

ONE

Covenant: An Overview

What is a *covenant*? If we are at all familiar with Christian terminology we have heard this word in at least two places: in reference to marriage, the “Covenant of Marriage”; and in the name Jesus used for the relationship between God—Himself—and individuals, the “New Covenant.” But what is the actual meaning of this word? What is a covenant? We tend to brush past this word, assuming we understand it, because we assume we understand these relationships. After all, people in these relationships are all around us. We may be in one or both of these relationships. Don’t we understand these relationships if we are *in* one?

In the coming pages we are going to see two things. First, the historic understanding of covenant has gone almost entirely missing in our own culture; therefore, it is highly likely that most of us do not understand the nature of this relationship: what defines a covenant, and what sets it apart from other relationships. Covenant is a specific kind of relationship that has been present in most cultures throughout human history in at least two forms: in marriage, and in something called a blood covenant. Second, understanding the central reality that defines this relationship; the opportunities, privileges, and resources that characterize this relationship, as well as the obligations, responsibilities, and duties it entails; and the vast, far-reaching, and powerful implications of this relationship—all of this will be of enormous help to us if we are trying to actually build one of these relationships either with a spouse or with God.

Would you build a house without a blueprint? What if you started

to build something with no clear idea what the finished product was supposed to look like, or how it was supposed to function, or the purposes it was intended to fulfill? You were just in love with the idea of building . . . something. Would you likely end up building the next big thing?

Would it not be better if an expert started with a vision for a particular outcome then designed something that perfectly fulfilled this purpose? If the architect or engineer was really stellar, what was made would not only be functional but beautiful. This product, used as intended, would not just function, it would create a sense of joy and reward. This is why we seek gifted people to design houses, or cell-phones, or cars, or public spaces, or our clothing. We want something that is not just OK, but perfect for our purposes, a perfect fit for our individual needs.

How about our marriages? How about our relationship with God? Is there a master plan, a grand design, behind these relationships? A plan that is designed to create something—in this case a relationship—that would have very specific outcomes and fulfill very specific purposes? A plan that is designed to build and form these relationships in very specific ways—and in the process to build and to form *us* in very specific ways—producing over time relationships that would be the most rewarding things we could experience? What if both of these relationships were created with *us* in mind, and we were literally *created with them in mind*?

Unfortunately, not only the world at large, but the Christian community, has shifted from God's original plan for marriage to the idea that a marriage is simply a form of contract—an agreement between two individuals that outlines what each will and will not do. We will examine relationships produced by this kind of agreement, for this misunderstanding explains much of the current confusion surrounding marriage, and most of the dysfunction in marriage. Similar thinking has taken hold regarding a relationship with God. This relationship is ostensibly about things we are *not to do*—"just say 'no' to sin." This view holds that God is responsible for holding up His end of the agreement, which is to do . . . everything else. We will also look at the

implications of this thinking versus the actual offer God extends to each of us.

A covenant is not a contract. It is not an agreement. It is not something *between two individuals*. **Covenant is a merger and joining of souls, identities, and natures.** In covenant a very special union is formed; two are joined into a particular form of one-ness. It is from the reality of this joining that every aspect of the relationship flows: everything we are to do and to be in these relationships. People in our world yearn for unity, long for love, hope for harmony. All of these aspirations vaporize, though, in the face of individuals pursuing diverging self-interests at the expense of others, whether in a marriage, in a congregation, or on the street. Covenant is God's answer to this dilemma. It forges an actual unity, and this changes everything in the equation.

If God were to offer a blueprint for these relationships, do you think we could do a better job of building them? Or might the One who created not only us, but the world and universe we inhabit, perhaps know more than we do about what would bring us joy and satisfaction in the end, about how our hearts work, and about how love works? Once we truly understand these relationships and their power to impact us, we can also see how He intends to impact everyone—all of society—through these relationships. This has been his plan throughout history.

This three-book series will do several unique things: it lays out the overall design for these relationships, rather than focusing on an aspect of relationship; it explores the many purposes of these relationships; it explores the potential of these relationships—what *can* be built. If we are to reach this potential, we need to understand our roles in building them according to God's plan, roles which become clear as we examine the nature of these relationships.

In the first volume we will consider the historic definition of Covenant relationships—how this relationship was understood at the time the New Testament and Old Testament Scriptures were written. We will examine the plan for building these relationships and the plan inherent in these relationships for building *us*. We will examine the

general implications of these relationships, for they impact every aspect of one's life. What we will see, overall, is that covenant represents a very complex and powerful plan.

