The New Covenant Series: Part 1 - Why Is the New Covenant Important to Us?

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Introduction: The New Covenant

God's latest and most important covenant revealed in the Bible is centered on His promise—His unwavering commitment—to create a new heart in those who unconditionally turn to Him for help.

To benefit from God's wonderful plan of salvation, it is essential that we correctly understand the meaning and purpose of the New Covenant that Jesus Christ implemented.

Does the New Covenant negate God's law and do away with any need to obey the Ten Commandments and other laws of God?

The belief that it does has long been a popular teaching in traditional Christianity. We'll thoroughly examine this question in this booklet.

Even more important, we'll address the real purpose of God's biblical covenants—more than one—and their vital role in the Creator's overall plan for mankind. It's highly important that we understand their true meaning.

"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds" (Hebrews 10:16, New Revised Standard Version).

How many people even know that the structure of the Bible is organized around a series of divine covenants—what we might call contracts or agreements—that reveal and describe the relationship God would like to have with every human being?

These covenants reveal God's promises. They also define the conditions that every person must meet to receive the blessings of those promises. God's covenants are the foundation of His divine plan to properly shape the way all people should think and behave.

God has a specific goal in mind. The final result of His plan is a divine family of sons and daughters who have developed the same righteous *character* that was evident in Jesus Christ when He was with mankind as a human being.

That character can be created only through an interactive process that takes place between each individual and God. It is a very personal process.

Why freedom of choice?

To make it possible for us to build that divine, holy and righteous character, God gives us freedom of choice. By giving us the liberty to make choices, He allows us to learn by our own experiences that we, with our limited abilities, cannot foresee all of the hurtful consequences that wrong choices produce. Only by relying on God's guidance will we learn how to avoid making bad choices.

Making wrong choices began with our very first human parents, Adam and Eve. They had to choose between two critical options.

They could allow God to fully guide their thinking and their way of life, or they could experiment and try to discern the best way to live by their own experiences.

They chose to learn by personal experience instead of fully putting their trust in God's instruction, guidance and help. All of mankind has followed that same path, reaping the same sad results.

God's covenants reveal His plan to reverse that dangerous pattern of harmful choices. In these covenants, He promises His divine help and blessing to those who turn to Him with their whole heart for the guidance and help they need.

Some of the blessings He gives for accepting His guidance and help are spiritual, offering us eternal benefits. Others are physical, designed to bless us in this temporary, physical life.

Why was the promise of a new heart so necessary?

God's latest and most important covenant revealed in the Bible is centered on His promise—His unwavering commitment—to create a *new heart* in those who unconditionally turn to Him for help.

Why is divine intervention essential in receiving that change of heart? It's really very simple. We were created *incomplete*!

God indeed made human beings with an amazing ability to think creatively—with an intellectual capability that far exceeds the creativity of any other physical creature. The unique talent He has given to us to design and produce what we imagine is patterned after His own astounding creative capacity (Genesis 1:27).

> *Genesis 1:27 NKJV - So God created man in His [own] image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*

But there remains a missing dimension in our thinking, a dimension that needs to be added so we can properly control our thoughts and the actions they produce. The Bible reveals that God is committed to creating in us that additional ability.

He promises to give us the knowledge, understanding and the *power* to rightly manage how we think, feel and behave—*if* we choose, willingly and sincerely, to give Him our full cooperation. We desperately need that added ability! The sad record of human history shows that we cannot *consistently* make right choices or maintain right attitudes without God's divine help.

Instead, each of us naturally weaves his own web of thoughts and patterns of behavior into a conflicting mixture of good and evil. Not everything we think and do is wrong. But neither is it always right. Like Adam and Eve, we reap the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.

Whether our life will be only physical and temporary or will last forever depends on whether we allow our Creator to actively change our hearts and minds.

As He told the people of ancient Israel: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore *choose life*, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20, emphasis added throughout).

