

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 46** and ask **Question #1: When have you recently turned to the Internet for a solution to a problem?**

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG page 47**. Share the author's story of finding the solution to reset the warning light on his dashboard.

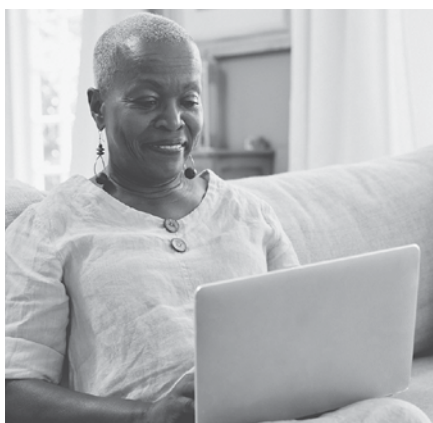
SAY: "Today, we desire fast and easy solutions to fix our problems. But when the problem is sin, only one solution exists: only Jesus can remove our sin."

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 47: Jesus came to remove our sin.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to open our eyes to why Jesus came, to offer salvation and hope for the problem of sin.

SESSION 4

WHY DID JESUS COME?



The Point

Jesus came to remove our sin.

The Bible Meets Life

Thanks to the Internet, we have easy access for finding solutions and fixing problems. But how do we fix our greatest problem: a broken relationship with God because of sin? Throughout time, countless

people and religious creeds have offered a host of ways to fix our sin problem, but only one solution exists. Only Jesus can remove our sin, and thankfully, He has made it possible for us to be forgiven and freed from sin.

The Passage

Luke 1:68-79

The Setting

A priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were both old and had no children. While Zechariah was ministering in the temple in Jerusalem, the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Gabriel said the aged couple would have a son, whom they were to name John. The child would grow up to be like Elijah and prepare the people of Israel for the coming Messiah. Because Zechariah doubted the angel's words, he was struck mute and remained unable to speak until after his son's birth (Luke 1:5-25).

Luke 1:68-71

68 Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has visited
and provided redemption for his people.

69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,

70 just as he spoke by the mouth
of his holy prophets in ancient times;

71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of those who hate us.

KEY WORDS: Horn of salvation (v. 69)—This term was used to describe God in Psalm 18:2. In Old Testament usage, a horn often symbolized strength, power, and victory. Here it refers to the Messiah.

Verse 68. After John was born, Zechariah was able to talk again after a nine-month silence. The Holy Spirit took hold of him and the priest became a prophet. Zechariah began to prophesy about the coming Messiah who would redeem His people and about his son who would prepare the way for the Messiah. Much of what Zechariah would say came directly from the Psalms and the Prophets of the Old Testament.

Zechariah broke his God-imposed silence with words of praise to **the Lord, the God of Israel**. Having initially doubted God's words given to him through the angel Gabriel concerning the birth of his son, Zechariah obviously had many months to ponder God's ways and God's work in his life as well as in the lives of God's people, the Israelites.

Zechariah praised God because of what He was doing. The events of Luke 1:5-67 demonstrated God had already **visited ... his people**. In its common usage the word for *visited* denoted an inspection or examination, which in ancient times could only be done in person. The idea of a visit from God is found throughout the Old Testament—sometimes to punish but other times to bring help. Zechariah experienced God's visitation through the angel who spoke to him and promised a son would be born to him who would be the forerunner of the long-awaited Messiah (Luke 1:5-17). Zechariah would surely have known of the coming birth of Jesus because Mary (who was related to Zechariah's wife Elizabeth) stayed with them for about three months (vv. 39-56).

STUDY THE BIBLE

Luke 1:68-71



10 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 48.

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Luke 1:68-71.

