

The New Covenant

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series: The God Who Makes All Things New

Luke 22:17-20

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The year 2007 is a time of renewal in our church. Why 2007? After 11 continuous years of construction, it's entirely appropriate to revisit why we erected these buildings in the first place.

We are a church committed to discipleship. We are learning all our lives what it means to follow Jesus.

Buildings are simply tools for ministry. This expanded sanctuary and new Ministry Center are dedicated to the mission of calling, equipping and sending more disciples to love and serve the world Jesus came to save.

I find it challenging to maintain a vigorous spiritual life while living in a secular culture. The distorting prejudices of a humanistic society undermine our efforts to live as Jesus' faithful disciples.

The word "renewal" literally means "to make new again." As Christians, we claim allegiance to the One who makes all things new.

Revival acts as a companion word to renewal, although, for some of you, revival conjures up vivid images of evangelistic crusades. Revival literally means to bring back to life or to start all over again. Some of us need divine resuscitation. We barely register a spiritual pulse. As the Psalmist prays, "Will you not revive us again, O Lord" (Psalm 85:6).

The 40 days before Easter, called Lent, serve as an ideal time for God's renewal. Just as nature revives each spring, so God can awaken us to new life.

On your bulletin cover, you will find an assortment of Biblical texts to illustrate ways in which God makes all things new. Today, our focus is the new covenant. Covenant may be the most important Biblical word nobody has ever heard of.

Human relationships are maintained either by contract or covenant. We make contracts with almost everyone, including unknown salesmen. A contract typically exchanges money for goods and services.

Chris and I signed a contract with a furnace company last year. We agreed to pay them \$275. In exchange, they agreed to service our furnace. This contract comes with a laundry list of conditions, what is called "fine print." Some of you know, by trial and error, how important it is to read the fine print.

Human relationships can also be maintained by means of a covenant. A covenant is a mutual pledge between two people which binds them to each other unconditionally. Our family ties illustrate the nature of covenantal relationships.

When our kids used to break curfew, we, as parents, didn't declare, "That's it! You're out of the

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family!” There is nothing parents or children can do to abrogate the covenant. Family members are unconditionally committed to each other. Perhaps the problem in American society today is our tendency to regard marriage as a conditional contract rather than an indissoluble covenant.

Let me restate the difference between a covenant and a contract. A contract exchanges property, while a covenant exchanges people. A contract is conditional, while a covenant is unconditional. A contract comes with an expiration date, while a covenant lasts forever.

Our relationship with God is established with a covenant, not a contract. God doesn't say to us, here are the terms and conditions: Break this contract and you're history. Rather, God offers us an unconditional, indissoluble covenant. There is nothing we can do to ever cause God to stop loving us. No matter what we do, God keeps his covenant. Even our most grievous sins do not invalidate the covenant.

Laura Winner writes in her book *Girl Meets God* about a Jewish man who asks his rabbi, “Why am I confessing all these sins? I didn't commit half of them. I haven't stolen anything or bribed anyone or told lies.” The rabbi looked at the man and said, “If you understood the glory and grandeur of God, you would realize you had committed each of these sins every day of your life.”

It has been said, “I am flawed and sinful more than I ever dared

realize but I am more loved and accepted than I ever dared hope.” Amen to that!

The Bible is divided into two testaments. The word testament is synonymous with the word covenant. There is an old covenant (called the Old Testament) and a new covenant (called the New Testament).

There are so many instances of God making covenants in the Old Testament that we couldn't possibly do justice to them all of them. Let me highlight three covenants, to express something of God's commitment to people.

God offers Noah a covenant after the flood, promising never to destroy the earth again. “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you” (Genesis 9:9-11). God places a rainbow in the sky as a sign of this covenant (9:13-17). Every time we see a rainbow, what should we think of—Dorothy singing “Somewhere over the Rainbow” in the Wizard of Oz? The rainbow reminds us of God's covenant.

God offers Abraham and Sarah a covenant: “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you... for an everlasting covenant” (Genesis 17:2-7). The sign of the covenant, in keeping with the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars, is the rite of circumcision (17:18).

God says to Moses, “If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples...” (Exodus 19:5). The sign of the Mosaic covenant is the Passover,

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an antecedent to Holy Communion. The terms of this covenant are expressed in the Ten Commandments and transported in the sacred Ark of the Covenant.

All of this is to say that what God established in the New Testament is precisely a new covenant.

Several of you this week have asked me to comment on the Discovery Channel's documentary airing tonight on *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*. The producers of this show believe they have made a discovery that will shake the very foundations of Christianity.

