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# Old Testament, New Testament

## Genesis 15

### Introduction

As we open up our Bibles we're quite familiar with the division of the book into two parts. We call these the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament tells us about creation, the fall, and the history of the Jews as God's chosen people. The New Testament concentrates on Jesus, the Son of God, come to earth to die for sinners. But how did they get their names? What is a testament anyway?

### Context

Well, testament is an old word not used much any more. It means a covenant, an agreement between two parties. Really if we were updating the language in our Bibles we would call the two parts the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

A covenant is a solemn agreement between two parties. Sometimes this can be a two-way agreement where both parties have a part to play. A marriage is a two-way covenant where both husband and wife swear to love the other no matter what happens, at least up until death. Or it can be a one-way covenant, a promise on the part of one party, that isn't dependent on what the other does. I have effectively got a one-way covenant with our cat. It is my duty to feed it and look after it. The cat has made no promise. It hasn't promised not to bite me, or attack my ankles. And it hasn't promised not to bring mice into the house.

Often there is a token or a sign attached to a covenant. The covenant of marriage is sealed with the putting on of rings. They're not part of the agreement, just a token. Otherwise I'd have been unmarried when I lost my wedding ring at Ayr Farm Park.

There's a good example of a covenant between people in the book of 1 Samuel (1 Samuel 20). Here Jonathan vows to let David know whether his father, Saul, wishes to kill David. In return David promises to take care of Jonathan's family when he becomes king.

But today we're going to look at a few of the covenants between God and his chosen people. Which one is referred to in the name "The Old Testament" and what does "The New Testament" refer to?

### Noah

The first person we'll look at is Noah. God had chosen him out of all the people in the world at the time and was going to rescue him and his family, and no one else.

*For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. [Genesis 6 v 17-18]*

The Lord goes on to instruct Noah on bringing animals into the ark, repeatedly using the phrase “keep them alive”. This is a two-way covenant, though God does all the work. He promises to rescue Noah and his family from the destruction that is to come. All they have to do is “come into the ark”. Does this remind us of salvation through Christ? He has done all the work and we simply must come in. “But as many as received him, to them he gave the power to become the sons of God”.

After the flood is over and Noah comes out of the ark, God sets up another covenant:

*Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. [Genesis 9 v 8-13]*

Notice that this is a one-way covenant. God is not asking anything of Noah, but makes the promise himself. Also see that this is an eternal covenant, following on from generation to generation. God is promising never to flood the world again. And remember we talked about tokens or signs? Well this covenant is given a token - the rainbow.

## **Abraham**

Let’s look forward a bit in time and get to the passage we read earlier. God has again chosen someone. In this case it isn’t to physically save them but that he might make a great nation from him. God chooses Abram and asks him to leave his home and family and follow where God will lead. In return he will be made a great nation, given a land to inhabit, receive a blessing and be a blessing to others. These are great promises and they are repeated to Abraham through his life. In chapter 15 of Genesis we see Abraham lay out a sacrifice to God, and God shows his sign that the covenant is agreed:

*When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates [Genesis 15 v 17-18]*

The burning torch and fire pot are a sign of confirmation to Abraham. God is going to fulfil his word and keep his promise.

Some time later, we also get this passage:

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your*

*name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”*

*And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. [Genesis 17 v 1-11]*

Here again God is promising great things: a father of nations, possession of the land where Abram has been pitching his tent and moving on again. And Abram’s part is that the males in his family should be circumcised. Again this is a token, a sign, of the covenant between God and man.

## **Moses**

Moses was again a man set aside by God, as he called him on the far side of the desert, out of the burning bush. This has been a theme, hasn’t it, the way God has chosen people for his work.

*‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” [Exodus 19 v 4-6]*

God has a message for the Israelites: if they obey the word of God, they shall be his treasured possession. Here’s a 2-way covenant again, the Jews have a part to play to ensure the covenant is executed. They can be a Godly kingdom of chosen people if they will obey.

Now we come to the big one, the reason this whole collection of books is called the “Old Testament”. Here is God calling Moses up Mount Sinai and passing on the law to him:

*And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. [Exodus 31 v 18]*

So here God is offering the Israelites the chance to be his people, that he might dwell with them. They can be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. But for their part they must obey the laws set down by God. There are the 10 commandments of course, but also many other laws. This law of God is perfect, it is beautiful, it is just and good. But it’s also impossible for the people to adhere to. In fact when they find themselves disobeying it there are steps they can take to show repentance and ask forgiveness, always involving a blood sacrifice.

The old testament law shines a light on our sin, and a new testament, a new covenant, is needed if we are to have any chance of escaping the penalty for sin.

## David

Another man chosen by God, the youngest in his family, David eventually becomes king of Israel, and God also makes a covenant with him. He promises David that his descendent will be the ruler of an eternal kingdom. This is a one-way covenant: it doesn't matter what David or his descendants do. In fact they make a real mess of things and end up being exiled from their land for 70 years. When they return there is no king put on the throne. But we can trace the line of David all the way down to Jesus.

## The New Covenant Prophesied

Thankfully there are signs of a new covenant, even in the dispensation of the old one. Jeremiah tells us the following:

*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares 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. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." [Jeremiah 31 v 31-34]*

This is great news. God is going to replace the old covenant, broken by the people, with a new one. This time it won't be a whole load of external laws, but an internal communion with God, so that the people of God will know the right path to take - the law will be written in their hearts. Their sins will be forgiven and never brought up against them.

But hold on, how will this happen? The old covenant demanded a blood sacrifice as payment for sin. That hasn't gone away.

## The New Covenant Embodied

So we come to the second part of our Bibles. It's called the New Testament, and it's all about Jesus. The Son of God is made flesh, dwells among his people, proves his identity and authority by many miracles, and then pays the sacrificial price. It's all about Jesus, and it's centred around the cross. The gospels build up to Jesus' death and resurrection. The Acts and epistles start with the cross and examine how it changes lives. Revelation looks forward to the end game, the results of the work on the cross: an eternal kingdom.

It's centred on the cross because that's the point of payment, of completion, of victory. Look at the words of Paul as he describes the last supper:

*In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." [1 corinthians 11 v 25]*

The cross was where sin was paid for. It was where justice was done for the people's failure to keep the old covenant. It replaced the demand for perfection with the perfection of Christ.

It's where our iniquity was forgiven, so that the Father will remember our sin no more. It is a two-way covenant, but our part is only to "enter in", Jesus has done all the work required so that we can be that holy nation. And the sign of the covenant is the cross. Jesus said as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so the Son of Man shall be lifted up. And as we look up to the one on the cross we see him say "It is finished!" And we receive life eternal.

### **Application**

So what do we do with this knowledge, of the old covenant and the new covenant? Well the second part of the New Testament in our Bibles contains a lot of instruction on living our the new lives that we have. Here are some highlights:

- Don't live your life weighed down by sin. Jesus has paid the penalty for that sin and we are free from it.
- Live each day rejoicing for the mercy and grace of God that is ours through Jesus Christ.
- Seek to live a life pleasing to God, in grateful thanks for the grace that is given to us.
- Spread the good news so that others can be part of this new covenant too.