

# DISCOVERY

## BIBLE STUDY COURSE

### ***Lesson Four: The Old Covenant***

*A misunderstanding of the subject of biblical covenants will result in confusion and frustration to the minds of Bible readers.*

For example, God commanded Noah to build an ark, Abraham to move to the land of Canaan, and the Israelites to build a tabernacle. Are we required to do these things today? Why not? The answer involves an understanding of the subject of covenants.

What is a covenant? Generally, we think of a covenant as an agreement or contract, and such is usually the case. The basic definition of a covenant is “a promise.” A good example of this is the covenant God made with Noah’s family and the entire animal population of the earth in Genesis 9:8–11.

Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: “And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. Thus I establish My

LOOKING BACK...

*The Bible tells the story of God’s love for us and His desire to save us from our sin...*

*There is objective evidence proving that the Bible is the Word of God...*

*God’s Word is authoritative, providing needed spiritual direction for those who desire to serve God...*



covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

Here, God promised not to destroy the earth again with water, and He gave the rainbow as a token of this covenant or promise. Nothing was required of humanity and the other creatures other than being recipients of God’s promise.

However, most covenants involve an exchange of promises and have conditions attached to them. These covenants are, in essence, agreements or contracts. Therefore, a good definition of a covenant is “a promise that may or may not have conditions or considerations involved.”

If you have ever borrowed money from the bank, used a credit card, or purchased a computer software package, you have participated in a covenant. When you borrow money from the bank, the bank promises to give you a sum of money if you will promise to pay it back with interest—this exchange of promises constitutes a covenant. When you purchase a computer software package, there is an agreement on the package; and by opening the package, you are agreeing to the terms outlined in the agreement. We make all sorts of covenants, but we usually call them agreements or contracts.

Several covenants between God and humanity are mentioned in the Bible. The most prominent of these include covenants made with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel (through Moses), and Christians (through Christ). This study will focus on the characteristics of the covenant God made with the nation of Israel. A proper understanding of this covenant will help us understand and appreciate the New Covenant.

## ➤ **God’s Covenant with Israel: Its Beginning**

Before examining God’s covenant with Israel, we must first consider briefly the covenant God made with Abraham, for the two are tied together closely. The record of God’s relationship with Abraham begins in Genesis 12. God asked Abraham to travel to Canaan, and in return, God promised to bless him greatly. Abraham accepted God’s call, and thus a covenant was established. Later, God reaffirmed and extended this covenant, asking Abraham and all of his male descendants to be circumcised (Genesis 17). Therefore,

Abraham's responsibility in the covenant was initial obedience in moving to Canaan and the acceptance of circumcision for himself and his male descendants. Based on a reading of Genesis 12:1-3 and 17:1-8, God's promises to Abraham can be summarized as follows:

- God would make Abraham's name great (name promise);
- God would bless Abraham and his lineage with provision and protection (provision promise);
- God would give the land of Canaan to Abraham and his family (land promise);
- God would give Abraham a large lineage that would become a great nation (nation promise);
- Through Abraham's lineage all nations of the earth would be blessed (seed promise).

Note that every aspect of this covenant involved not only Abraham, but also his family. God's covenant with Abraham was not fulfilled during his lifetime, but rather was to be fulfilled through his descendants in later generations. Who were Abraham's descendants? The nation of Israel—Abraham had a son named Isaac; Isaac had a son named Jacob; Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel, had twelve sons whose descendants were called the children of Israel. Thus, the Israelites inherited the covenant God had made with their forefather Abraham.

During a severe famine, Jacob and his family moved to Egypt and inhabited the land of Goshen (Genesis 46). In time, a Pharaoh rose to power who distrusted the Israelites and decided to enslave them lest they become a threat to Egypt (Exodus 1). After many years of harsh treatment, God summoned an Israelite named Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, sending many wondrous signs (plagues) on the land in order to convince the Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Upon their release, they crossed the Red Sea on dry ground and camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. Here God offered a written law to the people in the form of a covenant.

Then he [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient.” And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, “This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words” (Exodus 24:7–8; see also Deuteronomy 29–30; Exodus 34:28).

In this covenant, God made various promises to the Israelites conditioned upon their obedience, and in turn, the people promised to obey God’s laws. With this exchange of promises, a covenant was established. This covenant (called the Old Covenant in the New Testament, Hebrews 8:6) applied not only to the Israelites alive at that moment, but also to their descendants. At the heart of this covenant were the laws Moses received on Mount Sinai. In a nutshell, God’s covenant with the Israelites was this: “If you keep my laws, I will be your God; I will bless you with wealth; I will give you victory over your enemies. But if you do not keep my laws, sure punishment will be the result.” The laws they were to keep began with the Ten Commandments, which are listed in Exodus 20. The remainder of the book of Exodus and the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy record the finer details of God’s Law for the Israelites.

