

"The Blood of the Covenant"

Breach of contract. What is it? Wikipedia defines breach of contract as "a legal concept in which a binding agreement or bargained-for exchange is not honored by one or more of the parties to the contract by non-performance or interference with the other party's performance." That's a big legal definition, huh? So what's that mean in laymen's terms? Well, it basically means someone broke their promise.

You see, when you enter into a contract, you usually make certain promises. And if you don't keep the promises that you made, then the other party can sue you for breach of contract. But in the courtroom, they usually don't say that you "broke your promise." They use the fancy term "breach of contract."

Why? Because when you enter into a formal contract, you're making a more serious promise. You are making a very formal and official agreement. You are making very binding promises that will have tangible ramifications if you break those promises. That's why when you actually sign a contract, they even use formal language to describe that. You are "executing" the contract.

In our passage for today, Jesus talks about something kind of like contracts. He talks about covenants. In the ancient Near East, covenants were quite common. And Jesus talks about covenants as he institutes the Sacrament of Communion. This is his Last Supper with his disciples. He has been sharing the Passover meal with them. But then he does something out of the ordinary here. He takes the bread, and breaks it according to the normal custom and gives it to his disciples, but then he says that it is his body. Then he takes the cup of wine and gives it to them to drink. But when he does that, he says that the cup is his blood! And he says that his blood is the blood of the covenant!

And so Jesus does something dramatic here. One moment he is celebrating the Passover with his disciples. The next moment he is talking about establishing a new covenant. This should grab you as something serious. You know, if it is serious today to break a contract, it means you don't just enter into contracts lightly. That's why big companies pay lawyers lots of money to review a contract before they sign it. Well if it's a serious thing today when you enter into a contract, it was arguably even more serious back then to enter into a covenant, let alone break one. And so what I'd like us to do today as we look at this passage, is to consider the covenantal aspect of the Lord's Supper.

You see, it would be easy enough to talk in general about the Lord's Supper. We could talk about the what the bread and wine represent. We could talk about the benefits of receiving the Supper are. And we will. But I want to look at the institution of the Lord's Supper from the perspective of the covenant. Why? Because that's what Jesus is doing here. I didn't bring up covenant here. Jesus did. The Lord's Supper is a covenantal meal. And we are a covenantal people. We have been brought into a covenantal relationship with God. Understanding this, will not only help us to understand the Lord's Supper better, it will also help us to understand our relationship with God better.

So let's begin with some brief background on covenants in the ancient Near East. When the Bible uses the concept of covenant, it's not using it in a vacuum. It's takes a concept that was very common at the time, and *adapts* it for a holy use. It uses the well known concept of covenant to describe the way God has chosen to

relate to man. And so understanding how covenants worked in the ancient Near East helps us to understand the covenants God has made with man according to Scripture.

In the ancient Near East, covenants would often take the form of a sort of treaty between a greater power and a lesser power. For example, you might have a group of people that is threatened by a stronger group. Instead of the stronger people destroying the weaker people, they might enter into a covenant instead. The stronger party would often be called the suzerain, and the weaker party would be the vassal. The details of these covenants would vary a bit among different nations, but they generally had some common features.

Usually a covenant of this type would record first the parties and describe their historical relationship with one another. It would clearly identify who was the greater party, the suzerain, and who was the lesser one, the vassal. But then the covenant would list the stipulations of the covenant. These were the heart of the covenant. The stipulations were essentially the promises. They were the things required of each party. And when the covenant was being made between peoples of different status, the stipulations were normally only things required of the vassal, of the lesser party. In other words, normally, only the vassal had to vow to certain binding promises. Not the other way around.

That's not to say that the suzerain didn't have any obligations, however. But they usually would come in the next part and they were really of a different character. You see, the next part of the covenant was the sanctions. These were the consequences, either good or bad, for the vassal if they kept, or didn't keep, the stipulations. If the vassal did keep the stipulations, then the suzerain promised certain blessings to the vassal, maybe say military protection. If the vassal didn't keep the stipulations, well the threat was usually something like complete annihilation for them and their families. Something like that.

