

## Kings & Prophets: What Makes New Covenant New

Story Series | Jonathan K. Dodson | 2013

Last week, in the exodus story, we observed that *we are rescued to be sent*. God rescues Israel from Egypt and sends his people into Canaan to be a light to the nations. How were they to be a light? God used two terms to describe their mission. First, Israel was to be a “holy nation.” As God’s special people, they were to live in such a distinct way that they would attract the nations to YHWH. They were to be *holy*. Second, God called them a “kingdom of priests.” As priests, they collectively mediated God’s presence to the world. They were called to attractive holiness, which would draw the nations to the Lord.

### Covenant & Kings

Upon their rescue, God established a covenant relationship with Israel. Now, covenants are a primary organizing theme in the Bible. If you don’t understand covenants, then you’ll miss what God is doing. What is a covenant? It sounds antiquated and stodgy. Not like something you’d want to know, but hang with me because you’ll eventually see how lively and wonderful it is. Covenants in the Bible are very similar to covenants or treaties made in the ANE. These were created to establish a relationship between a king and his people. They typically have three primary elements: 1) Covenant Provision 2) Covenant Conditions, and 3) Covenant Promises (positive or negative). The **Provision** was a brief history of what the king did to establish the relationship. In the case of Israel, God’s provision was his exodus rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (referred to over and over throughout the Bible Ex 19:4; 20:2; Josh 24; Jer 31:31-34). Without this provision, there would be no Israel-God relationship. This redemptive provision establishes this relationship, which leads to the covenant **Conditions**. Conditions are what must be met to preserve the covenant relationship. With Israel, the conditions were contained in the Torah, a mix of ceremonial, civil, and moral laws, which were summed up in loving God and loving neighbor. In turn, these conditions led to covenant **Promises**, which were positive (blessings) or negative (curses), depending on whether or not Israel kept the covenant Conditions. In Exodus, we see the promise is God’s presence through the tabernacle. In Deuteronomy (which is one long covenant), chapters 27-28 detail a long list of blessings and curses promised to Israel, depending on how they respond to him. God’s redeeming *Provision* leads to covenant *Conditions*, which lead to covenant *Promises*. **Obedience is preceded by a remarkable act of saving grace**, which results in the enjoyment of God’s presence. It is not as though we have to obey first to get God’s favor, but rather that his favor compels us to obey. Those who truly value grace find themselves pursuing holiness. Like Israel, we are called to be holy. How are you fulfilling your calling? In examining this remarkable grace of God, do you overflow in a rich relational holiness in your media consumption, the way you speak to others, the use of your money? Do you run to the light of his holiness? Some of you are in a dark cave of sin. Your eyes have adjusted to sinfulness; they have become accustomed to the darkness. You may see a pinhole of light but vacillate in moving forward. You’re pulled to the darkness not to the light, one step forward two steps back. You can’t imagine the warmth and light out there. God is calling all of us to run to the light, to escape the caves of sin, and bask in the glow of his presence, where our eyes can adjust to his beauty, love, and glory and become a light to the nations. Now, the central

question in the story is: “Will Israel retreat to the cave or run to the light?” Will they be faithful to the covenant? Will they value God’s grace? Moving on from the Pentateuch, Israel enters a time of conquest (of Canaan) and the period of the Judges. The opening chapters of Joshua seem promising, but Israel eventually values the idols of surrounding cultures, and breeches the covenant. In the time of the Judges, everyone did what was right in their own eyes, until a good judge was raised up and Israel was restored. Eventually, the people ask for a king like the nations. They get off to a rocky start with Saul who goes psycho and starts killing his own people, starting a personal manhunt for David. A man after God’s own heart, valuing grace, David is an exceptional king, but is far from perfect, committing adultery and murder. The period of the kings, like Conquest and Judges, is characterized by a repetitive cycle: sin-exile-restoration. Where else have we seen this cycle? The closing chapter of 2 Kings ends on a dismal note. The Babylonians destroy Jerusalem/temple and Judah is sent into exile. Some Israelites even go back to Egypt where it all started (2 Kgs 25:26), leaving us to wonder: Will God’s blessing to the nations go forward? Shouldn’t God just quit and go home?