Therefore, the Israelite nation was recipient of two covenants. The first was made through their forefather Abraham, and the second was made through their spiritual leader Moses. Both of these covenants, founded in the exchange of promises, applied to each succeeding Israelite generation.

### ➤ **The Old Covenant: Its Scope**

By scope, we are considering to whom the covenant applied. The covenants God has made with mankind have varied in scope. For example, in Genesis 2, God made a covenant that involved only two people—Adam and Eve; while in Genesis 9, God made a covenant whose scope included not only all human life, but every living creature of the earth.

The covenant God made with Abraham was limited in scope to one family—Abraham’s descendants through his son Isaac. Among these descendants were Esau (and his sons) and Jacob (and his sons). In time, God changed Jacob’s name to “Israel,” and his descendants were known as the children of Israel.

The covenant God made with Israel was limited to one nation comprising the descendants of Jacob (Israel). It did not apply to any other nation. God did not expect the Egyptians to keep the Passover, nor did He expect the Babylonians to worship at the tabernacle. But He did expect the Israelites to honor the covenant they had made, for they had promised to do so (Exodus 24:7–8). Similarly, God Himself made certain promises under these covenants (e.g., protection, provision), all of which He was expected to keep.

Since the covenant God made with Israel involved a single nation, people naturally entered the covenant through physical birth: all those who were born to Israelite parents inherited the covenant their ancestors had made with God. These children knew nothing about God and knew nothing about the covenant, yet they were bound by it. They did not choose to become Israelites, nor did they choose to accept the covenant. From birth, they had to be taught about God and His covenant and be trained to obey its precepts.

#### WHAT IS A PROSELYTE?

**Although God did not require the Israelites to spread their culture and religion to other nations, He did allow foreigners, if they desired, to become a part of the Old Covenant. These “proselytes” (Exodus 12:48) entered the covenant by choice, vowing to keep the instructions found in the covenant God made with Israel. Later, the Israelites required prospective proselytes to undergo a ceremonial cleansing. These converts exemplify the willing submission of converts to God’s New Covenant. We will discuss God’s New Covenant in our next study.**

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### ➤ **The Old Covenant: Its Nature**

Under the Old Covenant, rewards and punishments were based on outward obedience to the law. A law is a code of right and wrong, a list of things to do and things not to

do. In law, blessings go to those who obey and penalties to those who disobey. Not only does the one who keeps the law receive a reward (or blessing), but he actually earns the reward. Blessings and punishments are given based on “pay for work done” (i.e., you get what you deserve).

Under a system of justification by law, if a person fails in just one point, he is a hopeless sinner. James says, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (James 2:10, NIV). Similarly, Paul states, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Condemnation for sin is a matter of wages because it is a just and fair payment for the work (sin) that has been done. A law by itself has no way to repair the terrible damage done by sin. Once a person sins, he becomes a lawbreaker, and this title remains with him perpetually. When the Israelites agreed to accept the conditions outlined in the Old Covenant, they were agreeing to live under a system of justification by law.

A covenant consisting of justification by law alone cannot save humanity. Why? Because humans are not perfect; they are lawbreakers. Since the Old Covenant did not offer a means of justification other than by obeying its laws perfectly, it was unable to save sinful man. Many Scriptures teach this truth, including the following two passages:

### MERCY AND THE LAW

**The rule under the Old Covenant was “obey the law and be blessed, or disobey and be punished.” However, the covenant did provide a means of forgiveness for some sins, especially those committed unknowingly or by accident, by bringing an animal for sacrifice to the priest (Leviticus 4–5; 6:1–7; 19:20–22). The covenant also allowed for the annual atonement of sins by animal sacrifice (Leviticus 16). The blood of these animals could not take away sins (Hebrews 10:1–4), but they provided a basis for God to forgive their sins in anticipation of the sacrifice of Jesus (Galatians 4:4–5; Romans 3:24).**

**Although the Old Covenant did not emphasize grace and mercy, God was often gracious and merciful toward Israel in spite of their imperfection in keeping the law. In this matter, He voluntarily did more than what was required under the covenant. Praise God for the mercy He shows to His people!**

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As it is written: “There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no not one”...Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:10–12, 20).

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith” (Galatians 3:10–11, NIV).

From the beginning, Adam and Eve proved that humans could not keep a law perfectly. They were placed in a perfect environment, the Garden of Eden. Here they had, to our knowledge, only two positive commands (to take care of the garden, to be fruitful) and one negative command (not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). Yet, with this simple law, in a perfect environment, they failed (Genesis 3). Regardless of the simplicity of the law or the excellence of the circumstances, humans are unable to keep a law perfectly and so save themselves.