GUIDE: Refer to **PSG page 49** to the list summarizing the information and instructions the angel gave to Zechariah after announcing that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child:

- *The child would be a son and they would name him John.*
- *John would cause joy and delight.*
- *John would be great in the sight of the Lord.*
- *John would never drink beer or wine.*
- *John would be filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb.*
- *John would preach and turn many people in Israel to the Lord.*

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 49**, to the two truths about God revealed in the prophecy:

- God provided redemption for His people.
- God saved us from our enemies.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 1** to provide further explanation about the terms:

- Redemption
- Salvation

GUIDE: Use **KEY WORDS** on page 49 (**PSG, p. 48**) to explain the phrase *horn of salvation*.

LEADER PACK: Distribute copies of **Item 2: Prophecy Chart** handout. As time allows, ask volunteers to read the Old Testament prophecies and the New Testament passages which demonstrate how the prophecies were fulfilled.

PROPHECY CHART		
The Old Testament prophecies about Jesus the Messiah were precise and numerous.		
PROPHECY	VERSE	FULFILLED
Messiah would be born of a virgin.	Isaiah 7:14	Luke 1:26-35
Messiah would be born of a virgin.	Isaiah 53:1	Luke 1:27
Messiah would be a prophet.	Deuteronomy 18:15	Acts 1:16
Messiah would be a servant.	Isaiah 42:1	Matthew 23:11
Messiah would be despised for 30 years of silence.	Isaiah 53:7	Mark 15:1
Messiah would be scorned, despised, and mistreated.	Isaiah 53:3	Mark 15:1-20
Messiah would be killed and buried.	Isaiah 53:9	Acts 13:29
Messiah would die for our sins.	Isaiah 53:10	1 Cor. 15:3
Messiah would be raised from the dead.	Isaiah 53:11	Acts 2:24-32

1 It was this aspect of God's visitation that drew the greatest praise from Zechariah. He noted that God had **provided redemption** for His people. *Redemption* in this verse is a synonym for "salvation," a theme Zechariah would reemphasize throughout his prophecy. In common usage *redemption* meant a price paid to secure another person's freedom; the person could be a slave or a prisoner. *Redemption* emphasizes an action initiated by a third party; it is something a person cannot do for him- or herself. While the people of Israel had long expected a political Messiah who would deliver them from bondage to Rome, God had a greater plan in mind. Almost since the dawn of human history people had been slaves to sin and prisoners to death. Through the Messiah God would fulfill His plan to bring about freedom from humanity's greatest bondage. God had promised redemption to His people, thus Zechariah was certain the Lord would fulfill His promise.

Verse 69. An animal's **horn** represented its strength and power. In the Old Testament the horn likewise referred to an individual's power—the ability to defeat and destroy. Both Psalm 18:2 and 2 Samuel 22:3 reference God as the "horn of my salvation." Compared to the previous verse, this image provides a more complete description of God's work of **salvation**. In the act of providing redemption for a person, there was the possibility that the same army could recapture the released person and again make him a prisoner. What God would do through Jesus, however, was to defeat and destroy both sin and death. No longer could the former captive be enslaved or imprisoned again. Thus while salvation includes redemption, it goes beyond it to incorporate forgiveness, peace, freedom from the fear of judgment, and more.

The term **raised up** pictures an important person who was brought onto the stage of human history. The expected Messiah, for whom Israel had long waited, was soon to be revealed to bring God's promised salvation. He would come from **the house of his servant David**. David was the great king of Israel who was noted for his loyalty to God and his heart for God. He was also frequently referred to as God's servant (2 Sam. 3:18; 7:5,8,20-21,25-28).

Verse 70. Zechariah was not the first to proclaim God's promise of the Messiah who would bring salvation for humanity. Throughout history (**in ancient times**) the **holy**

prophets of God were inspired to speak His words about the coming Savior from David's line. Jeremiah prophesied that the Messiah would be the "Righteous Branch" (or offspring) of David (Jer. 23:5; 33:15). Isaiah noted He would be a "shoot" or "branch" of Jesse, David's father (Isa. 11:1). Through the prophet Nathan God promised David a descendant whose kingdom would endure forever (2 Sam. 7:11-16).

