

Covenant: God Pursues

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Rev. Brian Bill

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Some of you may know that many years ago I had the privilege of serving as one of Ray Pritchard's associate pastors. Ray is my ministry mentor and most of what I know as a pastor I learned from him. Around 10 years ago Ray formed Keep Believing Ministries, an internet-based ministry that focuses on equipping and encouraging people to keep believing in Jesus. I've been serving on the board of KBM since it started.

Keep Believing is one of Edgewood's Go Team monthly partners and Ray will be preaching at Edgewood January 14-15. Ray and his wife Marlene are in the Ukraine where he is teaching the Book of Daniel and the Book of James to next generation leaders. Ray has written 27 books, including *Anchor for the Soul*. KBM has given away over 800,000 copies of this book to prison and jail ministries, to Pregnancy Resource Centers, to military personnel and outreach ministries all over America. The people of Edgewood have handed out more than 4,500 copies in the last three years!

KBM is in process right now of having this book translated and printed in Spanish! Since there are over 69 million Spanish speakers in America alone, we can't wait to see how God uses this gospel book for His glory and the growth of His kingdom among the Hispanic community.

Here's the backstory. KBM works with Moody Publishers to get the price down as low as possible. Are you ready for this? By taking out all profit and royalties and using a less expensive paper, we can translate, print, store and ship these books to ministries for only 75 cents a copy!

We are making the Spanish printing of *Anchor* part of our Christmas Offering this year. Half of what comes in will go towards the Hispanic Community Center in inner city Fresno through the work of our Go Team partners, Manuel and Kim Contreras. Taking the other half of what's come in so far (about \$9,000), Edgewood will be able to provide over 6,100 copies of *Anchor in Spanish*!

I can't wait to see how much will be given by the end of the year – last year the generous people of Edgewood gave over \$50,000 to help purchase the mobile ultrasound van for Pregnancy Resources. Beth and I have been saving for the

Christmas offering and we'll write our check before the end of the year. Can I encourage you to do the same? A gift of \$150 means \$75 will go to Fresno and the other half will purchase a box of 100 books! Some of you can't give that much and others can give a lot more. Simply mark "Christmas Offering" on your check or select "missions" if you choose to give online.

The English copies of *Anchor* are currently stored and shipped from a warehouse in Pontiac, the community we lived in before moving to the QCA. The next shipment of 100,000 English *Anchors* and 50,000 Spanish copies will be stored and shipped from a storage facility in Moline. Gary Pinger and Don Nugent are heading this up for Keep Believing.

We've been learning in our "Christmas: From Creation to Consummation" series that it's helpful to see the whole story of Scripture as God pursuing people who have been running from Him and ruining their lives in the process. We've moved from the creation of the world to the creation of Adam and Eve. We also looked at the linkage between the opening verses of Genesis and the opening verses in the Gospel of John. Last weekend we learned that if want hope in order to cope we must hold onto the past promises of God, we must lean into God's present provisions and we're to look forward to future fruit.

Today we're going to retell God's salvation story, utilizing the major covenants to do so. After all, properly understood, the Bible is not about you, or about me, it's all about God. He's the hero in the story. In 2 Kings 23:2, the Bible is called the "***Book of the Covenant.***" Properly understood, the Old and New Testaments are really first and second Covenants. In fact, the word "*testament*" is Latin for Covenant.

God's response to our rebellion is to reach out in relationship by making covenants. Covenants address the catastrophe of the Fall, and they all point to Christmas and the Cross. Someone has defined a covenant as a "*life-and-death relationship with God on His terms.*" There's no bargaining or negotiating. God conceives the covenant and He confirms it.

