**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](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/GEN.9.8-17.niv))
  + Joshua ([Joshua 24:1-17](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/JOS.24.1-17.NIV))
  + King David ([2 Samuel 7:11-16](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/2SA.7.11-16.NIV); [23:5](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/2SA.23.5.NIV))

together with many re-affirmations of original covenants ([2 Kings 11:17](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/2KI.11.17.NIV); [23:3](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/2KI.23.3.NIV); [Jeremiah 31:31-34](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/JER.31.31-34.NIV)).

* Yet the definitive covenant is with Israel, through Moses ([Exodus 19:1-8](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/EXO.19.1-8.NIV)) in the giving of the Ten Commandments ([Exodus 20:1-17](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/EXO.20.1-17.NIV)) and the setting up of the Ark of the Covenant with its Tabernacle ([Exodus 25:1](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/EXO.25.NIV) to [26:37](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/EXO.26.NIV)).
* 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](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/gen.12.1-3.NIV); [15:17-18](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/gen.15.17-18.NIV); [17:1-27](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/GEN.17.NIV)).
* 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](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/EXO.19.1-8.NIV)) 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 covenant commitment is everlasting, and he cannot forsake his faithfulness (as [2 Timothy 2:13](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/2TI.2.13.NIV) 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.

1. **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.

1. **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.

**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](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/gen.12.1-3.NIV)), 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](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/GEN.15.6.NIV); [Romans 4:3](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/ROM.4.3.NIV)). 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](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/EXO.19.4.NIV)) 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](https://www.bible.com/bible/111/EXO.20.1-17.NIV). Which one of the first four commandments and which of the last six commandments speaks most acutely to you now and why?

**Response**

* 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?