

The New Covenant

The New Covenant is the final and fullest expression of God's wonderful character. The phrase "***New Covenant***" is found in Jeremiah 31:31, Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:14, Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25, 2 Corinthians 3:6, Hebrews 8:8, 8:10, 9:15 and 12:24.

The King James Version of the Bible translates the Greek word "diatheke" as "***covenant***" in some of these verses and as "***testament***" in others. As a result, someone may imagine wrongly the written New Testament relates only to one covenant – the New Covenant. But the truth is the written *New Testament* refers *primarily* to the *New Covenant* but also contains verses or passages which relate to the *Abrahamic*, *Davidic* and *Old Covenants*.

The New Covenant was prophesied hundreds of years beforehand

The prophet Jeremiah prophesied the New Covenant after the Judeans had been conquered and taken captive to Babylon (see Jeremiah 30:1-31:34). Their capital city Jerusalem had been captured and their Temple destroyed (2 Kings 24:13-25:13). During this time in Exile, the Judeans wondered if their terrible sin had at last caused God to cancel the covenant promises He made to Abraham and David.

God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah in Jeremiah 23:1-8 and chapters 30 to 34, telling the people He would honour the covenants He made with Abraham and David despite their wickedness.

The people of Judah and the ten northern tribes of Israel had been punished by God according to their continued unfaithfulness to the terms and conditions of the Mosaic Covenant (see 2 Kings 17:5-23, Jeremiah 9:13-16 and 16:11-13). But as Jeremiah Chapters 30 to 34 show, God refused to break the unconditional aspects of the covenants He made previously with Abraham and David.

Note the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants had certain aspects which extended to all the nations on Earth and not just to the twelve tribes of Israel. For example, Jesus Christ was prophesied to rule *all* of the people on Earth as the God-appointed eternal King occupying David's throne. At the same time as promising not break the unconditional aspects of His promises to Abraham and David, God promised through Jeremiah what He called the "***New Covenant***". In Jeremiah 31:31-34, God promised to replace the Mosaic Covenant with His New Covenant. Also He pledged that people living under the New Covenant would have their sins forgiven, have His laws written on their hearts and minds and know Him closely. Isaiah 59:16-21, 61:8, Ezekiel 11:19-20, 36:25-28, 37:15-28, Hosea 2:18-23 and Malachi 3:1-4 are other prophecies relating to the New Covenant.

Main features of the New Covenant

The following is a summary of the main characteristics of the New Covenant:

- The mediator of the New Covenant is Jesus Christ (see Hebrews 9:15). A mediator is someone who is a *go-between* for two parties who have had an extremely bad relationship. The mediator aims to reconcile these two separated parties, working on both of their behalf's.
- Hebrews 7:22 speaks of *Jesus* being the *surety* or *guarantee* of the New Covenant. He is our *warrantee* from God. The word “*surety*” used on Hebrews 7:22 in Greek is “*enguos*” which means “*bail*”. ¹ Bail here refers to the guarantee given to a court of law on behalf of a person charged with severe crimes. Jesus was the *bail* given to God the Supreme Ruler and Judge as a guarantee for humans who were found guilty of terrible crimes against God.
- The New Covenant is based totally on the unmerited grace of God manifested through Jesus' death. Hebrew 9:15 states: “*And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.*” See also 1 Corinthians 11:25-26.
- The New Covenant is an *everlasting* covenant as Hebrews 13:20 reveals: “*Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant.*” In the Greek, the word “*everlasting*” here is a form of the word “*aionios*” which means “*eternal, without end*”. ² The New Covenant is everlasting in the sense the people who participate in it will have its promises applying to them forever. For example, their sins will be forgiven forever and they will be God's adopted children and exclusive possessions eternally.
- It is an *unconditional* covenant in the sense God promised to bring it into being regardless of the opposition of humans.
- It is a *conditional* covenant in the sense it is only those humans who have trusting faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who have accompanying repentance who will receive its promised eternal benefits.

The New Covenant and the Kingdom of God

It is very important that we as New Covenant believers see our relationship to God in *covenantal* terms. But we must balance this out by seeing our relationship to Him also in terms of the *Kingdom of God*. He is our King or Supreme Ruler. The New Covenant is one aspect of the Kingdom of God.

