

Covenant people

The story of God's relationship with humanity is marked by a series of covenants that God has entered into with people, and much of the Old Testament tells of the outworking of a series of three of those covenants: the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15), the covenant with Moses at Sinai, and the covenant with King David in 2 Samuel 7.

The first of those, the one with Abraham, involves God formalising the promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12, that is, descendants (a nation), a land given by God, and blessings (a special relationship for the nation with God). People often call it a covenant of grace, because it is one sided: God promises things to Abraham, and that's it. It is unconditional. God will do these things.

The covenant with Moses is different: it tied the people of Israel to God through a series of commandments and laws which covered most aspects of their lives, including worship, treatment of servants and each other, and protection of property.

Importantly, the covenant with Moses, was not 'one sided' with God promising to do things for the nation, instead, it also relied on the nation honouring God appropriately, and history would go on to show that the people often failed to keep God's commands.

The book of Judges tells the story of that time, and the ending of that ending pre-empted what would happen next. The last verse of the book, Judges 21:25, tells us. "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit".

Our Old Testament reading today from 2 Samuel, begins the next covenant God establishes, but this time it's not with the nation of Israel, it's with Israel's king - its second king, David, and it's quite different to the earlier covenants, and it arose because the nation of Israel fundamentally changed with kingship.

You might remember last month we looked at 1 Samuel, when the nation decided it wanted a king – even though God didn't want them to have a king. It fits that another covenant was needed, not with the nation, but with the king who would lead that nation.

The first part of verse 14, which ended our reading is key: it describes the special relationship that God binds himself to with the king "I will be his father, and he will be my son." 2 Samuel 7:14a

There is no qualifying 'if' in this covenant, although the kings themselves might suffer as a result of what they do, the dynasty (of David) would never be cut off. God is promising that David's reign will not end the way Saul's did.

This new covenant provided a certain hope for the future, the outworking of the promises of a land, a nation, a great name, and blessings for all the people of the earth that God had promised back in Genesis 12.

As chapter 7 begins we see David settled in his new palace in his new capital city. God has given him rest from all his enemies. And now he's got time to think. And he decides that the time has come to build a house suitable for God. Until then the ark of the covenant (the ark that contained the tablets of the ten commandments) had been kept in a tent – the tabernacle – which was fine while the people of Israel were also living in tents, but David thinks that now they've settled in the city it's time to build a house for the ark to be placed in.

He calls for Nathan the prophet, and says, "What do you think?" Well, Nathan thinks that sounds like a great idea. After all, the Lord is with him. He's sure to be right. And what could be better than to build a house for the Lord?

Except for one thing. It isn't! Nathan has made the mistake that so many of us make, of assuming that just because something sounds like a good thing it, must be what God wants, without first asking God what God thinks. Nathan hadn't prayed about it. He just thought it was a good idea.

Nathan gets a shock when God comes to him that night, to tell him that he doesn't want David to build him a house.

God doesn't want David to build him a house: God has a tabernacle for his presence to live in, the tabernacle that he instructed Moses to build for him.

David thinks it's his job to house God – he thinks a tent just isn't good enough.

David is in danger of forgetting the nature of his relationship with God. David is where he is today because God has taken him from being a shepherd boy, to become the king of Israel. God is the one who's brought him this peace, this rest from his enemies, this time to think. And God hadn't finished with him yet. Not only is God planning to give him rest from his enemies, but God says "Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth." (7:9b)

Rather than God wanting David to build him a house, God tells him he plans to make a house for David. Which is odd, because David's already got a palace! "The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you." The house God is talking about is not a physical one: Rather he means a royal house, a dynasty. The house that God will give David is the royal house of Israel. He's going to set up the house of David – the line of David. He's going to give David a son who'll establish his kingdom forever.

The next king of course was Solomon, but God isn't talking about Solomon, although it was in Solomon's day they the kingdom was at its greatest and the temple was built as a house for God. but as we read the Old Testament, we find out pretty quickly that he doesn't establish a kingdom that lasts forever. In fact, the kingdom splintered apart within a few years of Solomon's death.