Verse 71. Salvation is a recurring theme throughout the Book of Luke. The terms "salvation," "Savior," and "saved" are found more often in this Gospel than in any other. In this verse, the wording could be interpreted as having political overtones (salvation **from our enemies and from... those who hate us**), however, Luke primarily emphasized salvation in terms of humanity's connection to God. Our greatest problem is a broken relationship with God because of our sin. Only through faith in the Messiah's work can we experience forgiveness for sin and a restored relationship with God. The enemies being referenced are those conquered with the coming of the Messiah—sin, death, and judgment.

Even so, while we live on this earth we will have spiritual enemies (Eph. 6:12) led by Satan (v. 11), the one who hates us and seeks to steal, kill, and destroy us (John 10:10). One day, however, Christ will bring a swift and decisive end to these enemies of God (Rev. 19:11-21; 20:10) and God's people will experience the fullness of salvation in His eternal kingdom. ◀

Luke 1:72-75

72 He has dealt mercifully with our fathers
and remembered his holy covenant—

73 the oath that he swore to our father Abraham.

He has given us the privilege,

74 since we have been rescued
from the hand of our enemies,
to serve him without fear

75 in holiness and righteousness
in his presence all our days.

DISCUSS: Question #2

(PSG, p. 50): How would you describe the redemption God provides for us in Jesus?

(Alternate: How does the salvation described in this passage deliver us from defeat?)

TRANSITION: "In the next verses we will see how God keeps His promises and how we are to respond to His faithfulness."

STUDY THE BIBLE

Luke 1:72-75



10 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Luke 1:72-75.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 50** to the list of fears that get our attention:

- The fear of losing a job.
- The fear of losing a loved one to death from cancer.
- The fear of the future with all its uncertainties.

Encourage the group to add other fears to the list.

GUIDE: Refer to **DIGGING DEEPER** on **PSG page 51** for information about *covenant*. Refer members to the article titled “Covenant as a Biblical Theme” on pages 58-61 (**PSG, pp. 56-59**).

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 2** to give more details about God’s *holy covenant*. Point out:

- *The significance of the oath God swore to Abraham.*
- *God has dealt mercifully with His people.*
- *The promise given to Abraham was also given to Zechariah and his contemporaries.*
- *The promise included rescue from the hands of enemies.*
- *The result would be the privilege of serving God without fear.*

GUIDE: Refer group members to the good news on **PSG pages 51-52** that we are free to serve God:

- *In holiness and righteousness.*
- *In His presence all our days.*

2 ▶ Verses 72-73. One of the purposes of God sending His Messiah was to redeem His people from fear. Knowledge of this visitation of God through the Messiah was not something new or unexpected. Rather it was a fulfillment of God’s **holy covenant**. A covenant is a pact or an agreement between two parties. Whereas in verses 68-71 Zechariah emphasized elements of God’s covenant with David, in verses 72-75 he emphasized elements of God’s covenant with **Abraham**, the **father** of the people of Israel (Josh. 24:3; Isa. 51:2). This covenant refers to the **oath** (or promise) God **swore** to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 and 22:15-18, in which the Lord promised that all the nations (peoples) of the world would be blessed through Abraham’s offspring (or seed).

Zechariah noted that in the coming of the Messiah God had **dealt mercifully with**, or showed His mercy to, **our fathers**. God’s mercy is His steadfast, unfailing love to unworthy and undeserving human beings. While God emphasized His covenant to the actual fathers of the people of Israel—the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—other spiritual “fathers” of the Jewish people also testified to God’s merciful covenant. These included Moses (Deut. 7:9), Daniel (Dan. 9:4), and Nehemiah (Neh. 1:5). God’s covenant of mercy was not just a promise to the patriarchs or to others in ancient times, God’s oath and covenant were about to be fulfilled during Zechariah’s time. Zechariah noted **He has given us** the promise, they would have **the privilege** of being redeemed and of experiencing God’s salvation.