Two wrong extremes

There are two opposite, wrong common views about the relationships between the Mosaic and New Covenants:

The first view suggests that the New Covenant *is not really a new covenant* but instead *is just a renewed covenant*. In this view, the Old Covenant is not replaced but is merely figuratively “*given a fresh coat of paint*”.

¹ Vine, page 612.

² Bauer, page 28.

We can argue that the New Covenant is renewed in the sense it fulfils some aspects of the Mosaic as well as the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants. Refer to Chapter “The New fulfils parts of other older covenants” for more details.

But to argue the New Covenant is not totally brand new in some respects, is contrary to Jeremiah 31:31-32: **“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke...”** God here emphasises that the New Covenant would be **“not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers...”** – the Mosaic Covenant.

Also note the Hebrew word “hadas” which is translated **“new”** in Jeremiah 31:31, can mean “new” or “renewed”.³ In Ezekiel 36:26, “hadas” means “renewed”. But in Exodus 1:8, Deuteronomy 24:5 and 32:17, “hadas” means “brand new” and not “renewed”.

The Septuagint Greek translation of Jeremiah 31:31 uses the word “kainos” and not “neos”. So someone may argue, “the word ‘kainos’ means ‘renewed’ and ‘neos’ means ‘brand new’”. Hebrews 8:8, 8:13 and 9:15 use the word ‘kainos’ in relation to the New Covenant.” But note Hebrews 12:24 uses the word “neos” in relation to the New Covenant. Also it is debatable whether “kainos” always means “renewed” and never “new” in Greek. So it is very questionable to use the Hebrew word “hadas” and the Greek word “kainos” to try to prove the New Covenant is merely a totally renewed covenant.

Hebrews 8:7-8 records God found fault with the Mosaic Covenant. The Bible does not say the New Covenant has any faults. When comparing the Old and New Covenants, Hebrews 8:6 says the New is a **“better covenant”** and is founded on **“better promises”**. The New is not just like an old house with a fresh coat of paint.

The second generation of Israelites who left Egypt under Moses and the exiles returning from Babylon experienced a renewal of the Mosaic Covenant (see Deuteronomy 29:1-30:20 and Nehemiah 9:1-10:39). New Covenant believers experience much more than did these two groups.

The second wrong view teaches that the Old and New Covenants are totally opposed and have nothing in common.

The superiority of the New Covenant over the Mosaic

Romans 7:6, 2 Corinthians 3:6-11 and Hebrews 7:11-10:18 reveal there are *big differences* between Mosaic and New Covenants. This is even though the Mosaic and New Covenants are not different in all ways. For example, the Mosaic and New Covenants both emphasise God’s grace, His mercy, Him loving His people and them loving Him.

Hebrews 8:6-9 and 13 reveal how superior the New Covenant is to the Mosaic Covenant: **“But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to**

³ Vine, page 160.

the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt...In that He says, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."

These verses say the New Covenant is *based on better promises* than the Mosaic Covenant. This does not mean God found He made a mistake in initiating the Old Covenant. Instead it refers to the fact God knew the weaknesses of the Old Covenant when He began it and planned it as a *preparation* for His better New Covenant.

One of the weaknesses of the Mosaic Covenant related to its animal sacrifices. Hebrews 10:1-4 shows it was impossible for the animal blood sacrifices of the Mosaic Covenant to take away sins: *"For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshippers, once purged, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins."*

In Hebrews 10:11-12 and 14, we can see the great difference between the lack of effectiveness of the millions and millions of blood sacrifices of the Old Covenant and what Jesus achieved through His death: *"And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God...For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified."*

Hebrews 9:11-15 expresses how the imperfect Mosaic priestly sacrifice system has been replaced by a perfect High Priest – Jesus Christ – Who was also the perfect blood sacrifice for the sins of others.

The New Covenant is better than the Old also because only the New provided humans with a manifestation of God the Son in the flesh. It was a marvellous thing for humans to observe God in the physical realm for 33 years.

The Old Covenant related to the nation of Israel and to those non-Israelites who chose to attach themselves to this nation (see Exodus 19:1-6, Leviticus 17:8, 17:10, 17:13 and 22:18). Deuteronomy 23:3-4 and 7-8 show the Mosaic Covenant had certain limitations on which nationalities could enter it for specified numbers of generations after Moses' time.

