

What are Covenants?

Many people approach their relationship with God with a sense of commitment, believing, “If I make and keep covenants with God, then I’ll receive his blessings.” In Mormonism, this idea echoes the statement found in Doctrine and Covenants 82:10: “I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise.” This verse essentially captures the spirit of the old covenant, which God established with his people through Moses—a conditional, two-sided covenant where blessings depended on Israel’s faithful obedience. As Deuteronomy 28:1 declares, *“If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth.”*

But what if God’s ultimate promise to us is different? What if his blessings are rooted not in our ability to keep our promises but in his commitment to keep his? As we explore the covenants throughout the Bible, we’ll see that while God’s old covenant was conditional, his new covenant with us through Jesus is radically different. It’s a one-sided promise where all blessings rest on God’s faithfulness—not ours.

Let’s look at how this new covenant redefines what it means to be in a relationship with God and experience his unchanging love.

What does “Covenant” mean?



“Covenant” is a word that is not often used outside of a religious context. It comes from old Latin and French words meaning “to agree,” “to unite,” and “to come together,” and this is essentially what the English word still means today. A “covenant” is a binding agreement between two parties that establishes a special relationship.

In ancient times, in the lands around Israel, covenants were common between individuals, estates, and even nations. There are a few examples in the Bible of these covenants between two human parties: Abraham and Abimelek in Genesis 21:22-34; the Israelites and the Gibeonites in Joshua 9; and David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18:1-3.

However, the most significant covenants in the Bible are between **God** and mankind. God makes a binding agreement with various people, which establishes a special relationship. Often, the covenants God makes with humans are accompanied by statements that signify the new special relationship like, “I am your shield, and your very great reward” (Genesis 15:1), “[I will be] your God and the God of your descendants after you” (Genesis 17:7), “You will be my treasured possession ... you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a **holy** nation” (Exodus 19:5–6), and “I will be their God, and they will be my people ... I will **forgive** their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Hebrews 8:10, 12 quoting Jeremiah 31:33-34). In each of these instances, God enters or reaffirms a special relationship with people through a covenant. Keep reading to learn more about these covenants and how they differ!

What are God's different covenants with his people in the Bible, and how do they differ?

There are two major covenants in the Bible: one in the Old Testament, which God established with the Israelite people, and one in the New Testament, established with all believers. Both are solemn bonds between two parties (God and mankind) that establish a relationship, but that is where the similarities end. In the Old Testament, God entered a bilateral (two-sided) covenant with his chosen people at Mount Sinai. Under this conditional agreement, God promised to make Israel his treasured possession *if* they obediently followed his commandments (Exodus 19–24). Israel's continued success in the promised land was contingent on their obedience and faithfulness to their side of the covenant. If they were faithful, then God would be faithful to his side. However, the Bible reveals that sinful Israel repeatedly fell short of fulfilling their side of the covenant. ***If this bilateral covenant was how people were supposed to be saved and live with God forever, then no one would have any hope.***

But that is not the covenant in which people are saved for ***eternal life***. God foretold the coming of a new covenant: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant ... I will put my ***law*** in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. For I will ***forgive*** their wickedness and will remember their sins no more’” (Jeremiah 31:31, 33–34).

The Old Testament people looked forward to this new covenant and the Messiah that would bring it about; they were saved by ***faith*** as they trusted God's promise! The new covenant starkly contrasts its predecessor, as it is a unilateral (one-sided) agreement, dependent solely on God's faithfulness. There are no conditions humans must fulfill to keep their side of the covenant! ***The new covenant is composed entirely of God's promises and gracious actions.*** Jesus Christ is the embodiment of God's fulfillment of this new covenant.

In what way does Jesus embody the new covenant?

During his life on earth, Jesus fulfilled the terms of the old covenant on our behalf. As our ***substitute***, he lived a sinless life, obeying the ***commandments*** perfectly and crediting his ***righteousness*** to us. Through his sacrifice, the first covenant became obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). In its place, Jesus instituted the new covenant “in his blood” (Luke 22:20), offering us complete ***forgiveness*** (Colossians 1:14). Every promise of this new covenant rests entirely on Jesus, rendering it unshakeable and trustworthy.

Because of this new covenant, we can now approach ***God*** with unwavering confidence. The ***forgiveness*** of our sins and our ***reconciliation*** with him are not contingent on our flawed attempts at obedience. Instead, they hinge solely on the finished work of Jesus Christ. In him, we find the fulfillment of all God's promises, the assurance of his unfailing love, and the invitation to an intimate, eternal relationship. What a joy it is to be a part of this new covenant!

What was the purpose of God's covenants in the Bible?