Verse 74. Zechariah next emphasized the crux of God’s covenant. Again, he saw this future event as something that had already come to fruition—**we have been rescued from the hand of our enemies**. This phrase calls attention to the work of the Messiah, who would deliver people from the power and control of sin and death so they could experience freedom. Having received forgiveness of all their sins (Rom. 8:1; Col. 2:13-14), reconciliation with God (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:20-22), and adoption as sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8:14-17), believers have no need to fear. This was Zechariah’s point when he emphasized the privilege of serving God **without fear**. Paul expanded on this idea in Romans 6:16-23 when he noted that we are released from being slaves to sin to become slaves to righteousness, that is to God. Those who repent of their sins and receive the salvation found in God’s Messiah Jesus Christ are set free from sin to serve God. ◀

3 ▶ Verse 75. True service to God is rendered in **holiness and righteousness**. The Greek word for *holiness* is used only one other time in the New Testament (Eph. 4:24) where it is translated “purity.” The word emphasizes piety or devotion in a person’s actions toward God, carefully doing what God expects and has commanded. It reflects integrity both inside and outside—a new lifestyle (outward) that is a reflection of a new heart (inward). Holiness also carries the meaning of being separated from the world for devotion or service to God.

Righteousness is a closely related term. The word comes from a Greek root that means just or right and reflects conformity to a standard. Whereas holiness usually deals with a person’s conduct toward God, righteousness adds the element of a person’s behavior toward other people. Those redeemed in the Messiah by faith receive Christ’s righteousness as a free gift (Rom. 4:22-24; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9) and reflect righteousness in how they live (Eph. 4:24).

We who have been redeemed and have experienced the salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ should exhibit right actions toward both God and others **all our days**. This emphasizes a permanent, ongoing action. It is not just an action on Sundays or during revival or renewal times, but every day for as long as we live on this earth. This can happen because we live in God’s **presence**—or to put it another way, because His Spirit lives in us (Rom. 8; Gal. 5:16-25). ◀

Luke 1:76-79

76 And you, child, will be called
a prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord
to prepare his ways,

77 to give his people knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins.

78 Because of our God’s merciful compassion,
the dawn from on high will visit us

79 to shine on those who live in darkness
and the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible**

Commentary 3 to explain what it means to serve God “in holiness and righteousness ... all our days.”

DISCUSS: Question #3

(PSG, p. 52): How has God dealt mercifully with you?

(Alternate: How would you describe God’s holy covenant and how God is faithful to keep His promises?)

TRANSITION: “In the next verses we will see how John would be the fulfillment of God’s promise to send a messenger to prepare the way for the Messiah.”

STUDY THE BIBLE

Luke 1:76-79



15 minutes

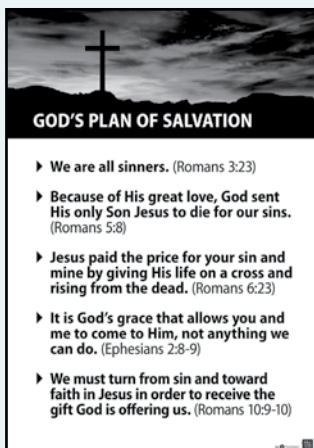
READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Luke 1:76-79.

GUIDE: Refer members to **PSG page 53** to Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1, the key verses that prophesy about a forerunner to Messiah. John's role was two-fold:

1. *Prepare the way for the coming Messiah.*
2. *Point to the salvation coming through the Messiah.*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 4** to provide more insight into what John would do.

LEADER PACK: Display **Pack Item 3: Plan of Salvation**. Use this as a tool to personalize what it means to experience the salvation that was prophesied in this passage.



Verse 76. After nine months of silence, Zechariah's first words were of praise to God for what He was doing. Only then did the aged priest speak to and about his **child**, John. Even while speaking to his son, Zechariah's words continued to emphasize what God was doing through the Messiah to redeem humanity from sin.