In addition, the Old Covenant did not command Israelites to work actively towards the conversion of non-Israelites, whereas the New Covenant instructs us to share the Gospel with all nations (see Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15). Galatians 3:28 indicates that under the New Covenant, Israelites and non-Israelites are treated equally in Jesus Christ.

A major difference between the New and Mosaic Covenants

There is a major difference between the New and Mosaic Covenants which can be easily missed by those studying the Bible. The difference is that all those who are under the New Covenant are saved, whereas only some of those who were under the Mosaic Covenant were saved.

All circumcised Israelite males and all Israelite females were under the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants (see Genesis 17:9-14, Leviticus 12:3 and Deuteronomy 29:1). But not all of the Israelites were saved (see Romans 2:28-29 and 9:6). Jesus and John the Baptist told many

Jews who were under the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants that they were unsaved (see Matthew 3:7-12, 8:10-12, 23:1-33, Luke 3:7-9, 11:52-53, 13:1-5, 18:9-14 and John 8:37-47).

More emphasis on unmerited grace in the New Covenant

The New Covenant was the high point in the revelation of God's grace. Throughout the New Testament, there are wonderful expressions such as "*exceeding riches of His grace*" (see Ephesians 2:7), "*abundance of grace*" (see Romans 5:17), "*grace abounded*" (see Romans 5:20), "*exceeding grace of God in you*" (see 2 Corinthians 9:14) and "*the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant*" (see 1 Timothy 1:14). Such expressions are not found in the Mosaic Law. In the Law of Moses, the mercy and grace of God are mentioned (see Exodus 20:6, 22:27, 25:17-22, 33:19, 34:6-7, 37:6-9, Numbers 6:25, Deuteronomy 4:31, 5:10, 7:9, 7:12 and 13:17), but not nearly as much as under the New Covenant.

In John 1:14 and 16-17, the Apostle John taught that the New Covenant through Jesus Christ has *more emphasis* on *God's grace* than did the Old Covenant through Moses. John 1:14 states: "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*" In verse 14, John declares Jesus Christ – the living Word – was "*full of grace*". In the Greek New Testament, the word "*full*" in this phrase is "*pleres*". In this context, "*pleres*" means "full of, abounding in, wholly occupied with, completely under the influence of..."⁴ Therefore, Jesus Christ is a complete expression of God's unmerited grace. There is no grace lacking in Christ. He is a *perfect manifestation of grace*.

In John 1:16, John says: "*For of His fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace.*" In Greek, the word "*fulness*" in this verse is a form of the word "*pleroma*". "*Pleroma*" is derived from the word "*pleres*" which was mentioned above. In John 1:16, "*pleroma*" means "sum total, fulness, even (super) abundance".⁵ So believers have received from the fullness or abundance of God's grace in Christ. This superabundant grace was manifested through the New Covenant which Christ instituted.

Also note John said "*we have all received*" of the abundance of grace in Christ. In context, John is referring to all believers who received Him (see John 1:12-13). So it is not just some special select group of believers who have received of the superabundance of Christ's unmerited grace. *All believers* have received this.

In John 1:16, John teaches that all believers in Christ have received "*grace for grace*" (N.K.J.V.) or "*grace upon grace*" (N.A.S.B.). In Greek, the two usages here of the word "*grace*" are forms of the word "*charis*" which in this verse means "free favor, free gift, grace"⁶ or "that which is given freely and generously".⁷

Vine argues that the phrase "*grace for grace*" in John 1:16 means "that grace we receive corresponds to the grace inherent in Christ, out of whose fullness we receive it".⁸ Bauer

⁴ Perschbacher, page 332.

⁵ Bauer, page 672.

⁶ Perschbacher, page 436.

⁷ Louw and Nida, page 569.

⁸ Vine, page 696.

says “*grace for grace*” in this verse means “grace after or upon grace (i.e. grace pours forth in ever new streams)”.⁹

In John 1:17, John states: “*For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*” In this verse, John contrasts the Mosaic and New Covenants. The Mosaic Covenant had a strong emphasis on God’s grace. But the New Covenant was such a superabundant manifestation of His grace that the Mosaic Covenant is seen as *less gracious* by comparison. As John reveals, the covenant given through Moses was *Law-centred*. Being Law-centred, the Mosaic Covenant had much more emphasis on deserved rewards.