Let's go back to our relationship with Moody Publishers. When we work out all these details for every printing, Keep Believing and Moody sign a contract. In order for there to be no confusion this contract is very specific, covering every possible contingency. According to an attorney friend, a contract is "*an agreement between two or more parties creating obligations that are enforceable by law.*"

Our culture is more familiar with contracts than with covenants. While there are some similarities, there are at least six main differences. Covenants are:

- **Permanent.** A covenant is a permanent arrangement; contracts often have an end date.
- **Total.** A contract generally involves only one aspect or skill or task, while a covenant covers a person's total being. Contracts generally involve the exchange of either goods or services; while covenants involve the exchange of the individuals themselves.
- **Initiative.** Someone needs to take the first step; in the Bible God is always the one who initiates.
- **Unilateral.** My lawyer friend reminded me that a contract requires two (or more) parties. There is no such thing as a unilateral contract but God makes unilateral covenants with His people.
- **Unconditional Love.** The foundation of all of God's covenants with His people is love. Covenant love is described in various terms but the most common is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which communicates the idea of faithful love in action. Lamentations 3:22: ***“The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end.”*** I like how the *Jesus Storybook Bible* says it: *“God loves us with a Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.”*
- **Costly.** When God makes a covenant, He keeps it. When He makes a promise, you can count on Him to come through. Psalm 105:42: ***“For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant.”***

Let's walk through the various covenants and see how they are completed in Christ. John Ortberg helped me in my understanding, so some of what I'll share reflects his insights.

The Covenant with Noah

As we continue in the Genesis narrative after Adam and Eve sin, we see a family fracturing, when Cain kills Abel. Genesis 6:5-6 gives us a description of how sin exploded in the world: ***“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.”***

Because sin was so out of control, God decided to wipe the world out with a flood. Genesis 6:11 sounds like our society today: ***“Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.”***

Incidentally, Christmas only makes sense against the backdrop of how corrupt we are. The incarnation is filled with meaning precisely because of the evil in human hearts. The Savior was sent to save sinners. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

God then unleashed a worldwide flood but Noah and his family members were saved because they entered the Ark. Noah is given the same mission in Genesis 9:1 that was communicated to Adam in Genesis 1:28: ***“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”***

God then makes a covenant with Noah as seen in Genesis 9:11: ***“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.”***

This is why the rainbow is so significant in God’s salvation story: ***“When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth”*** (Genesis 9:16).

The first explicit mention of covenant refers to the initiative taken by God to enter into relationship with human beings, despite their depravity.

The Covenant with Abraham

Years later, God pursues a man named Abram (Abraham) and moves him from a pagan land to a new location. We see this in Genesis 12:1-3: ***“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’”***

This covenant is reaffirmed in chapter 15, where God initiates an irreversible relationship with Abraham. Let’s carefully unpack this agreement called a covenant because it’s really at the heart of the Bible, mentioned some 325 times. In the Hebrew the phrase ***“making a covenant”*** can be translated, ***“to cut a covenant.”*** John Ortberg defines it this way: ***“A covenant is a means to establish a***

binding relationship where none existed before, based on faithfulness to a solemn vow.” The background to this is both gripping and a bit gross.

In response to Abraham’s question, **“How can I know?”** God tells Abraham to gather a heifer, a goat, and a ram, along with a dove and a young pigeon. Here’s where we see how costly a covenant is. He then cuts the three animals in two and leans the two halves against the walls of a trench. The blood from the animals now pools on the path between the carcasses.

Abraham would have understood from this that God was getting a covenant ready for signing. This was their way to *“cut a deal.”* Typically two parties would take a covenant walk through the blood, symbolizing that if either one broke it, they would end up just like the animals. Jeremiah 34:18 tells us that this was more than just a contract; it was very serious: **“And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts.”**

Abraham may have been waiting to take this walk with God but amazingly God puts him to sleep and a **“dreadful and great darkness fell upon him”** in verse 12. God tells Abraham that hardships are ahead for his people and then when it was dark, **“...a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.”** The pot and torch represent God, showing Abraham that the keeping of the covenant is principally a promise of God.

God took the blood walk alone, showing that He signed it for both of them. The message is clear. God’s covenant with Abraham is based on who God is, not who Abraham is or what Abraham does. Listen to Genesis 15:18: **“On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your offspring I give this land...’”**

This covenant with Abraham is repeated and passed along to his son Isaac in Genesis 17:19: **“Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.”** We can follow God’s covenant promise from Noah to Abraham to Isaac and then to his son Jacob, who had 12 sons, Joseph being one of them.