The last part of a typical covenant included witnesses. Maybe the gods would be invoked. Copies of the covenant would be given to each side. So that's a brief summary of the normal parts in these ancient Near Eastern covenants. But let me give you one other piece of historical information. When these covenants were enacted, there would usually be a ceremony to ratify them. Sometimes there'd be a meal to celebrate the covenant too. But as for the ceremonies to ratify them, let's begin by saying, well, that they were usually bloody. A very typical ceremony might include this - cutting up animals into pieces, lining them up into two rows, and then having the vassal walk through the pieces in between. The picture is this: as the vassal walked through these broken up animal pieces, it was his way of saying, may it be to me like these animal if I should break this covenant. By the way, understand that this was something that only the vassal would do, not the suzerain. The suzerain was the greater power, and was not really under the same sort of obligation that the vassal was. The vassal was taking on the stipulations. The suzerain was just promising certain blessings if the vassal kept the stipulations. And so the vassal would cut up these animals when ratifying the covenant to put his own life on the line as part of the terms of the covenant. This was such a well known thing, that back then you didn't "make" a covenant, you "cut" a covenant. Whenever you see in the Old Testament it talking about making a covenant, the word for "make" there is actually "cut". That was the idiom of the day. And it referred to the sorts of graphic ceremonies done when ratifying the covenant.

So let's turn to our passage again and think about why this is important in thinking about this passage. Notice Jesus' words in 24. He talks of the blood of the covenant. That's actually an allusion back into Israel's history. It would have called to mind when the Israelites ratified the Mosaic Covenant back in Exodus

24. We read that passage earlier in the service. Jesus' actions here need to be seen in light of the ratification of the Mosaic Covenant. And so if you have your Bibles with you, you can turn back to Exodus 24 (page 68 of the pew Bibles). I'm going to briefly review this passage, since Jesus alluded to it. Here in Exodus 24, you'll notice this is just a few chapters after Moses received the Ten Commandments and other laws on top of Mount Sinai from God. Essentially God is making a covenant with the Israelites. God is like the suzerain of all suzerains. There is no greater Lord than the one true God. And so God has laid out the stipulations of the covenant. He has given the people the laws he wants them to keep. And so in verse 3 of Exodus 24 the people vow to keep them. They say, "All the words which the LORD has said we will do." And so Moses wrote up all the words of the LORD into the Book of the Covenant and it says in verse 7 that he formally read them before everyone, and they again said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." So here at the ratification of the Mosaic Covenant, the people submit themselves to God as their Suzerain Lord. They vow to keep all his stipulations per the terms of the covenant. And notice that they didn't just "make" a covenant, they "cut" one, in a very typical sort of fashion. They spill the blood of animals on an altar at the foot of Mount Sinai according to verse 5. But just before they did that, Moses had built twelve pillars next to the altar. Why? Verse 4 tells us. The twelve pillars represented the twelve tribes of Israel.

And so why did Moses build twelve pillars right next to the altar? Because they were cutting a covenant. The animals that would be sacrificed on the altar represented Israel. If Israel didn't obey God's laws as they vowed, then their fate would be like that of these slaughtered animals. If the identification of Israel with these animals wasn't clear enough, then after the people formally vowed to keep the covenant, Moses splashed the people with the blood of these animals. He sprinkled them with the blood from these sacrificed animals and said, "This is the blood of the covenant," verse 8.

Thankfully the Mosaic Covenant allowed for more sacrifices in the future as well. The covenant was an expression of God's grace, albeit a very legal one, that provided for a number of sins to be atoned for via the blood of more sacrifices. Of course, as the author in Hebrews points out, these sacrifices were never enough. Though an expression of God's grace, they weren't sufficient, by themselves. They had to keep being offered up to God because the death of animals could never fully take the place of men who rebelled against God. Rather, as we'll see, all the sacrifices of animals in the Old Testament pointed forward to a greater sacrifice to come in Jesus.

And at the end of the day, Israel didn't keep the covenant. They didn't obey God's commands. What was the result? They suffered the consequences. I mentioned earlier that covenants also had sanctions attached to them: blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. For the Mosaic covenant, those sanctions are listed in Deuteronomy 28. If the people kept the Mosaic covenant, they would be blessed with prosperity in the Promised Land. If they broke the covenant, they'd suffer curses in the Promised Land, with the final curse being removal in exile from the Land. That's what ended up happening of course. They kept breaking God's covenant time and time again. God sent prophets to warn them that the covenant curses were going to fall upon them. They persisted in their rebellion. They persisted in their breach of contract, so to speak. And so God enacted the sanctions. He sent them to exile. The covenant was broken.

