



cell outlines
JANUARY 2021

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OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of every year people all over the world make plans, promises and resolutions. It's a good time to refocus ourselves and realign our lives. We have a similar practice in The Salvation Army. Every January we spend time looking at our vision as a territory and recommitting (or perhaps committing for the first time) to place this vision at the forefront of our lives. This year our focus is on 'God's covenant'. 'Covenant' is a word you might have heard before but might not fully understand. Don't worry, you're not alone there. We are going to explore this together for the next four weeks. Let's go.

WHAT ON EARTH IS COVENANT?

WELCOME

All sorts of thoughts come to mind when we think about the word 'Christianity'. Some of these might be positive and some might be negative. Some of these words might be things you think, and some might be words you know would come to the minds of your friends or family.

Give each member of your group one minute to write down as many words as they can think of that come to mind when they hear the word 'Christianity'. You could ask them to use a pen and paper, their mobile phone, or you could use the whiteboard function on Zoom so everyone can write on the same screen.

Once the time is up, ask the group to share the words they have written down and see if any came up more regularly than others. Then check to see if anyone wrote down the word 'covenant' or not.

Ask the group:

- 💬 Why or why not did they include the word 'covenant'?
- 💬 Do they know what this word means?

Covenant is widely misunderstood by Christians and non-Christians alike. However, it is arguably one of the most important words to help us understand ourselves, God and our relationship with God. Let's look at what it means.

WORD

Say: The word covenant wasn't created by the people who wrote the Bible, and it isn't a new concept just used in Christianity. In fact, this was a term used by ancient eastern nations long before the Old Testament writers used it.

Game: Split the group into two teams. Explain that you're thinking of a common household item and that their task is to bring it to the screen. However, you're not going to tell them which item you're thinking of. Instead, you're going to give them clues. Team 1 will get half of the clues and Team 2 will get the other half. They will have one minute to discuss the clues in their teams and fetch the item. (You could use breakout rooms for the team discussion.) Let the teams try to fetch the correct item first and then allow the teams to share their clues with one another and try again.

Team 1 clues: I can be found upstairs and downstairs. I am often placed on top of another item. I'm soft to touch.

Team 2 clues: I can be any colour. I'm often square shaped. You might find a few of me together in one room.

Answer: cushion.

Team 1 clues: I am smaller than a piece of A4 paper. I am mostly shiny and smooth. I am used every day.

Team 2 clues: I am often found downstairs. Most households have quite a few of me. I am lighter than a mobile phone.

Answer: fork

Ask the group if it was easier once they shared the other team's clues.

📖 **Read:** 1 Kings 5:10-12

10 in this way Hiram kept Solomon supplied with all the cedar and juniper logs he wanted, **11** and Solomon gave Hiram twenty thousand cors of wheat as food for his household, in addition to twenty thousand baths of pressed olive oil. Solomon continued to do this for Hiram year after year. **12** the Lord gave Solomon wisdom, just as he had promised him. There were peaceful relations between Hiram and Solomon, and the two of them made a treaty.

Say: The word 'treaty' used at the end of this passage is the Hebrew word *berit* which means 'covenant'. Here is an example of a covenant between Hiram and Solomon. They both have something the other person/nation needs.

Ask: What does Hiram have and what does Solomon have to give?

Say: A 'covenant' is a formal partnership between two parties to accomplish a goal. It is formal like a contract but also has an added relational aspect between the two groups, ie they become friends. This was the normal way for nations or people to interact with one another in the ancient east.

Ask: Can you think of an example of a 'covenant' like this in society today?

 **Read:** Malachi 2:14

14 You ask, 'Why?' It is because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Say: The word used to join a man and a woman together in the Old Testament is the word 'covenant'. Their marriage was understood as two parties coming together to bring something the other party needed in order to create children. This was done in the context of a loving relationship rather than just a legal obligation.

Ask: The man and the woman are obviously the two parties involved in this covenant, but there appears to also be a third party – who is that and what is their role?

Say: While some covenants we read about in the Bible seem to be of a simply practical nature, others seem to have a sacred element to them too. Marriage is one of those sacred covenants where God is at the centre of the partnership.

