covenant which says that we belong to him and he to us. 'I will walk with you and you shall walk with me; all you have I shall have and all I have shall be yours. As you walk in obedience, I will be with you and your children and your children's children.'
- Throughout the Bible we read of God renewing the covenant (see [Jeremiah 31:31](#); [Ezekiel 36:26](#)). Ultimately, the covenant is fulfilled in the person of Jesus.
- In understanding covenant, we will appreciate Jesus even more. The great covenant events of the Bible all head towards the coming of Christ.
- It is why the narrative of the birth and life of Christ are contained in a new book, the New Testament = the New Covenant! It is why Jesus is described as the mediator of the new covenant ([Hebrews 9:11-15](#)). It's why at the Last Supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you'. (Luke 22:20).

<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Rev Mike Breen, one-time Rector of St Thomas, Sheffield



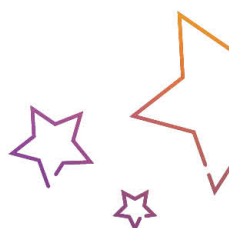
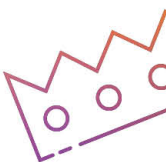
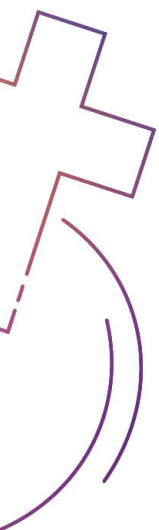
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- Paul wrote and explained that we are all invited into covenant with Christ ([Ephesians 2:11-13](#)), and now we are invited to go forward together with him as a covenanted people.
- In these days, at the start of 2021, consciously, intentionally, we are invited to renew our covenant or to enter into covenant for the first time with him by saying: 'All I have is yours' and discover that God says to us 'All I have is yours.'

## Conclusion

- Covenant is amongst the best news we ever have received! In a covenant with God – in this coming together, in this exchange of places –we give up our life to him and he gives his life to us.
- He says to us, 'You give me your life that should end in death marked and tarnished with sin, and you will receive my eternal life!'
- The blood of Christ was shed for us as the payment for our sins. He dies in our place and this is the culmination of the eternal covenant that has been running through all the pages of Scripture.
- You won't just have his name – '**Christian**' – you will have him! The covenant will be written on your hearts, not engraved on stone. This covenant will be sealed with the blood of Christ. It is written in red.
- Now when we understand covenant, it changes everything for us. It helps us understand and appreciate that:
  - God is Emmanuel - the one who is with us.
  - He is able to help us at every turn of our lives and every step of the way.
  - Heaven is not simply a destination, it is an eternal experience to be increasingly enjoyed now.
  - Our relationship with a loving, covenant-making God must impact our relationships with fellow believers who are also part of the covenant - we are family!
  - Together our lives must be in the service of Father God; but this means too in the service of his created world for which we have a covenanted responsibility. It is God's world in which we have been called to be salt, light and love, in order that boys and girls and men and women of every nation and tribe should have the opportunity to hear and know the gospel of Jesus Christ.



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## REFLECT - questions for discussion/small groups

### Personal

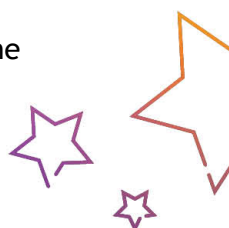
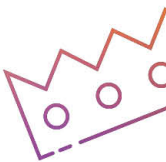
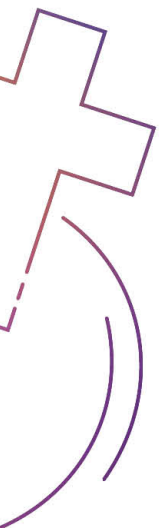
- What have been the significant changes you have experienced during the past year? Reflect on the positive and negative aspects.
- Have you experienced God in any new and different ways in recent days?
- How will you respond to God's invitation to renew or enter into covenant with him?

### Community

- Share ideas (in a small group) for prayer resources / Bible study plans that help you to deepen your relationship with God.
- How might a fresh understanding of covenant impact your relationships with other people?

## ENGAGE - Interactive ideas for prayer, worship and mission

- **Play:** 'Written in Red' by Gordon Jensen or 'Give thanks' by Henry Smith and reflect on the lyrics as you listen. Thank God for a covenant that allows us to give our life to God in exchange for his eternal life.
- **Pray:** Look at some of the objects you have around you in your home. Many of them remind you of events of the past, or of people you love. Allow them to guide your prayers, and let the Lord inspire you in this way to pray about people and things in a way you would not otherwise consider.
- **Pray:** Get a short fat candle. Turn off lights in the room and then strike a match, light the candle and think of how the candle resembles Jesus (you can't physically touch it, but you know it's there because you can see its effects; it gives light, heat/warmth, destroys / is powerful etc). Then light more candles from the main one. Explain how the light spreads to people. Pray that you will be a light resembling God, and pray that you will spread the light to other people.  
(<http://ccn-online.org.uk/creative-worship-ideas/>)
- **Split or steal:** You will need two small cards for each participant, one red and one green, and prizes. Covenants are based on trust and the assurance you're better off together than alone. Both parties will typically benefit. In this activity, ask pairs of volunteers to come to the front and explain that they are going to play a



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game (for whatever amazing prize you choose - make it good!). The rules are simple. If both participants pick 'split' they get to split the prize; if one chooses 'split' while the other chooses 'steal', the one who chose 'steal' gets everything; and if both choose 'steal' they both lose. The red card means 'steal' and the green card 'split'.