The tomb, discovered in 1980, contains the remains of ten people, including Jesus, Mary, Joseph, another Mary (whom producers infer is Mary Magdalene), and Judas, son of Jesus. The filmmakers believe this finding substantiates *The Da Vinci Code* assertion that Jesus was married and had a child.

This documentary makes for good TV but bad history. These are common first century names. There is no likelihood Jesus' family owned a family tomb—much less in Jerusalem. There is no credible, historical research that Jesus was married or had a child.

My concern is that Christians are duped by such made-for-TV news. We must keep the main thing in Scripture the main thing.

The primary message of the New Testament is that God established, in the New Testament, a new covenant. Jeremiah anticipated a day when God would make a new covenant with people

(Jeremiah 31:31-34). Jesus Christ mediates this new covenant (Hebrews 8:6). The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs of this new covenant. What God offers us in baptism is a covenant, not a contract. Note carefully Jesus' words that institute Holy Communion: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20).

God offers us a covenant. Aren't you glad God offers us an unconditional covenant rather than a conditional contract?

Have you entered into this new covenant with God by professing Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? You can invite Jesus Christ into your life today as your Savior from sin and yield to him as Lord of your life.

Some of us have already entered into this covenant relationship, yet the fire of our love for God is nearly extinguished. Like believers in the Ephesus Church, we have lost the love for God we had at first (Revelation 2:5). It's not enough for God to have done something in our lives back then and there. What about the here and now? Revive us again, O Lord.

You may be thinking this sermon is for other people. This sermon is for those who need it the most and for those who think they need it the least!

I researched this week sermons on revival. There are so few compelling sermons which call us to revival in our day. Most of the sermons that caught my imagination date back to the 17th and 18th

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centuries, during the First and Second Great Awakening in America. After reading sermons by Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield and Charles Finney, let me tell you, those guys had it going on! They knew how to preach revival!

There is, in contemporary society, a bias against the old. Thomas Oden coined a name for this bias—he called it “Modern Chauvinism.” Modern chauvinism has, as its premise, that newer is better and older is worse. It views the past as irrelevant to the present. It regards the challenge of the present as so unprecedented that the past could not possibly have anything of value to say to us. G. K. Chesterton called it, “The arrogant oligarchy of those who happen to be walking around.”

As I study the Great Awakenings, I recognize five ingredients to renewal:

First, is a commitment to prayer. The leaders of the Great Awakenings spoke of this earnest, persistent prayer as “Prevailing Prayer.” A few weeks ago, I was presented with a notebook of 350 signatures of people committed to pray for the renewal of our congregation and church. What would happen if we were committed to prevailing prayer?

Second, is a genuine confession of sin. I find the fourth step in the AA’s 12-step recovery process particularly compelling, the willingness to “make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.”

Third, is the faithful preaching of the gospel, something I hope and pray I am doing here today.

Fourth, is a commitment to mission. Revival is more than a “bless me club,” it’s a “blessed to be a blessing” orientation to living.

Fifth, is a commitment to the community of believers. Revival in each of our lives will bring about corporate renewal in the church.

The essential question is this: Are you willing to let Jesus Christ do something in your life right now? Jesus Christ not only offers us forgiveness, he offers us transformation. He can make all things new!

The point here is that with the New Covenant that Christ established and the gift of the Holy Spirit who indwells all its members, we not only know what to do, we also have been given the power and strength to do it. More on this in a moment. Third, the Old or Mosaic Covenant was temporary. The new covenant comes through the death of Jesus Christ. It's in the Bible, Luke 22:20, NIV. "In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you.'" The new covenant means we can go directly to God through Christ. It's in the Bible, Hebrews 7:22, NIV. "Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant." There is forgiveness of sins only through the new covenant. It's in the Bible, Hebrews 9:14-15, NIV. Question: "What is the New Covenant?". Answer: The New Covenant (or New Testament) is the promise that God makes with humanity that He will forgive sin and restore fellowship with those whose hearts are turned toward Him. Jesus Christ is the mediator of the New Covenant, and His death on the cross is the basis of the promise (Luke 22:20). The New Covenant was predicted while the Old Covenant was still in effect—the prophets Moses, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all allude to the New Covenant. The old covenant demanded works (doing) while the new covenant only demands obedience. In the old, Moses and prophets were mediators while in the new covenant, Jesus Christ is the mediator. The old covenant is a covenant of letter while the new covenant is a covenant of spirit. The Idea of the New Covenant as presented in the Gospels and the Pauline letters may sound "new" to modern Christ-followers. But is it really? Jeremiah declared that in the future the LORD would establish a New Covenant with both the house of Israel and the house of Judah. This covenant, unlike the previous one, would be characterized by God's™s Torah being written on the very hearts of the Ancient People of God (Jer. 31:31-34).