

Mary Craig Ministries, Inc.

Dr. Mary Craig

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Series: *Covenant: God's Way of Relationship*



A Teaching Sermon: *The Character of Covenants*

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“I will be your God and you will be My people” expresses the heart of the Living God in relationship. God’s covenant binds Him to us and us to Him. Understanding the binding character of the covenant, the signs and seals, the granting of gifts, the offering of sacrifice, the fellowship of a meal, and the necessity of the bond in blood satisfies the yearning of our hearts to rest in the love of God our Creator and Redeemer.

In this study we will explore the nature and diversity of the divine covenants, their unity, their promises, and their benefits for us, the believers. We hope to establish and strengthen our faith in God and His promises to us as we grow in our understanding of covenantal relationship. We hope to discover the basis of God’s provision, God’s protection, God’s pity, God’s preservation, and God’s pursuit of His enemies while growing in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, the Christ of the covenants.

If we want something to keep us close to God and give us the confidence that we are never without Him, then we are looking for God’s covenant. God relates to His creation and to His people in covenant. God’s covenants provide the foundation and structure for life. God’s covenants are unilateral; there is no negotiation. For true assurance, we want to become enmeshed in the reality of God’s covenants in order that we may benefit from their promises and their surety.

What is a covenant? We may as well be trying to define motherhood. Instead, let’s listen to an example from O. Palmer Robertson’s book Covenants.

“This was our first time to be surrounded by a group of angry cannibals, but God delivered us.” (From an old missionary diary; Garlock, H. B. *Before We Kill and Eat You*, ed. Ruthanne Garlock. *Christ for the Nations*, Dallas, Texas, 1974: 75).

“Five missionaries were surrounded by natives with cutlasses and spears, threatening to kill. A native boy had disappeared from the missionary school and the missionaries were being blamed. Since the natives were cannibals themselves they may have suspected that the missionaries had eaten the poor lad. That evening King Tho and his elders returned, begging the missionaries to overlook what they had done in anger. The child had returned on his own, safe and sound.

After the apology the throat of a white bird was cut. The blood was sprinkled first on the missionaries and then on the natives. The chief declared that a blood covenant had been made between the two parties. Never would they shed the blood of the missionaries and never would the missionaries shed the blood of the natives. All future generations on both sides of the covenant were committed by this ceremony.” (O. Palmer Robertson, page 7)

Today we enter into contracts. We sign them and seal them and have them notarized to indicate that we have entered into a legally binding oath that is violated only with severe legal consequences.

There are differences, however, when we talk about the covenants of God. God established a covenant with creation, a/k/a the covenant of works or the Adamic covenant. Likewise, God established the covenant of grace, which was revealed progressively in the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David and climaxed in what we call the new covenant in Jesus Christ. There is a unity in the covenant of grace. I say, “Trace the grace.” When we do that, we see that it goes back to Genesis 3:15. In the midst of the curse, a promise. We’ll be getting into that more as we go on.

The Character of Covenants

1. A Bond. A covenant is a bond in blood sovereignly administered. It is a bond of life and death. It is inviolable. It is relational. The result of a covenant commitment is the establishment of a relationship “in connection with,” “with,” or “between” people.

God’s covenants are divine. They are established by a verbalized declaration of the character of the bond being established. God speaks to establish His covenant. He commits Himself to His creation and declares the basis on which He shall relate to it.

2. A binding oath. This oath might be verbal alone or a symbolic action might be attached to it or the granting of a gift, the eating of a meal, the setting up of a memorial, the sprinkling of blood, the offering of sacrifice, the passing under the rod, or the dividing of animals. The oath establishes the commitment being made.

3. Signs. Covenantal signs enforce the binding character of the covenant. Examples include the token of the rainbow, the seal of circumcision, the sign of the Sabbath, baptism, covenantal meals like Passover and communion. (Rings in a wedding covenant ceremony are tokens and pledges of the “constant faith and abiding love” of the persons entering marriage.)

4. Cutting. The binding character of a covenant is related to a terminology of “cutting.” Animals were cut in a ritual ceremony, e.g., Genesis 15. This cutting indicates a pledge to the death at the point of covenant commitment. Dismembered animals represent the curse that the covenant-maker calls down on himself if he should violate the commitment which he has made. (Jeremiah 34.18) Israel was disloyal to their covenant commitments and so called down on themselves the curses of the covenant. Therefore, Jeremiah 34.20.

[Jeremiah 34:18-20 New King James Version \(NKJV\)](#)

¹⁸ And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it— ¹⁹ the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the ^[a]eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf— ²⁰ I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth.

5. Bond in blood. Blood represents life. The life is in the blood. (Lev. 17.11). The shedding of blood represents a judgment on life. Blood sacrifice emphasizes the interrelation of life and

blood. The pouring out of life-blood signifies the only way of relief from covenant obligations once incurred. The cutting of the covenant commits the parties to loyalty on pain of death. Once entered, nothing less than the shedding of blood may relieve the obligations incurred in the event of covenantal violation.

“In the case of a ‘covenant,’ death stands at the beginning of a relationship between two parties, symbolizing the potential curse-factor in the covenant. In the case of a ‘testament,’ death stands at the end of a relationship between two parties, actualizing an inheritance.” (Robertson, page 11)

6. Life and death. The death of a covenant-maker comes about in two stages, first in the symbolic representation of the curse, anticipating possible covenantal violation, and then actual death. The representation of death is essential to the inauguration of a covenant, but only in the event of covenant violation does actual death of the covenant-maker occur.

Jesus’ death was a substitutionary sacrifice. Christ died as a substitute for the covenant-breaker. Because of covenantal violations, people were condemned to die. Christ took on himself the curses of the covenant and died in the place of the covenant-breaker. His death was a covenantal act, not testamentary. Christians are heirs of God by the process of adoption into the family of God, not by the process of testamentary disposition.

7. Provisions. The provisions of God’s covenants may include aspects which continue beyond those people then living at the time of the cutting of the covenant. (Deut. 7.9; Psalm 105.7-9)

[Deuteronomy 7:9 King James Version \(KJV\)](#)

⁹ Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations;

7He is the LORD our God; His judgments carry throughout the earth. [8He remembers His covenant forever, the word He ordained for a thousand generations—](#) ⁹the covenant He made with Abraham, and the oath He swore to Isaac.... Psalm 105:7-9

[Psalm 106:45](#)

And He remembered His covenant with them, and relented by the abundance of His loving devotion.

8. Unilateral. God’s covenants are unilateral. There is no bargaining, negotiating, bartering, or contracting. They don’t change. The terms are dictated by the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. He is the Divine Suzerain.

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Declaring Jesus Christ, the Promised One, who heals, saves, and delivers,

Mary Craig

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“He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.” Revelation 21:7



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