4▶ Though Zechariah was a descendant of Levi and Aaron (thus he was of the priestly tribe of Israel), John would not be a priest. Instead, he would be **called a prophet**. The Greek term translated *called* carries an emphasis of what John would actually do. God had called John to be His prophet before he was born. The angel Gabriel had said John would "be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:15) and minister "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (v. 17), who was arguably one of the greatest prophets of ancient Israel. A prophet sometimes foretold what would happen in the future but most often proclaimed God's message of judgment and salvation to a specific person or nation. John would fulfill this dual function of a prophet as he spoke for **the Most High God**. Zechariah also prophesied that John would **go before the Lord** as a herald **to prepare his ways**. It had been over 400 years since Malachi, the last prophet, had spoken to the Jewish people and promised a messenger would come to them who would prepare the way for the Lord (Mal. 3:1). As the Messiah's forerunner John would turn the hearts of the Jews back toward God and prepare them to meet their Redeemer (4:4-6). A new day was dawning, which would usher in the new covenant between God and humanity.

Verse 77. Zechariah next began to prophesy about the essence of the new covenant that would be proclaimed by John and would be accomplished through the work of the Messiah. John would **give** God's people (the Jews) **knowledge of salvation**. While the Jews of that day wanted salvation from their Roman oppressors, their greatest need was to experience deliverance from their slavery to sin and death. John would instruct them about repentance (turning away) from sin and about the true salvation that comes through **the forgiveness of their sins**.

The Greek word translated *forgiveness* can also be translated pardon or remission. It pictures a debt being canceled or dismissed and someone being released from his or her obligation. Human beings are powerless to do anything about our sin, which ultimately brings

condemnation and death. Even before humanity sinned in the garden of Eden, God had a plan for our salvation (Eph. 1:4). Through the Messiah, God would make it possible for our sin debt to be canceled. In experiencing salvation we would be pardoned—treated as if we had not sinned. ◀

5 ▶ Verse 78. Salvation is possible because of **our God’s merciful compassion**. *Mercy* is more than a feeling; it is tangible action to alleviate the affliction of others. God’s mercy is seen and proclaimed throughout the Old Testament as His kindness and goodness toward sinners. The Greek word for *compassion* literally means bowels or intestines, the innermost part of a person that was considered the center of emotions. Taken together, the two terms point to the depths of God’s concern for sinful humanity.

The exact meaning of **the dawn from on high** is debated, but it most likely refers to the coming of the Messiah. Jesus is the “light of the world” (John 8:12) who came down from heaven to accomplish the Father’s plan of salvation (6:38). Zechariah looked forward to the Messiah’s **visit**. This word pictures someone who shows up with the intention of helping, of bringing comfort and relief. This is what Jesus did as He ushered in God’s new covenant with humanity.

Verse 79. Zechariah again emphasized the light of God’s salvation, echoing the words of Isaiah 9:2 about how the Messiah would **shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death**. The word *darkness* is used here, and elsewhere in the Bible, as a metaphor for ignorance, captivity, and sin. To speak of those living in *the shadow of death* emphasizes fear, misery, and hopelessness.

The coming Messiah would break through the darkness and call people out of the shadow of death, offering freedom, hope, and life for those who by faith put their trust in Him. Zechariah noted the Messiah’s light would also **guide our feet into the way of peace**. A guide knows the way and will not get lost or take a wrong turn. The emphasis of the word *guide* is also on the one who removes any obstacles that hinder the goal. As sinners we were considered enemies of God. Through His sacrificial death on our behalf Jesus made it possible for us to have peace with God (Rom. 5:1; Col. 1:20). The word *peace* comes from a term meaning to join—peace occurs when we are rejoined or reconciled to God. When we have peace with God we experience harmony, wholeness, and security. This was made possible by Jesus the Messiah, the Prince of peace who promised His peace to all who through repentance and faith in Him experience the redemption He brings from sin (John 14:27). ◀

DISCUSS: Question #4
(PSG, p. 53): What does it mean to be forgiven of your sin?

