

Covenant: Bound Till Death (Praise the Lord!)
Prairie Division Men's Camp at Beaver Creek February 19-21, 2010
Speaker's Notes by Captain Michael Ramsay (Swift Current)

1. Good News, Handcuffs

Handcuffs – Definition of Covenant

Good New - Genesis 15:7-21

2. Judges and the Verdict on Covenant

Gibeonites - Judges 2:1-5, Joshua 9, 2 Samuel 21:1-14

3. McChickens and Milkshakes

Galatians 3:19-25

Romans 9:30-10:4

Hebrews 8:8-13

4. The Strength of our Covenant

OT Salvationists? Numbers 6:1-12

Session 1: Berit[h]: Handcuffs and the Good News

Who can tell me what a covenant is? (Contract / agreement)

Can anyone give me an **example of a covenant**? What covenants do people sign in our contemporary society? (Marriage, Soldiership, Officership)

Like all agreements a covenant with an equal, a superior, or a subordinate... Covenants can also be made with God as either a partner or a witness. This is important because when God is a party to a covenant it adds a whole even new stronger meaning to the covenant.

Any Hebrew scholars in the crowd today? Does anyone know what the most common Hebrew word for covenant is in the HB? (Berit[h], 289 times)

Can anyone tell me what Berit[h] literally means? Can either of the volunteers tell me? (It means to fetter, shackle, the bind together, to handcuff)

Think of the most common covenant involving God in our Canadian society – marriage.

And think of the beautiful expressions that we have to refer to it such that actually relate to covenant...the 'old ball and chain' – (wives are good; the better half, of course). That expression though isn't that far off but the thing is that this covenant when it involves God (as it does in Christian marriages and Soldiership agreements) is a good thing. I'll explain this in a little detail in a little bit. First I want to have some of what we, who used to be in the business - it is a long time since I taught in a classroom now - we used to refer to as 'teacher talk' – these are the answers to the exam questions. This is what we really need to know about covenants made with or before God.

These are the key points for session one:

- 1) It is very important for us to respect our covenants: be they marriage, Soldiership (Salvation Army membership) or other covenants that are made with or before the Lord.**
- 2) God is faithful to His covenants even when we are faithless (Ro 3:3,4; 1 Thes 5:24; 2 Thes 3:3).**
- 3) The default length of time for a contract made with God as either a partner or as a witness (such as marriage and Soldership for example) is life. We are not released from our covenant responsibilities simply by disobeying them. We'll look a that a little later.**

Pertaining to the advantage of the fact that God is faithful even when we are faithless and that He doesn't toss us aside for simple disobedience, I'm going to read a little bit here from an analogy that I have used at corps council meetings as well as in a 2008 article in The Officer Magazine. The analogy is to a three-legged race:

The three-legged race is always a fun one to watch at the fair. Perhaps you have noticed that some people seem to do it with ease whereas many others tend to fall down and trip all over each other. I have seen dads tied to their kids who have simply picked them up and run with them without breaking the tie that binds. It is a lot of fun but you'll notice that the team that wins moves in sync with each other so that with every stride they are matching their partner.

When you have two independently minded people however (like siblings often) you see two people going nowhere other than to a pile-up on the ground. Over this weekend we will be looking at covenants in our sessions here. The thing about covenants – as we discussed we will discussed – the word itself refers to being bound, tied, or shackled together, not unlike the three-legged race.

We in the Salvation Army are a covenanted people. Our soldiers pledge to uphold our doctrine and, among other things, abstain from all that can enslave the mind and body. Our officers covenant to make soul-winning a primary focus of our lives. We are bound to this. And as Christians in general we are yoked together with Christ, like a child tied to his father in a three-

legged race. In this, I think we need to remember that it is difficult to move, let alone win the race, when the one you are yoked together with is going in the other direction; ...BUT when you are following in a proper covenant, the Lord's yoke is easy! And really what can we accomplish on our own that isn't accomplished much more easily and effectively when we were shackled to the LORD!

REVIEW

- 1) What is the most common word for covenant in the HB?
- 2) What does berit[h] mean? (To fetter / to shackle)
- 3) What is the default term for a divine covenant?
- 4) If we are not the most skilled team members does God just release us from our contract?
- 5) Bonus marks: How many times does the word show up in the HB? (286 times)

What is the Good News? Jesus lived, died, rose again, and he's coming back and because of this we will all have eternal life – all of the nations are blessed through Jesus.

Where in the Bible do you think that we would find this mentioned for the first time?

Where would we find the promise of salvation of blessing for all the people of the world, all the nations? (**Read Genesis 12:3**)

Now we don't have a lot of time today. I do encourage you to read Genesis Chapters 12-17 tonight for homework. And pray through them – really meditate on the scriptures.

Today I want to **concentrate on Genesis 15:7-21**. I'll set the stage a little bit for this: This is where God ratifies His contract with Abram with a strange but significant covenant ceremony. The terms of contract mentioned in Genesis 12-17 are 1) all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him 2) Abram and Sarai will have children and 3) their children will inhabit the land he is on at some point in the future. He ratifies the contract with a very strange covenantal act (v.18).

Read Genesis 15:7-21.

THE CEREMONY ITSELF

Now let's take a look at the whole contractual ceremony because it is peculiar in Scripture.

- God asks Abram to bring him a number of different dead animals of varying (and mostly forgotten) significance and He has Abram cut many of them in half (Genesis 15:9).
- Abram stays by these bodies guarding them from animals that want to eat them (v.11) then he falls asleep in a 'deep and terrifying darkness (v.12).'
- Abram is terrified as the Lord approaches him and says, verse 13, "know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years.
- The Lord meets him with the comforting words of, 'your descendants will be slaves for 400 years.'

...On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:17,18)

Picture this moment with me. Have many of us ever been hunting? Would you consider this good news? We do. Now this is important: the 400 years of sin and slavery are signs of the covenant. They are not the covenant itself and Abraham will never even see this sign.