Ask: Do you think this is how people understand marriage today?

WORSHIP

So, the word 'covenant' is taken by the writers of the Bible and used in lots of different ways to help us understand how God relates to us. *(Seriously this comes up all the time in pretty much every major storyline in the Bible from Adam to Noah to Abraham to David and to Jesus. We're going to explore some of those covenant stories in the weeks to come.)*

God invites humanity into a covenant with him – a partnership where both parties bring something to the table and give to the other. We know God has far more to give us than we have to give him but he invites us into this partnership anyway. He doesn't do this as a formal contract but he does it through a loving relationship with him.

Activity: Ask everyone to grab a piece of paper and a pen. While you listen to a song, ask each person to draw a line down the middle of the paper, writing 'God' on one side and 'me' on the other. Ask them to take some time to write or draw what different things God gives us and what different things we can give God. Once the song has finished you can invite the group to share what they have written down if they are comfortable.

WITNESS

In our society today people break promises and commitments all the time.

Ask: Can you think of a time when you've broken a promise or commitment you made?

Ask: Why do you think we can find it so hard to be committed to something or keep a promise?

This week you might want to think about the promises and commitments you've made in the past or might make in the future. If God's way of interacting with us is to keep his promises and commitments, then we can show people who God is by also keeping our promises and commitments.

Challenge: Every time you make a promise or commitment this week, take time to ask God to help you be faithful to the person you are committing to.

NOAH

WELCOME

Last week we dipped our toes in the ocean of what a 'covenant' is. A covenant is a formal partnership between two parties, where each gives something to the other. A covenant is a relational partnership and is the way in which God chooses to interact with his creation. We know this was not a new idea when the Bible was written but was a commonly used method of interaction between nations and people. However, covenants with God have an added sacred nature – they are more than just a contract.

Start this week's cell group with a classic ice breaker game: who am I?

Ask each member of your group to write down on a piece of paper an animal of their choice and not to show anyone else. Then taking it in turns, give the group the chance to ask each person five questions to try and guess which animal they are. After five questions the person being questioned must show their piece of paper to the rest of the group to see if the group guessed correctly.

We probably all have a favourite animal. One study looked at which were the most popular animals on Instagram. Not surprisingly dogs (138,672,934 posts) and cats (117,668,890 posts) won by a landslide. If you want to see something cute check out:

@jiffpom or <https://www.instagram.com/jiffpom>

@nala_cat or https://www.instagram.com/nala_cat

We will get to the relevance of animals a little later. Let's start by delving into the Bible together.

WORD

Watch the Bible Project's video on covenant: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ferLlsvlml> | (5mins 45secs)

Ask: What stood out to you in the video?

Ask: Do you consider yourself in partnership with God?

Say: While this video mentions four covenants in the Bible, there are many more than this. God is making covenants right from the start in the book of Genesis with Adam and he does this over and over again with his people. This week we are going to focus on the covenant God makes with Noah.

Say: God established a covenant with Noah after Noah has been obedient to God, built an ark and preserved God's creation during the flood. Now Noah finds himself on dry land, with his family and all the animals from the ark, and God tells him that his family will be blessed, will increase in number and have dominion over all the creatures on the Earth.

Read: Genesis 9:8-11

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: **9** 'I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you **10** and with every living creature that was with you – the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you – every living creature on earth. **11** I establish my covenant with you: never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.'

Discuss the following questions:

- 🗨️ What is God promising to Noah in this covenant?
- 🗨️ How do you think Noah would have felt hearing this?
- 🗨️ Why do you think God does not ask for anything in return from Noah as part of this covenant?

Read: Genesis 9:12-16

12 And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: 13 I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. 16 Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.’

Ask: What sign does God give Noah that he will keep his promise and why do you think this sign is important?

The rainbow was a sign of faithfulness, trust, peace and stability from God to Noah. It was a sign that God keeps his promises. It was a reminder that God is King over creation but that he will never harm it in this way again.

Ask: What does a rainbow represent in our society today?