And yet there was good news. After the people broke the covenant, God made a promise of a new covenant through the prophets. Jeremiah speaks of it very clearly. Jeremiah 31:31 "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will

make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah -- not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

And so after the people broke the Mosaic covenant and were sent into exile by God, God eventually brought them back to the Promised Land. In the book of Nehemiah we read about that. We see how Ezra read the law to the people and they renewed the covenant that God had previously made with them. They started trying to keep the terms of the Mosaic Covenant again. But that was not the new covenant that Jeremiah spoke about. Jeremiah spoke about a new covenant that would be better than the old. But when the people came back after exile, there was nothing better about it. They were in a worse state, still under foreign occupation, nothing but slaves in the Promised Land. And they were still sinful people that struggled to keep the laws of the Mosaic Covenant. But Jeremiah had prophesied of a better covenant. The covenant he talked about was one where God would write his laws on the people's hearts and minds. You see the covenant God was going to make with his people would be one that they wouldn't be able to break. The old one they could break. That's because in the old covenant the stipulations of the covenant were taken up by sinful people. The sinful people vowed to keep all the laws. They splashed the blood on themselves to make themselves liable. But they were sinful people, and failed.

But here in Mark chapter 14 we see why the new covenant is so much better. Jesus' actions in this first Lord's Supper are essentially a ceremony to ratify a new covenant. Jesus tells us that the bread and wine represent him. Jesus gives them his body and blood in the making of a new covenant. Should the covenant be broken, it would be his death. And of course this was more than just a pledge by Jesus. Right after this meal, he would be going to the cross. This evening he would be betrayed by Judas and delivered over the chief priests and scribes. The next day he would die on the cross. The next day his blood would be shed.

Jesus pledges his blood for the keeping of the new covenant. And this tells us so wonderfully about what Christ has done for us. In one sense, he keeps the covenant for us. As man, he represents us. He did not sin. He obeyed all God's laws. He earned the blessings of the covenant for us. But we didn't. We sinned. We deserved the covenant curses and death. But if we are under the new covenant, then it's not our death, but Christ's death. Christ died once for us. Christ took on the curses of the covenant for us. And unlike the many sacrifices of the old covenant, this one sacrifice is more than sufficient to cover all our sins. For he was God in the flesh. And so on the cross, Jesus' sacrifice would be expiation. It would satisfy our debt to God. He would pay the penalty of our sin.

And so when Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper, this is the promise he is making. He's making a new covenant to save his people by his own sacrifice. I hope you see how this is something better than the Mosaic covenant. The old covenant put sinful man under obligation, but we failed. Even the sacrifices of the old covenant proved insufficient. It left us guilty. It left our life condemned to eternal death and damnation. It made us see the need for a better covenant with a better sacrifice. And the good news is, that this has come in Jesus Christ.

And so at this first Lord's Supper this was a pledge by Christ of what he would do. The disciples were called to trust in this promise. If so, they would benefit from the body and blood of Christ. It would mean for them salvation. The same is true

for us. We too are offered to be a part of this covenant by faith in Jesus Christ. By faith, we are made a part of this new covenant. We too benefit by the body and blood of Christ.

Of course at this first Lord's Supper, Christ's death was still to come. We now live on the other side of his cross. For the disciples, that first Lord's Supper looked forward in anticipation to his death. It looked forward to the final ratification of the new covenant through Christ's death. For us, the Supper celebrates his death and the new covenant.

And yet for both us and the original disciples, this Supper still represents something provisional. We are both called to faith in the final realization of this new covenant. You see, Jesus says in verse 25 of Mark chapter 14, "I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." We still drink and eat of this Communion table, but we do it in anticipation of a greater meal to come.

You see, the Communion table is a celebration. It's a sort of covenant renewal ceremony. But it also looks forward to the final realization of this new covenant. We already have tasted of the new covenant, but we haven't yet fully tasted of it. With Christ's death on the cross, he inaugurated the new covenant. But it's not been consummated.

Just think about Jeremiah's prophecy. He promised that the new covenant will be where God will write his laws on our hearts and minds. That means we won't sin any longer. Well, we've already begun to taste of that. God sent his Spirit to circumcise our hearts. He's working in our hearts to transform us. That's what our sanctification is about. He's molding our hearts and minds to love and keep his laws. But we know that this work is not yet complete. That work will be complete when he returns to consummate all the blessings of the new covenant.