TWO KEY POINTS ABOUT THIS COVENANT

- **It is only one of three in the entire Hebrew Bible where God himself is bound;** the other two are with Noah (Genesis 17, Numbers 25:12) and David (2 Samuel 23:5, Psalms. 89:3, 28-29; 110:4). The image is that of God binding and actually shackling himself through a promise to Abram. In so doing, not only is God bound to the promise but also He is bound to the consequence of a broken covenant.
- This consequence, as we shall see, is not canceling the covenant because God doesn't release us from our vows just because we don't live up to them. **The consequence for transgressing this covenant is death to the one bound to the covenant** (cf. Jeremiah 34:18-20).

GOD IS BOUND

Not only that, here it is ONLY God who is bound by the covenant AND He is bound voluntarily.

- It is God (represented by a smoking firepot with a blazing torch) who walks between the halves of the dead animals – not Abram.
- This is interesting because in so doing God says that He will pay the consequence for the broken covenant.
- The consequence here for transgressing the covenant is death. God says that He is bound and if we are unfaithful that He will pay for it and that He will pay for it with His own life.
- This is quite a serious ceremony and this ceremony has parallels in ancient customs and literature but only in Jeremiah (34:18-20) in the Scriptures is this type of a ceremony mentioned and there it says:

...all the people of the land, which passed between the parts of the calf; I will even give them into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of them that seek their life: and their dead bodies shall be for meat unto the fowls of the heaven, and to the beasts of the earth.

If the covenant fails after this ceremony, the one bound by it dies (Jeremiah 34:18-20). If the parties do not live up to the agreement in Genesis 12-17 – God dies. This is serious and this is the ceremony that God has voluntarily taken upon Himself.

- In Genesis 15 it is recorded that Abram believes God even **BEFORE** God covenants up to even His own life. Abram believes God that he and Sarai will have children and that they will inherit the promised land and that all the nations of the earth and **THEN** God makes this deal by which He may even risk His own life if the covenant fails.
- And then after God pledges to give His life should we sin against the covenant, Abram, at his wife's insistence, has sexual relations with his wife's slave (Genesis 16:3) and she becomes pregnant. He tries to solve her barrenness by his own strength.
- **God didn't need to make this covenant with Abraham** that all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him and that Abraham would have kids and that his descendants

would (at least for a time) occupy the territory in Palestine but he did and then – after God had declared that He would die if the covenant was violated - Abraham (instead of acting out his faith in God) had sexual relations with his wife's slave.

WHAT ABOUT US?

Well, what about us? Are we any more faithful to our covenants than Abram was with God's life on the line? Do we really avoid all that may enslave the mind, body, and spirit, or do we rationalize that our indulgences are fine whereas other people's indulgences may or may not be? Do we keep our vows before God about forsaking all others 'until death do we part' or do we pretend that God releases us from those vows as soon as we no longer wish to be bound?

Abram, righteous Abram, in the text before us, now has chosen to act on his own instead of trusting God. God pledged his life so that we may have faith and faithfulness (see Romans 1-3) but we are faithless many times over and what is the consequence of our faithlessness? God dies. God is fettered and bound in this covenant with Abram. As a consequence of Israel's sin in the desert a whole generation dies outside of the promise and as a consequence of our sin today, God dies: Jesus dies on the cross.

We are not unduly compelled to make our covenants with and before God and God didn't need to make His promises to us. He didn't need to make His promise to Abram. Abram believed the LORD before God put His life on the line. However God did make this promise and the thing about God is, even if we are unfaithful to our promises, He remains faithful (Romans 3:3,4). As we look ahead in our text from Genesis 15 we see that God is not unfaithful and in Genesis 21:2 it records that, "Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him."

So here it is- even though Abram may not have acted in a manner consistent with faith, ONLY God was bound here and as the covenant is fulfilled, God lives! God died for our sins and he was raised so that we all may live. God is faithful. God promised children to Abraham and God provided children to Abraham. God promised that his decedents would inhabit Canaan after

400 years of slavery and God provided that they inhabited the land after 400 years of slavery. Like the Apostle Paul says emphatically, centuries later, in his letter to the Romans, “What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! (Romans 3:3,4; see Deuteronomy 31:6, Joshua 1:5, Hebrews 13:5).” No way. No! No! No! God is faithful even and especially when we are not!

As we tie ourselves to Him in our covenantal promises we will experience the full blessing of the child who cannot run anymore tied to his father in the three-legged race where our heavenly father picks us up in his arms and carries us across that promised finish line.

Let us pray.

Session 2: Judges and the verdict on Covenant

When I was in my first year of studies at university, a friend of mine and I decided that we were going to have the time of our lives that summer or die trying. That is the year we took up SCUBA diving. I went white-water rafting for the first time, did a lot of ocean kayaking and we went parachuting...

As neither of us had ever been parachuting before we needed to be trained. We spent the day at the airport studying wind trajectories, physics, the speed of acceleration of a free falling object, as well as what to do if your parachute fails to open. I did not understand it at all and even when we practiced with a mock parachute, I didn't get it.

We went to the plane. Flipping a coin to see who would go first, I lost and was supposed to jump first. Discovering, however, at about 850 ft in the air that I was afraid of heights, I convinced my companion to jump first.

We were jumping from 3000 ft. As this was our first jump, cords were tied to our parachutes so that they would open automatically upon exiting the plane. My friend climbed out on the wing (as he was supposed to) jumped, counted to five (as we practiced), looked up saw that the parachute had opened beautifully and enjoyed one of the most peaceful experiences of his life noticing the miracles of God's creation while drifting to the ground on this perfectly windless day.

Emboldened, I do the same: climb onto the wing, jump, count, and look to see my parachute; I reach to grab the steering toggles on my parachute...they aren't there. My parachute isn't there (most of it anyway). It isn't working. I have to take it off my back and pull the emergency chute all the while falling faster and faster towards the ground. As I pull the cord, I pray: "Lord, please save me." I pull the cord, look, and the emergency chute didn't open properly either. It isn't catching any wind. It isn't slowing me down. I fall beneath the trees towards the power lines and highway below.