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 5** to explain ...

- ... God’s merciful compassion.
- ... the dawn from on high.
- ... how the Messiah would shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death.
- ... how the Messiah’s light would guide our feet into the way of peace.

DISCUSS: Question #5
(PSG, p. 54): How have you experienced God’s merciful compassion?

(Alternate: How can we shine the light on those who live in darkness?)

DO: Encourage group members to take a few minutes to complete the activity **“Preparing the Way”** on **PSG page 54**.

LIVE IT OUT

**5 minutes****GUIDE:** Emphasize **The****Point: Jesus came to remove our sin.**

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 55)**; (see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Encourage group members to reflect on their experience of coming to know God's salvation. Remind them that just as John prepared the way for the coming of Jesus, we can be the instruments God uses to prepare the way for others to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus.

PRAY: "Father, thank You for Your salvation through Jesus. Help us to share this good news with others."

LIVE IT OUT

We are a people who love to fix things ourselves, but when it comes to sin, we can't do it. Thankfully, we don't have to because Jesus removed our sin for us. What will you do with that truth?

- ▶ **Stop using spiritual duct tape.** You might be able to "mask" your sin problem, but you can't fix it. Without Christ, you're lost. Accept the fact that you can't fix your sin problem, and ask Jesus to forgive you. If you need help with this step, look on the inside front cover of this book.
- ▶ **Live free from fear.** If worries or fears periodically arise, memorize Romans 8:38-39. Embed the truth in your mind that nothing you might fear can separate you from Christ and His love.
- ▶ **Share the truth.** You know others who are spiritually broken. Give them hope by sharing what you've learned in this study about the redemption Christ offers: freedom from defeat, fear, and sin.



BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR



To the left of the altar inside the Church of St. John the Baptist just outside of Jerusalem is the grotto (cave) that was part of the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth and where John was supposedly born.

Not since the time of the prophet Malachi had Judah heard the voice of God. But that was about to change.

Zechariah and Elizabeth seemingly made the perfect couple, seeing that they were both from priestly families: he from the division of Abijah, and she from the daughters of Aaron. Yet all was not perfect with their ideal family. For years they longed for a child but had not had one. Yet that too was about to change.

While first-century Jewish culture often associated the barrenness of a woman with sin, Luke 1:6 clearly indicates this was not the case for Zechariah and Elizabeth. Her barrenness was by God's design and was ultimately to be for God's glory. Her son was destined to

be the forerunner of the Messiah, thus the timing of his birth had to be in harmony with the timing of the Messiah's advent. Elizabeth's barrenness and the Lord's 400-year silence were both about to be broken simultaneously in one event, God's announcing the coming of the forerunner of the Messiah.

We can learn lessons from the experiences of Zechariah and Elizabeth. (1) Just because we start out life full of potential does not mean we will have a smooth ride. Zechariah and Elizabeth were considered the perfect couple until they wound up later in life with no children. (2) When things don't turn out the way we planned, we should continue to trust in the Lord. Even though their prayers for a child went unanswered, Zechariah and Elizabeth continued in their service to God. (3) Without our realizing it, God may be at work to provide for us a life beyond our dreams. Elizabeth and Zechariah never imagined their child would be the forerunner of the Messiah, but God's plan was exactly that. (4) God has the power to bring His plans to fruition, but we have to open our lives for Him to use us.

Some might say Zechariah just happened to be in the right place at the right time to receive God's blessing. But it's preferable to believe God blesses those who are faithfully serving Him.

The excerpt above is from the article "Zechariah and Elizabeth: A Silence Broken" (Winter 2007-2008), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

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COVENANT AS A BIBLICAL THEME

BY E. LEBRON MATTHEWS

A right relationship between God and humanity, what does that look like? Fortunately, the Bible reveals the answer. Likewise it describes acceptable relationships between people—the details of which were often outlined in covenants. Covenants were binding agreements that defined relationships, the ancient equivalents to legal contracts and international treaties. They, therefore, were ideal for communicating what God designates as appropriate human behavior in relationships. Although not always stated overtly in the Bible, the thread of covenant weaves its way from Genesis to Revelation. The Old and New Testaments are the old covenant God made at Sinai and the new covenant He made in Christ.