Show them the prize and give them a few minutes to think about what they'd like to do; they may then discuss with each other (optional). Give them more thinking time and then have them present their cards. Allocate prizes in line with their choices. This could be played online in the same way. The volunteers can use household items, eg a tableknife for split, and a fork for steal etc. Be sure to count down before they reveal their choice.

- **I'm going on a trip:** Announce that you're going on a trip, and if anyone wants to come they must bring along certain items. Any object they bring must meet a specific criterion and the congregation's goal is to figure out what that is. If they think they've figured it out, they need to guess to confirm, rather than shouting out what the criterion is.

For example, say, 'I'm going to Hawaii, and I'm going to bring [a swimsuit].' Then the members take turns saying what they are going to bring - 'I'm going to Hawaii, and I'm going to bring [a palm tree].' Based on your criterion, after each statement respond with 'Yes, you can' or 'No, you can't.'

Example criteria could be:

- You must say 'um' or 'uh' before you make the statement
- The items must go in alphabetical order
- The items must have a double letter in it
- The items must all consist of the same number of letters

If you're playing online, people can unmute to say what they're bringing or you can have people write in the chat.

- **Trading Places:** Ask the question: 'If you could swap places with someone for a day, who would it be and why?' This could be a pre-recorded video interview with a corps member. But still give everyone the opportunity to think about it. If done over Zoom, allow responses to be shared.



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## Worship

Read [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#) aloud, then:

- Light a candle to remember Christ's presence with you.
- Sit for 5 to 15 minutes in silent meditation paying attention to the deep breath.
- God's law is 'written on your heart'.
- Search your heart. What is written on your heart?
- What word written on your heart captures your attention today?
- Focus on this word.
- What feelings are heightened as you focus on this word?
- What do you know about God as you stay with the focus?
- What message does God have for you?
- Is there a call to action?
- Give thanks to God for this time in prayer and for any new insights you have received.

(<http://prayingthelectionary.life/2018/03/12/jeremiah-3131-34-written-on-their-hearts>)

## PRAY - Prayer liturgies for different contexts

Heavenly Father, what a great and awesome God you are! Your faithfulness to your people, Israel, and the promises you have given them are beyond our understanding. Thank you that Jesus came to earth as the Messiah of Israel and Saviour of the Gentile world, and that through faith in him I have become your child. Remove the blinkers from the eyes of your chosen people, through whom was born my own precious Saviour, who died for my sins and rose again, so that I too may rise into life immortal. I look forward to the day when your New Covenant will be fully and finally ratified, when the earth will be subjected to Christ's kingdom of righteousness and justice. Thank you in Jesus' name. AMEN.


(<https://prayer.knowing-jesus.com/Jeremiah/31>)

Thank you, heavenly Father, that while I was still dead in my trespasses and sins and at enmity with you, Christ Jesus my Lord died for me. Thank you that his blood paid the price for my sins, and that by grace through faith in him I have been brought near to you, returned into covenant relationship with you, forgiven of my sins and I have received the gift of eternal life. To you alone I offer my praise and worship. In Jesus' name I pray. AMEN.

(<https://prayer.knowing-jesus.com/Ephesians/2>)

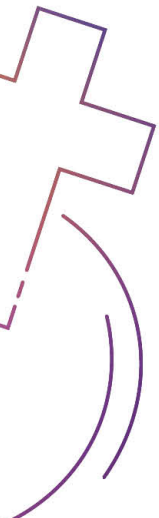


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Gracious God  
We come to you broken -  
from that which confine us:  
the prejudice buried,  
weighted down with fear  
distorted self-protection  
breaking me, breaking you.

And, so we come to you  
seeking  
to be made whole.  
For you God,  
put your love within us  
you wrote it on our hearts;  
that we may be your people.



On this night/day we pray for those who  
weep,  
who are struggling from lack of -  
clean water  
healthy food,  
quality, affordable health care.  
Women who want to make decisions  
About their families, their lives  
their bodies, how and when, and with whom.

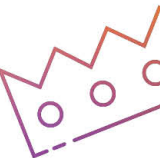
And, so we come to you  
seeking  
to be made whole.  
For you God,  
put your love within us  
you wrote it on our hearts;  
that we may be your people.

Compassionate God  
God of covenant,  
God of love -  
We come to you tired  
yearning  
for peace and harmony.

Loving God  
We offer up our  
suffering

And, come to you  
seeking  
To be made whole.  
For you God,  
put your love within us  
you wrote it on our hearts;  
that we may be your people.

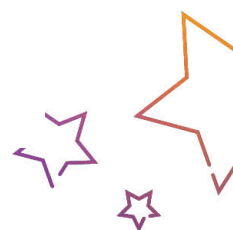
Gentle God  
God of covenant  
Of love,  
Glorify us through Your love.  
Draw us to you, into you,  
Anoint us with your peace.



Write your compassion on our  
hearts,  
That we may love you as you  
love.

Amen.

(Terri C Pilarski <https://revgalblogpals.org/2012/03/24/sunday-prayer-lent-5b/>)



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*'He [Jesus] did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption.'*

(Hebrews 9:12)

Once  
for all time  
Christ sealed the covenant  
with his own blood.

He barged straight into  
the sacred place,  
with all of us in tow.

Who could love us more?

Thank you, Lord.  
Thank you.

(Anne Osdieck <https://liturgy.slu.edu/BodyBloodB061012/prayerpathmain.html>)

