

Understanding the Sacraments
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 2: Covenant Signs and Seals

Opening Question: How does the Old Testament teach us about salvation? How does it teach us about the church?

Summary of Lesson 1

- We believe in objective truth. Two contradictory practices on baptism cannot be true.
- Baptizing infants will not make sense if you misunderstand a few foundational beliefs:
 - Salvation is God's work, not our decision. Regeneration precedes our awareness of it.
 - The church will always be a mixture of those who have genuine faith and those who do not. Some genuine believers possess a faith that cannot yet be confirmed.
 - There is continuity between Old and New Testaments. The gospel is the same in both: Old Testament saints were always and only saved by faith in Christ (Heb. 11). Covenant is the overarching structure to both.
 - The New Testament explains baptism by referring to the Old Testament.

Our Relationship with God: Covenants

The Bible describes the purpose of our creation and the goal of redemption is to have a relationship with God.

- How does God enter a relationship with his people?

God establishes a covenant relationship with his people. In general, a covenant is a relationship under sanctions.

Definition: God's covenant is his formal relationship with his people based on terms that must be satisfied. Signs and seals are used to ratify the covenant and identify those who belong to the covenant people.

*How is this better than general or informal promises?

The question for us is whether the church is a covenant community or a voluntary association of people. We begin by understanding how covenants function.

There are **two types of covenants** in the Bible.

- **Law (conditional) covenants** are ones where humans must satisfy the obligations.
- **Promise (unconditional) covenants** are ones where God promises by grace.

These two represent opposite forms of religion. You get salvation either by grace or by keeping a condition that you were required to do. Yet in God's plan of redemption, they are compatible.

The original relationship God establishes with humanity at creation is one of **condition**. God enters a **Law covenant** with Adam and the rest of humanity in him.

Genesis 2:16–17 *And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, [17] but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”*

Adam must obey to maintain the relationship. The sanction imposed on his disobedience is death.

Genesis 3:24

[24] He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Because of his sin, Adam could not pass through the sword to access the tree of life.

The key to understanding the unfolding plan of redemption is that **God does not annul conditions of obedience**. God does not substitute a promise covenant for the law covenant. The redemptive covenant adds promise to law.

Redemption Accomplished in Two Interdependent OT Covenants

1. Abrahamic Covenant: God establishes a promise covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12. God promises to Abraham and his offspring that He will bless them and in them all the families of the earth shall be blessed. The NT makes clear that this is the promise of Christ that Abraham believed by faith.

The **one-way gracious nature** of this covenant is evident in the way God confirms the covenant. Abraham asks, “How will I know you will do this?” And God responds with a **covenant ritual**.

[17] When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. [18] On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, [19] the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, [20] the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, [21] the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”
Genesis 15:17–21

- The ritual would typically include both parties walking between the severed animals. It symbolized the sanctions. If one party broke the covenant, then they would be dismantled like these animals.
- Here God alone takes the responsibility for delivering the promises and bears the threat of death if the covenant is broken.
- The covenant with Abraham is a promise covenant; there are no conditions on him.

2. Mosaic Covenant: God makes a second covenant with his people at Mt. Sinai. This covenant is **conditional**. God gave Israel the Law. They took an oath “All the words that the

LORD has spoken we will do" (Ex. 24:3). After they swore this, Moses sprinkled the people with blood (Ex. 24:8). The symbolism was clear; it will be their blood if they break the covenant.

- This covenant did not annul the promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:17). The people of Israel were still saved by faith in the promise of Christ.
- The conditions promised physical life and temporal blessings upon obedience, while threatening death and exile for disobedience. These typologically reflect the conditions given to Adam. Israel only disobeyed. The **Law exposed** their **sinfulness in Adam** and inability to be righteous.
- Faithful Israelites, however, could still be saved by faith alone. Daniel could go to heaven when he died, while remaining in Babylon while he lived.

3. Compatibility of Covenants: Jesus Christ fulfills the unilateral promises of the Abrahamic covenant by fulfilling the typological conditions of the Mosaic Covenant.

- Jesus does not simply succeed where Adam failed. Adam began without sin. Jesus enters a sinful world, obeys where Adam failed, and assumed the curses and death typified in the Mosaic Covenant.
- Jesus is the true seed of Abraham and the true Israel.

The New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31 contrasts with the Mosaic Covenant. It proclaims the fulfillment of the Law and the arrival of the blessings promised in Abraham.

