

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## Part 20 – The New Covenant and Baptism

### Key Questions:

- What is the relationship Christians have with God like? Do Christians have to follow the Old Testament Law?

### A Reminder of the Old Covenant

The Bible tells us that God wants to have a real relationship with people. His relationships are always based on promises, and He can always be trusted to do the things He has promised. God's main aim throughout history has been to **have a people who will live in the place He has prepared for them under His rule enjoying His blessings** (throughout these studies we have defined the Kingdom of God in these terms). The way God has done this has been through **covenants**, which are special agreements with a group of people based on promises. The first covenant mentioned in the Bible was in the time of Noah, when God promised that He would never again destroy the whole earth in a flood. In Genesis chapter 9 we read how God made this covenant with every living creature, including all mankind, and how He gave the rainbow as a sign to mark it. The second covenant in the Old Testament (from which the Old Testament takes its name) was the basis of God's special relationship with the nation of Israel. The sign of this covenant was that all male Israelites would be circumcised. This "Old Covenant" was given in three stages:

1. **Abraham** (c. 2000 BC) – God gave three promises to Abraham, who was the fore-father of the nation of Israel.
  - a. That his descendants would possess the land of Canaan (Palestine)
  - b. That he would have many descendants who would be a great nation
  - c. That all nations on earth would be blessed through his descendants
2. **Moses** (c. 1440 BC) – the nation of Israel received the Law of God, which showed them three things:
  - a. *Moral laws* – showing them what is right and wrong
  - b. *Ceremonial laws* – rules about how to worship God by making sacrifices
  - c. *Civil laws* – rules about how to govern the nation of Israel
3. **King David** (c. 1000 BC) – God added an additional promise, that David's family would be kings for ever.

For their part, the nation of Israel had to respond to the Covenant in faith and obedience. The Old Testament is the story of how sometimes they did this and at other times they did not.

### The Old Covenant fulfilled in Jesus

The Old Covenant was fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah:

1. **He was the descendant of Abraham who brings blessing to people of all nations**
2. **He fulfilled the Law of Moses**
  - a. He was perfect and sinless, keeping the moral laws
  - b. He was the one sacrifice for sins forever, fulfilling the ceremonial laws
3. **He was the descendant of David who will be a King forever**

As a result, followers of Jesus have a different kind of relationship with the Law than Israel had:

- a. *Moral laws* – the standard of right and wrong has not changed, as it is based on God's unchanging character, but Christians do not try to become holy by obeying a written set of rules. Instead we have a new power inside that enables us to do what is right and to avoid wrong (see below).
- b. *Ceremonial laws* – we no longer need to make sacrifices to worship God, as Jesus died as our perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 9:11-28) and Christians no longer need to be circumcised or to avoid certain foods. These laws were signs pointing forward to Jesus and now that He has come they are no longer needed.
- c. *Civil laws* – these laws were intended specially for the nation of Israel. Christians must be good citizens of whatever State they live in (see *Part 22* for more about how Christians view citizenship).

### The New Covenant promised and established

#### Jeremiah's vision of a New Covenant

In around 600 BC, God gave a vision to the prophet Jeremiah. He fore-saw a day when a new relationship with God would be possible – a New Covenant. He wrote about this in Jeremiah 31:31-34. This New Covenant would not be like the Old Covenant which the people of Israel had broken (verse 32), but under it:

1. God's Laws would be written on the minds and hearts of His people (verse 33a)
2. God would be their God and all of His people would know Him in a personal way (verses 33b-34a)
3. God will forgive their wickedness and never again remember their sins (verse 34b)

#### Jesus instituted the New Covenant, which is sealed with His blood

Jesus spoke about this New Covenant on the night before His death when He shared His last meal with His disciples. He spoke about a cup of wine as "*the token of God's new covenant to save you – an agreement sealed with the blood I will pour out for you*" (Luke 22:20). Jesus was claiming that the New Covenant promised 600 years earlier by Jeremiah was about to begin, and that it would be established because of His death on the cross.

### Jesus fulfilled the New Covenant as its High Priest, Sacrifice and Mediator

The book of Hebrews takes up the theme of the New Covenant. It was written to Jewish people who were deciding whether to follow Jesus or to stay in the Jewish religion. The writer compares the Old Covenant with the New Covenant. In Hebrews 8:10-12 he quotes from Jeremiah chapter 31. The letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus as:

- i. **The High Priest of the New Covenant** – Jesus is the One who made the sacrifice for sins that makes it possible for them to be forgiven (Hebrews 8:1-6). Jesus is a better High Priest than the High Priests in the Old Testament, because He is actually present in heaven before God, and is alive forever to save us.
- ii. **The sacrifice of the New Covenant** – Jesus was also the sacrifice that was made to bring the New Covenant into place. He offered Himself up as a sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 9:11-14). Jesus was the perfect sacrifice that paid for all sins once for all because He was sinless and He was both God and man.
- iii. **The mediator of the New Covenant** – A mediator is a person who brings two people together. Jesus brings us into a new relationship with God on the terms of the New Covenant (Hebrews 9:15, 24-28). He is alive forever to ensure that this relationship lasts, and He will come again in the future to take us to live with God.