Why do we need a relationship so powerful, complex, and multifaceted? We will look at the world into which God introduces this relationship. A relationship and a plan with this power is desperately needed if the issues we confront, in our daily lives and in our world, are to be adequately addressed. We will see that God's plan is adequate to this task—if it is actually applied.

The second volume will apply our new understanding of covenant to the Covenant of Marriage. What is the nature of marriage? How does this relationship work? How is a marriage built to its potential? How are we built to our potential? And what kind of relationship does this plan produce? A relationship that answers our yearning for happily-ever-after, that addresses the deepest needs of our hearts, that builds us to our potential? Yes.

The third volume will examine the New Covenant: the nature of our relationship with God, what we must do to build this relationship, and how we are matured and transformed through this process of building. Then, as in marriage, we will look at the relationship that is produced with God, and the relationship God intends be produced with fellow Christians. We will examine our deepest needs and God's plan to meet those needs. We will see that the New Covenant is God's plan to build the abundant life He promises in Scripture.

Now, to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us.

EPHESIANS 3:20

If a working plan from God has existed throughout history, why do our lives and our relationships and our world look as they do? This is an excellent question, one we will examine in detail. The answer has to do with our freedom to choose our own path. But this is not the most important question. The most important questions for our lives are: Do we know God's plan for these relationships, and have we whole-

heartedly implemented this plan so far? If not, how can we develop an understanding of His plan? How can we fully implement this plan? And, are there good reasons why we might choose to do so?

God's plan of covenant is designed to do four main things. First, *to teach us how to love*, which includes offering us a comprehensive definition—God's definition—of love. Second, *to give us a working plan for relationship-building*. Third, to the extent that we are not capable of wholeheartedly and comprehensively loving God or our husband or wife, to motivate us to love to the extent we are capable, and to *change us into people capable of loving deeply, broadly, and consistently*. God's plan produces people who are capable of building these relationships to their potential and who learn to fully enjoy them in the process. Fourth, to take these mature, loving people and *use them to parent children* to ensuring the success of the next generation; to *integrate these mature, capable people into society* to produce a more loving, just, and functional society; and in the case of the New Covenant, to *use these spiritually mature people to build the Kingdom of God*. If this is God's plan to develop maturity, what happens if most people do not follow this plan even though they are married? Even though they are Christians? What would this lead to in many marriages, and in the Christian community? Might this explain what we see all around us in marriages, in the church, and in our society?

God's plan to accomplish all of these things may surprise you even if you have already been exposed to a great deal of Christian teaching. It certainly surprised me when I got my first clear look at it. I thought I understood these relationships as well as anyone because I had been a Christian for several years and was married at the time. It will be interesting to see if you have the same reaction I had to what you are about to learn. Teaching us to really love even one other person, or God Himself, is a much more challenging, difficult, and multifaceted project than any of us would like to believe, especially about ourselves.

We all think we are pretty good at loving other people, and we probably do have real skills and the best of intentions. It shouldn't take *that much* adjustment, should it? But what is really keeping us from loving other people? The answer is obvious: "If all of them would just

...” Well . . . we actually know it isn’t all about everyone else. Just . . . mostly? Perhaps our estimate of this relative percentage will change as God’s plan unfolds before us. And is this not great news? Because so far we have had so little success changing *all of them*. Also, God’s plan is not about incremental changes in us. Which is also good news, given our self-help results to date. OK, what is God’s plan if not this?

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First, let’s see what we already know about covenant relationships:

What Is a Covenant Relationship?

Referring either to marriage or to our relationship with God

- 1) A declaration of our love for our spouse-to-be, or for God
- 2) A pledge of lifetime commitment to our spouse-to-be, or to God
- 3) A promise that we will act in certain ways for the rest of our lives toward our spouse-to-be, or toward God
- 4) Giving ourselves to another person, or to God, just as we are
- 5) Something different than any of these—and far more powerful

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WHY DO WE NEED GOD’S COVENANT PLAN?

How can this one thing, this unique form of relationship, be God’s overarching answer to the problems of life? Let’s first think about life’s central problem and how our world tries to solve this problem apart from God. If we understand the drawbacks of the world’s plan—and simply study its outcome on all sides—this will help us appreciate the brilliance of God’s plan.