It is at this time that the Lord's hand reaches out and actually lifts me up in the air, opens my parachute and gently sets me on the ground without a scratch. This is a true story. A gust of wind was sent on a windless day, lifted me up in the air, opened my parachute and lowers me down gently right onto the field where I was supposed to be. It was indeed a miracle and an answer to sincere prayer.

When I was without a parachute and about to pull the emergency cord, I prayed. Now, I was a smoker back then and when I pulled my emergency cord, I remember praying, "Dear God, if you save me I'll quit smm... - never mind just please save me!" And He did. And I knew that as He did the first thing that I would want after I landed would be a cigarette. And it was, so it was a good thing that I didn't make the vow. (I did eventually quit smoking; but that's an unrelated story.) I know that God takes covenants, oaths, and vows very seriously and I didn't make one then that I wouldn't keep.

1. We are going to read about Joshua, the Israelite leaders and a vow that they wish that they didn't make today – but first let's review.

Review:

What is the most common word for covenant in the HB?

What does berit[h] mean? (To fetter / to shackle)

Bonus marks: How many times does the word show up in the HB? (286 times)

What is the 'good news'?

When is the first time that it is mentioned in the Bible?

Are we released from our covenants with God for disobeying them?

If we are faithless, is God also faithless or does He continue to honour our covenants?

Here are the key points for session 2:

- God is faithful to our promises even when we are faithless (Romans 3:3,4)
- We are NOT released from our covenants for simple disobedience.

Read Deuteronomy 7:1-4 and Judges 2:1-5 –

This is a sad way to begin the stories of the Judges and it explains why the Israelites and their allies suffer hundreds of years of oppression. It informs us that the cycle of sin, enslavement, repentance, deliverance, and sin again... which continues repeatedly until Israel finally descends into civil war and anarchy - this whole downward spiral all stems from one broken promise; a disobeyed covenant.

Our promises, our covenants are important to God. The Lord said to His people that He will never break His covenant with them (Judges 2:1) nonetheless there are consequences of rebellion...

SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES OF DISREGURDED COVENANTS TODAY

Now this should be easily understandable for us because, really, as we think about it we realise that this same thing happens in our world today. Think about the children who are raised in broken homes. Think about many of the children whose parents broke their marriage contracts with each other and with God. There are IMMEDIATE consequences:

- the struggles of how to raise a child in two separate homes with two separate sets of rules.
- whatever the problem was that split up the marriage in the first place was obviously never resolved: mom or dad still moved out.
- that children from broken homes are more likely to be 'latch-key kids' and less likely to have all the material support that their peers do.
- at best, one will only ever get a good night kiss from one, single parent. (Praise the Lord, in light of this, for His grace that is available to all)

But there is more than that in our world today; there are consequences for future generations as well.

- Many people who get divorced once wind up getting divorced 2x or even 3x. Children of divorce are more likely to be divorced themselves and perpetuate the devastating cycle that contributes to generations and generations and generations going without the emotional, spiritual, and other support that only comes from a strong marriage covenant.

It is the same with our marriage, our Officer's and Soldiership covenants. There are consequences for not walking in proper covenants.

JOSHUA 9

Joshua 9 explains to us why the Israelites are in so much trouble.

The passage that we are about to look at (Joshua 9) is right when the Israelites are at the beginning of their Jihad on the Promised Land. God has made a covenant with them and under no circumstances are they to make a treaty with the people who live there (Cf. Deut 7:1-6; 20:16-18). They promised God that they would kill all the inhabitants of Palestine – including the Gibeonites who are Amorites.

Read Joshua 9:3-19 –What strikes you about this event?

RESULTS OF MAKING THE COVENANT WITH THE GIBEONITES (DISREGARDING THEIR COVENANT WITH GOD)

- You will notice, in Joshua 9, that the Israelites ARE STILL HELD TO THEIR COVENANT with the Gibeonites even though they were tricked into making this agreement with the Gibeonites.
- They didn't realise they had broken their promise to God. They entered into this agreement under false pretences.
- The Gibeonites lied to them but that doesn't change the fact that Israel is bound through the covenant her leaders made with the Gibeonites before God. (Joshua 9:18; Judges 2:2) And they know this,

- Joshua 9:18, when the Israelites find out that they have been tricked, they don't nullify the agreement: it is not within their authority (power) to do so; Israel still does not attack the Gibeonites. They don't attack the Gibeonites because –even though they have been lied to, even though they have been tricked, even though they have been deceived – they are still bound to God and the Gibeonites via this treaty.

Key points for today's lesson reiterated:

- God is faithful to our promises even when we are faithless (Romans 3:3,4)
- We are NOT released from our covenants for simple disobedience.

COMPARISON TO OUR COURT ROOMS

So this is interesting isn't it? In society at large, in many courtrooms, in many countries today, this agreement, this contract with the Gibeonites would be thrown out on the spot.

In our country if a man who is still legally married to one woman, marries another, when the first marriage is discovered the Judge will declare the second one void.

If a landlord has already collected rent on an apartment from one tenant she can't turn around and rent that same apartment to another.

Our pluralistic Canadian society says that simply disobeying an agreement may in some circumstances render it void. God, however, in our stories before us today, disagrees. God says, through His angel, Judges 2:1: "I will NEVER break my covenant with you." The covenant is not nullified; the ties are not severed, just because they disobey God.

Read 2 Samuel 21:1-3, verse 6, verse 14b.

Israel enters into a covenant with God first and this agreement says that they will not make a covenant with the Canaanites but instead will destroy the present inhabitants of the land. **Then the Israelites –without consulting God- enter into the second covenant with the Gibeonites**

promising that they will not destroy them and in the process Joshua and the Israelites disobey the first covenantal agreement that God entered into with them.

Israel enters into two covenants – one with God and one before God - each promising exactly the opposite and Israel is held equally accountable to both.

Joshua suffers the consequences of breaking the covenant NOT to exterminate the Gibeonites; Saul suffers the consequences of breaking the covenant TO exterminate the Gibeonites.

