As I Have Loved You

Michael d'Offay 14 September 2023



Many of our relationships are loose and informal, but our most important relationships are covenantal in nature. To make a covenant speaks of making binding promises to those we love the most. My wife Ady and I did this when we made sacred vows to love one another through all seasons of life. Next year, by God's grace, we will celebrate our 26th wedding anniversary.

The theme of covenant runs through the Bible, and if we do not understand it, we will misunderstand the character of God. In fact, the word 'testament' really means covenant. The Bible itself is all about God's covenants with us. God chooses to relate to us through covenant–not because He is obliged to, but because of His kindness towards us. Peter De Korte wrote an article on the New Covenant, which explains covenants in more detail, while my article will focus more on understanding God's grace in covenant and how that plays out in the nitty-gritty of our relationships with one another.

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Old Covenants

If we go back to ancient times, it was common practice for groups or individuals to make covenants. For example, it could be between two equal parties (such as David and Jonathan) or between a king and his subjects. There would be binding promises made, with benefits for keeping the covenant and warnings about consequences if anyone broke the agreement. These covenants would benefit both parties in some way. This has been true in my marriage–Ady and I both need each other and benefit from our relationship.

But in the case of the living God who covenants Himself to us, what do we have that the Lord of creation needs? He is the self-existent, triune God who is complete within Himself! He didn't create us to meet some inner need in Himself or because He was lonely. Rather, He creates us for His pleasure and then makes a covenant with us for our good on the basis of His goodness. In other words, the Creator God took the initiative and reached out to undeserving humans like us when He was not obliged to do so.

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Noah and Abraham

The Lord did this with Noah, who represented the human race. The Scriptures say that God showed favour to Noah (Genesis 6:8) and promised that he would not flood the earth again in judgement. This is grace! It was an unconditional promise.

We also see the example of God's covenant with Abraham. He picked out this undeserving man and chose to bless him. He promised that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:1-3). All who believed and trusted God as Abraham did would be part of this Abrahamic covenant. This is why, as Jesus followers, we count Abraham as our spiritual prototype–the one who was saved first by his faith in the Lord's promises (Galatians 3:6-9).

Moses and the Law

God then later makes a covenant with Moses, through whom He gave laws, promises, blessings and warnings of curses to Israel to shape them into His people. Before Yahweh could give His son to the world, He gave His law to the Israelites to prepare the way for Christ. And while many of the promises given to Israel were conditional upon their obedience, this does not make God any less gracious. In many ways, He gave them the law as a gift to reveal His nature and heart for them. This is why many Jews cherished the law (even though it could not empower them to

obey). For example, Psalm 19 tells us how much David loved the law. He called God's laws "perfect, reviving the soul" (v.7) and "more to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb." (v.10)

Hesed

Many Christians falsely believe that God was not as gracious in the Old Testament as in the New. I'm always astounded by how patient and slow to anger God was towards His rebellious people, time and time again! God is a merciful and gracious God who gives His people time to repent. We see this in the way God revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7.

Yahweh describes Himself as having 'hesed' for His people. This multifaceted word is used over 250 times in the Old Testament, and translates as love, mercy and kindness, depending on the context. It is such a rich word that Bible versions translate it differently to try to capture God's attitude and affection towards His covenantal people. The ESV says God is "abounding in steadfast love [hesed] and faithfulness", while the NASB says "lovingkindness", the KJV says "goodness", and the NLT says "unfailing love". Other Scriptures that use the word describe God's compassion and mercy (Numbers 14:18-19) and how He shows "faithful love [hesed] to a thousand generations" (Exodus 20:6 CSB). Our God has a special relationship with His covenant people, based on His kindness and faithfulness. We must not forget this!

All these and other Old Testament examples of God's covenants really prepare the way for His ultimate promise through Jesus, and the new covenant in His blood (1 Corinthians 11:25). In Jesus, God promises to give us a new heart, identity and family. This new family is a sociological miracle–a supernatural phenomenon of sinners joined together by the Spirit, loved and accepted by God because of faith in Jesus. We are an odd bunch!

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Grace for Each Other

In a real sense, we are in covenantal-type relationships with each other in our local churches, just as we are with God. Being in Christ means that we now belong to one another (Romans 12:5). The Lord's dream for His church is for us to be devoted to one another in fellowship: to care for each other; to bear one another's burdens; to consider others as better than ourselves. And the basis of these relationships should be grace. "As I have loved you, so you must love one another," Jesus says. (John 13:34)

I have been involved in church life for many years, and because it is filled with sinful saints (as I still am), conflict, offence and misunderstandings happen. This is not abnormal or strange, but rather how God uses relationships to sharpen us. This is why the New Testament encourages us so many times to bear with one another in love (Colossians 3:13).

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If God loved me when I was hostile to Him, I am called to do the same to others. If God reached out to me, then I am called to reach out and pursue peace with others. This is why Jesus always commands us to make right when there is offence (see Matthew 5:23-24, 18:15), because our Father in heaven took the first step to reconcile with us (Colossians 1:20). I've had to put this into practice many times–forgiving and asking forgiveness of those I've offended or hurt through my careless joking or thoughtless comments. I'm still learning to put into practice the text that urges us: "Let your speech always be gracious" (Colossians 4:6).

Considering all of the above, I trust that you would see afresh the gracious nature of the great God we serve. He has reached out to us because of His unmerited favour and kindness. He is a covenant-keeping God who has made mind-blowing promises to us, even though we are undeserving. "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

May these truths seep deep into our souls and relationships.