

1 January 2023

Covenant
Joshua 24:14-18

CALL TO WORSHIP

O God, our Covenant Friend, you have been gracious to us through all the years of our lives. We thank you for your loving care, which has filled our days and brought us to this time and place.

We praise your holy name, O God.

You have given us life and reason, and set us in a world filled with your glory. You have comforted us with family and friends, and ministered to us through the hands of our sisters and brothers.

We praise your holy name, O God.

You have filled our hearts with a hunger after you, and have given us your peace. You have redeemed us, and called us to a high calling in Christ Jesus. You have given us a place in the fellowship of your Spirit and the witness of your Church.

We praise your holy name, O God.

You have been our light in darkness and a rock of strength in adversity and temptation. You have been the Spirit of joy in our joys and the all-sufficient reward in all our labors.

We praise your holy name, O God.

You remembered us when we forgot you. You followed us even when we tried to flee from you. You met us with forgiveness when we returned to you. For all your patience and overflowing grace.

We praise your holy name, O God.

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One of the strangest things in our Bible, if you stop and think about it, is the way God keeps making covenants with humans. Why would eternal, almighty God want to enter into a mutual agreement with *us*? Let me illustrate the absurdity of the idea this way: what would you do as a parent if your toddler refused to hold your hand before crossing a busy street? Would you sit down and try to make a deal with that two-year-old? Offer a compromise (“This time you have to hold my hand, and next time you don’t have to, all right?”) Would you bribe the child? (“If you hold my hand, I’ll buy you ice cream!”) I hope not. I hope you just take the child’s hand and say, “Sorry, but this is not something you get to choose. We’re crossing the street now, and I’m holding your hand.” And the child will cry, and the child will *not* get run over by a UPS truck.

You see, when we make a deal, we are giving each side some agency. I do this, and you do that. But you don’t give a toddler agency when doing so jeopardizes the child’s life. Well, you see where this is going. God is infinitely farther above our understanding than we are above the understanding of a two-year-old. Why would God make a deal, a covenant, with people who are manifestly unable to handle it? In fact, it’s worse than that. We can have a reasonable expectation that in time we will be able to trust that child to cross the street all by herself, but, based on humanity’s track record, can God have the same reasonable expectation that we will one day be able to live up to the freedom we’ve been granted? I wouldn’t think so. And surely God knew

from the start that as soon as we had the freedom to do so we would invent theft, envy, pride, laziness, bullying, anger, perversions of all sorts, murder, racism, greed, war, and genocide. It feels like we are the least likely choice for a partnership of trust with God.

And yet God does it anyway. Perhaps the single most consistent theme in all the vast scope of scripture is that God makes covenants with human beings. A covenant with Noah. A covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A covenant with the People of Israel at Mount Sinai. A covenant with David and Solomon. The Law books of the Hebrew Bible are the terms of a covenant with God. The history books are the record of humanity's disregard for those terms and that covenant. The books of the prophets are the words of God's messengers calling people back to covenant. And then, the entire Christian part of the Bible is the story of how God's Son brought what? A *new covenant*. The Netflix summary of the Bible would probably read: "God makes covenants with people. People don't keep them. God makes new covenants." So, one more time: why? Why does God do this?

All I have for you today is a humble suggestion. It feels to me as if God doesn't just want us to keep covenant. God wants us to *choose* to keep covenant. I assume it was possible for God to create a world in which we all kept covenant with God because there was no other option, where obeying the law of God was like obeying the law of gravity. Not a choice; just something you did. But that was not the world that God made. God created the world, and us in it, in such a way that we could choose to keep covenant with God. Or not. And yes, I think God was perfectly well aware that most of us, most of the time, would choose the easy option of *not*. God knows that our promises are, as a general rule, about as enduring as dew in August. But God also knows this: the only way for people to become trustworthy is for someone to trust them.