Ask: Are there any similarities between what the rainbow meant to Noah and what it represents to our society today?

WORSHIP

A great way to worship God is through our creativity. We see God’s creativity from the beginning of creation right through to everyday life as we study science, go for a walk or watch a person grow.

Ask your group to use their creativity during this time of worship to help them meditate on the faithfulness of God and the never-ending way in which God loves us. Ask them to use anything they have around the house to create their own ‘art attack’ version of a rainbow. Once they have finished, they can stop and be still, simply meditating on their creation and on God’s creative power. You might want to play a piece of music in the background to help everyone remain calm and focused.

The group might want to share their art attack creations once you’ve finished.

Remind the group that while a rainbow represents many things in our society today, nothing can top the incredible fact that it is a symbol of God’s covenant relationship with Noah – that despite knowing Noah and his descendants would break their side of the covenant, God was faithful anyway.

WITNESS

God promises Noah through this rainbow that he will never cause such chaos and instability on Earth again. Despite this, our planet still suffers every day. God told Adam and Noah that he and his offspring (that includes us) would have dominion over the animals and the plants – that we would have everything we need on this planet. Watch [this video](#) to explore humanity’s impact on the planet. (4mins 12secs)

Discuss the following questions:

- 🗣️ What stood out to you in this video?
- 🗣️ How does this make you feel?
- 🗣️ Do you think this is what God had in mind when he made this covenant with Noah?

Challenge: What can you do to reclaim this covenant and take up your role as a partner with God to care for his creation?

ABRAM

WELCOME

Last week we started our session thinking about animals and specifically some very cute ones on Instagram. Today we're getting a little gory, so if you're a big animal lover you might want to have something comforting nearby for later (maybe a warm drink or a big fluffy cushion)! Today things get a bit darker.

Today our Bible story includes trust, war, kidnapping, animals and a strange floating brazier. In the spirit of all these themes, let's see if you can guess the titles of these movies. Play each clip until someone has guessed correctly. You can add more movies that have anything to do with the themes in the story.

- ▶ (PG) Lord of the Rings (start at 0:37) <https://youtu.be/rCZ3SN65kIs?t=37> (4mins 33secs)
- ▶ (PG-13) Taken <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjiml5xzK68> (3mins 51secs)
- ▶ (U) Onward <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MifkpysWjSk> (59secs)
- ▶ (PG-13) Abduction <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLtqUyxg8Ng> (5mins 7secs)
- ▶ (U) Madagascar https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YolcmX40_s (3mins 19secs)

WORD

Watch: In case you missed it last week or you just want a reminder – watch this video from the Bible Project on the theme of covenant. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ferLlsvlml>

Ask: Did anything new stand out to you this time?

Say: Back in Genesis 12 God asks Abram to leave his home and his people in order to go to a new land that God will show him. In return God promises Abram that he will make him a great nation, will bless him and that the whole world will be blessed through him. Abram was 75 years old but he trusted God and set off with his wife and nephew Lot. At some point along the journey Lot is caught in the crosshair of two nations at war with one another and he gets taken prisoner. Abram attacks and gets his nephew back, but he knows he has angered Lot's captors.

 **Read:** Genesis 15

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

'Do not be afraid, Abram.

**I am your shield,
your very great reward.'**

² But Abram said, 'Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' ³ And Abram said, 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.'

⁴ Then the word of the Lord came to him: 'This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.' ⁵ He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'

⁶ Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Discuss the following questions:

- 🗨️ Why do you think Abram is doubting God's earlier promise in Genesis 12, that his family will become a great nation and the world will be blessed through him?
- 🗨️ Would you believe God if you were over 75 years old, worn out from travelling and having had your family member taken captive, and then God told you that you will have as many children as there are stars in the sky?

Say: Abram believed God and God said that Abram was righteous. The word 'righteousness' means to be in 'right relationship' with God.

Ask: What can we learn from this passage about what a 'right relationship' with God looks like?

Say: God then restates his promise to Abram: that God will give Abram possession of a great land. Abram is quite human in his response and he asks God how he can be sure of this. God's response doesn't seem immediately helpful; in fact it's quite disturbing.