Would it be fair to say that our most serious day-to-day problems

have to do with human relationships in one way or another? If so, what is the heart of these relationship problems? We yearn for unity, we long for love. We find either infrequently, if ever. We want happily-ever-after, but ever-after has the odds of a coin toss, and happily might have longer odds. Why are relationships so challenged? We have no unity because we are a fractured, fragmented group of individuals. Each of us has a sense of our own best interests. This understanding may be correct, or we may not really know that is best. We only think we do. Regardless, our personal agendas are built upon our understanding of our best interest. Our world has trained us to think that our best shot at satisfaction comes from getting our way, from successfully pursuing our ideas about the good life—money, education, status, power, stuff, or fill in the blank. If this pursuit is the most important thing in our lives, everything else is less important. Things like other people and relationships. We accept wounding and betraying others. We sacrifice relationships as necessary collateral damage on our various roads to glory.

On the other hand, almost everyone feels a strong need for relationship and for love. Thus we engage in a balancing act. In order to build and sustain key relationships, we are willing to give up some part of our agenda and defer to another to satisfy them . . . to a point. Enough for the relationship to survive . . . we hope. Even if love is felt powerfully, though, our culture trains us to see our perceptions of self-interest as a higher priority. Let's see . . . what is most important . . . that job offer or my future with my fiancé . . . my old friends or my marriage . . . that drug or my marriage . . . that exciting secret offer from my new acquaintance or my old girlfriend/boyfriend, or my marriage? Is this new way to get ahead, or to meet my needs, or to amuse myself more important, or my relationship with God? And this assumes that people actually care. But what if they do not care, which is the case for most of the rest of humanity?

If people do not care, how is this world held together? How do we build anything worth having as we compete, collide, and contend to get what we all think we want and need? Our uncaring pursuit of self-centered desires can easily destroy other people if left unchecked.

Though the ultimate outcome of this plan is still an open question, the world's strongest move to problem-solve is to develop something called a contract. People enter into agreements about what they will do and not do. These may be formal, written, legally binding documents. Or they may be informal, the kind of negotiations we all engage in with others so they will treat us in ways we can accept and vice versa.

This is the way most people build marriages. Who is going to empty the dishwasher or do the laundry; who is going to make it and who is going to decide where we spend it? The most important element in most marriages over time is the negotiated agreement about who-is-going-to-do-what. We are so used to this pattern that we engage in it without conscious awareness on a moment-by-moment basis in a marriage or in any other relationship. "What will they think?" is also a part of the contract system of social expectations, along with everything else we do to build our images in society. In fact, our whole society is held together by something sociologists term a "social contract." We agree to do certain things as a society and refrain from doing other things so we can live together in mutually beneficial ways. Theologians often describe our relationship with God as a contract. "Covenant" is most often defined as "*a contract, only one written by God*" in current Christian teaching.

Why is viewing marriage or a relationship with God as a contract a problem? First, these relationships are not contracts. Covenant relationships are a completely different thing, so this is misleading at best. Second, contracts have an inherent weakness: they are only as strong and binding as the willingness of the parties to obey them. In practice, if you simply have an agreement between two separate individuals or between a few hundred million separate individuals to do certain things that are constructive, and to refrain from doing things that are destructive, what can we reasonably expect? Our world trains people to be most strongly guided by what they feel like doing in the moment, despite any other consideration, commitment, or even common sense. An in-the-moment agreement based on the value one thinks another will add to his or her life over time is not a particularly strong form of glue, especially in the face of predictable marital struggles and dis-

appointments. Loving, good-natured, well-intended people can live together in a contract-model marriage and get by fairly well. These marriages may endure, even thrive to a degree. But what key underlying issue always remains in a contract? The issue of division—nothing in a contract actually unites people. A contract is an attempt to find common ground between two separate entities with different, often conflicting interests. God has designed a different and better approach to marriage, one that solves this fundamental problem.

Is a relationship with God merely a contract? “Make a decision, pray a prayer, and you will go to heaven; don’t sin and you will be blessed,” would be a fair wording of the supposedly God-authored contract, the updated and revised “New Covenant” as it is portrayed in current Christian culture. In our modern culture we are told that *being told what to do* is bad. And the very things God tells us not to do are marketed heavily as the paths to fulfillment, not to judgement from God. So, in practice we run into the problem noted above: compliance with such a contract is going to be a predictable issue. Most simply will not exactly follow this contractual plan—to *not sin* in exchange for some not-very-well-defined future benefit from the hands of a being they have never learned to trust in any real way. In the contractual view, if anticipated benefits do not show up in one’s life, will one not conclude that God has failed to keep His end of the bargain? If all that binds us to God is anticipation of benefits, mostly in the distant future, this is also very weak glue that easily pulls apart amidst the struggles of life. As a result, “It is not working for me” is often the endpoint of both relationships. I am not sure people should follow this plan, because this is not the real plan for our relationship with God or for our marriage. What could a covenant be if it is not this kind of arrangement?