This is important for us to remember. We should not enter into our covenants lightly. I don't believe that God says we can simply declare (through the courts or otherwise) that our partner did not live up to the marriage covenant and so we are no longer married. I don't think that God says that simply because we had a drink we can throw out our Soldiership agreement. I don't think the shackle is cut. I don't think that God says that just because we decide not to be Officers anymore that we are released from our vow to 'make soul-saving the primary purpose of our lives.' I think that this covenant referred to in Genesis 15, Joshua 9, Judges 2, and Samuel 21 points to the fact that God doesn't break His covenants with us and as a natural result, there are consequences for us if we are trying to break that chain. Just the opposite: God is faithful even when we are faithless!

I often compare a covenant with God (be it through marriage, Soldiership, Officership ...) to being shackled to a high speed train (Skytrain, LRT), with God being the train. When we are chained to the train and ride comfortably on it – following the Lord's leading - we wind up where He is going a lot faster and a lot easier than if we travel the road on our own strength (under our own steam). This is the benefit of a strong covenant with the Lord.

But, if once we are bound to the Locomotive of the Lord by a covenant, if we try to go our own way or try to shackle ourselves to something going in a different direction, it is not going to be a pleasant experience. The tie doesn't break. Disobedience to our covenants is like jumping off the train and trying to run in the opposite direction while we are still chained to it.

It's going to hurt but it is not God's fault; He doesn't throw us from the train and because God is faithful (cf. Rom 3:3,4), this covenantal chain is so strong that won't break – and what we suffer are the natural results of our own actions. This is what happened in our story today (Judges 2). God, wanting the Israelites to experience the full rest of the promise land entered into a covenant with them. They willingly shackled themselves to His train but then, however, at the same time they shackled themselves to the Gibeonite train that was going in a different direction and suffered the natural and logical consequences of their actions. And this is exactly what happens to us when we don't respect our covenants.

However, there was good news for the Gibeonites. There was good news for Israel and there is good news for us in this as well. The Gibeonites, even though they didn't deserve it, even though they acted deceitfully, the Gibeonites gained access to the promise. The Gibeonites -as they aligned their covenant with the Lord's - the Gibeonites -Joshua 9 records- the Gibeonites were saved. And truly I tell you that God was faithful to His promise that the whole world would be blessed through Abraham and this was fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And there is still more good news in this for us for no matter how many times we are faithless and jump off that train. No matter how many times we try to break that covenant; no matter how many times we throw ourselves on the tracks, under the wheels of the 'God Train,' the Lord is faithful: the covenantal chain will not be broken as long as we live; God will not give up on us. God is faithful, and Jesus himself is standing there as the new chain that binds us in our relationship to God; Jesus is the new covenant through whom whosoever may be pulled back up onto the train. As this is the case, instead of rebelling against God, instead of pulling against the tie that binds, let us all give our lives over fully to the Lord, buckle up, lean back and enjoy the fully sanctified ride on this train because this train is bound for glory.

Let us pray.

Session 3: McChickens and Milkshakes

Mickey the Hen

One day at the McDonald farm there is a rumbling in the air; something is a foot. In the chicken coop – something isn't just quite right. The old farmer walks all around the chicken wire fence. It seems to be in tact. The barbed wire along the perimeter looks undisturbed. Everything looks fine as he locks up the hens for the night. But inside the henhouse on the top rung, something is stirring...it is Henrietta the Poultry Hen.

Now, as soon as Farmer McDonald closes the door to the coop, Henrietta, the Hen, speaks up: "It's time." Quickly Henrietta, Polly, Mick, - and all the chickens on the top rung - run to the southeast corner of the coop. They peck and they peck the ground in the corner like never before. Last night they had almost made it. Tonight would be the night. Finally – breakthrough! Henrietta and the other Chickens are free. They are free from the farmer's coop. They are free from the barbed wire and the chicken wire; they are free from the tedious ritual and routine. They are free!

They spend the next morning roaming around the yard, exploring the whole farm. They eat what they want, when then want. They can be near or wander far away: they talk. They talk and they talk some more; it's a hen's life. They spend that whole day walking around eating what and when they want and really enjoying the full freedom from the yard. At the end of the day, they perch on a branch of a tree across the road from the farm and cuddle up the night. It is good.

They have a nice rest but in the morning when they wake up, they notice something on the road - - it is Mick the chicken crossing the road. They wonder. Why did the chicken cross the road? (pause) Mick is walking back towards the farm.

Mick is walking back to the coop. She goes across the road, to the fence and through the same crack under the chicken wire fence. She walks around the corner and up the walkway onto her old bar in the farmer's small, confining chicken coop. The farmer then notices the crack in the fence and repairs it quickly. Mick is trapped.

Henrietta can't believe it. She sees the whole thing where she is sitting, still free, looking on from her perch on other side of the road. She sees Mick, of her own accord, trapped all over again on the farm.

Mick was free and then she just goes back to be trapped all over again and it is even worse then she thought at first - As Henrietta scans the farm and hears the noises: here a cluck, there a cluck everywhere a cluck, cluck. She remembers, Mick the Chicken is on McDonald's farm. The Mick Chicken is back at MacDonald's! And you know what happens to McChickens at McDonald's. They get eaten. Mick is trapped.

And this is just like the Galatians that we'll be looking at a little bit here and this is some of what Romans is warning us about and this is very much why Hebrews declares that the Law is obsolete. The Law is a big part of the old covenant and today we will see how some of us have become just as trapped by the Law of the old covenant as Mick the Chicken is by McDonalds. And Paul, Paul is quite concerned; after all as we read in Galatians 3, where Paul repeatedly calls the Galatians 'foolish', he says in verse 10, "All who rely on the law are under a curse; for it is written 'cursed is anyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law (cf. Deut 27:26).' And it seems no one can do that.

REVIEW:

What is the most common word for covenant in the HB?

What does berit[h] mean? (To fetter / to shackle)

Bonus marks: How many times does the word show up in the HB? (286 times)

What is the 'good news'?

When is the first time that it is mentioned in the Bible?

Are we released from our covenants with God for disobeying them?

Does God cancel our covenants before they are completed?

If we are faithless, does God respond in kind?