Read: Genesis 15:9-10 and 17-21

⁹ So the Lord said to him, 'Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.'

¹⁰ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half.

¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates – ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.'

Ask: Yes, that's right – this week the animals get cut in two. Get that fluffy cushion or warm drink handy! What do you think this strange scene is all about, and how is it meant to reassure Abram that God will deliver on his promise?

Say: This scene is not actually as random as it seems. We see a similar scene in Jeremiah 34. In Jeremiah 34 God is angry at Israelite kings for not setting their slaves free when they said they would in a covenant. God tells them that they will be treated like a calf cut in half. The ritual of walking between animals cut in half was to symbolise the serious nature of the covenant and the high cost that goes with breaking it. These Israelite kings will now face a consequence just as severe.

Ask: Do you think we take our promises and commitments this seriously?

Say: In the passage above, God is the smoking brazier walking between the pieces of animal. While God does this Abram is passed out on the floor. This is unusual because normally both parties would walk through the animal pieces to establish the covenant.

Ask: Why do you think God walked through the pieces alone and left Abram asleep on the floor?

Say: God appears to be protecting Abram from the worst consequences of breaking the covenant. Just as with Noah, God knows that Abram won't be able to keep his side of the promise, but God doesn't want this to get in the way of the world being blessed through Abram.

WORSHIP

So many feelings come to mind when we think about the fact that God chooses to have a relationship with us even though we often let him down. Take some time to think about how that makes you feel. It might make you have a whole host of different feelings. Your feelings don't have to be logical or the same as anyone else.

Give your group as many options as you can to respond to God:

- * Draw
- * Write
- * Talk
- * Be still/silent
- * Read the passage again
- * Lie down
- * Walk

It's easy to be busy and push our feelings aside, but God creates a safe space for us to approach him with anything at all. Our worship doesn't always need to be loud and happy – what God really desires from us is to come before him honestly. That is what will lead us to 'right relationship' with God.

WITNESS

God came to Abram in a vision at the start of this week's story. Abram paid attention to this vision and he was able to trust God, to ask God questions and... experience some rather strange stuff. God works in the everyday stuff in our lives but he also works in ways beyond our comprehension and understanding. We can sometimes miss this if we are so caught up in daily life that we don't stop to recognise God is speaking.

Ask: How much time each day do you spend doing absolutely nothing?

Ask: How do you feel about long periods of quiet or silence?

Challenge: This week set a timer for 10 minutes a day to stop and just listen to God. God has so much he wants to give us and say to us. Some of it might even be a bit strange and not make perfect sense at the time (like a floating brazier). But we don't want to miss out on any of the ways in which God wants to partner with us and be in relationship.

JESUS

WELCOME

We've reached the final week of delving into the topic of covenant. I hope that by now you feel you have a deeper understanding of this word and how significant it is in the Bible story. This week we're starting our session with perhaps the best thing on the planet – food!

Ask each member of your group to bring their favourite food to cell group this week. This might be over Zoom, or if it's in person you could provide this as the leader. Spend the first 10 minutes simply eating together and catching up. Jesus knew the importance of eating a meal with friends and so it makes sense to take time to do likewise.

You can do this food-themed quiz while you eat together:

1. What type of beans are used to make baked beans?

 - a. Borlotti beans
 - b. Haricot beans**
 - c. Cannellini beans
 - d. Flageolet beans
2. Bobotie is a national dish of which country?

 - a. Nigeria
 - b. Ethiopia
 - c. South Africa**
 - d. Kenya
3. Who won *The Great British Bake Off* 2020?

 - a. Lottie
 - b. Dave
 - c. Rowan
 - d. Peter**
4. What country is nigiri from?

 - a. Russia
 - b. Japan**
 - c. China
 - d. Thailand
5. Which of these chocolate bars does not contain nuts?

 - a. Snickers
 - b. Double Decker**
 - c. Picnic
 - d. Toblerone
6. Which flower does the spice saffron come from?

 - a. Orchid
 - b. Crocus**
 - c. Nasturtium
 - d. Poppy
7. Which of these is not a mushroom?