As seen in the question above, **God's** covenants differ primarily in whether they are unilateral or bilateral. Besides the two major covenants (old and new), there are a few smaller, unilateral covenants. For example, in Genesis 9, God unconditionally promises never again to destroy the world in a flood. Later in Genesis 15, God again unconditionally promises that Abraham will have numerous descendants and that they will inherit the promised land of Canaan. In 2 Samuel 7, God unconditionally promises David that a line of his descendants will rule on his throne. Each of these covenants, together with the larger old and new, differed in specifics but were united in purpose: to bring **salvation** and **eternal life** to all mankind. They all pointed towards the promised new covenant whereby all mankind is **saved** and brought to life with God!

God was ruling over history through his promises and covenants to his Old Testament people so that all things would be in their proper place for the entrance of his Son (Galatians 4:4-5). **Jesus** was the fulfillment of all those covenants and hours before his death, he established the long-foretold new covenant that unconditionally gave salvation and eternal life to all mankind! Our God was in the driver's seat for all of history so that he would accomplish this. The covenants in the Bible were all about having an eternal relationship with you—his treasured possession!

Were some of the covenants in the Bible only temporary?

Short answer: yes! But let's look more closely at it. The covenants **God** made with Old Testament figures such as Abraham and David and the Old Covenant made at Mt. Sinai were ultimately fulfilled in Christ. So, all the rules about dieting, animal sacrifices, and civil government no longer apply to God's believers; those were temporary covenants. Christ has ushered in the new, everlasting covenant whereby he redeemed all mankind (Hebrews 8).

Do I need to make and keep covenants with God?

There is a bit of a misconception contained in that question, namely, that we are the ones who make covenants with **God**. In every single covenant in the Bible, both the unilateral ones and the bilateral ones, God is the one who initiates the agreement. God is the one who came to Abraham and promised his descendants would be a great nation. God is the one who rescued Israel from Egypt and made them his special nation. Most amazingly, the Bible tells us God is the one who descended to this world as a man (see John 1:1-14) and ushered in a new covenant where he unequivocally **justified** the whole world, including you!

This new covenant Christians are *already* a part of is a unilateral covenant; that is, there is no part of the covenant humanity must keep; it is only God giving blessings and **forgiveness**. So, there is nothing for those who trust in Christ to keep or maintain on their end in the new covenant. Just look to **Jesus** and learn about what he did and is doing for you without your asking or earning.

Upon hearing this good news and really taking it to heart, you might naturally feel inclined to do something about it, to dedicate your life to Christ in some way or do something for him. That is a wonderful desire and is part of God's intent with saving you! He wants you to live in the joy of his love and to lead a godly life out of thanks and praise to him. But any command you obey or sacrifice you offer is no longer a *need to do* but a *want to do*. You do not *need* to make and keep

covenants with God because *he established* the only covenant you need through which he gives and gives and gives. Now, you *get* to enjoy the blessings and say thank you with your life! You *get* to serve God joyfully and confidently because **God has already given you his greatest gifts in Christ Jesus.**

Are there any covenants in the church today?

Since we don't make or keep any new or special covenants with **God**, there is but one covenant in the church today: the new covenant we've spoken so much about which Christ established on the eve of his death. Luke 22:20, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." Elsewhere this new covenant is described as, "For the **forgiveness** of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Christ shed his blood for our forgiveness. So now, Christians are in a personal relationship with **Jesus** through which he gives forgiveness of sins to all people. This sole, standing covenant is not conditional! There is nothing we humans need to do to keep up our side of the bargain. It is pure grace and love!

Learn more below about the connection between the new covenant and the Lord's Supper.

How can I be sure that God will keep his covenants with me?

Our sinful natures are tricky. They don't enjoy hearing **God's** promises or experiencing his comfort. Our sinful natures do all they can to resist God's truth and sow doubt in our minds. They want us to think that God really doesn't love us unconditionally; they try and tell us that God really can't be this good, that we'd be better off thinking that we must contribute something to his plan or not believing in him entirely. God knows this and declares and demonstrates again and again that he can be depended on.

Let's look at some examples.

James 1:17 says God "does not change like shifting shadows." Psalm 102:27 addresses God and says, "But you remain the same, and your years will never end," and Hebrews 13:8 says, "**Jesus** Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

God is not some fickle being who wavers or changes. He is our solid rock and foundation upon whom we can always depend. You need not fear that he will change his mind about you, for he does not change. He will always be there to love you, **forgive** you, and uphold his gracious covenant.

Even when we are unfaithful to God, even when we make mistakes and sin, God remains faithful and forgiving to us! Romans 3:3 says, "What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all!" That is the beauty of God's new covenant in Christ; no part of it is dependent on you. It seems strange, it seems impossible, but listen to your Lord's words; it is true! You are held tightly in God's hand, and he will not let you go (Romans 8:38–39).

A Closer Look: God's Faithful Covenant

We've answered many questions about covenants in general so far, with a special emphasis on Christ's new covenant he established before he died. So, let's zoom in on another example of a

unilateral covenant found in Genesis 15. This chapter provides a powerful illustration of how **God** works in covenants and gives us confidence in the surety of his promises.

