

# GOING FORWARD together LIVING IN GOD'S Covenant



## Week 2 - Covenant: God's Promise and God's Choice Bible Readings: Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 19:1-8

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

### Introduction

- There are many examples of God's covenant in the Old Testament (OT) - see:
  - Noah ([Genesis 9:8-17](#))
  - Joshua ([Joshua 24:1-17](#))
  - King David ([2 Samuel 7:11-16](#); [23:5](#))together with many re-affirmations of original covenants ([2 Kings 11:17](#); [23:3](#); [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)).
- Yet the definitive covenant is with Israel, through Moses ([Exodus 19:1-8](#)) in the giving of the Ten Commandments ([Exodus 20:1-17](#)) and the setting up of the Ark of the Covenant with its Tabernacle ([Exodus 25:1](#) to [26:37](#)).
- This covenant is well summed up by Jeremiah: 'I will be your God and you shall be my people' (Jeremiah 7:23).
- Going even further back in time, in a covenant with Abraham, God makes both a personal promise to Abraham and the universal promise to bless all humankind through his descendants. Abraham's obedience and trust in God is his part of the agreement ([Genesis 12:1-3](#); [15:17-18](#); [17:1-27](#)).
- God's covenants with Abraham and Moses reflect both his promise to humankind and his commitment to us.

### Exploration

The Covenant with Israel through Moses ([Exodus 19:1-8](#)) has three key ideas that emerge:

1. **God's Initiative and his Eagles' Wings**
  - God asks Moses to remind the people who have been rescued from Egypt, 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself' (v4). This image of being carried to God on eagles' wings is both compelling and reassuring, as Isaiah rightly reminds us - '...those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint' (Isaiah 40:31). It also underlines the initiative that God takes in choosing us first.
  - Everlasting covenant: There is a significant difference between the idea of a 'contract' and a 'covenant'. A contract may be broken and dissolved, and of course humankind proves unfaithful in its covenant with God. Yet God's



# GOING FORWARD together LIVING IN GOD'S Covenant



covenant commitment is everlasting, and he cannot forsake his faithfulness (as [2 Timothy 2:13](#) reminds us).

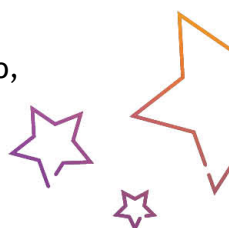
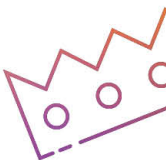
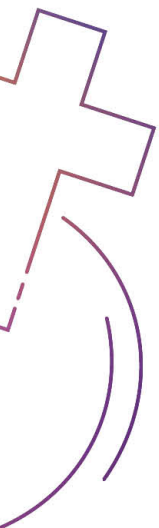
- *Hesed* - 'covenant love': The Hebrew word *hesed* - or as variously translated, *loving-kindness, steadfast love, loyal love, unfailing love* - repeatedly sums up this covenant commitment of God's love, and is the closest thing in the OT to the NT understanding of grace. Again, it is Isaiah who clearly captures the reality: "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love (*hesed*) for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the Lord, who has compassion on you' (Isaiah 54:10). This reassurance is spoken to an unfaithful Israel, in exile.

## 2. God's Commandments and our obedience

- While God's covenant is everlasting and faithful, it is designed to be a relationship in which we as God's people declare our love and humble obedience to our King, and in him find our life and fulness. God says to Moses, 'Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession' (v5).
- One God, our King: God's covenant with Israel through Moses is accompanied by the giving of the Ten Commandments which are to define the character and the conduct of God's people, enabling them to be different from all other peoples and nations of the world. Historical study shows just how radically different these expectations were from any other known religion or polytheism in the surrounding nations, in worshipping one living God with no other idols or gods.

## 3. God's Holy Covenant of Love

- Ultimately the people of God in covenant with him were being called to grow into the very character of the God who chose and called them, set apart for him and holy. God said to Moses, 'Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (vv5,6).
- Bearing Witness: When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (the Septuagint), the Hebrew word for covenant was translated as 'testament', or as the dictionary defines it 'the evidence of a specified fact'. The covenant people of God are called to bear witness to their King, in word and deed. A '**kingdom of priests**' mediates or at least signifies God to the world, and so bears witness to who God is and what God expects. Equally a '**holy nation**' is a people set apart, who as such give clear testimony to the nature and character of God.
- The Generous Love of our Holy God: In our focus on holiness, it's easy to get stuck on what we don't do (the negative aspect of holiness) rather than what we actually do (the positive aspect of holiness)! If God's covenant love, *hesed*, speaks of constant, unfailing love and forgiveness, then the character of our holiness in the world is to be known fully for our actively generous, sacrificial, merciful and unfailing love, as the people of this holy King. That is what we do, and who we are called to be.