In Genesis 3, we also see the results of failure to keep a system of law. When Adam and Eve transgressed there was no opportunity for justification. As much as they may have regretted their sin they could not return to the garden. Their covenant did not provide for forgiveness; it granted only blessing for obedience and punishment for disobedience. Such is the nature of law in respect to justification. And such was the nature of the Old Covenant.

### ➤ **The Old Covenant: Its Purpose**

From the beginning, God understood that a system of law could not save imperfect people. He did not provide the Old Covenant for that purpose. As one reads the law of the Old Covenant in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the words “save”

and “salvation” are nowhere to be found, except in the context of salvation from enemy nations. Nothing is said of spiritual life, eternal life, or even life beyond the grave. Salvation, as we understand it, is not described in the Old Covenant. Why? Because God understood that a system of justification by law could not provide salvation for people whose service was imperfect.

If the Old Covenant was not given for the purpose of salvation, why was it given? Paul says it was given because of sin (Galatians 3:19), to make people conscious of sin (Romans 3:20), and to prepare a people for a Savior (Galatians 3:24). The Old Covenant:

- Made mankind aware of his exceeding sinfulness;
- Allowed mankind to grow accustomed to living under a system of rules and regulations;
- Taught mankind concerning sin and its consequences;
- Taught mankind that they could not save themselves or earn their salvation;
- Taught mankind concerning God and His expectations for His creation;
- Taught mankind to depend on God;
- Taught mankind concerning the penalty of sin (death) and a type of sin’s remedy (blood sacrifice);
- Provided many types, figures, and prophecies (hope for the future).

In a nutshell, the Old Covenant and its system of law taught a nation (Israel) concerning sin and their need for a Savior, and then prepared them to recognize and accept Him. The Old Covenant law served a vital purpose in God’s scheme of redemption, but it was not for the purpose of redemption. The purpose of the Old Covenant law was preparation. Paul wrote:

What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The



law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law (Galatians 3:19–25, NIV).

Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons (Galatians 4:1–5).

### ➤ **The Old Covenant: A Temporary Covenant**

Because the purpose of the law was that of preparing, not justifying, mankind, it naturally follows that the law was not a permanent part of God’s salvation plan. It was temporary. Not only is this the logical conclusion, it is exactly what the Word of God teaches. In Hebrews 8:6–13, the writer quotes from Jeremiah, a Jewish prophet who was living under the Old Covenant.

For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with

the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD”...In that He says, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Hebrews 8:7–9, 13; cf. Jeremiah 31:31–34).

The writer of Hebrews confidently affirms that, by his day, the Mosaic covenant had been replaced by a better one. He further affirms that this was in fulfillment of the prophecy made in Jeremiah 31. God never intended for the Law of Moses to last forever.

Notice also the teaching of Galatians 4:21–31. To paraphrase, Paul is writing to Jews who did not want to “give up” the Law of Moses—he directs the teachings of this passage to those “who desire to be under the law” (v. 21). He then gives an allegory involving Abraham and his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was born through a bondswoman named Hagar; Isaac was born through Sarah, Abraham’s wife, in keeping with God’s promise. After Isaac’s birth, Hagar and Ishmael were cast from the family. In the allegory, Paul says Hagar represents the covenant that came from Mount Sinai (the Ten Commandments and the other Old Covenant laws, see Exodus 20) and that living under this covenant resulted in spiritual bondage due to sin. On the other hand, he says Isaac represents the New Covenant. After setting the allegory, Paul drives the point home in verses 30–31:

Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondswoman and her son [the Old Covenant], for the son of the bondswoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondswoman [the Old Covenant] but of the free [the New Covenant] (see also Romans 7:1–4).

Therefore, no religious practice today, moral or doctrinal, can be based solely upon the Old Covenant. It was temporary and has long since disappeared. Someone will ask, “What about the Ten Commandments? Surely you are not saying that they have disappeared.” Yes, this is what the Scriptures teach. The law that came from Mount Sinai was temporary (Galatians 4:21–31; Hebrews 8:9; 2 Corinthians 7:3). Does this mean that we can make graven images, take the Lord’s name in vain, cheat on our spouses, and steal from our neighbor? No. But the reason is not because the Ten Commandments forbid such behavior. Rather, the reason we cannot engage in such behavior is because the New Covenant forbids it.

**An Illustration.** Our original thirteen colonies lived under the laws of England. After declaring their independence in 1776, they adopted the Articles of Confederation. The laws in the Articles were similar to those in England, the Motherland. Later, the United States adopted the Constitution as a basis for law. These laws are similar to those found in the Articles, which, in turn, were similar to those found in England. In fact, some of the laws are exactly the same. But what would you think of a lawyer who argued his case on the basis of the laws of England? Or on the basis of the Articles of Confederation? You would explain to him, “Even though the laws are similar and in some cases the same, we do not live under the laws of England or the Articles of Confederation—we live under Constitutional law. You must base your arguments on these laws.” So it is today in matters of religion. We do not live under the laws of the Old Covenant. Some of the laws of the New Covenant are similar to those under the Old Covenant, but the Old Covenant is past history. Its precepts are no longer binding. Our arguments for doctrinal belief and moral conduct must be based on the New Covenant, the covenant under which we live today.

