

## *Our Relationship with Jesus Christ*

August 18, 2002

### Background Study

Last week, we began an eight-week sermon series exploring our vision for St. Andrew, which is that we are “to invite people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving.” In the first sermon in this series, we examined the invitation God extends to us all, an invitation to follow Jesus Christ and embrace a new way of being God’s people. This week we’ll look at the nature of our relationship with Jesus.

#### *A Key Scripture Passage – Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSV)*

<sup>31</sup>The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup>It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup>No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

#### *Covenant*

The notion of *covenant* is one of the central themes of the Bible. It isn’t a word we use much anymore, but it expresses the making and keeping of commitments and promises. Though there are several types of covenants in the Bible, they fall into two broad categories, (1) the covenant between God and his people and (2) the covenants among humans. Covenants are used in the Bible to bind two persons legally and personally, as when Jonathan makes a covenant with David (1 Samuel 18:3-4), wherein their loving bond diminishes the legal aspects of the covenant. In other cases, such as the covenant between Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31:43-54), the legal power of the covenant is much more important because Laban and Jacob don’t trust each other. In most biblical covenants between humans, God is called on as the witness and guarantor. When God is a participant in the covenant, such as God’s covenants with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) or Moses (in Exodus and Deuteronomy) or David (see 2 Samuel 7), the covenant takes on all the theological significance of a commitment between God the creator and his creation, between God the king and his people.

In the Old Testament, the fullest expression of God’s covenant is the covenant brought to the Israelites by Moses. As Kittel<sup>1</sup> notes, the basic idea is that God is willing to act to give his people *shalom* in a relationship of fellowship that transcends a purely legal understanding. God promises that he will be Israel’s king, protecting her and bringing her peace, raising her above all nations, so long as Israel keeps God’s laws and embraces God’s way of being his people. It is through this covenant that God will fulfill his covenant with Abraham that all nations will be blessed through Abraham’s descendents. Regrettably, much of the Old Testament is the story of Israel’s inability to fulfill her commitments under the covenant and God’s relentless pursuit of his people nonetheless. Indeed, the vocation of Israel’s prophets is to continually remind Israel of the covenant, painting hopeful images of a restored Israel and restored cosmos, while also painting stark

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<sup>1</sup> From Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged by G. Bromily)

pictures of the judgment that awaits Israel if Israel does not return to God's way. Jeremiah, writing 600 years or so before Jesus during the time of Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians, brings God's promise of a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34), in which God will put his law (his way of being God's people!) in the hearts of his people, so that every person knows God and is bound into the sort of relationship with God that God had always envisioned. Truly, God says, "I will be their God and they will be my people." Though beyond the scope of this week's study, it is important to understand that God was always interested in the human heart; law and sacrifice were always a means to an end (see Micah 6:6-8).

### *The Covenant in the New Testament*

When we come to the first century and the arrival of Jesus, the driving tension in the OT is unresolved. The Jews believed that their God was the one true God, that this God had chosen Israel as the agent for his renewal of all creation, and that God had made wondrous promises about the restoration of Israel – they believed all this, it just sure didn't like the promises of God would ever be kept because of Israel's inability to live up to its responsibilities in the covenant. Nonetheless . . . God is the great covenant-maker and covenant-keeper, so it is not surprising that Paul sees Jesus as God's means of covenant-fulfillment, as the representative Messiah, doing for Israel what Israel was unable to do for herself. Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Romans 3:21-22).<sup>2</sup> In these verses, Paul is saying that God's righteousness, i.e., God's covenant-faithfulness, is demonstrated by the faithfulness of Jesus to his vocation, even to the point of his own death. As Brueggemann puts it, "God wills Covenant. God is with us because it is God's purpose to be and God will not be thwarted."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus' invitation, "follow me," is an invitation to enter into a covenantal relationship with him and to live as part of the new covenant community. When Jesus was asked about the OT law, he said that he had come to fulfill it, not abolish it (Matthew 5:17). Later, he explained that the heart of the law, the essence of the covenant, is to be found in two commandments: (1) to love the Lord God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and (2) to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (see Matt 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34 and Luke 10:25-28). We see this even in the portion of the OT law that everyone knows, the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments are about our relationship with God and the last six are about our relationships with each other.

But what characterizes this covenant relationship to which Jesus invites us? Perhaps we can gain a few insights by returning to the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-34). Our covenant relationship with Jesus is a relationship of the "heart," which Jews and Christians have always understood to include our emotional, ethical, and intellectual lives. Our covenant lives are to be lived within a community of faith, open to all persons from "the least to the greatest." Our covenant lives with Jesus are based on God's forgiveness of our sins (v. 34).

Next week, we'll look a closer look at the covenant community into which Jesus invites us. In later weeks, we'll consider how worshipping, learning, loving, and serving are all essential activities in our covenant relationship with God and with each other.

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<sup>2</sup> I follow here the alternative translation "the faithfulness of Jesus Christ" rather than "faith in Jesus Christ." The alternative translation is increasingly preferred. For an introduction to this choice, see N. T. Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said*, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup> From Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense*, p. 63

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1</b> Genesis 9:8-17 ~ God's covenant with Noah</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> Genesis 17:1-14 God confirms his covenant with Abraham</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> Deuteronomy 6:1-9 – The importance of obedience to God's covenant brought by Moses</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> Luke 1:67-79 The hymn of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist: Jesus as the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> 1 Corinthians 11:17-32 – Paul reminds the church that Jesus' blood is a sign of the new covenant.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Write a brief description of a covenant. What are some examples from your own life?
2. What would it mean if you thought of your life in the church and in your family as bound by a covenant? What would be the hallmarks of these covenants?
3. Read Exodus 24:3-8. In this ceremony, the entire community of God's people is bound into the sacred covenant. This covenant is built around numerous rules about how the Hebrews were to live as the people of God. These covenant rules (the Law) defined the community – you were Jewish if you kept these rules! What place do rules have in our new covenant with God and our relationship with Jesus? What did Jesus mean when he said he had come to fulfill the law, not to abolish it? What defines our Christian community?
4. What would it mean if you thought of God as the great covenant-maker and covenant-keeper?
5. What are our responsibilities as God's covenant partners?