And *every now and then*, someone proves trustworthy, at least for a while. And every *once in a great while*, after slipping up, somebody says, "I've not been living up to my promises. I want to re-commit myself to the covenant with God." Our scripture today is the account of Joshua leading Israel to do just that. God had made a covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai, with Moses serving as intermediary between the two parties. Now, decades later, Moses' successor Joshua calls the people of Israel together. He reminds them where they came from – idolatry and slavery. Then he reminds them of all the ways that God had kept the covenant, caring for them in the wilderness, bringing them into the Promised Land. Then Joshua calls on the people to renew their side of the covenant. We read from the book of Joshua, chapter 24, verses 14-18:

¹⁴ *'Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. ¹⁵Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.'*

¹⁶ *Then the people answered, 'Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; ¹⁷for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.'*

It sounds almost like a responsive liturgy, doesn't it? With Joshua giving the prompts and the congregation responding. And it continues that way. As we read on in chapter 24 Joshua responds, "Don't lie, now! You people couldn't keep a covenant if you had to!" and the people respond, "No, really! We mean it this time!" And then they take vows. This isn't just a speech. It's a ceremony: a covenant renewal ceremony.

An interesting side note: Ancient Near Eastern archeologists have found old treaty documents and have noticed that they all follow the exact same pattern. Clearly there was a widely-used template for such deals. Today, it's sometimes called the "Hittite Suzerainty Treaty." Anyway, Joshua chapter 24 follows that template down to the last detail, so this isn't just a ceremony, it's a formal, official ceremony, following legal precedent.

Anyway, that's what the Bible teaches us about covenant. God is a God who seeks relationship, seeks a mutual covenant with us his creatures. And, for the most part, it's a thankless quest. God keeps covenant; we don't. So God has two options: either chuck it all as a waste of time or stick it out and try again and again. It appears to be God's nature to try again. Because of that, if we set ourselves to renew covenant, God is always willing.

In the 18th century, an English clergyman named John Wesley – you may have heard the name – came to the same conclusion. And so it became an annual practice at the beginning of each new year for Wesley's group (they were called Methodists) to hold a covenant renewal ceremony. Wesley borrowed a ceremony that he found in a book and adapted it. Today, we borrow Wesley's covenant renewal ceremony. The call to worship we used at the beginning of our worship was from Wesley's service. Now I invite you to join me in the rest of it. We read together, but I invite each one to apply the words to themselves individually.

COVENANT PRAYER

O righteous God, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, see me as I bow before you. Forgive my unfaithfulness in not having done your will, for you have promised mercy to me if I turn to you with my whole heart.

God requires that you shall put away all your idols.

I here from the bottom of my heart renounce them all, covenanting with you that no known sin shall be allowed in my life. In your power I will watch all temptations that will lead me away from you. For my own righteousness is riddled with sin, unable to stand before you.

Through Christ, God has offered to be your God again if you would let him.

Before all heaven and earth, I here acknowledge you as my Lord and God. I take you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for my portion, and vow to give up myself, body and soul, as your servant, to serve you in holiness and righteousness all the days of my life.

O blessed Jesus, I come to you, hungry, sinful, miserable, blind, and naked, unworthy even to wash the feet of your servants. I do here, with all my power, accept you as my Lord and Head. I renounce my own wisdom, and take you for my only guide. I renounce my own will, and take your will as my law.

Christ has told you that you must suffer with him.

I do here covenant with you, O Christ, to take my lot with you as it may fall. Through your grace I promise that neither life nor death shall part me from you.

God has given holy laws as the rule of your life.

I do here willingly put my neck under your yoke, to carry your burden. Your law of love is holy, just, and good. I therefore take it as the rule for my words, thoughts, and actions.

The almighty God searches and knows your heart.

O God, you know that I make this covenant with you today without guile or reservation. If any falsehood should be in it, guide me and help me to set it aright.

And now, glory be to you, O God the Father, whom I from this day forward shall look upon as my God and Father. Glory be to you, O God the Son, who have loved me and washed me from my sins in your own blood, and now is my Savior and Redeemer. Glory be to you, O God the Holy Spirit, who by your almighty power have turned my heart from sin to God.

O mighty God, the Lord Omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you have now become my Covenant Friend. And I, through your infinite grace, have become your covenant servant. So be it. And let the covenant I have made on earth be ratified in heaven.

Amen.