THE PAST		CURRENT
Our Nation	Articles of Confederation	United States Constitution
God’s People	Old Covenant	New Covenant

## ➤ **The Old Covenant: Its Fulfillment**

Two natural questions arise: (1) When did the Old Covenant cease to be effective? (2) What brought the Old Covenant to a close and ushered in the New Covenant? The Scriptures plainly tell us that the cross of Jesus brought to an end the old system of law that could not save mankind. When Jesus died, the Law of Moses passed, and the new, better covenant took precedence.

...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:14).

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law (Galatians 3:23–25, NIV).

Why did the Old Covenant pass away? Did God arbitrarily decide to “break” that covenant and offer a new agreement (covenant) with man? Absolutely not. Covenants cease to be effective when their promises have been fulfilled. For example, if I make a covenant with the bank by borrowing money for a car, when will that covenant come to an end? When I fulfill my promise to pay back the money I borrowed plus the interest agreed upon in the covenant. When the promises are fulfilled, the covenant ceases.

Jesus was the fulfillment of the covenants God had made with Israel through Abraham and Moses. God had already fulfilled all of the other promises He had made in the covenants. The only promise left to be fulfilled was the Seed Promise—the promise that through Abraham’s lineage all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). This “blessing,” the forgiveness of sins, was made available when Jesus died on the cross. Note Jesus’ words:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled (Matthew 5:17–18).

As further proof that the Old Covenant ended at the cross, as Jesus died for the sins of the world, the veil of the temple was torn in half (Matthew 27:51). No longer would mankind remain separated from the Creator because of sin. The Savior of the world had died, bringing an end to that system and establishing a New Covenant for all who were willing to approach the Father in search of forgiveness and grace.

## ➤ **Conclusion**

When the fullness of time was come (when the Old Covenant had served its purpose, and man and society were adequately prepared to receive a Savior), God sent His Son to die on the cross (Galatians 4:4). In doing this, Jesus took the Old Covenant out of the way, nailing it to His cross (Colossians 2:14), and established a New Covenant for all humanity.

But now He [Jesus] has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second (Hebrews 8:6–7).

To fail to understand the purpose of the Law of Moses; to fail to realize that it was only temporary in nature, never designed to justify sinful man; to fail to realize that it was superseded by the Law of Christ which is based on grace and faith, is to fail to understand the Word of God.

Although the Old Covenant passed away at Jesus' death, it still serves a purpose for us today. It teaches us concerning God's character and gives us a sense of appreciation

for our spiritual heritage. Paul said that the writings preserved in the Old Testament were written for our learning (Romans 15:4) and that we should learn from the examples contained within its pages (1 Corinthians 10:1–11). However, the Old Covenant cannot be used today as an authority to support any particular teaching or practice that is not first found in the pages of the New Covenant.

## Questions and Answers

1. What is a covenant? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Other than the ones listed in this lesson, give some examples of covenants people commonly make today. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. God's covenant with Abraham applied to him and his \_\_\_\_\_.
4. God changed Jacob's name to \_\_\_\_\_. His descendants were known as the \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Who was Israel's leader when God made a covenant with them? \_\_\_\_\_
6. God's covenant with Israel applied to them and their \_\_\_\_\_.
7. To how many nations did God give the Old Covenant? \_\_\_\_\_
8. How did one become a part of the Old Covenant? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Under the Old Covenant, justification was based on \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Was the Old Covenant a permanent part of God's plan to redeem us? \_\_\_\_\_
11. Are the Ten Commandments still in effect today? \_\_\_\_\_
12. What event fulfilled the last remaining promises of the Old Covenant?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. What purpose does the Old Covenant serve for God's people today? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### **Thought Questions**

1. Why can we not be justified by a system of law alone?
2. What was the purpose of the Old Covenant? What did it accomplish?
3. Why are the Ten Commandments not in effect today? Does this mean we can kill and steal? Why not?

### **Additional Study Goals**

1. Read the following passages: Hebrews 8–9; Galatians 3:15–4:7; Galatians 4:21–31.
2. Reread the section entitled, “The Old Covenant: Its Fulfillment.”

### **Your Questions**

In the space below, write down any personal notes or questions that you had while reading through this lesson.

### CHARTING THE COURSE

*How does the New Covenant differ from the Old Covenant? What are the identifiable characteristics of the New Covenant?*

*These important questions deserve the attention of every Bible student. In our next lesson, we will consider the characteristics of the New Covenant.*