> *Deuteronomy 30:19 NKJV - "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, [that] I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live;*
> *Deuteronomy 30:20 NKJV - "that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He [is] your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."*

From the beginning God has wanted all human beings to walk the path that leads to eternal life. Yet only one person has ever heeded His voice completely and walked that path perfectly—Jesus Christ!

All the rest of us have fallen short (Romans 3:23).

> *Romans 3:23 NKJV - for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

At His crucifixion, Jesus, through His death, implemented the New Covenant. This is why, on the evening before He was crucified, Jesus "took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is [figuratively speaking] the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you'" (Luke 22:20).

> *Luke 22:20 NKJV - Likewise He also [took] the cup after supper, saying, "This cup [is] the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.*

In that new covenant God gathers together all of the carefully planned details of His plan of salvation. To benefit from that wonderful plan, it is essential that we correctly understand the meaning and purpose of the New Covenant that Christ implemented. Far too many people still misapply or distort what the Bible actually says about that New Covenant. Let's now unravel those distortions.

God's Magnificent Series of Covenants

Through special covenants made with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, God long ago began to reveal important details of His plan to produce for Himself an enduring holy people. The promised New Covenant—the basis of Christ's gospel—is the capstone of that revelation process.

What is the central message of Jesus Christ's gospel? It is the promise that God plans to transform all people to be like Him, starting with their hearts and minds. Proclamation of that message continues

through the Church He built (Matthew 16:18). But the full impact of that message will not be felt by all people until after He returns.

> *Matthew 16:18 NKJV - "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.*

Eventually, as a result of His direct supervision, the whole "earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). Christ's first coming was only the beginning of His personal involvement in transforming the spiritual nature of mankind.

> *Isaiah 11:9 NKJV - They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea.*

God's visionary plan

Through special covenants made with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, God long ago began to reveal important details of His plan to produce for Himself an enduring *holy* people (Leviticus 20:26; Leviticus 26:12; Hebrews 8:10). The promised New Covenant—the basis of Christ's gospel—is the capstone of that revelation process.

> *Leviticus 20:26 NKJV - 'And you shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD [am] holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine.*
>
> *Leviticus 26:12 NKJV - I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.*
>
> *Hebrews 8:10 NKJV - "For this [is] the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD:* ***I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.***

Through the pen of the prophet Jeremiah, God summarized what He intends to accomplish through Jesus Christ: "I will make an *everlasting covenant* with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear *in their hearts* so that they will not depart from Me" (Jeremiah 32:40).

> *Jeremiah 32:38 NKJV - 'They shall be My people, and I will be their God;*
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> *Jeremiah 32:39 NKJV - 'then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them.*
>
> ***Jeremiah 32:40 NKJV - 'And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me.***
>
> *Jeremiah 32:41 NKJV - 'Yes, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will assuredly plant them in this land, with all My heart and with all My soul.'*

"I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart" (Jeremiah 24:7, New International Version).

The impact of that promise was only hinted at—through symbolic ceremonies—at the time ancient Israel became a nation under the Sinai Covenant. For example, the temple worship of ancient Israel anticipated Christ's sacrifice with figurative rituals and ceremonies.

Those rituals *symbolized*—for those living in that era—that a lasting, permanent solution to the problem of humanity's spiritual inadequacies was needed. But the sacrifices and rituals given to Israel at that time did not provide that solution.

The reason was that "the *gifts and sacrifices being offered* were not able to *clear the conscience* of the worshiper" (Hebrews 9:9, NIV). Only by forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of Christ and receiving the spiritual power provided by the gift of the Holy Spirit is that possible.

> *Hebrews 9:9 NIV - This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.*

Righteous laws, but no righteous heart

Since most of the people of ancient Israel did not receive God's Spirit, they were unable to live or apply God's teachings from the heart as a truly holy people. As Moses told them, "The Lord *has not given you a heart* to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear" (Deuteronomy 29:4).