What we are going to see in the rest of this volume, then in expanded form in the next two volumes, will answer this question. Briefly, we are going to see, within the definition and nature of covenant, an explanation for everything we are told to do in marriage, within the Body of Christ, and in our relationship with God. This includes all the specific ways we are to treat each other, all the attitudes we are to have

toward each other, and all the things we are to do for each other. We will find the reason for every ritual of the Christian faith, as well as the purpose of a wedding. We will see a definition of faith that is more than a feeling, more than confidence that God will—we hope—cause things to turn out as we hope they will. Instead, faith is synonymous with faithfulness to our covenant with God—in our attitude toward Him, in how we relate to Him, and in our expectations of Him, which are to align with what He has committed Himself to be toward us in covenant. Further, in order to be faithful to either covenant, we must first *believe*, and *believe* in the Author, for only then will we reasonably submit to His plan. We will see that faithfulness in marriage extends far—very far—beyond physical faithfulness. We will see that this expanded vision of faithfulness, lived out, is the path to building the most loving and rewarding marriage. And all of the above is the path to building the best *us*; to maturing us, to transforming us so that we reach our true potential, not only in marriage and a relationship with God, but in all of life. Our character, it is said, determines our destiny. Faithfulness to covenant is the path to developing the strongest and most virtuous character. From this will flow many new opportunities in the rest of life. It is hard to overestimate the magnitude of the overall change in the direction and quality of one's life if one simply follows God's plan.

What we will see as we commit ourselves to carry out God's plan is that each covenant impacts each of us at every level and in every aspect of life. Simply put, God's plan is the most direct route to building loving relationships—in marriage, with Him, and in the church. But this most-direct route is going to have far more hills, twists, and turns than we could imagine. We will see that God created mechanisms and powers within us which, when properly directed, lead to the growth and transformation needed to carry out His plan. Revising us into beings who can consistently love in mind, heart, and action requires that we be literally rebuilt from the ground up. And this is precisely where we start in covenant: as new beings with new identities, new potential, new resources, and a new, totally committed relationship to draw from. We now have a lifelong partner who, in the case of a

spouse, is committed to learn to love us as we learn to love them; in the case of God, we have a Partner who knows more about love than we ever will, and desires that we become like Him in every way our finiteness allows. “Christian,” after all, means “little Christ.” How this all comes about, what it all means, and the life all of this produces will require three volumes to even begin to cover. Some topics are narrow and defined. This topic touches, and changes, literally every aspect of one’s life, in present, future, and eternity. It takes a lifetime to explore these implications even for a single life; yet this same plan is capable of crafting, forming, and directing every unique human life as God desires to produce the individuals and the world that God originally intended. Yet, little of this has come to fruition at this point because so few fully follow God. This is also a topic we will explore, for our decision to follow God, or not, in general and then in each detail, has more power to direct the course of our lives than any other influence.

We will see God’s definition of love clearly spelled out, and we will see what love-in-action looks like. We will see what His grace is, and what it is not. We will develop a new understanding of sin, and a new understanding of the impact on our lives of the cumulative rebellion of humanity. Sin is more than an act: it is a direction, a path, an implemented plan. Once we begin to see God’s plan clearly, we will also be able to distinguish the alternative plan that is always before us in our world. And we will develop new reasons to resist this alternative, for our lives are at stake, not just in some abstract sense but in real and important ways. We will gain a more clear understanding of the impact of the beliefs we choose and of the choices we make based on our beliefs.

We will see our responsibilities, duties, and obligations in these relationships, which, though clearly spelled out in Scripture, are almost no part of current Christian teaching. The idea that we are supposed to be passive, though grateful, recipients of everything God wants to do in our lives, offering nothing of ourselves in return, could not be further from the truth of covenant. A covenant is an all-in kind of thing, requiring every ounce of strength. Everything of each life must be given into the relationship if two are to build what can be built. This

is as true of a relationship with God as it is of a marriage.

Where can we seek a correct understanding of these relationships? The strictly correct answer is, “In the Scriptures, for in them is all the truth we need to build the lives and marriages God has for us.” But there is a problem: in order to understand God’s plan we must correctly define the words used in the Scriptures. If we mis-define key words, inserting modern concepts instead of defining these terms as Jesus and those who heard His teachings in person understood these terms, might we miss something important? Might we misunderstand the relationship He offers to each of us? If He is offering a very definite, specific kind of relationship with Himself, or if God in the beginning offered a very definite, specific kind of relationship between a man and a woman—marriage—that was intended to produce a very specific set of outcomes in our lives, might we miss out on these blessings if we do not correctly understand the nature, the defining reality, and the principles of this relationship?