# GOING FORWARD together LIVING IN GOD'S Covenant



## Conclusion

- While the Israelites' journey as a covenanted people reveals disobedience and seasons of questioning their destiny, God keeps his covenant. He is faithful, just and merciful no matter how the people behave. God is unchanging, and our responsibility to obey him does not change despite our failures.
- When Abraham faithfully and courageously set out on his journey with God, and believed the promises of God for his life, his family, his descendants and his future ([Genesis 12:1-3](#)), it was with a very dim and rather smoky view of what this meant.
- In contrast, in God's covenant with Israel through Moses we see a much fuller flowering of God's character and intent, to be ultimately superseded and fulfilled hundreds of years later in the hopes of the prophets and the reality of Jesus (see Week 3's resources).

## REFLECT - questions for discussion/small groups

### Personal

- When Abraham faithfully set out with God, he exercised huge trust in this unexpected and strange voice of God, different from any of his expectations. He is applauded by the apostle Paul for his believing in this covenant call ([Genesis 15:6](#); [Romans 4:3](#)). How do we learn to hear and discern the strange voice of God? How often do we act upon it?
- In contrast to Abraham, the people of Israel had been miraculously and dramatically delivered from captivity in Israel 'on eagles' wings' ([Exodus 19:4](#)) as the foundation of their covenant call. What are some of your experiences of God's faithfulness that should give us confidence to step out with him under his love and protection?
- If God's covenant of love with us is an everlasting and unfailing love (*hesed*), then what obstacles might there be to this covenant reality being fully alive and active in us, and what can we do about them?
- It is often noted that the Ten Commandments (like the Lord's Prayer) begin with a focus on our love for God (first four) and then move on to a focus on our own life in this world and with other people (last six) - [Exodus 20:1-17](#). Which one of the first four commandments and which of the last six commandments speaks most acutely to you now and why?



# GOING FORWARD together LIVING IN GOD'S Covenant



## Community

- God reminds the people through Moses that their covenant bond is not just something spoken in words, but something backed up in who we are and how we act. What words would you use to express your testimony of God's love in your life? How can you share your testimony with others to show God's *hesed* in action?
- Do you know someone whose journey reveals disobedience and seasons of questioning their destiny? When the Israelites were in this situation God kept his covenant. How can you show those in difficult seasons that God is faithful, just and merciful no matter how they behave? How can you share a bit of God's nature with them?

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

- **Eagles' wings:** God not only carries us as on eagles' wings, but according to Scripture also hides us under his wing. Check out the following verses of Scripture, reflect on and pray them through for yourself and any other people that come to mind. Create a poster by taking one of these verses and adding it to an internet image, using available software such as PowerPoint, Word or another of your choice.



- Deuteronomy 32:11
- Psalm 36:7
- Psalm 91:4
- Isaiah 49:15
- Isaiah 66:13
- Matthew 23:37

- **Eagles' wings 2:** Guide your congregation in making a simple [origami eagle](#). They may write the Scriptures on it and keep it as a reminder that God carries us. If this is done at home, people can take pictures of their creation and share them online.
- **Hesed:** This wonderful Hebrew word is rich in meaning and describes the unfailing love of God and his covenant making. Read the following verses that include this word *hesed* and either create a poster for one of the following verses or sketch an image that illustrates it:



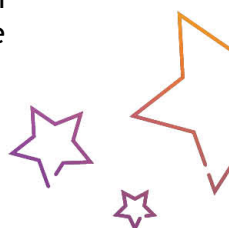
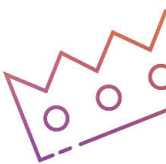
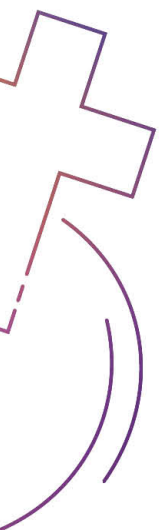
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- Deuteronomy 7:9
- Psalm 23:6
- Psalm 103:17
- Hosea 6:6