In the Old Testament

Two verbs dominate Old Testament references to covenants. The first is commonly rendered “make” and denotes creating a covenant. The Hebrew word literally means “to cut,” an allusion to the use of sacrifices in initiating covenants (see Gen. 15, “made” in verse 18 is this verb).¹ The second Hebrew verb is rendered “establish.” It literally means “to stand up.” It pertains to carrying out one’s obligations under a covenant (see Gen. 17:7, “confirm” is this verb).²

Genesis 6:18 contains the first biblical reference to covenants. Before the flood God promised Noah, “I will establish my covenant with you.”³ The language emphasizes God’s commitment to sustain the yet unstipulated covenant. After the flood God reaffirmed His commitment to this covenant (Gen. 9:9). At that time God specified all of Noah’s descendants and all surviving animal life were parties to this covenant. The rainbow became a sign of this covenant. It was a visual reminder God would never send another universal flood. God has kept His covenant agreement and not destroyed the entire planet by water. This covenant remains in effect. All subsequent events in history transpire within the context of this existing covenant.

The next significant biblical covenant was between Abraham and God. Sometime around the end of the third millennium BC, God summoned a man named Abram, whose family was from the Mesopotamian city of Ur.⁴ The covenant grew out of God’s mandate for Abram to leave everything and go to an unspecified location (12:1-3). Abram’s family previously migrated from Ur 600 miles northwest to Haran.⁵ In response to God’s calling, Abram moved to Canaan, which was an additional 400-plus miles to the southwest. Whereas the previous migration involved his father’s entire family, this move involved only Abram, his wife, and nephew. The scope of God’s pledge to Abram ranged from increasing his prodigy and reputation to the intangible idea of blessing. Later God promised to give Canaan to Abram’s descendants (13:14-17).

Years would pass before God entered into a formal covenant with Abram (15:18). The covenant sealed a relationship born out of a breathtaking expansion of God’s previous promises. God’s promise of a great nation became a promise of offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abram’s faith-filled response set the precedent (v. 6). Thereafter faith became essential for people to enter into a covenant relationship with God.

God initiated His covenant with Abram in a solemn rite involving the sacrifice of animals (vv. 9-11). This unique ceremony exposed another key component of biblical covenants. They were inaugurated with bloodshed. God’s commitments to Abram also took on new certainty. Previously God simply promised Abram certain blessings. Now the promise acquired the sense of a binding legal obligation. This new legal status emphasized the absolute certainty that God would fulfill His covenant obligations. Since a covenant was



From Ur’s Early Dynastic III period (about 2600–2500 BC), an electrotypic copy of gold dagger and an elaborate sheath. God instructed Abraham, “This is my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you, which you are to keep: Every one of your males must be circumcised” (Gen. 17:10, CSB).

a contract binding two parties together, with each having specific obligations, the guarantee of God's compliance stressed the need for human partners to fulfill their obligations as well.

When Abram was 99 years old, God again visited their covenant. In Genesis 15:18, the expression "the Lord made" denoted the beginning of the covenant relationship. In Genesis 17:2, God's statement "I will set up my covenant" concerned continuing the covenant. God imposed two significant modifications to the contract. These changes were reminders of each party's responsibility. First, Abram's name was changed to Abraham. Abram means "exalted father." Abraham means "father of a multitude." So Abraham's name became a reminder of God's commitment to His promise that Abram's descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Second, circumcision became the sign of this covenant for Abraham and for subsequent generations. It was a physical reminder to each individual that he was to comply personally with the covenant's terms.

