

# What is a covenant?

When the Bible mentions a covenant, it's referring to a **strong, solemn agreement between two parties**. It is very important to notice that biblical covenants are very different from the kinds of contracts we are familiar with:

**1. Covenants make two into one.** When two parties make a covenant in the Bible, they are joined together and identified with each other.

- They may exchange coats (1 Sa 18:3–4),
- have a commemorative meal (Ex 24:11),
- Or set up a long-lasting memorial to their promise (Gn 31:46).
- At every covenant's core, there is a change in relationship.

**2. Covenants involve promises.** People don't just join together at random: the agreement usually includes some kind of practical application.

- Sometimes it means not harming one another (Gn 31:50).
- Sometimes it means protecting one another (1 Sa 20).
- Sometimes it means agreeing not to obliterate a weaker people group (Jos 9:15).
- In some cases, it can have everlasting consequences—we'll get to those later.

**3. Covenants involve families and bloodlines.** In the Bible, two parties may make a covenant that is intended to last for generations.

- The following generations are automatically included in the covenant, and they share in the duties and benefits.
- For example, David made a covenant with his friend Jonathan, but after Jonathan died, he still cared for Jonathan's relative, Mephibosheth (2 Sa 9:7).

**4. Covenants are spiritually charged.** When Jacob and Laban agree to keep the peace, they don't just say, "I'll do this, you'll do that. OK?" They call God as witness (Gn 31:50).

- David and Jonathan call God as witness between them, too (1 Sa 20:17).
- Covenants are taken seriously, and for good reason: two people are joining together based on little more than their words.
- They trust a divine being to hold them accountable, which means . . .

**5. Covenants are not easily broken.** The people making covenants often slaughter animals to demonstrate what should happen to the one who breaks the covenant.

- To break a covenant is a serious thing.

- Jonathan calls on God to kill him if he does not alert David of danger (1 Sa 20:13).
- When Saul breaks a covenant his forefathers swore to the Gibeonites, God punishes Israel with a three-year famine (2 Sa 21:1–2).

**When the Bible speaks of covenant, it's usually more than just an alliance, and certainly more than a transaction of goods and services: it's a bond that God Himself holds people to.**

## **2 main kinds of covenant in the Bible**

There are two main kinds of covenants in the Bible:

### **1. Covenants between man and man.**

They tie families together, they make new families, and they define relationships between entire people groups.

#### **Examples:**

1. Abraham and Abimelech (Gn 21:22–34),
2. Jacob and Laban (Gn 31),
3. David and Jonathan (1 Sa 18:1–5; 20),
4. and marriage (Gn 2:22–24; Mal 2:14).

### **2. Covenants between God and man.**

These are the really important ones—the ones that shape the story of the Bible.

#### **A few things make these covenants especially special:**

- God is His own witness. When a man swears an oath, he swears by something higher than himself. God doesn't have that option (Heb 6:13).
- Some of God's covenants are completely unconditional: they're not sustained by human performance.
- When God makes His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, He doesn't require anything from Abraham.
- His covenant with David was unconditional as well (1 Chr 17).

Much of the Bible's story is shaped around the covenants between God and man. In fact, the **Old Testament** and the **New Testament** are named this way because they detail two major covenants between God and His people.