But there is a king who'll be descended from David for whom this is all true. Jesus – who is of the line of David - comes and establishes both a kingdom that will last forever and a house for God's name. Look at verse 14: " I will be his father, and he will be my son." And we can turn to the New Testament and see this fulfilled - the gospel accounts tell us of the voice from heaven speaking at Jesus' baptism – "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11) and again at the transfiguration ""This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7).

And God did build a house for David, not a house made with stones and mortar, but a house made up of the people of God. The body of Christ. The church.

And this is where we come in. We are the people of the covenant. God promises to build a house for David, a house for his name, and it turns out we are that house. At the same time we stand in the line of David, because we're followers of Jesus. We're his adopted brothers and sisters.

The New Testament uses this picture of building a house in a number of places. Jesus makes a direct reference to this prophecy in John 2:19 where he says: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He's saying the Temple that Solomon built and that Ezra, Nehemiah and now Herod have rebuilt, is just a pointer to the real Temple that he will rebuild in his resurrection body.

Paul uses this idea in 1 Cor 3:10,11: "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ."

And Peter takes this idea further in 1 Peter 2:4,5: "Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

And in our reading this morning from Paul's letter to the Ephesians "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord." (Ephesians 2:19-21)

Using a horticultural metaphor rather than an architectural one, Paul in 1 Cor 3:6,7, says "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." Like David, it's no good us saying, we're going to build a house for God. Because it's he who will give the growth, he who will build his church.

It's something that we often forget. So often Christians decide they want to grow the church, and ask what do they have to do to achieve that. But the success of God's kingdom isn't dependant on us; as I said, there's no "If" in God's promises to David.

But that doesn't mean we do nothing. Because although God's kingdom isn't dependant on us, we get to be part of it. We get to respond to God's grace to us in the death of Jesus to reconcile us to God, by sharing that good news with others.

Jesus said to Peter, "And I tell you that you are Peter [the rock], and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Matthew 16:18) God builds his Church, but he builds it on the foundation, not just of Jesus, but also on the foundation of the apostles. As we see in the book of Acts, the church was established and grew as the apostles were sent out by Jesus to share the gospel to the ends of the earth. Then they called others to carry on the mission. People gave up their lives for God's service. Some provided food and accommodation, others gave money to support the church. And to this day, that's how God continues to build his Church, inspiring people by the Holy Spirit, and using the skills and talents and assets and labour of all who follow Jesus.

When the ancient temple was built (1 Kings 5), Solomon took David's vision of a temple and got someone to design it. He raised the money to build it. He enlisted the aid of his allies. Solomon paid for the timber with grain and olive oil that came from the people of Israel. We read that he conscripted 30,000 labourers from Israel to go and cut the timber. He had 70,000 carriers and 80,000 stone cutters, as well as 3300 foremen to supervise the work. It was a massive undertaking.

He was building this temple that David had dreamed about and planned for. But who supplied the effort to build this new Temple? The people of God.

And so it is today. Who's building this Church of Jesus Christ? Well, God is. Clearly this body we're part of is the work of God. Nothing else would have stood up to the difficulties of the past 2000 years. But at the same time, we're building it, as we each do our part to build on the foundation laid

by Jesus, by the apostles, and by all those faithful generations of Christians between then and now. All of God's covenant people.

The church in Australia today is mostly in decline. And that decline is across locations and across denominations. And we wonder what we can do. And we wonder what we've done wrong. And we're older. And tired, and have less energy, less time, and less money. And so often we despair.

But we are still here, and we are still God's covenant people. God's promises to us don't change because our attendance falls or offertory falls or we do the wrong thing. God's promises remain always.

And ultimately it is God who builds his kingdom. We are called to be part of the building of that kingdom, not matter how few of us there are, or old we are, or how tired or how stretched we are.

So to finish, let me ask:

Do we know that you are part of God's covenant people? Not simply in a Sunday School answer way, but know it in our hearts? Because God's promises to David are God's promises to all of us. God's promises to us don't change because of what we do – or what we don't do.

And if we do know it, do we act on it?

Because we are, God's special people, God's chosen people, God's covenant people.

And as we truly understand that, we can hold that in our hearts, and know God's direction, and his energy and his inspiration, for our lives and our church.

Amen.