In Genesis 15, God makes a covenant with Abram (later called Abraham). God promises to make Abram's descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and give them the Canaan land as their possession. This covenant is significant because God initiates it and takes full responsibility for its fulfillment. He is the one who does all the work to put it into effect. God made this point vividly with Abram.

Today, most contracts are enacted when a notary public notarizes them. Then, and only then, are they official. In the Old Testament, they had a striking ceremony which served a similar purpose. The two parties would cut various animals in half, lay the halves in two rows, and then both parties would walk between the rows. This vivid display put the covenant into effect. Interestingly, the Hebrew term used to make a covenant means "to cut a covenant."

The scene in Genesis 15 unfolds as God instructs Abram to bring specific animals for a covenant sacrifice. Abram conducts the sacrifices, and as he waits, a deep sleep and thick darkness come over him. In this divinely orchestrated moment, God reveals the future hardships and oppression that Abram's descendants will face but assures him that they will eventually come out of it with great possessions.

Then, God does something extraordinary. He passes between the pieces of the sacrificed animals *alone*, symbolizing his commitment to fulfilling the covenant without any requirement from Abram. This unilateral act demonstrates that God takes full responsibility for keeping his promises and does not depend on human efforts or obedience.

The message is clear: God is the one who establishes and upholds covenants. He is faithful, and his word is unchanging. His promises are sure because he and he alone guarantees them. Ultimately, regardless of Israel's continual struggle with sin, God delivered them and brought them to the Promised Land.

So why does this covenantal promise about land and descendants matter for us today? Well, it matters because we also belong to a unilateral covenant; only ours doesn't deal with land or descendants, but **forgiveness** of sins and eternal life with God! Just as God fulfilled his covenant with Abraham, he will fulfill every promise he has made to us through the new covenant in **Jesus** Christ. You are forgiven. Christ died for you. You will live with God. These are unilateral, unconditional elements of our covenantal relationship with Christ!

What Does God's Unilateral New Covenant Mean for You?

We've said it many times in this article as we sought to understand the meaning of covenants, but let's reiterate it one more time. What does all this talk of Christ's new covenants mean for you? It means that **forgiveness** and a restored relationship with **God** are not based on our ability to make and keep covenants. The essence of biblical Christianity lies in the person and ongoing work of **Jesus** Christ. It is not about what we can do but what Christ has done and continues to do for us.

In the new covenant, sealed by the precious blood of Jesus, we find the fulfillment of all God's promises and the assurance of his unending love and **grace**. Through trust in Jesus Christ, we are **reconciled** to God and receive the forgiveness of sins. Our acceptance by God is not contingent on our performance but solely on the perfect obedience and sacrifice of Jesus.

This is what is behind and in the **sacrament of the Lord's Supper**: God intimately, personally, and miraculously delivers his covenant, the **forgiveness** of sins. It is not a time for us to recommit ourselves to our side of the covenant, for in the new covenant, we don't even have a side to keep! It is unilateral from God to us! What God does for us in his supper is even more breathtaking than what he did for Abram. Rather than making his covenant with bloody animal pieces, through his cut body and shed blood, connected with the bread and wine, Christ says, "Your sins are forgiven; believe it and receive it."

God's unbreakable covenant declares, "Jesus is enough to make you my treasured possession." Jesus' atoning sacrifice covers our sins completely, and his **righteousness** is imputed (gifted) to us. We can rest in the knowledge that our **salvation** is secure because it is based on the finished work of Christ. Our relationship with God is not about striving to meet a set of requirements or living in fear of failing to keep covenants but about resting in the grace and mercy freely given to us through Jesus.

Let go of any burdensome striving and embrace the liberating truth that Jesus has done everything. He has fulfilled every covenant on our behalf and offers us the gift of **eternal life**. Place your trust in him, for he is faithful, and his love knows no bounds. We find forgiveness, acceptance, and true reconciliation with God in him. His grace is sufficient, his love is unchanging, and his faithfulness endures forever. In his universal one-sided covenant, God promises you that Jesus is enough.

Study Covenants in the Bible

- Exodus 19-24
- Jeremiah 31:31, 33-34
- Hebrews 8
- Luke 22:20
- Colossians 1:14
- Genesis 15

Songs about the Cross

- **Cornerstone** by Hillsong Worship: This contemporary worship song draws from the imagery of the cornerstone, representing the unshakable foundation of God's covenant with us through Jesus Christ.
- **He Will Hold Me Fast** by Keith & Kristyn Getty: This song reassures believers of God's unyielding grip, even in times of doubt or struggle.
- **His Mercy Is More** by Matt Boswell and Matt Papa – Proclaims the overwhelming mercy of God in forgiving sins.

- ***Christ Is Mine Forevermore*** by CityAlight – Reassures believers of their eternal relationship with God through Christ.