> *Deuteronomy 29:4 NIV - But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.*

But God already had a clear plan in mind to give them that "new heart" in the future. Even when speaking to Moses, God expressed His eager longing for the time when that change of heart could happen. He exclaimed to Moses, *"Oh, that they had such a heart in them* that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!" (Deuteronomy 5:29).

> *Deuteronomy 5:29 NIV - Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!*

But the time was not yet right for God to make His Spirit available to the masses of humanity—not even to most of the people of Israel. Except for Israel's prophets and a few other specially chosen servants of God, Israel's history describes a people who had righteous laws but lacked *righteous hearts.*

Like most people today, they did not have the *ability* to live by the full spiritual intent of the instructions God reveals in the Scriptures. Something was missing.

Therefore, "God found fault *with the people* [notice that the fault was *not* with the laws He gave them] and said: 'The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a *new*[revised] *covenant* with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to My covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. *I will put My laws in their minds and write them on their hearts*. I will be their God, and they will be My people'" (Hebrews 8:8-10, NIV).

> *Hebrews 8:8 NIV - But God found fault with the people and said: "The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.*
>
> *Hebrews 8:9 NIV - It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.*
>
> *Hebrews 8:10 NIV - This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*

A changed heart offered to mankind

Most people assume that the New Covenant abolishes the laws of God as enumerated under the Sinai Covenant (also known as the Old Covenant). But notice that *no indication is given in this promise that God's laws are to be ignored or abolished.*

On the contrary, they are to be *engraved into the minds and hearts* of the recipients of the promised New Covenant—to be made a part of their very being! This New Covenant is a vital *revision* in how God interacts with His people.

God has fully committed Himself to changing the hearts of all people who choose to serve Him willingly. Since "there is no partiality with God" (Romans 2:11), He has extended this promise to all nations.

> *Romans 2:11 NLT - For God does not show favoritism.*

As Paul explained, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you *all the nations* shall be blessed'" (Galatians 3:8).

> *Galatians 3:8 NLT - What's more, the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would declare the Gentiles to be righteous because of their faith. God proclaimed this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, "All nations will be blessed through you."*

From the beginning, God's plan has been that *all peoples* are to receive an opportunity to repent—to turn from doing things their own way to wholeheartedly embracing God's way—and have their hearts changed so they can live as He intended. He decided to begin with one family—faithful Abraham and his descendants through his grandson Jacob.

God changed Jacob's name to Israel. From his 12 sons came the tribes of the ancient nation of Israel. To these physical descendants of Jacob, God began to reveal the essential details of His plan to make a holy people for Himself.

What is a covenant?

Inherent in any covenant is the concept of a lasting commitment to a clearly defined *relationship*. Generally speaking, a covenant is a long-term agreement between two or more parties that formalizes a *binding relationship* between them. It defines their essential *obligations* and *commitments* to each other.

In ancient times, major covenants were ratified and kept alive through symbolic rituals that reflected each party's commitment to, and acceptance of, the covenant's binding requirements. However, covenant *rituals* are not the same as covenant *commitments and obligations.*

Rituals in divine covenants serve primarily as symbolic reminders and are intentionally given only a figurative value. The real value is in the *substance* of the commitments made! Through the substance of His covenants—His divine commitments—God *binds* Himself to perform all of the *promises* He makes.

In a divine covenant, God defines the basic *obligations* that He imposes on Himself and, usually, on the other participants. Thus a dominant feature of a covenant is a list of blessings that God promises to give to those who honor their covenant commitments.

A divine covenant can be compared to a sacred constitution established to regulate human relationships with God. It is a formal declaration of God's will and purpose. It typically expresses His deep love for humanity and reveals one or more major aspects of His plan for humanity's salvation.

Covenant discussions in the New Testament

Two covenants, the Sinai or Old Covenant and the New Covenant (mediated by Jesus Christ), are the focus of considerable discussion in the New Testament. Both are based on God's earlier covenant with Abraham that promises the *inheritance* of a global kingdom to Abraham's special "seed" or descendant—Jesus Christ (Romans 4:13; Galatians 3:16).