The Covenant with Moses

During the time of Joseph, the Israelites move to Egypt to escape the ravages of a famine. A different Pharaoh comes to power and ends up enslaving the Israelites. After being in bondage for 400 years, the people cry out to the Lord and we hear how God responds in Exodus 2:24-25: ***“And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.”***

It doesn't take long for the people to stray as they end up worshipping a golden calf. God continues to pursue them and renews His covenant with them in Exodus 34:10: ***“Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.”***

As you may know from reading the Old Testament, God's people don't keep their part of the deal as they continuously break covenant with Him. I love the promise that God makes in Leviticus 26:44-45: ***“Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them, for I am the LORD their God. But I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD.”***

As a result of God's covenant with Noah sinners got another chance to multiply and fill the earth. Through His covenant with Abraham, his descendants became a nation. In God's covenant with Moses, God's people were planted in the Promised Land. This set the stage for the establishment of God's covenant with David.

The Covenant with David

Many years later, King David is on the throne and God makes a startling promise in 2 Samuel 7. David is told that after he dies, his throne will continue *forever*. Listen to verses 12-13: ***“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”***

After David dies, Solomon's sins trip him up. If you read through the books of Kings and Chronicles, you see that the covenant promise remains front and center but king after king disobeys and disqualifies himself. Because of this there

developed a longing for a coming king who could fulfill all the conditions of the covenant and sit on David's throne to rule and reign forever. The problem was that no earthly king was qualified to do so.

Psalm 89:3-4 says it clearly, ***"I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: 'I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations.'"*** This is highlighted in verse 28: ***"My steadfast love I will keep for him forever, and my covenant will stand firm for him."***

The New Covenant

Before we leave the Old Testament, let's jump over to Jeremiah 31:31-33: ***"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."***

The prophets predicted the coming of a king and a new covenant but it seemed like nothing was happening. Almost 1,000 years had passed since King David ruled and it was now four centuries after Malachi's last message. While some had lost hope, others held on, longing for a visitation from God. Surely God would keep His covenant, wouldn't He?

Christ the Covenant Keeper

Fast forward to the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. As Zechariah looks down at his baby boy named John, he knows that help was on the way. The long wait was now over!

Check out how Zechariah links the coming of his son John and the coming of Jesus to the whole idea of covenant in Luke 1:72-73 - ***"to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his [wait for it...] holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham..."***

Do you remember the promise made to David? In Luke 1:27 Gabriel was sent ***“to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the [wait for it...] house of David...”***

When Gabriel gave God’s message to Mary he called on the covenant with David in Luke 1:31-33: ***“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the [wait for it...] throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”***

As Mary contemplates all that the angel said to her, she breaks out into song, linking Christmas to the fulfillment of covenant in Luke 1:54-55: ***“He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, [wait for it...] to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”***

Listen to what Luke 2:4 says about Joseph – ***“...because he was of the house and [wait for it...] lineage of David...”***

Check out how the opening verse of the Gospel of Matthew links the coming of Christ to the covenant with Abraham and the covenant with David: ***“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the [wait for it...] son of David, the [wait for it...] son of Abraham.”*** King David is listed five times in the family tree of Jesus found in Matthew 1. Why is that? Because first and foremost, Jesus Christ is a direct descendant of David and therefore qualified to be the eternal king.