We are going to break up into groups in a little bit again here but first, who can tell me when the Bible speaks about the Law (or the Law and the prophets), what are we speaking about? The Law is the apparent cornerstone of the 'old covenant'

What is this 'old' covenant?

Roughly sketched out, the covenant here is that God will be the Hebrew's God and they will be His people and He will give them the Promised Land IF they simply remain faithful to Him and His Law (Deuteronomy 5:32, 33; Jeremiah 31:31-35; Hebrews 8:8-13). *Jeremiah said that if they abandon their covenant with the LORD then it will be no good to them and they will need a new one if they leave their old one behind. The preacher to the Hebrews (Hebrews 8:13) says that the old one now has now become 'obsolete'.*

What were some of the features of this old covenant?

This old covenant was very, very important to the Hebrew people. Their whole society was founded upon it. It was more important but not entirely dissimilar to the Canadian Constitutional Acts of 1982 and 1867 or even the Magna Carta and Habeus Corpus. There were a number of activities and ceremonies that were involved in the many cultural traditions that related to this old covenant, such as,

- circumcision (this was actually directly related to Abraham's covenant but often seen in light of the Mosaic covenant; John 7:22, see Genesis 17:11);
- ceremonial hand-washing;
- worshipping at the Temple (They would try to go here at least once a year);
- priests and Levites who had various jobs relating to the covenant;
- Sabbath (even though this has its roots even before Moses, in creation itself; See Genesis 2:2, Exodus 20:11, Hebrews 4);
- the Ten Commandments (the Law and the prophets are closely associated with it too; see Exodus 20, 34; Deuteronomy 5, 10);
- frequent sacrifices (of course) and much more.

What are some equivalents in TSA today? Band, Songsters, Social Services, etc.

What are some equivalents in Canada today? Moses, election, the Temple, the Torah and all their ceremonies and holidays were as important to them as is to us:

- birthday parties,
- Sunday church services,
- Christmas

It would be as difficult for the Hebrews to imagine life without the ceremonies of the old covenant, as it would be for us to imagine winter without Christmas.

Break up into groups and complete the worksheet on the following page. Each group will answer the same questions. They will each however concentrate on different scriptures:

- **Group 1: Galatians 3:15-25, 4:1-5**
- **Group 2: Romans 9:30-10:4**
- **Group 3: Hebrews 8:1-13**

McChickens and Milkshakes Worksheet

Group 1: Galatians 3:15-25, 4:1-5

Group 2: Romans 9:30-10:4

Group 3: Hebrews 8:1-13

1. Does God cancel our covenants before they are completed?
2. Why, in your opinion, does or doesn't God cancel our covenants before they are completed?
3. What was the purpose of the Law or the so-called 'new covenant'?
4. Did the Law and the old covenant fulfill its purpose?
5. Was there anything wrong with the old covenant?
6. What is the so-called 'new covenant'?
7. Other thoughts and comments....

Hebrews 8:13 - “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.”

What happened to this ‘old covenant’? Why is it obsolete?

The terms of the covenant were broken. The covenant was a conditional contract and we broke the conditions of it. Israel betrayed the Lord and they betrayed each other.

- Remember when Jesus was asked about the old covenant and the Law? What did He say summed up the whole Law and the prophets? (Matt 22:36-40; see also Luke 10:25-28, Exodus 20, 34, Leviticus 19:18, Deuteronomy 5, 10). Love God and Love your neighbour.
- How does one love one’s neighbour? By Looking after the most vulnerable in society, by turning the other cheek, and by bringing others to the Lord (see Matthew 6:19-21, 19:13-26, 25:31-46). Micah 6:8 says that we are to ‘love justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God’. The Hebrews didn’t do this. They did not live up to the terms of the agreement. (See for example, Exodus 23:6,11, Leviticus 19:10,15, 23:22, 27:8, Deuteronomy 15:7, 15:11, 24:12-15, 1 Samuel 2:8, Psalms 22:26, 34:6, 35:10, 82:3, Isaiah 61:1, Ezekiel 16:49, 18:12, 22:29, Amos 2:7, 4:1, 5:11-12, 8:4-6, Zechariah 7:10, Matthew 6:19-21, 19:13-26, 25:31-46).

THE OLD COVENANT WASN’T EXACTLY CANCELLED

An important point to remember here is that this covenant wasn’t exactly cancelled (See Leviticus 26:42-44; Deuteronomy 7:9; Judges 2:1; Matthew 5:17-20, 24:35; Luke 16:17, 27:33; Romans 3:3-4, 31, 7:1-6) rather it was completed (fulfilled) by the advent of Christ (See John 19:30). Remember that we said when we were defining covenants that when they are made with the Lord, He will be faithful until they are completed (See Leviticus 26:42-44; Deuteronomy 7:9; Judges 2:1; Matthew 5:17-20, 24:35; Luke 16:17, 27:33; Romans 3:3-4, 31, 7:1-6).

This old covenant wasn't forsaken. **It was completed or even renewed like a library book or a rented movie.** When the allotted time for borrowing a book or a movie is completed, it can be renewed. We must not forget though that, as there is a penalty to pay if we fail to live up to the rental terms – if we're late or damage the book/video there are late fees - so too there was a penalty that Christ paid on our behalf before He renewed our covenant (see Jeremiah 31:31ff, Ezekiel 36:16ff, Joel 2:28ff, and also Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 6:10; 9:25; Ezekiel 44:7). Let me explain by exploring a couple of more questions.

Was there anything wrong with the old agreement itself?

Yes and no. No, in that the old covenant was certainly fair: God promised that He would look out for His chosen covenant partners and He did. He let them enter His rest so long as they loved Him and their brothers and sisters. It is like any of us who are parents saying, "all right children, we can all go for a milkshake at the 'Land of Milk and Honey' ice cream parlour after dinner so long as you kids don't fight and don't give me a bad time." This seems fair. The problem is that the children of Israel just wouldn't stop fighting and they weren't very nice to their Father either. They were always fighting. They were always hurting each other. And they didn't even bother to obey their curfew. They were likely to not even come home at all. Instead they'd hang out all night in the hill country with the Baals when they should have been spending the night safely in the protection of their Father's house. And when they did come home the children of Israel would fight amongst themselves about all of this and more too. They didn't show their love for their Father or for their brothers or their sisters.