> *Romans 4:13 NLT - Clearly, God's promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was based not on his obedience to God's law, but on a right relationship with God that comes by faith.*
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> *Romans 4:14 NLT - If God's promise is only for those who obey the law, then faith is not necessary and the promise is pointless.*
>
> *Galatians 3:16 NKJV - Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ.*

The covenant made at Mount Sinai established the ancient *national* kingdom of Israel. The New Covenant promises that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, will establish the much more inclusive Kingdom of God that will rule over the *whole earth* (Isaiah 9:7; Matthew 25:34; Luke 22:29-30; Revelation 11:15).

> *Isaiah 9:7 NKJV - Of the increase of [His] government and peace [There will be] no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.*

> *Matthew 25:34 NKJV - "Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:*
>
> *Luke 22:29 NKJV - "And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed [one] upon Me,*
> *Luke 22:30 NKJV - "that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."*
>
> *Revelation 11:15 NKJV - Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become [the kingdoms] of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"*

Jesus made that coming Kingdom, and the repentance required for us to participate in it, the central feature of His gospel (Mark 1:14-15). To qualify as an heir of that Kingdom, one has to meet the terms defined in God's covenants. Jesus Christ alone has met all of those terms perfectly.

> *Mark 1:14 NKJV - Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God,*
> *Mark 1:15 NKJV - and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."*

So He alone is the qualified *heir* of all the *promises* made to Abraham. And only *through* Him may other human beings—including such men of faith as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Hebrews 11)—share in that *promised inheritance.* As Paul explained, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs *according to the promise"* (Galatians 3:29, NIV).

> *Galatians 3:29 NIV - If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

Peter confirmed this central role of Jesus, saying, "There is no salvation through anyone else; in all the world *no other name* has been granted to mankind by which we can be saved" (Acts 4:12, Revised English Bible).

> *Acts 4:11 NIV - Jesus is " 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.'*
> *Acts 4:12 NIV - Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."*

This is why Jesus Christ's role in God's covenants is so vital. Those covenants contain the promise of salvation that He alone, as the Messiah, can make a reality.

Each covenant points to specific aspects of God's ultimate solution to the problem of sin and evil. And the New Covenant deals explicitly with the "heart" aspect of that solution.

Part 2

The character of covenant recipients

God carefully chose special individuals to convey some of His covenant commitments to the rest of humanity. Each of these special covenant recipients had already been serving God *from the heart.* Each had a personal relationship with God and was already living a *righteous* life to the best of his ability and knowledge.

Noah is the first person mentioned specifically in the Bible as entering into a covenant relationship with God. This occurred at a time when all human beings—except for Noah (and apparently his immediate family)—had become completely engrossed in an evil way of life (Genesis 6:5-8; Genesis 9:8-11).

The second individual recorded in the Bible with whom God made a personal covenant was Abraham (Genesis 15:18; Genesis 17:1-2).

Abraham shared Noah's key character traits. Just as God chose to have a covenant with Noah, a righteous man (Genesis 6:8-9), so He chose Abraham, a man of faith and obedience (Genesis 15:6; Genesis 26:5), for this second covenant. From these two examples it becomes clear that God initiated covenants with individuals only if the persons receiving those covenants had already demonstrated that they were *willing* to obey Him.

These traits of faithfulness and obedience were also present in Moses (Numbers 12:3; Hebrews 11:24-28) and David—as well as in the other prophets who participated in writing the Old Testament scriptures. Concerning David, God says: "I have made a *covenant* with My chosen, I have sworn to My servant David: 'Your seed [Jesus Christ] I will establish *forever,* and build up your throne to all generations'" (Psalm 89:3-4).

Paul mentions, concerning the people of Israel, that God "raised up for them David as king, to whom also He gave testimony and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, *a man after My own heart, who will do all My will.'* From this man's seed, according to *the promise,* God raised up for Israel a Savior—Jesus" (Acts 13:22-23).