In Matthew 1:20, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, ***“Joseph, [wait for it...] son of David, do not fear...”***

In Matthew 22:41-42, Jesus asked the Pharisees a question: ***“What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, [wait for it...] ‘The son of David.’”***

After Jesus healed a man, Matthew 12:23 says, ***“And all the people were amazed, and said, ‘Can this be the [wait for it...] Son of David?’”*** And, do you recall what the people proclaimed on Palm Sunday? Matthew 21:9: ***“Hosanna to the [wait for it...] Son of David!”***

And do you remember what the Gospel tract that was placed on the cross over the head of Jesus said? John 19:19: ***“Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the [wait for it...] King of the Jews.’”***

The Apostle Paul understood the covenant connection to Christ when he wrote in Romans 1:3: “*concerning his Son, who was [wait for it...] **descended from David according to the flesh.***”

Jesus is the eternal son of David and He also ushers in the new covenant. When Jesus ate the final Passover meal with His closest followers, He said in Matthew 26:28, “*For this is my blood of the [wait for it...] **covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.***” Luke 22:20 records, “*This cup that is poured out for you is the [wait for it...] **new covenant in my blood.***” In 1 Corinthians 11:20, Paul quotes the words of Jesus as he gives some communion correctives. He calls the cup, “*the [wait for it...] **new covenant in my blood.***”

In the Book of Hebrews the entire passage from Jeremiah is quoted in 8:8-12. Jesus is called the “*Mediator of the [wait for it...] **new covenant***” in Hebrews 9:15. In Hebrews 7:22 He is called the “*guarantee of a better [wait for it...] **covenant.***” It’s better because it does what the old one could not -- it removes sin and cleanses the conscience (Hebrews 10:2, 22).

Covenant Commitments

The coming of Christ is connected to the fulfillment of the covenants in the Old Testament. Here then are three covenant commitments that we’re called to keep.

1. Keep the covenant of marriage. If you are married, you are in a covenant commitment with not only your spouse, but with God Himself. Don’t enter this covenant lightly and don’t break it flippantly. Malachi 2:14: “*...Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by [wait for it...] **covenant.***”

2. Renew your covenant commitment with the Lord. If you’ve been drifting, it’s time to recommit to a covenant commitment with the Lord. In 2 Kings 23:2-3 after King Josiah rediscovered the Scriptures, he made some huge changes: “*And the king went up to the house of the LORD, and with him all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the **Book of the Covenant** that had been found in the house of the LORD. And the king stood by the pillar and **made a covenant** before the LORD, to walk after the LORD and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with*

all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people joined in the covenant.”

What kind of covenant recommitment do you need to make today?

3. Share the message of Christmas as a minister of the New Covenant. 2

Corinthians 3:6 says that we are all “*ministers of a* [wait for it...] *new covenant.*”

With whom will you share that message between now and Christmas? Think about someone that God wants you to invite to our Christmas Eve services at 3 or 5 pm and our Christmas Day service at 10. BTW, we still need help in the nursery!

I find it interesting that the American Atheists are at it again with a ‘*Go ahead and skip church campaign.*’ [Show PPT] I wonder why they are working so hard at keeping people from going to church? They must know there’s something powerful that happens when people gather to praise and to hear the proclamation of the gospel.

In a recent poll of 1,000 Americans, LifeWay Research discovered that among those who don’t normally attend church at Christmastime, a majority (57 percent) indicated they would likely attend if someone invited them! That means people *want* to go to church...they just don’t know where to go.

I pulled into Panera this week and posted this invite [hold up]. I also stopped at the storage company that will be housing the *Anchor for the Soul* books and gave a card to the woman I’ve been working with. Someone in our family had a fender bender on Friday and I invited the woman who ran into our car to our services.

So here’s a challenge. *Everyone invite one!* As a way to help you do that, grab a bunch of invite cards today and put them in your car so you’ll have them ready to hand out when God brings someone across your path. We’re going to have some for our neighbors when we have them over on Monday night for our Christmas Open House.

Let’s everyone invite one. Will you invite *your one*? Think of that person right now and say a prayer that God will give you the courage to be a bringer. Your family member, neighbor, co-worker or classmate may just be waiting for an invite from you.

Give the gift of Christ, the Covenant Keeper.

Video: Christmas Invite

New Members

- Dave and Patty Kraft (Saturday night)
- Brenda Near (8:00 service)

Receive this Benediction from Hebrews 13:20: ***“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the [wait for it...] eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”***