**TEACHING STARTER**

***Living in God’s covenant, our faithful response***

**Introduction and Background**

This summary is drawn from The Bible Project’s section on biblical covenants. It contains all the Scripture references for the points listed below, as well as plenty more excellent material on covenants, including some great short videos which work well in gathered worship or small group study. You can find it all here:

<https://bibleproject.com/articles/covenants-the-backbone-bible/>

What is a covenant?

‘A covenant is a relationship between two partners who make binding promises to each other and work together to reach a common goal. They’re often accompanied by oaths, signs and ceremonies. Covenants define obligations and commitments, but they are different from a contract because they are relational and personal.’ (Whitney Woollard, The Bible Project)

The Old Testament tells the stories of four covenants between God and God’s people:

The covenant with Noah

* + God’s commitment: God promises to preserve the Earth
  + People’s commitment: Noah and his descendants’ responsibility is to fill and rule the Earth
  + The sign: The covenant is signed by God with the rainbow

The covenant with Abraham

* + God’s commitment: God promises that Abraham’s family will settle in a land, then grow and flourish to bless the whole world
  + People’s commitment: Abraham’s responsibility is to follow God’s leading to the new land, and to teach his tribe to do right
  + The sign: the covenant is signed by Abraham and his descendants through circumcision

The covenant with Moses

* + God’s commitment: God reiterates the promises made to Abraham
  + People’s commitment: Moses’ and the people’s responsibility is to live according to the Law – a code of living for their relationships, work, morality and worship
  + The sign: God signs the covenant with tablets of stone

The covenant with David

* + God’s commitment: God promises to raise up a descendant from David’s line whose throne and kingdom will last for ever
  + People’s commitment: David’s descendants are to keep the Law given to Moses
  + The sign: David signs the covenant with a temple

In faithfulness God kept all of these covenants, but God’s people did not, and so came the ‘New Covenant’. When Jesus shared the wine with his disciples at the Last Supper, they knew about Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, so his mention of ‘covenant’ (Matthew 26:28) would have been familiar language for them. A new era of relationship between God and people was about to begin.

Bible passage – Hebrews 10:11-25 *NLT*

11 Under the old covenant, the priest stands and ministers before the altar day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which can never take away sins. 12 But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down in the place of honour at God’s right hand. 13 There he waits until his enemies are humbled and made a footstool under his feet. 14 For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who are being made holy.

15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies that this is so. For he says,

16 ‘This is the new covenant I will make with my people on that day, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.’

17 Then he says,

‘I will never again remember their sins and lawless deeds.’

18 And when sins have been forgiven, there is no need to offer any more sacrifices.

19 And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven’s Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. 20 By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. 21 And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God’s house, 22 let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him. For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ’s blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.

23 Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. 24 Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. 25 And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

The writer to the Hebrews was writing to people who would understand this concept of covenant, so this New Covenant is deliberately described in a similar way to how the Old Testament covenants were set out, with the commitments and responsibilities of both parties, and it looks something like this:

**The New Covenant**

God’s commitment to us:

* + Revelation – God making himself known to every single one of us, in the deepest places of our hearts and minds: ‘I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.’ (v16)
  + Forgiveness – the complete eradication of everything that separates us from God: ‘I will never again remember their sins and lawless deeds.’ (v17)
  + Access - a welcome into God’s presence anytime, anywhere, whoever we are, for ever: ‘We can boldly enter heaven’s Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus.’ (v19)
  + Life – full, free and eternal: ‘By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way …’ (v20)

Our response to God:

* + Prayer – we choose to keep drawing near to God: ‘Let us go right into the presence of God with sincere hearts fully trusting him …’ (v22)
  + Hope – we choose to keep trusting God for the way ahead: ‘Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm …’ (v23)
  + Kindness – we choose to demonstrate God’s love in all that we do: ‘Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works …’ (v24)
  + Unity – we choose to live out our faithfulness to God in community with one another: ‘Let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another …’ (v25)

The Sign:

* + ‘By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way …’ (v20)

**Living in the New Covenant**

It’s important to notice that in every covenant God has ever made with humankind, God’s part is far bigger. We’re not equal partners; God is infinite, omnipotent and eternal, and we are fragile and limited. It’s a good job, then, that God always takes ‘the lion’s share’ of the commitment, because if it was down to us, the covenant might not last long. The New Covenant is perhaps the most unequal covenant of all. God gave everything, even God’s very self, to open that ‘living way’ for us. All we need do is accept the gift of relationship. The revelation, the forgiveness, the access and the life are available to us from the moment we say ‘yes’ to Jesus’ invitation to follow him.

