

# The Universality of the Covenant(s)

The covenants have been presented by some as a kind of exclusive deal God makes with a select (elect) group of people, singling them out for special favors. While there is some truth in that concept, it doesn't portray the whole picture. God did select (elect) certain individuals and make covenants with them and their descendants. These covenants not only included significant blessings but heightened responsibilities as well. God intended for His gospel of salvation to be shared, not hoarded. The covenants were designed to be inclusive, not exclusive. God's covenants with humanity are all grace-based, gospel-bearing, and mission-directed.

In at least one place in Scripture, the divine covenant is likened to a will (Heb. 9:16ff.). An executor of a will is responsible to inform those named in the will regarding their portion of the inheritance and to oversee the distribution of the estate to the beneficiaries. Using this metaphor, we may think of God's covenant as the will of His estate. His estate includes eternal salvation, as well as any temporal blessings and responsibilities that may be specified. Thus, we may think of those with whom God made His covenant (e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, David) not as exclusive beneficiaries of God's estate but rather as executors themselves, commissioned to notify the entire world that all nations of the earth have been listed as beneficiaries of this marvelous will—the gospel, resulting in life that glorifies God and lasts forever. It is



a gospel conceived and offered by grace, to be received according to the terms and conditions specified. The terms and conditions are simple and profound: faith, through which God works His inner transformation of heart and mind to produce love and obedience to His commandments.

The everlasting gospel of grace, expressing God's everlasting covenant promise and commitment to sinful human beings, has always been universal in its application.<sup>1</sup> It was always God's purpose that the recipients of the individualized, differentiated covenants would share the gospel with the entire world. The gospel would reveal to the world that God's law had been given for their benefit (Deut. 10:13), to bring life, but that the world had broken this law (1 Kings 8:46; Isa. 24:5; Rom. 3:23) and that God had kept His promise to send His Son to take away the sin of the world (Gen. 3:15; Isa. 53:4, 6; 1 Pet. 1:18–19; Gen. 22:8, 17; John 1:29; Heb. 13:20).

### **The Universality and Mission-Directed Purpose of the Covenant(s)**

God's covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, David, and new covenant believers were never intended to be for them alone, but for everyone who would accept God's appeal in the everlasting gospel through their witness, for "my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:7). As Dallas Willard notes, "God not only interacts with every individual human being (John 1:9; Acts 10:30–31; 14:17; Rom. 1:14–15), but also establishes a *public* presence in human history through a covenant people in which he is tangibly manifest to everyone on earth who wants to find him."<sup>2</sup>

With the intent that His covenants would be applied universally, God designed them to groom, equip, and commission the people He chose to carry out this missionary purpose.<sup>3</sup> This insight is crucial for a proper understanding of the covenants.

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faithful followers in every historical era have had of their divinely appointed mission to share the gospel with the nations.

At creation, God's everlasting covenant of love and peace embraced the whole of His created order.<sup>4</sup> In the creation story, even the animals did not prey on one another but, like human beings, were given a plant-based diet (Gen. 1:29–30). Had Adam been faithful to God, all humankind would have benefited from the unending blessings of God's covenant of creation.

### **The Universality and Mission-Directed Purpose of God's Covenant(s) Throughout the Old Testament Era**

God's remarks to the serpent in Eden (Gen. 3:15) were an implicit covenant promise to Adam and all humankind that the woman's seed, the Messiah, would ultimately destroy Satan and the suffering Satan had imposed on them through the sin of Adam.<sup>5</sup> This grace-based, gospel-bearing covenant promise was mission-directed, and Adam was to pass it on to his descendants, providing them with hope.

God's covenant with Noah was a "renewal" of His grace-based, gospel-bearing covenant made previously with Adam and his

descendants (Gen. 6:18).<sup>6</sup> That the Noahic covenant was indeed a gospel-bearing covenant is evident from the sanctifying effect it had on Noah who "became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (Heb. 11:7). In addition,

this covenant anticipated the impending flood and offered protection to Noah and his family. By strong implication, God's gracious offer of

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righteousness by faith and protection from the flood was extended to the entire world, for God's covenant with Noah had ordained and equipped him as "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5).<sup>7</sup> After the flood, God's covenant with Noah was expanded further to include the universal sign of the rainbow to remind all people everywhere of "the everlasting covenant between God and *all living creatures* of every kind on the earth" in which God "swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth" (Gen. 9:16, italics added; Isa. 54:9).