Signs and Seals of the Covenant

Covenant relationships are made official by signs. The signs are not arbitrary but relate to the substance of the covenant. Participating in covenants signs equates to participating in the covenant.

Michael Horton writes:

"In a covenantal context, signs do not merely represent or bring to mind an absent signified. Nor do they become fused in essence. Rather, **words and signs** together **create a covenant**. It is significant that the Hebrew idiom for making a covenant is *cutting* a covenant. The ritual is inseparable from the treaty itself, establishing and not merely symbolizing a new relationship between two parties. *The question, then, is not the abstract nature of signs-and-signified but whether the agent effectively executes a speech-act through signs (both words and ceremonies).*"

- We've seen how the ritual of God passing through the severed animals established the covenant.

Circumcision

In Genesis 17, God gives Abraham the sign of circumcision, establishing him and his descendants as a part of the covenant.

Did the requirement of circumcision make the covenant with Abraham a conditional covenant? Wasn't circumcision the condition?

Genesis 17:7-11

[7] And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. [8] And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

[9] And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. [10] This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. [11] You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."

Verse 11 makes it clear that **circumcision is not a legal obligation** but a **sign** of the covenant. Abraham was in the covenant by faith; Galatians 3:18 explains this: *"For if the inheritance comes by law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise."* Circumcision identifies the recipient of the covenant and makes it clear that a covenant exists.

The ritual of circumcision, though, **dramatized a threat** against the person being circumcised. The recipient went under the knife. The **symbolism** worked **two ways**.

- For those who are righteous, they will pass through the knife unharmed.
- For those in their sin, the knife represented the blood they will shed.

The third cutting ritual in the Abraham story illustrates this.

Genesis 22, Abraham is commanded to **put Isaac to death** (raising a knife over him). This was **not symbolism**; this was the actual judgment curse. Isaac, like all of Abraham's descendants, is sinful and stands condemned. The whole plan of redemption is at risk, as well, because Isaac appeared to be key to the blessed offspring of Abraham.

- While Abraham holds the knife over Isaac, God replaces Isaac with God's ram. The ram is then killed as a substitute.
- Circumcision functions like the blood of Passover. The Egyptian firstborn, who were not under the blood of the Passover lamb, fell under God's wrath. The Israelite firstborn, who were under the blood, were redeemed from His wrath.

In Exodus 4:24-26, Moses failed to circumcise his son, and the consequences prove the point: "The LORD sought to put him to death."

- His wife Zipporah cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with the bloody foreskin.
- The blood of circumcision averted the wrath of God that otherwise would have fallen on Moses. When Zipporah touches his feet with the blood, she was saying, "Let the one take the place of the other."

As Israel enters the land, Israel must circumcise its children because the wilderness generation had failed to do it

Joshua 5:2-3, 7

[2] At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time." [3] So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth...[7] So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised. For they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way.

- This event is prior to Joshua encountering the Angel of the Lord wielding a sword.
- Had Israel tried to proceed apart from their circumcision, the Lord would have turned the sword against them, just as the cherubim guarding the entrance of the garden after the fall was prepared to do to Adam and Eve.

The covenant signs point to the spiritual reality.

- If you are righteous, then you will pass through the knife to access the Tree of Life.
- If you are sinful, then the knife will cut you off from the Tree of Life.
- You can only become righteous by faith in Christ who was cut off from life by the cross and then passed through Death to Life through the resurrection.

The covenant **signs** are also **seals** (Rom. 4:11, Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of righteousness). Bavinck *"Seals, after all, are distinguished from signs by the fact that they do not just bring the invisible matter to mind but also validate and confirm it."*

The New Testament People of God

Church is a covenant community, not a voluntary association of people.

God's covenant people in the Old Testament were not saved by their obedience to the law. They were saved by faith in the promises and practices that prefigured Christ. There was a mix of genuine and nominal believers within the covenant people. Being in the covenant had great advantages and blessings, but participating in it did not equate to salvation.

God's covenant people in the New Testament, likewise, are saved by faith in Christ (and what he accomplished prefigured in the OT). Members of the new covenant are not automatically assumed to be regenerate. The new covenant is the visible church not the invisible church.

The Big Question about Baptism

If baptism was just an outward sign of an inward reality about us, then we would expect only positive associations and no threatening: Jesus cleanses me. My old life is dead, and I am raised with him.

If baptism is a covenant sign and seal, then we would expect the symbolism to include curse and threatening for those who abandon faith in Christ.