- **Testimony:** One of the ideas behind the word covenant, from the Greek language, is that of a testament that stands as a practical witness to a reality or fact. Write out your testimony of how you have come to know and love God in no more than 100-200 words. What would you prioritise in this concise account of God at work in you?
- **Ark of the Covenant:** Read the account in Exodus 25 of the constructing of the Ark of the Covenant and find, or create, your own diagram that illustrates and explains the significance of each feature.
- **Craft:** Rebuild the Ark of Covenant using a 'cut-out' template such as one found [here](#).  
Use this as a visual reminder of God's covenantal love.  
You could also use this to create a treasure hunt around your corps, with the winner being the one who finds the Ark.
- **Holiness:** It is a core belief of ours that God's full salvation involves our becoming holy in covenant relationship with himself and through the working of the Holy Spirit within and through us. If holiness involves us reflecting something of God in his everlasting covenant love and faithfulness, take some time to reflect on what this practically looks like, write a list of some of them, and pray through for yourself and your Christian community.
- **Zoom Bake-off:** Send out a list of ingredients well before time. You will each be creating a melting chocolate dessert. There are a range of recipes on Google, so choose one to suit you. The idea is that when a hot sauce is poured over the dessert, the chocolate 'orb' melts away to leave a sweet treat. As the chocolate is melting, reflect on Isaiah 54:10 (NLT): "For the mountains may move and the hills disappear, but even then my faithful love for you will remain. My covenant of blessing will never be broken," says the Lord, who has mercy on you.'

In some recipes, the orbs will take quite a while to set. You could make them together, leave them to set and then schedule a later call to melt them together; or you could enjoy the making process together and then let everyone reflect and enjoy their desserts by themselves. To use in an in-person service, you could film yourself making the dessert (you may need to speed up some parts) and show the congregation (failures and all). As your creation (or store-bought alternative) is melting, read out the verse.



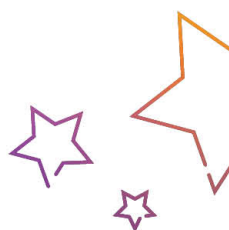
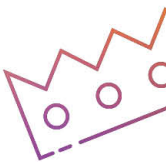
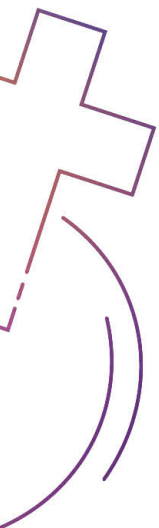
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**Would you rather:** The Israelites (like us, many times) had seasons of questioning whether God had done the right thing by them. It seems the answer to ‘Would you rather stay a slave in Egypt and eat all you want, or embark on a long journey to freedom with limited food choices?’ would be a no brainer. But not for the Israelites. Let’s see how you do! You can get the congregation to stand up for the first option and stay seated for the second. Or write ‘1’ / ‘2’ in the Zoom chat.

Would you rather:

- Eat only homemade bread for over a year, or eat only fruit and vegetables for the foreseeable future?
- Only listen to one song for the rest of your life (but you get to choose the song), or only listen to the music your parents/kids like for the rest of your life?
- Have the super strength of Samson or the wisdom of Solomon?
- Eat all your food ice cold or super hot?
- Carry the Ark of the Covenant across the Jordan River, or carry Jesus’ cross to Golgotha?
- Go to jail for a crime you didn’t commit, or send someone else to jail for a crime they didn’t commit?
- Never sit in traffic again, or never wait in line again?



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## PRAY - Prayer liturgies for different contexts

We are met in the presence of God,  
And we do not meet alone.

With the angels in the highest heaven  
We gather to worship the Lord.

With Abraham and Sarah  
We gather to worship the Lord.

With the saints of every age  
We gather to worship the Lord.

We embark on our own journey of faith;  
God's holy name be praised.

God makes of us a great people;  
God's holy name be praised.

In the desert and in the den, in barrio and basilica,  
God's holy name be praised.

We journey in the presence of God,  
And we do not journey alone.


(Rev Daniel B. Randall <http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/>)

Generous God,  
you gave us our voices, no two the same.  
As you did with Abraham and Sarah,  
you take and touch our lives and they can become extraordinary.  
And in your Church you have gathered us,  
in your community of common folk and complainers,  
prophets and puzzled people,  
you have called us and made a place for us.  
So let what we say and do here,  
what we ponder and decide here,  
be real for us and honest to you,  
as you prepare us for the life of the world in which you are praised. Amen.

(*Journey of Steadfast Love: Service Prayers for the Second Sunday of Lent*, by Rev Daniel B. Randall <http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/>)



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Heavenly Father, as I read through your word and see the wonderful plan of salvation which you purposed to carry out through your chosen people, Israel, I thank you that despite their disobeying the conditions of your covenant, you never gave up on your people, and used them to be your witnesses - through whom was born the Messiah, who became the sin-offering for the world.

Thank you that today you are carrying out your plans and purposes through the Body of Christ, which is the Church, and thank you that by faith in him I am also your precious possession - through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you that the day is coming when you will ratify your New Covenant with the house of Judah and the house of Israel and that Christ will return to set up his Kingdom on earth as King of kings and Lord of lords. We praise your holy name, for Jesus' name's sake. Amen.

<https://prayer.knowing-jesus.com/Exodus/19/5>