### **Covenant & Prophets**

God raises up the Prophets. Depending on which prophet you’re reading, the prophet prophesies before, during, and after exile. Many of them warned the kings. Sometimes we think of these guys as whacked out dudes in the desert who predict the future, but they were often trained in Torah and rarely predict the future (less than 1% of literature). The prophets actually act as God’s lawyers by prosecuting his covenant lawsuit against Israel. Israel breeches the covenant in three major ways: idolatry, religious ritual, and social injustice. God brings judgment to the divided houses of Israel and Judah through 6<sup>th</sup> C B.C. invasions. Reflecting on this Ezekiel describes Israel’s apostasy as the glory of the Lord leaving the temple. *Not only have they left God’s presence, God’s presence has left them.* He didn’t let it go. Remarkably, Israel has periods of flourishing during exile. Jeremiah instructs exilic Israel to seek the good of the city, of Babylon. A faithful remnant forms. Like Joseph, Daniel rises to power as an advisor to the king. He walks the thin line of devotion to YHWH and service to the government. He is at once a cultural elite and public worshipper of YHWH. **We need more Christians like this, who make great culture and publically identify with God and his people, the church, so that they’re making a name for God not for themselves.** Eventually, the prophets announce God’s judgment against Israel’s enemies, the nations who took them captive, and Assyrian king Cyrus sends Israel back to their promised land. They return to the land but, in many ways, remain in spiritual exile.

### **New Covenant**

What are we to make of these two episodes in the Story—the kings and prophets? **How are the stories similar?** The prophets wed the two stories together by showing that sin will result in judgment on both Israel/Judah and on the nations. Also, the prophets signal a brighter future, one of restoration where both Israel and the nations worship to God together. These two stories of restoration come together in God’s New Covenant. We will look at the two key NC texts. Jeremiah 31 first: [“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.” (31:31-32) Jeremiah is clearly contrasting a new covenant to the old/mosaic covenant in Exodus and Deuteronomy. **What’s new about the new covenant?** Does God remove the law and replace it with grace? Many Christians think this but its not true. Keep reading: “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” (31:33). **Where is the law?** It’s not gone but it has moved. **What is new then?** The new covenant doesn’t abrogate the law; it relocates the law in our hearts. Let’s linger on this because we have a tendency to replace the law with grace. We tend to see laws as oppressive and restrictive, but laws are actually for our flourishing. Perhaps a better word to use would be “rightful response.” Any worthwhile relationship is established with a set of laws. When two people get married, there is a rightful response to the person who pledges their love to you. For the husband, it is to serve her, provide for her, and protect her. You pledge to not betray one another’s love by committing to sexual and romantic faithfulness. When this rule is broken, there are devastating effects. So there is a set of right responses in any good relationship. Similarly, God the Father, who rescues us and initiates a relationship with us, establishes laws or a rightful response. These are for our good, like don’t murder. Instead, promote life. When humans live by God’s laws, in relationship with him, we flourish. Not only that, we reveal that our Creator is great. When we see an actor pull off a great performance, we marvel not only at them, but also at the director and screenwriter who created their role and character. We look them up on IMDB. Why? Because we are impressed not only by the actor but by the director/writer who elicited the right response. The same actor might get a different script and director and the performance bombs. Why? Because there’s more to good acting than a performance; it requires good direction and good writing, a relationship with scripting. So it is with God who has established a story, script, a rightful response. The world is meant to see, through our relationship, a shining Director. This why he says he acts to vindicate his holy name. When we live in rightful response to him, we flourish *and* He shines. **So, if the law isn’t what’s new, what is new about the new covenant?** *The provision.* The conditions and promises are the same, but the provision changes. “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (36:25-27). **How has the provision changed?** Permanent cleansing from sin is possible. How? Jesus bears the covenant curse of death on our behalf, so that the covenant can continue. But more than forgiveness is necessary or we will continue to not value grace. God hasn’t merely forgiven Israel but also promised them a new heart, a heart that contains a new spirit, which empowers them to “walk in my statutes and be careful to obey his rules.” Grace does not replace the law; it enables us to keep the law, which is summed up by Jesus as “love God and love your neighbor.” In other words, the difference between the people of God in the Old and New testaments is not that they lived by different rules but that they lived by different natures. The new nature given by the Spirit enables God’s people to keep the old law, so that we are a light to the nations, an attractive holiness for our flourishing and God’s shining. In the OT,

the Spirit temporarily came upon prophets, kings, and architects to empower them for works, but in the NT/NC, the Spirit dwells with in us for life. **He isn't itinerant; he is permanent. He doesn't just pay us a visit; he comes home to live with us.** So we see the provision has changed but the conditions remain the same. We are empowered by the Spirit to live as a "holy nation" and mediate the presence of God to the world. The world will know God by our holy love for him and one another. The sin-exile-restoration cycle doesn't have to continue because Jesus went into exile for us, securing our restoration. God has always been faithful to the covenant, a loyal husband, to a whoring people. Dumbrell comments: "[Divorce on the divine side could never be contemplated.](#)" Now, in the new covenant, we are tied to his side, we are empowered to live in covenant with him. With the Spirit and the Son. The one requirement is that you acknowledge your wayward sin and receive God's mind-blowing provision—the Spirit and the Son. Then you can truly be human, living in a flourishing relationship with Him with a better king, the better covenant, a better people, in a better land. With the presence of God never to leave again.