A big part of the problem with Israel's (humanity's) disobedience was that God promised them the metaphorical milkshakes from the 'Land of Milk and Honey' ice-cream shop IF they would JUST be good. And even though they didn't deserve it, God really still wanted to give them their 'Land of Milk and Honey' milkshakes (See for examples Isaiah 3:1-6; 8:16-22; 9:1-7; Jeremiah 31, Amos 9, Micah 2:1-11-13; 5:1-4). Not only that: He wanted to drink the milkshakes with them in the 'Land of Milk and Honey' ice-cream shop, Himself. He wanted to spend this quality time with His children. He wanted to have fun with them. He wanted to give them all of this and much more but they just wouldn't stop fighting and they just wouldn't listen to Him so He just wouldn't give them their reward.

This was the purpose of the milkshake incentive: the purpose of the Law, the old covenant, was to bring people closer to God so that they could experience His Salvation. God's Law, His old covenant – that He set up so that His children could come for the eternal ice-cream with Him – this Law, that was created for good, actually wound up preventing His children from getting the ice-cream that God wanted to share with them. Because they were bad and they didn't deserve this ice cream, God was very sad. God kept His part of the covenant. God wanted to enjoy that milkshake with them in the 'Land of Milk and Honey' ice-cream parlour but they just wouldn't co-operate (See Romans 3:3,4). This old covenant failed to bring people into a Salvific relationship with God (Hebrews 8:7-9; See Hebrews 4, Numbers 14 and Deuteronomy 1; See also Galatians 3-4). God's chosen people, the children of Israel failed Him; the Law therefore did not provide for their (our) salvation (see Galatians 3 and Romans 2:1-14).

What is this new covenant?

Since this old covenant did not give us the Heavenly milkshake, what about the new covenant? What is it? Can God use the new covenant as a way to share the milkshake of eternal life with us? What is this new covenant that is God's seemingly new idea? Firstly we should note that it's not really a new idea at all. God knew all along that He would eventually implement this new covenant. He knew this even before He put the old one in place but this new one comes into place with Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection (cf. Genesis 15:7-21; Jeremiah 34:18-20; Romans 7:1-7). Jesus' death fulfils the old covenant: it is finished (John 19:30). The old one – as bad as we were at living up to it - was not thrown out before it was finished; it was only discarded after it was completed on the cross.

It is like with my children. Our girls are only 7 and 8 right now but we know that someday there will be curfews and guidelines for using the car but there is no need for those to come into place just yet. We know this new order will eventually be coming to our home; it is not here yet but it is inevitable. Likewise, God knew that this new covenant was inevitable even before He made the old one.

As far as my children are concerned, even further down the road (and probably an even better analogy to God's new covenant), relating to these curfews and guidelines for driving the car that we will eventually have for our girls: there will come a time when even these rules will no longer be needed. Our children will grow up and be ready to have a relationship with us, and the world, as responsible adults. If we do our job as parents, then our children will grow up to love God, read their Bibles, love their neighbour and clean up after themselves – all on their own, without our rules to make them do it. They will do their chores and assignments as adults living and working in the world without us needing us to enforce our old house rules. (If we try to enforce our old house rules after our children have moved out, it will not work: our whole relationship with our children will inevitably fail.) This is what the Law and the old covenant is like; it was only good until the enactment of the new covenant at the advent of Christ (Galatians 3:24-25). The advent of Christ is like humanity's coming of age – it is our growing up, our leaving home for the final time (Galatians 4:4).

Paul tells us in Galatians 3:23-25 that the old covenant and the Law was needed but that the people were being imprisoned and guarded by the Law. He says that the Law –depending upon your translation -was our guard, our disciplinarian, our custodian, or some translations even say our schoolteacher. In Galatians 4, the Apostle Paul goes on to explain the Law as if it were this guardian servant who is the tutor of a small child. The guardian servant only has any authority until the child is grown, then the child has authority over her servant. And now we are here today; we are like the twenty-something year-old son or daughter who is making her way in the world today without our tutor, without our teacher, without our parents' house rules but still with our Heavenly Father's very real love. This is what the new covenant is. We no longer have the house rules to follow but because God raised us well, we can read our family history (the Bible) and because we are His children we can live the way He would have us live and this is good (1 Thessalonians 5:12-24). And the really good thing too is that – just like a Christian parent of an adult child – if for some reason we do become confused in life, we can always come to God. God is even closer than a phone call away; God is as close as a prayer.

Let us call upon Him now.

Session 4: Numbers 6: 1-12
Nazirites, the OT Salvationists?

Today we are talking about a very positive covenant in the scriptures and a very important covenant, a significant vow in our text. (The picture up here is a wedding picture of Susan and I.) We, like every married Christian couple, made our wedding covenant and took these very serious vows with our spouse before the Lord. We promised to forsake all others and be joined by God with this one other person – separated from all others - until our death (Cf. Romans 7:2,3).

Covenants, vows, and oaths are very important to God. Covenants are a way for God to bind us to the vehicle of Salvation, his Son. This is very important. People used to enter into covenants more in this country. People used to call God as a witness and/or mention Him right in official documents. Even our national anthem and our country's official motto refer to God (cf. Psalm 72). There was a time not too long ago when people would take an oath in our public courtrooms, on the Bible, before God, that they would be honest and tell the truth. And when people took oaths they used to realize their significance as well (cf. Joshua 9; Judges 2, 11; 2 Sam 21).

Canadians used to realise the importance of marriage – a very important oath that people still take before God today – before the 1970s. Between 1971 and 1982, however, the annual number of divorces more than doubled from 29,684 to 70,430. They peaked some years later in this country. It seems that the 'good old days' where one's word was one's bond are long gone and it seems that now people tend to forget how important covenants are and that covenants before God do not end just because we have difficulty living up to them.