Yet the writer to the Hebrews suggests several things we might do to help us make a faithful, faith-full response to this New Covenant, beginning each of them with the words ‘let us’. That’s an interesting choice of words. We might expect ‘we must’, the words of obligation and duty, but instead we find words of invitation and encouragement: let’s do these things as a love response to the One who has given us so much. It’s not that we’ll exclude ourselves from God’s love if we don’t do these things – that’s not how this covenant works; the Bible tells us that even ‘if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself’ (2 Timothy 2:13 *NIV*). The covenant doesn’t rely on our ability to remain faithful; no matter how often we falter, the covenant stands because it rests on God, not on us. But when we begin to understand all that God has done for us, it’s natural to want to respond to that faithfulness with some faithfulness of our own.

These ‘let us’ invitations are responses, but the writer seems to be suggesting that they could also become responsibilities. A ‘response’ is something spontaneous and one-off, whereas a ‘responsibility’ is a choice we make to keep doing something because we know it’s a good thing to do. Again, these responsibilities aren’t obligations – we don’t get disqualified if we don’t do them. They are things we choose to do in response to the love and grace of God in our lives. When we take up something as a responsibility, we commit to doing it until it becomes a habit, and the habit in turn helps us grow and mature.

Our passage suggests four responses we might make to God – four responses which in turn can become responsibilities which deepen and strengthen our faith:

1. Let’s make a habit of prayer

In the New Covenant we’re welcomed into God’s presence, we’re invited to draw near and get to know God. The most natural response to a loving invitation like that is to come in, and that’s what prayer is. God is everywhere, of course, always present with us, but we’re invited to enter a special place where we connect with God in a more intentional, more intimate way. Jesus talks about going into the ‘inner room’ to talk with the Father (Matthew 6:5); the writer to the Hebrews talks

about entering ‘heaven’s most holy place’ (v19). It’s not a physical place any more, as the Temple was for the Israelites; it’s a heart-place which we can access anywhere, at any time.

But prayer is also a partnership. When we pray, we participate in the restoring and renewing of all things. Prayer may be a natural response to God’s faithfulness, but the Bible also encourages us to make prayer a responsibility, establishing a faithful rhythm of prayer that underpins our life.

Whether prayer is a natural, spontaneous response or our chosen responsibility, or indeed both, the writer to the Hebrews encourages us to pray:

* Regularly, making a habit of drawing near to God (vv19,22)
* Confidently, knowing we are welcome, loved and forgiven (vv17-22)
* Honestly, being real and sincere in the presence of the one who knows us completely (v22)

1. Let’s make a habit of hope

God is faithful. God has been faithful to every covenant, and God is faithful to every being in all creation. When we look back over our lives and see the fingerprints of faithfulness, it does our heart good. Our natural response is to be thankful, to be encouraged, to feel more hopeful about the journey ahead of us.

Yet the writer to the Hebrews invites us to turn that response into a responsibility – not just responding to God’s faithfulness with the occasional surge of thankfulness and optimism, but choosing to hold tight to hope (v23):

* Gratitude – strengthening our hope by choosing to look back and say thank you for the good things God has given us
* Trust – strengthening our hope by choosing to trust God for the future because ‘he who has promised is faithful’ (v23 *NIV*)

1. Let’s make a habit of kindness

We have received unnumbered blessings from God. That’s the way it has always been, throughout the Bible. God has poured out blessing on God’s people, that the people might be a blessing to the world around them. When we become aware of God’s blessing in our lives, it’s not unusual to find ourselves caught up in a spontaneous urge to be kind to others. It’s the love response to the faithful generosity of God.

The writer to the Hebrews again encourages us to make that love response into a responsibility by choosing to be kind. The Old Testament covenants involved learning a complex set of rules and obeying them impeccably, but when we become partners with God in the New Covenant the law is written on our hearts and in our minds (vv16-17). The things of God come more and more naturally to us and the Holy Spirit works in us to make us like Jesus.

Verse 24 suggests two kinds of kindness:

* Acts of love – the kindness that comes easily to us because it springs from loving feelings.
* Good works – the kind things we do even when we don’t feel love.

1. Let’s make a habit of unity

Part of God’s faithfulness to us is to place us in communities – families, friendship groups, geographical communities, churches – and, providing those communities are caring, we will probably find ourselves wanting to contribute something to the wellbeing of the group. That’s the love response, to want to give something back, to want to play our part.

The writer to the Hebrews stirs us again to turn that response into a responsibility: to make a habit of connecting with others. In this increasingly individualistic society of ours, that’s a challenging habit to form. We may even prefer to privatise our own faithfulness (‘I’ll make sure I’m being faithful to God, and let everyone else get on with their own faithfulness’). Yet these verses in Hebrews invite us to express our faithfulness to God together:

* By encouraging each other, even ‘spurring each other on’ to be a force for blessing in the world (v24 *NIV*).
* By meeting together; that’s not about meetings for meetings’ sake, but about spending time with each other, worshipping together, working together and, just as importantly, enjoying one another’s company (v25).