 - a. King oyster
 - b. Chicken of the woods
 - c. Tiger's tail**
 - d. Lion's mane
8. An Eccles cake comes from which county?

 - a. Yorkshire
 - b. Lincolnshire
 - c. Lancashire**
 - d. Cheshire
9. What happens to an egg laid by an old chicken?

 - a. It gets smaller
 - b. The yolk turns green
 - c. The shell wrinkles**
 - d. The shell gets spots on it
10. What is the most eaten food in the world?

 - a. Rice**
 - b. Bread
 - c. Potatoes
 - d. Meat

WORD

Read: Luke 22:14-20

¹⁴ When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. ¹⁵ And he said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God.'

¹⁷ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, 'Take this and divide it among you. ¹⁸ For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'

¹⁹ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'

²⁰ 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.'

Remind the group of the story from last week of God making a covenant with Abram and that God establishes the severity of the covenant by walking between the carcasses of animals chopped in two.

Ask: Can you spot any similarities between the story from last week and this scene of the Last Supper?

Say: In the Last Supper story we have Jesus splitting the bread in two (think of the animals chopped in two). He then divides this out to his disciples and says that the bread represents his body. In essence, Jesus is going to be the serious cost, the way in which God establishes his covenant with his people. No dead animals are needed to show how seriously God is taking his new covenant with his people. Instead the covenant will be made through Jesus' blood (represented by the wine).

Ask: How does connecting these two stories make you see the Last Supper story differently?

Say: God is making a covenant with Jesus and Jesus is the cost/price for that covenant being established. Now the covenant can never fail. Jesus is the one person who will always be faithful to God because he is God.

Ask: How does this make you feel?

Say: Jesus makes this covenant with God for us. It doesn't require us to be perfect, always follow the rules and never make a mistake. It doesn't even require us to never have doubts or questions (Abram certainly did at times). But we are still called to live our lives in response to the incredibly good news – that God promises to be our God and for us to be his people and that this is made certain through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Ask: What sort of response do you think God's covenant with Jesus requires?

Say: Being a Christian means to put our trust in the generous, loving faithfulness of God and then to get up and follow him every day.

WORSHIP

Jesus says that when we break bread and drink together (or perhaps share any meal), we should remind ourselves of the covenant he made and of the cost he paid to assure us of that covenant.

Ask your group to have some bread and a drink available to them. Read through the passage above slowly three times. During the first reading ask the group to simply listen and pay attention to each word. During the second reading invite the group to break their bread in two and eat some of it. During the third reading invite the group to take a sip of their drink. As they do this, invite them to accept the great cost that Jesus paid as a personal gift to them.

If you have the Vision and Commitment cards available to you, you may wish to invite the group to read and sign these as a symbol of their desire to be part of the covenant relationship God made with Jesus. If you don't have the cards available, you can invite the group to make their own by simply signing their name on a special piece of paper and keeping it somewhere safe.

WITNESS

We know that signing our name on a commitment card or eating some bread is not the end of the story. In fact, it is the start of a daily adventure with God. It is an invitation to come and 'live life to the full' (John 10:10) in relationship with God.

Ask: What do you think would help you to actively follow God daily?

Ask: What do you think can get in the way of actively following God daily?

Accountability is a powerful tool which can help our goals become a reality. Sharing your plans and asking others to encourage you and challenge you, can help you flourish in a way we can't do on our own. It's great to share our plans with God, but it's also great to share them with one another. God created his people to be in community – in covenant relationship with one another.

Challenge: Share one thing you want to do or stop doing to help you follow God every day. You can think out of the box and there is no right or wrong answer. Then agree to keep one another accountable. That might mean sending each other an encouraging message in the week, asking a challenging question or remembering to check with one another next week to see how you've got on.

The wonderful thing about covenant is the very nature of it is doing something together. You can't be in a covenant by yourself. It requires relationship, generosity and trust. This is how God journeyed with every person we read about in the Bible and it's what God invites us into every day. It's brilliant, wonderful, life-giving, freedom-bringing news. Do you want to join in?