That's why Jesus words in verse 25 are looking forward. They are looking to something new. He will drink the cup anew in the kingdom of God. This is referring to the end. This is looking forward to his return when he will bring us into the new heavens and the new earth. Then we will eat and drink anew with him! We will celebrate his victory in a great heavenly feast. That's all part of the blessings of the new covenant that Christ earned for us.

Saints of God, we are a covenant people. If we trust Jesus as our Lord and Savior, then we are parties in this new covenant. That's why we sometimes talk about the church as God's covenant community. We are a community that's defined by a covenant. People sometimes don't like the organized church. They see too many abuses. Certainly that can be the case. But what makes us an organized church is not man-made laws and rule. What makes us a people is the new covenant. The covenant tells us how we are related to God and how we are related to one another. That's our defining charter. That's what characterizes us. That's even why we believe children of believing parents are to be a part of our community and worship. Because God has said in his word that the promise is to us and to our children.

Of course, not everyone who is visibly a part of this covenant community is really members of the covenant. Some of us profess faith, but don't really believe. Even our kids who belong to the covenant community might grow up and decide they don't believe. Even believing adults sometimes turn away. And yet what a small requirement for admission isn't it? Faith. God calls us to believe. He calls us to trust our lives and our salvation to him and his grace. Even in the old covenant, that's what the people were supposed to see. They were supposed to see

the sacrifices God provided and know God was sending an ultimate sacrifice. Many in the old covenant did believe, and we will join them in heaven one day. But the consistent testimony in Scripture is our need for God to save us. And he has.

That is what we celebrate at the Lord's Supper. We are commanded to eat and drink. We are commanded to do this in faith. We are called to believe and trust. What are we called to have faith in? That's the beauty. We are called to trust God. We are called to believe that he will keep the covenant. In the Mosaic Covenant the blood representing Israel was put upon them. When they broke the covenant, the blood was on their head. But in the new covenant, the obligation is put upon God. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, died, had his blood shed, to keep us from dying. When keeping the covenant is up to man, we should be worried about breach of contract. But since the keeping of the covenant is up to the God-man Jesus Christ, we have nothing to fear. His perfect obedience led him to the cross where he completed all that was necessary. He cried out on the cross, "It is finished."

And so here we have it. We have this wonderful covenantal meal. Whenever we eat and drink of the Lord's Supper, we are being renewed in God's promises to save us. It calls us to look backward at what Christ did on the cross. And it calls us to look forward to the day of his return, when all things will be made new, and we will sup together with him in the kingdom of God.

And Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that when we eat of this covenantal meal, we are participating in Christ. There's something spiritual going on as we eat and drink of this. God uses this covenant meal to bless his people. That's why he calls us to celebrate it regularly. That's why he calls us to examine ourselves before we partake of this. That's even why we have our children hold off from taking Communion until they are old enough to properly examine themselves and profess faith. Because God uses this meal to individually and corporately renew us in our faith and in the covenant.

You know, many churches today believe that it's important to have times to renew our faith. And yet so often it's done in the form of what is commonly called an "altar call." You know, the speaker will share the gospel and call people to come forward to either give their life to Christ for the first time or to recommit their life to Christ. That's nice and all, and God has certainly worked through altar calls. But God essentially gives us the substance of that in the biblical ordinance of the Lord's Supper. You see, that's the difference between the typical altar call and the Lord's Supper. One's a biblical institution, and the other is a human invention. Why not put the focus on what God has commanded?

And so I would submit to you that we don't need altar calls, we need table calls! We need to regularly go back to the table. We don't go to the altar - there are no more sacrifices for sin to be made. We go to the table and partake spiritually of the once for all sacrifice for sins. And as we do that, we reflect on where we are at spiritually. It's a chance to corporately get right with God and with each other in a formal way. And it's the biblical means God has given us to do. Let's not take that for granted.

You see, I hear sometimes things like this. I don't need to be a part of the organized church. I don't need to be baptized with water, I'm baptized inwardly by God's Spirit. Well, that's great and all, but God calls us to do both. Even Jesus was baptized with water because he said it is the right thing to do. And so yes, you can have the substance of the Lord's Supper even without the Lord's Supper, but if God tells us to receive these blessings through the Supper, why we argue with him? Why would we think that we are wiser than God? Let's not neglect the table of the Lord. Let's see it for what it is - a great blessing. A reminder that we

are in the covenant, and a God-given means for examining our lives and being renewed in his grace. Let's keep eating and drinking of this table until he comes. Amen.

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