In our Salvation Army corps across the division today, we have people who are considering two very important covenants. One with God and The Salvation Army: their Soldiership oath; and the other with

each other, before God: their marriage covenant. In our text today, Numbers 6, we have another sort of vow –similar to these– that the Lord used to greatly bless some of the ancient Israelites: the Nazirite vow.

Numbers 6:1,2: The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘If a man or woman wants to make a **special** vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite...’” There are some things she must do. But first can anyone name for me any famous Nazirites from the Bible to help us sort things out a little bit? (Samson, Samuel, John the Baptist.) I invite you to keep these fellows in your mind as we are thinking today.

Off the bat I should tell you that there are some key differences between their vows and other people who took a Nazirite vow.

- 1) None of these three people - Samson, Samuel, John the Baptist -entered into the Nazirite vow of their own accord;
- 2) And their vows, which were made on their behalf (Samson's and John's were initiated by God and their parents), were for their entire life – which is the default position for vows, covenants, and oaths unless otherwise specified.

This is different than most times when a Nazirite vow would be taken; in general, the Nazirite vow was **voluntarily** entered into by both men and women and it was for a **specified** period of time (verse 4). And unlike Soldiership vows and Christian marriage covenants, the typical Nazirite vow has an expiry date. The vow itself is interesting and I think it is important for us today because it is not entirely different from our Soldiership vows that we take with the Lord in The Salvation Army.

Verse 3: “He [the Nazirite] must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or from other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins.”

And 4, “As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins.”

1) No Grapes

This is interesting. Now, as many of us may know, in general The Salvation Army Soldier does not drink. He swears that, he “will abstain from alcoholic drink...and all else that could enslave the body or spirit.” Abstaining from fermented drink, alcohol, is common to both the Nazirite and the Salvation Army Soldier; you can see how this could be beneficial for setting people apart for God. In The Salvation Army, when God raised us up in London’s East End over a century ago, alcohol was one of the primary things that the enemy was using to enslave people. They would even serve drinks to young children. We were separated from that societal evil of alcoholism for God.

Today, we can see how much good God can do in delivering people from alcohol still. We even have an AA groups that meet in many of our corps. It is exciting because in AA you can hear more than one testimony of people who have actually found God through the Alcoholics Anonymous programme. Some of the steps that they take in enjoying sobriety are as follows:

2. Came to believe that a **Power greater than ourselves** could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to **turn our will and our lives over to the care of God** as we understood Him.

Now in order to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understand Him (step 3), we need to seek God and when one truly seeks out God, God promises that we will find Him (Matthew 7:7-8; Luke 11:9-10; cf. also Matthew 6:33). One anonymous friend of mine recounts almost every week how when he told a priest that he didn’t believe in God; the priest asked him, well what if God didn’t believe in you? This gave my friend some food for thought and he – like so many others through AA – came into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ as he abstained from alcohol.

There is more than abstaining from alcohol to this part of the vow though. This separation from alcohol for the Lord is part of it but there is more. You see the Nazirite is not permitted any grapes – not just fermented grapes- so *Welch's* grape juice is out of the picture as well as those little packages of *Sun-Maid* raisins that so many kids have in their lunches. Many people, like I said, could readily find reasons why one might want to abstain from alcohol at least for a time but why do you think we would want to abstain from raisins, grapes, grape juice, etc.?

Grapes were generally seen as frivolous for the Israelites. They were seen as extra. They were dessert while they were in the desert (which is where they are in the book of Numbers). No one needs to drink grape juice; we can just drink water. This is reminiscent of the primitive Salvation Army as well. In the old days Officers were not allowed to wear earrings (Cf. 1 Tim 2:9) or even engagement rings. Soldiers weren't even allowed to have a feather in their hat. These we seen as frivolous; they weren't necessary so why would we want to spend the money that God has given us stewardship over on something as frivolous as a feather or an engagement ring? In the Army we have moved away from that and both my wife and I have rings – and before my daughter pulled it out, when she was two, I had an earring as well (cf. Exod 32:2-3, 35:22; Num 31:50; Judges 8:24) and I know many good Salvationists who even have gotten tattoos after becoming soldiers (cf. Lev 19:28).

That being said, we do come back to our roots of self-denial at this time of year. During the Lenten season, The Salvation Army concentrates on missions and we used to even call this season 'Self-Denial'. It is when we put aside money every day and every week that we would normally spend on dessert, going out for dinner, or renting a movie, for example. We are – for this season – to deny ourselves, take up our cross in this way for Jesus and His mission through us (Matt 16:24, Mark 8:34, cf. Luke 14:27).

2) No Haircut

That brings us to the next part of the Nazirite vow and this refers to the hair. (Show old picture of myself). Nazirites were not supposed to cut their hair for the whole time that they were separated from society for God. We, of course, are all familiar with the story of Samson (Judges 13-16). This was the straw that broke the camel's back as it were. He strained against his covenant more than once in his life but it was when he provided for his hair to be cut, that the strength of his covenant was no longer available to him – for a time (16:20,21).

This part of the vow is certainly noticeable, as the bulk of the Israelite population at this time - Israelite men, anyway - would have had short hair. People separated for the Lord would let their hair grow long (Num 6:5; cf. Lev 21:12, 2 Sam 14:25-26). It was a distinctive feature of their vow. The Nazirite would intentionally stand out, drawing attention to the fact that he is separated; he is holy unto the LORD.

This is akin to The Salvation Army uniform. We are noticeable when we are in uniform and if someone knows anything about the Soldiers' covenant then they know that we are separated from a number of societal behaviours – 'all that can enslave the mind and the body' – for God. They know that we are separated for God. This has come in very useful for my ministry in our various different contexts. When in uniform, we are immediately recognizable for someone who finds himself in need of help from a servant of God.