### The promises of the New Covenant for Christians

Christians have an amazing new relationship with God, all because of Jesus' death for us and because He lives forever to bring us to God. This Covenant depends on God's promises to us and what He has done for us, not what we have done for Him. In Christ, the three promises of the New Covenant are true for every Christian:

1. **God's laws in our minds and hearts** – This promise speaks of the work of the **Holy Spirit** in our lives. He changes us from the inside out (rather than us trying to change ourselves from the outside). He makes our minds more like Jesus' mind so that we begin to think more like Him, and He makes our hearts more like Jesus' heart so that we begin to desire the things God wants. This is the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. So, instead of trying to keep a set of written standards like the Old Testament Law in our own power, Christians seek to be filled by and led by the Holy Spirit who gives us power to obey the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.
2. **All people will know God personally** – All Christians can know God in a personal way as our Father. Unlike the people of Israel in the Old Testament, we do not need priests to stand between God and us. Instead, we can come into God's presence through Jesus. So, when Christians pray we are promised that God will hear us, and will answer our prayers in the way that He sees to be best. As Christians we have a personal, living relationship with God.
3. **Our wickedness forgiven and our sins never remembered again** – Because Jesus has taken the punishment for our sins and paid the price for their forgiveness, we can never be found guilty of our sins or punished for them. We are declared not guilty before God because of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

### The sign of the New Covenant – the Lord's Supper (also known as "communion" or "breaking of bread")

Every covenant has a sign to remind the people with whom it is made about the promises God has given them, and the sign of the New Covenant is the Lord's Supper, which is celebrated regularly by most Christians (in some churches every week and in others once per month or once every three months). The celebration is based on Jesus' command to his twelve disciples in Luke 22:19-20. After He ate the Passover meal with them on the night before His death, Jesus took bread and wine and shared it with them. He told them to do this in remembrance of Him. The bread represents His body, given for us (in other words His death on the cross), and the cup of wine represents the New Covenant sealed by His blood shed for us. Christ Himself is the sacrifice that sealed the New Covenant.

In I Corinthians 11:23-34, Paul taught the church in Corinth about the Lord's Supper. He explained how important it is because Christians will celebrate it only until Jesus comes again and until then it announces Jesus' death as our hope (verse 26). When Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper they should examine themselves to make sure they are living closely with God and in a good relationship with other Christians. The Lord's Supper reminds us that our faith is only in Christ, that His death is our only hope of salvation, and that we need to keep living in obedience to Him.

## Water Baptism

The Lord's Supper is one of only two things (sometimes called "ordinances") that Jesus specifically commanded Christians to do (in addition to loving one another!) The other is baptism in water. Baptism was practised by John the Baptist as a sign that the people who he baptised had repented of their sins and wanted to follow God's ways. Jesus told His disciples that they should baptise all new Christians (see Matthew 28:19), and in the book of Acts this was exactly what they did (see Acts 2:41 for example). Every new Christian was baptised in the "*name of*" Jesus (meaning in His authority – showing that He is now their Lord) and the Father and the Holy Spirit. Different churches have different views about baptism (especially whether babies of Christians can be baptised and whether the person should be immersed in water or sprinkled with it), but this author believes that only the baptism of people who have personally believed by immersion fulfils the biblical pattern.

Baptism is a very powerful picture of what God has done in a person's life (see Romans 6:3-14 for Paul's teaching on this):

- a) **Going under the water is like dying with Jesus** – the person has become a true follower of Jesus, taking up their cross to follow Him (Matthew 18:24-26). They have died to their own selfish ambition and have accepted Jesus as their Lord, promising to follow Him always. Their sins have been forgiven because of the death of Jesus.
- b) **Coming up out of the water is like being raised to new life with Jesus** – the Christian has entered into a new, living relationship with God. The Holy Spirit has come to live in their life to give them power to live for God, making them spiritually alive. From now on they will live for Jesus, making obedience to Him their first priority.

Although baptism is not necessary for a person to become a Christian, and it is only an outward sign of the spiritual reality of what God has done, it is expected by Jesus as an act of obedience and a sign to the whole world that the person now belongs to Him. Christians are only baptised once. If you are a Christian, why not be baptised?

### Key Lesson: Christians receive the promises of the New Covenant through Jesus

Jesus made a New Covenant with those who trust in Him – through it our sins are forgiven forever, we know God personally, and God changes us by the Holy Spirit who lives in us. There are two things Jesus commanded Christians to do: baptism (a once off witness to Christ) and the Lord's Supper (a regular way to remember Jesus).