Abraham and David are especially significant to the divine promises and covenants most necessary for humanity's salvation. That is why the very first words in the New Testament are: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, *the Son of David, the Son of Abraham"* (Matthew 1:1).

This opening sentence links Christ's mission directly to the promises made to Abraham and David. The covenants with these men contain the basic promises related to God's plan to offer salvation to all mankind through Jesus Christ.

The covenant with Abraham

To Abraham God promised: "I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"*(Genesis 12:2-3).

Here God declares His intention to offer salvation not only to the physical descendants of Abraham but also to "all the families of the earth." But Abraham's descendants were to play a special and vital role in this process—especially the unique descendant of David who would come as the Messiah.

Peter explained to his fellow Jews what Jesus Christ's most challenging role would be: "You are sons of the prophets, *and of the covenant* which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, *in turning away every one of you from your iniquities"* (Acts 3:25-26).

This is what the whole world needs most. Only when all of humankind has received a "new heart"—through Christ's active involvement in *turning all peoples away from their sins* —will God's plan be complete. Peter explained that full reconciliation, as planned by God, requires "every one of you" to turn away "from your iniquities."

That is God's goal. And He has promised to achieve it! His covenants contain His commitments to fulfill that goal.

More details revealed about God's plan

In His covenant with Abraham, God first began to give clear details of His plan. He told Abraham: "I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly . . . and I will make *nations* of you, and *kings* shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and *your descendants* after you in their generations, for an *everlasting covenant,* to be God to you and your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:2-7).

This covenant anticipated the following key elements of God's plan: God's special relationship with Abraham's descendants, the institution of the kingdom of Israel , the birth and reign of the Messiah over the Kingdom of God and the ultimate salvation of all nations.

Abraham's faith—his implicit trust in and loyalty to God—is ascribed to him as *righteousness* (Genesis 15:6). His full confidence in God was the foundation of his character. His trust in God was demonstrated through his *obedience* (James 2:21-24). Abraham not only *believed* God, he also understood and faithfully *obeyed* God's laws as a result of his faith (Genesis 26:5).

Abraham's pattern of faith—demonstrated by his obedience to God—is the model of living faith that Paul describes in the book of Romans, where he makes the point that even obedient Abraham still needed forgiveness. Speaking of Abraham and his faith, Paul says: "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him" (Romans 4:7-8, NIV).

Abraham's manner of life was that of obeying God from the heart. But even he was not without sin. He still needed forgiveness for the sins he committed—just as do all of us.

That forgiveness is possible only through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But once forgiven, we all are expected to follow Abraham's example in demonstrating our faith by putting our full effort into pleasing God through obedience to Him. That is the righteous response our faith should produce in us.

God's covenant with David

The next covenant to consider between God and a specific person is His covenant with King David.

In it God promises that David's dynasty will last forever and that the Messiah— David's special descendant—is to be the everlasting King of that dynasty. "I have made a covenant with My chosen, I have sworn to My servant David: *'Your seed* I will establish *forever,* and build up your throne to all generations'" (Psalm 89:3-4).

God declares that this covenant will be irrevocable. "Thus says the Lord: 'If you can break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, so that there will not be day and night in their season, then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant, so that he shall not have *a son* to reign on his throne'" (Jeremiah 33:20-21).

When the time came for the Messiah to be born, notice what the angel announced to the woman chosen to be His mother: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and *the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.* And He will *reign* over the house of Jacob *forever,* and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:30-33).

The apostle Peter also commented on the importance of God's covenant with David: "Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne.

"Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

"For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."' Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:29-36, NIV).

From the beginning of man's existence, God has been putting into place the details of His great plan for humanity's salvation. Crucial to that plan was the birth and mission of the Messiah—the promised descendant of David and Abraham. To assure us of the irrevocability of that plan, He confirmed it with a series of covenants.