I have literally had people running up the street behind me yelling 'Captain, Captain!' and even 'Priest! Priest!' The uniform also came in very helpful when offering emotional and spiritual care after Hurricane Ike struck Galveston Island a year ago and immediately following the explosion that hit Nipawin a year and a half ago. After the tragedy, a number of the clergy there even lamented that they did not have some sort of uniform –like ours - to show themselves as distinct, separated for God. The uniform, like a Nazirite's long hair, is a way that people can know that indeed we have been set apart, we have been

made holy for God. This is of course what holiness is –in this context – it is a setting apart, a separateness for God. Therefore, when we don our uniforms, as every soldier in The Salvation Army is eligible to do, as symbols of our covenant, we are recognisable to people, as an instrument of hope from the Lord; therefore, let us indeed be holy as the Lord our God is holy (Lev 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:7-8; 26).

3) No Dead Bodies

The third aspect of the vow is no less significant than the first two and I can't say that it really has its direct equivalent to our Soldiership vow but it does have its parallels: that is the prohibition against contact with dead bodies. Verse 7 states specifically that the Nazirite is not to come in contact with a dead body: even if the dead person is your own mother or father. If your mother or father passes away during your Nazirite vow, you may not attend the funeral ceremony. You may not! Ordinarily the Israelite has very special responsibilities pertaining to the passing of one's parents, even though it would make her ceremonially unclean (Num 5:2, 19:11; Lev 21:1-3). For the Nazirite, she is not allowed to be unclean – even for her parents (Cf. Lev 21:10-12). One must choose between one's family responsibilities and one's responsibilities to God (cf. Lev 21:10-12; Matt 10:35,12:22-48, 19:29; Mark 3:23-35, 10:29-30, 13:1-28; Luke 8:19-21, 14:25-26; John 19:27). This is important. God is more important than anyone else in the holy person's life. To the covenanted Nazirite, to the covenanted Soldier, to the devout marriage partner and to the fully committed Christian, God is first. What good is it to gain the whole world and yet lose your very own soul? (Matt 16:26, Mark 8:36).

4) It remains secure

There is even more to this though – believe it or not. Look at Verse 9ff. This is very important. This is extremely important for the Nazirite and it is equally significant for Soldiers in The Salvation Army or anyone else taking a covenant before the LORD. If a person dies in the Nazirite's presence, the Nazirite is STILL guilty of sin. Even though the Nazirite did not mean to break his vow, he still broke it and needs to be restored in his covenant relationship. Take a look, reading from Verses 9-12 (NIV):

“If someone dies suddenly in his presence, thus defiling the hair he has dedicated, he must shave his head on the day of his cleansing—the seventh day. Then on the eighth day he must bring two doves or two young pigeons to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. The priest is to offer one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering to make atonement for him because he sinned by being in the presence of the dead body. That same day he is to consecrate his head. He must dedicate himself to the LORD for the period of his separation and must bring a year-old male lamb as a guilt offering. The previous days do not count, because he became defiled during his separation.”

Not only is he guilty of breaking his vow but the covenant remains in tact. It is even renewed: the previous days do not count; he gets a fresh start. This is important. Like we have emphasized this weekend about covenants, the covenant remains until it is fulfilled. We are not released from covenants and vows simply for disobeying them. This is VERY important. The covenantal tie is not broken when we disobey God. Even when we are faithless, God is faithful (Romans 3:3,4). There are consequences for transgressing the covenant. There are natural and logical results of not living up to our vows, our promises, our covenants with or before the Lord – but we are not released from them for simple disobedience.

This is one of the very important aspects of covenants that we enter into with and before the LORD. When we disobey the covenant – there are consequences – but He is still there for us. Until the successful completion of our covenant, if it has an expiry date, or until our death (Romans 7:1-3), if it does not, our covenants remain to bind us to the Lord.

Our covenants in this way are like seatbelts. When the car crashes, we don't take off our seatbelt and say that we are never going to wear it again. No, this is when we praise the Lord for it more than ever before.

It is like a couple of years ago when my daughters and I were coming home from Tisdale. We were driving that highway like we did a couple of times every week when all of a sudden we hit black ice, we swerved into on-coming traffic and then off our side of the road where the car proceeded to flip: it rolled over a time and a half. We did not see the accident coming and therefore could do nothing to prepare for it anymore than a Nazirite could prepare for someone suddenly dying in his presence. Even though the experts admitted that there was nothing we could do to avoid the accident, I guarantee you that SGI (the insurance company) declared that it was our fault. This is the same with the Nazirite. YHWH Insurance, so to speak, declares that they are at fault and He requires payment. In this case the payment is their hair and as far as their clean driving record is concerned, they have to start over again – but the insurance isn't cancelled. Similarly when the Soldier runs into troubles her covenant isn't cancelled; it remains in place to protect her.

It is the same with seatbelts. In my accident the seatbelts did not break and this too is like our covenants before the Lord. Even though the car was totalled, the seatbelts held. This is important. Like sometimes an alcoholic makes a mistake and has a drink; like a husband sometimes does not operate perfectly as a loving husband; like at times we might sin before the Lord and like there are times when our lives just come crashing down all around us; when my car rolled over, there was that moment of panic as I looked back to see if my daughters were all right. To my relief they were safe and sound – even though we were all dangling upside down after the accident – they were all right because the LORD protected them through their seatbelts that did not break. We are safe and sound and soon restored to our normal life because of the Lord and our seatbelts.

In our world today we know that as we mentioned previously that Jesus died on the cross because of our covenantal unfaithfulness. Jesus died for our sins. But did Jesus stay dead? No. Jesus rose from the grave defeating sin and death and whosoever of us believes in him does not need to perish. As long as we are

alive he is calling us to him and he is calling us back to him. As long as we are here, he is calling us to eternal covenantal salvation and eternal covenantal holiness. He is here now inviting us to join him, return to him, or grow closer to him (as the case may be) in an eternal covenant of everlasting life.

Therefore, for all of us when our lives come crashing down around us, we will be safe and sound as long as we rely on the strength of our holy seatbelt -our covenant with the Lord- because the Lord will not let His covenant with us break no matter what happens to the automobile of our life. So then, let us enjoy the security of this holy seatbelt and, like the ancient Nazirite, through our covenants, let us rely fully on His strength rather than our own so that we may indeed be holy unto the LORD even as the LORD our God is holy.

Let us pray.