

## ***“Words You Should Know: Covenant”***

*Romans 6:1-11 • Genesis 17:1-13*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • June 12, 2022

This morning we are continuing our sermon series on “Words You Should Know.” These are theological words that all believers need to know and understand. These words help us to clearly understand important aspects of the Christian faith. The word we are studying today is *covenant* and it’s an important part of Reformed theology.

The word *covenant* is actually a legal term. For example, if you live in a neighborhood with a neighborhood association, there’s a good chance you signed a covenant when you bought your house that listed a number of restrictions you agreed to, things you agree to do and things you agree not to do.

The first house we bought actually came with a set of these deed restrictions, even though we didn’t have a neighborhood association. Our house had been built in 1955 and the restrictions are rather funny to us today. For example, any home built in that neighborhood must be at least 600 square feet. If the home was two stories the first floor had to be at least 400 square feet. And the house had to be at least 5 feet from the property line. One interesting thing that was specifically permitted in the deed restriction from 1955: a home trash incinerator.

A covenant is essentially a contract but in the Bible it’s much more serious than a legal contract. A number of scholars have pointed out that covenants in the Old Testament are very similar to treaties that were made in the ancient world. Biblical covenants are how God defines the relationship between us and Him. They spell out what each party will do and the penalty for breaking the covenant.

At the heart of it, in his covenants God makes promises. And we can be sure that he always keeps his promises. When He made a covenant with Noah God’s promise was, “Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood.” When He first made a covenant with Abraham he promised that Abraham would

have descendants more numerous than the stars. And in the covenant with King David, God promised that David’s descendant would be king forever. Two of the Gospels make sure to tell us that Jesus is descended from David.

In Jeremiah 31, God promises a new and better covenant. He says, “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

In Matthew 26, Jesus inaugurates that new covenant with His people. Shortly before he was arrested he was with his disciples in the upper room celebrating the Passover supper together.

After supper he took a cup of wine and blessed it and said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

When we look at covenants in the Old Testament we learn that they are always sealed with blood. A sacrificial animal was cut in half and the parties to the covenant would walk between the halves. This was a way of saying, “you can do this to me if I violate the terms of the covenant.” This is why in Hebrew, the word used for making a covenant is “cut.” In Genesis 15 God has Abram cut the animals for the

covenant ceremony and then God is the one who passes between them. And shortly after Jesus makes the new covenant it is sealed with his own blood.

In addition to the promises of the covenant and the blood sealing it, covenants also included a sign, a physical reminder. For example, when God made the covenant with Noah that he would never destroy the whole world by flood again, he gave Noah the sign of the rainbow. When he made the covenant with Abraham and promised that he would have more descendants than the stars in the sky, the sign of that covenant was circumcision. And when God made the covenant with Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments, the sign of that covenant is the Sabbath. The day of rest not only reminds us of God's promises but it reminds us of his laws which reminds us that we are sinners which reminds us that we need a savior. And that's where Jesus comes in.

In the New Covenant Jesus promises forgiveness and a restored relationship with God. It is sealed with his own blood. The signs of this new covenant are the sacraments—the Lord's supper and baptism. In today's reading from Romans 6 we begin to understand the promises that God makes to each one of us, the promises of baptism. The Apostle Paul says, "do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the

glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." We understand that baptism is the visible, outward sign or symbol of something that God does in us. It's the sign of God's covenant with each of us.

In the waters of baptism we are given a new identity. We are no longer who we were. We are "in Christ." As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "You are not your own, you were bought with a price." That means you can be confident about the promises God makes. Colossians 2 says, "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism."

That leads us to one of the questions most often asked about baptism in Presbyterian churches: "Why do you baptize infants?" This is certainly an area that has caused lots of disagreement over the centuries between different parts of Christ's Church. The short answer is that it's our way of visually saying that God claims us as his own long before we could ever choose him. Just as God commanded that infant boys be circumcised on the eighth day as a sign that they are part of the covenant community, we baptize infants as a way of saying that God has claimed that child as part of his covenant. I pray that each of you today will remember the promises of God, the promise of forgiveness and eternal life, and that you would be joyfully confident in the Holy Spirit applying them to your life.

*Amen.*