Centuries after Abraham's death, his descendants were slaves in Egypt. God sent a fugitive felon named Moses to accomplish their emancipation. Moses' first effort appeared to be a disaster. God assured Moses, however, that He would keep His covenant obligation to give His people the land of Canaan. Furthermore, God stated that henceforth He would be worshiped by the name Yahweh (Ex. 6:2-8). Thereafter the name Yahweh (commonly rendered "the Lord" in English translations of the Old Testament) would remind God's people of their covenant with Him.⁶

God's giving the Law at Mount Sinai (19:1–24:18) marked the next phase of His covenant relationship with humanity. In one sense, the Sinai covenant merely transferred God's covenant with Abraham to the latest generation of his descendants. Yet the covenant took on fresh implications with an expanded emphasis on human responsibility. The Ten Commandments were a delineation of Israel's covenant obligations. A series of case laws follows, setting forth real-life applications of these terms (20:22–23:33).

During the next 860 years, Israel demonstrated an inability to comply with the terms of the covenant. Periodically, spiritual revivals produced temporary covenant renewal. Josiah led the greatest revival and covenant renewal in Israel's history (2 Kings 23:1-25; 2 Chron. 34:14–35:19). The roots of sin, though, had been firmly established among the people through the preceding generations. After Josiah's death, the people abandoned the reforms and returned to unfaithfulness and idolatry. Covenant renewal failed to turn the tide of sin.⁷

Thereafter the prophet Jeremiah declared God would institute a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-40). Through this new covenant, God would radically change people's hearts. He would both forgive and forget their sin. Rather than being based in the Law, the new covenant would be based on



Overlooking Anathoth, which is about three miles northeast of Jerusalem. Anathoth was Jeremiah's hometown.

participants enjoying an intimate fellowship with God through faith. This intimate relationship would be available to all—regardless of their status in society. This “relationship with the Lord of the covenant by faith [was] the goal of all the earlier covenants”⁸

In the New Testament

Hebrews 8:6-12 describes Christ as “the mediator of a better covenant.” The passage quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 in its entirety, the longest Old Testament quotation in the New Testament. Zechariah prophesied that the birth of John the Baptist was part of God fulfilling His promises to Abraham (Luke 1:72-73). Mary, Jesus’ mother, celebrated that the coming Savior was a fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham (vv. 46-55). Early Christians clearly associated Christ with Abraham’s covenant (Acts 3:25) and with Jeremiah’s new covenant (Rom. 11:27; 2 Cor. 3:6).

Previous covenants had been inaugurated through bloodshed. This new covenant is no different. During the Last Supper Jesus took a cup and said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”⁹ His words clearly alluded to Jeremiah’s prophecy.

First Peter 2:9-10 echoes Exodus 19:5-6a, with some alteration. Peter’s words show how Jeremiah’s words of a new covenant written on people’s hearts and granting forgiveness had become a reality in Christ.

A distinction between the two covenants lies in the relationship between the people. The people at Sinai largely were descendants of Abraham. The majority of individuals in the new covenant do not share a common ethnic background. The only characteristic they share in common is faith in Christ. “Despite their differences, the divine covenants exhibit a structural and thematic unity.”¹⁰ Each relates God’s revelation of Himself and His desire for an intimate relationship. Likewise each covenant calls for godly behavior. Ultimately such conduct is the natural outgrowth of faith in Christ. 🕯

1. Eugene Carpenter, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [NIDOTTE], gen. ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:729; Elmer B. Smick, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [THWDBK], ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:457.

2. Elmer A. Martens, NIDOTTE, 3:902-904.

3. All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

4. Joel F. Drinkard, Jr. and E. Ray Clendenen, “Chronology of the Biblical Period” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [HIBD], gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 293.

5. Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, vol. 1B in *The New American Commentary* [NAC] (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 91.

6. Brad Creed, “Names of God” in *HIBD*, 1172.

7. F. B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16 in NAC (Broadman Press, 1993), 280.

8. *Ibid.*, 285.

9. Matthew 26:28; see Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25.

10. Steven B. Cowan, “Covenant” in *HIBD*, 358.



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