God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants envisioned that "*all peoples on earth* will be blessed through you." "Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. *All peoples on earth* will be blessed through you and your offspring" (Gen. 12:3; 28:14, italics added). God envisioned Abraham's descendants spreading throughout the world carrying the gospel to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. Ellet Waggoner suggests that the altars Abraham built were an evangelistic witness to the peoples around him: "When Abraham built an altar, he 'called upon the name of the Lord.' Gen. 12:8; 13:4....When Abraham erected the family altar, he not only taught his immediate family but he proclaimed the name of the Lord to all around him. Like Noah, Abraham was a preacher of righteousness. As God preached the Gospel to Abraham, so Abraham preached the Gospel to others."<sup>8</sup>

Meredith Kline likewise sees the altars built by Abraham and his descendants, including the nation of Israel prior to the conquest of Canaan, as "a missionary-evangelistic witness" to the nations they sojourned among:

[Their altars] were a summons to repentant turning from the worship of idols and a call to reconciliation with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Creator of heaven and earth. They were a missionary-evangelistic witness....In their function of summoning to covenantal commitment to the Lord of redemptive promise, these altars afforded an intimation of a coming day when the reconciling call of the altar

of Calvary would be heard in all the earth, when the gospel of Christ would go forth in the power of the Spirit to the Gentiles and the promise would be fulfilled that in Abraham's seed all the nations would be blessed with the salvation of God.<sup>9</sup>

God's covenant with Israel at Sinai called the entire nation to become a "kingdom of priests" through whom "*the nations* will know that I am the LORD;" declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I show myself holy through you before their eyes" (Exod. 19:5–6; Ezek. 36:23, italics added). The believing Israelites perceived the universal scope of God's purpose for them as bearers of the everlasting gospel of salvation and prayed: "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, *your salvation among all nations*" (Ps. 67:1–2, italics added). Through Israel's witness, God intended that "the law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations" (Isa. 51:4). However, realizing the magnitude of Israel's failure to fulfill its God-given mission of evangelizing the nations with the everlasting gospel, Isaiah confessed on Israel's behalf: "We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to people of the world" (Isa. 26:18). Stating that God's covenant at Sinai was "made with the nation of Israel *only*," some imply that God created conditions that made it difficult for outsiders to get in and share the blessings of the covenant.<sup>10</sup> Such a portrayal misrepresents God's heart and intent with regard to this, or any other covenant He has made. His covenants always bore the whole of humankind in mind, were always for humankind's benefit, and were designed to promulgate the gospel of eternal salvation worldwide.

It was clear also to David that God's "everlasting covenant" with him followed the precedent set in the earlier covenants made with his forefathers in that it intended for David to lead his people to "make known *among the nations* what he [God] has done," to "declare his glory among *the nations*, his marvelous deeds among *all peoples*" (2 Sam. 23:5; 1 Chron. 16:7–33; Isa. 55:3–5, italics added).

God often reiterated the timeless universal mission purpose of His covenants to His covenant people. In a scriptural passage that blends the

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proclaimed mission of Israel with the prophesied mission of the Messiah into what has sometimes been called “the Great Commission of the Old Testament,”<sup>11</sup> God said through Isaiah: “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will

display my splendor [NKJV: in whom I will be glorified]...It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49:3, 6).

When Paul and Barnabas defended their own mission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles in the new covenant historical era, they quoted from this very passage in Isaiah, as if to say that they were fulfilling the commission God gave to His covenant people from the beginning (Acts 13:46–47).

Indeed, throughout the entire old covenant historical era, God’s covenants with His chosen people commissioned them to extend His everlasting covenant/gospel invitation to the entire world: “Turn to me and be saved, *all you ends of the earth*” (Isa. 45:22, italics added). “For God is the king of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise. God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne. The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted” (Ps. 47:7–9).