John 1:17 contains a relative comparison. When this verse says: “*law was given through Moses*”, John did not mean Jesus began a covenant of lawlessness. The New Covenant declares that lawlessness is sin and evil (see 1 John 3:4, Matthew 7:21-23, 13:37-43 and Titus 2:14). Also, the New Covenant contains commands and laws (see 1 Corinthians 7:19, 9:21, Galatians 6:2 and 2 Thessalonians 3:10).

Also, when John says “*grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*”, John did not mean the Mosaic Covenant was a truth-less and grace-less covenant. For just as the Mosaic Covenant contained God’s truth (see Psalm 119:142, 119:151 and Romans 2:20), so to did it manifest much of His grace. So John did not mean God’s grace and truth were only expressed in the New Covenant.

But by comparison, the New Covenant has far more emphasis on unmerited grace and less emphasis on merited rewards than the Mosaic Covenant. This is just as the New Covenant has a greater revelation of God’s truth than the Old. Jesus Christ is the truth (see John 14:6). He was revealed far more under the New than the Old.

The fullest manifestation of God’s gracious merciful character

The New Covenant is by far the *fullest* expression of God’s gracious merciful character in that it is only specific covenant in which all believers:

- can have the Lord Jesus Christ by His Spirit living inside them in permanent spiritual union with themselves. Colossians 1:27 and Galatians 2:20 relate to this. Colossians 1:27 says: “*To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this ministry among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” Numbers 11:25-29 shows that many or most believers under the Old Covenant did not have the Holy Spirit.
- can have God’s laws put in their minds and written on their hearts (see Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 8:8-10 and 10:16). This is done in a deeper sense than it was on the consciences of unbelievers.
- can know Jesus Christ intimately (see Philippians 3:8-10).
- and may have total authority in Christ over all demons and Satan himself (see Mark 16:17, Luke 10:19 and Ephesians 2:6).

These are just some of the superior features of the New Covenant when compared to all other specific covenants.

⁹ Bauer, page 73.

An example of misunderstanding the differences

Throughout the history of the church, there have been many leaders who have had various false understandings of the differences between the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant. Jerome (347-419 A.D.) is one example. Using the phrase “the Gospel” to refer to the New Covenant and the expression “works of law” to mean the Mosaic Covenant, Jerome tried to justify his unbiblical teaching that virginity and celibacy are more godly spiritual states than marriage: *“Again, when explaining the witness of the apostle to the Galatians, ‘By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified,’ I have spoken to the following effect: ‘Marriages also are works of the law. And for this reason there is a curse upon such as do not produce offspring. They are permitted, it is true, even under the Gospel; but it is one thing to concede an indulgence to what is a weakness and quite another to promise a reward to what is a virtue.’ See my express declaration that marriage is allowed in the Gospel, yet that those who are married cannot receive the rewards of chastity so long as they render their due one to another. If married men feel indignant at this statement, let them vent their anger not on me but on the Holy Scriptures; nay, more, upon all bishops, presbyters, and deacons, and the whole company of priests and levites, who know that they cannot offer sacrifices if they fulfil the obligations of marriage.*

*Again, when I adduce evidence from the Apocalypse, is it not clear what view I take concerning virgins, widows, and wives? ‘These are they who sing a new song which no man can sing except he be a virgin. These are “the first fruits unto God and unto the Lamb”, and they are without spot. If virgins are the first fruits unto God, then widows and wives who live in continence must come after the first fruits – that is to say, in the second place and in the third’. We place widows, then, and wives in the second place and in the third, and for this we are charged by the frenzy of a heretic with condemning marriage altogether.”*¹⁰

Results of a false comparison between the Old and New Covenants

Many modern Christians have a false understanding of the differences between the Mosaic and New Covenants. They:

- falsely believe an emphasis on obedience to God’s Word and His Spirit’s guidance are a legalistic expression of Old Covenant thinking. This is contrary to Matthew 28:20, John 14:21, 15:10, 1 Corinthians 7:19, 14:37, 1 Peter 1:14 and 1 John 3:22.
- falsely believe God does not send judgement on unbelievers in New Testament times. This is contrary to Acts 12:20-23 and 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16. In addition, the supposedly “hard judgemental” God of the Old Covenant is believed to have been replaced by a “Santa Claus” type of “God” or a *grandfather* type of “God” who gives lollies and chocolate but never disciplines believers. This is contrary to 1 Corinthians 11:32, Hebrews 12:5-11 and Revelation 3:19.
- change the New Covenant teaching of grace into a perverted abused grace, which merely covers sin but does not stress the availability of the Holy Spirit’s unlimited power to enable them to resist known sin. Likewise, they alter the New Testament concept of “faith” and “believing” into “easy believism”. Easy believism is a hypocritical type of faith that does not include surrender to the Person our faith is supposedly in. Also easy believism falsely

¹⁰ Jerome, “Letter 48”, 10.

claims we can be converted to Christ without repenting in our hearts of our known sins. This is contrary to Acts 2:38, 3:19 (taken together with 3:26), 20:21 and 26:20.

- are deceived into thinking that God's moral standards for daily living are lower and more compromised under the New Covenant because of this covenant's greater emphasis on grace than the Old. This is contrary to verses like Matthew 5:21-32.

The full revelation of Christ and the Gospel through the New Covenant

Ephesians 3:2-9, Colossians 1:25-27 and 1 Peter 1:10-12 show that the full revelation of Jesus Christ and of the Gospel occurred at the beginning of the present New Covenant dispensation. In Mosaic Covenant times, the prophets and other believers did not understand that under the New Covenant, believers would have the Christ living within them (see Colossians 1:25-27). Nor did they realise that the Gentiles – non-Israelites – would be so fully and equally included with Israelites in the undeserved benefits of God's grace (see Ephesians 3:4-6).

The Mosaic Covenant had provision within it for non-Israelites to enter a relationship with God (see Deuteronomy 23:7-8) but there were limitations on this in relation to Moabites and Ammonites (see Deuteronomy 23:3-4).¹¹ The Old Testament prophets predicted the fuller inclusion of non-Israelites into God's people under the New Covenant (see Amos 9:11-12, Hosea 1:10, 2:23, Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6). But few Israelites understood this.

Romans 1:1-2 records how the Gospel was promised through the Old Testament prophets: *"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures."* As stated earlier, Galatians 3:8 states God spoke elements of the Gospel to Abraham. Hebrews 4:2 demonstrates God revealed the Gospel in seed form to the people of Israel living in Moses' time: *"For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it."*

The Gospel has been progressively revealed more and more from its most basically expressed form in Genesis 3:15 till its fullest expression through the New Testament writings of Paul, Peter, John and other God-inspired authors.

Bible Study Questions

1. Does the written New Testament relate only to one covenant – the New Covenant? Why?
2. Explain the Biblical historical background of Jeremiah's prophecy of a New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34.
3. What is a mediator?
4. Who is the mediator of God's New Covenant?
5. What does Hebrews 7:22 mean when it says Jesus is the surety or guarantee of the New Covenant?
6. Explain why Hebrews 13:20 states the New Covenant is an *"everlasting covenant"*.
7. Why is it wrong to regard the New Covenant as just some type of renewed covenant?

¹¹ The Book of Ruth, however, shows how God later allowed Moabites such as Ruth to become a part of the Lord's people. Ruth became an ancestor of Jesus Christ (see Ruth 4:18-22 and Matthew 1:5-16).

8. Explain why the New Covenant is superior to the Mosaic Covenant.
9. Was every person under the Mosaic Covenant eternally saved by God?
10. What expressions in the New Testament reveal that there is more emphasis in the New Covenant on God's unmerited grace than under the Mosaic Covenant?
11. What are some specific features of the New Covenant which are not found in God's other covenants?
12. What are the results of the false comparison which many modern Christians make between the Mosaic and New Covenants?
13. Which verses prove that the Gospel was revealed in seed form in Old Testament times?
14. Which verses show that the full revelation of Jesus Christ and the Gospel occurred at the beginning of the present New Covenant dispensation?