

### Summary

God created the universe and humankind out of love, establishing covenants to guide relationships with Him and each other. Jesus' new covenant fulfills all previous ones, offering salvation and unity.

### Call to Worship

*I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. (Ps 138:2)*

### Worship in song

Sing hymns and/or worship songs of your choice.

### Reading from the Psalms

- Psalm 103:1-18

### Prayer of confession

Father, forgive us when we have been singing praises with our voices  
but kept the joy from our hearts.

Forgive us when we have prayed for what was possible with you  
but believed only what we could see.

Forgive us when we have abused your love and lordship  
and wanted you to serve us.

Forgive us when we have allowed our passion for renewal to slip into carelessness  
and our vision to be dimmed by laziness.

Forgive us for treating the miracle of this fruitful earth poorly  
with no thought that it is valued by you.

Forgive us when we have valued things only by their economic indices  
and not by their inherent worth.

Forgive us when we have not been possessed by your love  
and compelled by your spirit to be servants of each other and stewards of your creation.

### Assurance of forgiveness

*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)*

### Prayer of thanksgiving

Loving God,

- In a world that denies the existence of truth, you guarantee final truth.
- In a world which is lazy about truth, you promise that those who seek will find it.

## WHAT WAS ON GOD'S MIND?

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- In a world that declares truth is optional, you say truth will characterise your people.
- In a world that designs truth to suit its life-style, you say you desire truth in our innermost being.
- In a world where truth bends with rubbery ethics, you say “Be holy, as I am holy”.
- In a world full of truth claims that contradict, you declare that “your word is truth”.
- In a world which considers truth to be a constraint of the gullible, you declare that you will judge by what is true.

Thank you Lord for the gift of truth, that you embody truth, for the security of truth, that your grace enables us to endure truth, and for the beauty of your truth.

### Holy Communion

*During the Bronze Age in the Middle East, the strongest bond that could exist between two people occurred when they agreed to enter into a blood covenant with each other. The ceremony associated with this covenant involved both people cutting their wrists and letting their blood mingle together. The end of the ceremony typically concluded with a covenant meal.*

*When Jesus ate his last supper with his disciples, he deliberately turned the meal into a covenant meal, a meal that represented the strongest bond possible between two people. However, in this case, it was a covenant between God and humankind. Jesus took a cup of wine and asked them all to drink it. He said, “This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28).*

*God chooses to commit himself to us in covenant. This covenant commitment is so strong that God was prepared to sacrifice himself as Jesus to die to take the blame for our sins so we could be made worthy of life with God. On the cross, Jesus exchanged our sinfulness for his holiness so we could be made right with God.*

(Say a prayer of thanks for the bread and the wine which represents the body and blood of Jesus sacrificed in order to rescue us back to God. Then share the bread and wine together.)

### The Bible Reading

- Jeremiah 31:31-34

### The Message “WHAT WAS ON GOD'S MIND WHEN HE MADE US?”

#### Covenant

As we enter the advent season in which the church gets ready to celebrate the coming of Jesus, it's worth asking, what, exactly, was on God's mind regarding you and me? What was the idea God had? What was the passion that burned within him regarding our being? Why go to all the trouble of making a universe in which intelligent life could exist on a tiny planet circling a middle-aged star in the Milky Way galaxy?

What's God's idea about you and me... and are we fulfilling it?

## WHAT WAS ON GOD'S MIND?

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Well, the whole idea about creation began in the mind of God. We get a hint of it in Genesis which reports God talking with himself: 'Let us...' (Gen 1:26).

The sense here is that there was a conversation within God. We know that the one true God exists within himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each is perfectly in synch with the other; each has the same essential substance as the other, each perfectly represents the other, but each is also distinct – and each lives in perfect community with the other members of the Trinity. This one true God, says: '*Let us...*' make the universe and all biological life, including humankind.

The Bible teaches us that God freely chose to do this. He freely chose to expand on that which he could love and relate to (Is 43:7; 1 Jn 4:16). It's important to remember that God didn't need to create. He didn't have a loneliness that needed to be fulfilled, or an ego that needed us to pander to... or any other reason. God chose to expand the canvas on which the truth about himself could be expressed. It was a pure act of grace, an act of love.

God chose to invite more within the community of himself. What God had in mind was there would eventually to be a community in which he could be *with* his people face to face (Rev 21:3). This community would be called the 'kingdom of God'. This was, and is, God's 'end game' and he wants you to be are part of it.

So God chose to create us – and (amazingly) to create us, in some degree, in his own image (Gen 1:26). He created us with free will to accept or reject his invitation to a relationship. He created us to be like him in that we too are highly relational, we too have moral understanding, we too have authority to rule and influence our environment (as God's 'under-stewards'), and we have the capacity to see beyond the physical to the spiritual... and know God. And so God created the universe and us.

God took a great deal of time about it. Time, of course, means nothing to God, because he stands outside time. But he wanted us whom he created to understand this was a big project and important project – a project that concerned his heart. God made the universe very big and very amazing. Crazy so. Why? Because he wanted the universe to declare his glory (Ps 19:1-4). As such, God's 'calling card' hangs within the wonder of the universe itself.

Then God set to work to introduce himself to us. And a concept that God chose to help do this was the concept of covenant.

The book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, is shot through with the idea of covenant. It is a concept that weaves its way through the Old Testament and reaches its fulfilment with the coming of Jesus in the New Testament.

So let's have a look at the concept of covenant, and learn from it what was on God's mind concerning us.

A covenant is an agreement. It is an agreement for two to become one. It is an agreement to walk together.

## WHAT WAS ON GOD'S MIND?

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The two parties of a covenant represent each other, live for each other, and are committed to each other. It is concept that springs from the very character of God who lives in community within himself of Father, Son and Holy Spirit... so it's important to understand it.

There are, of course, many types of covenant and variations on the theme. Some were agreements between two people who enter a covenant to become blood brothers e.g. between David and Jonathan (1 Sam 18:3), and between Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer.

Others took the form of a treaty that existed between a conquering nation and its vassal state. These were the suzerainty treaties that invoked blessings if you complied, and curses and if you didn't. You will see something of this characteristic in some of the covenants made between God and his people in the Old Testament (Deut 11:26).

Although a covenant could be made with an individual, God always made a covenant with a people. Even when he made a covenant with Abram (who later became Abraham), God had in mind that this covenant agreement would be passed on to his children, and to his children's children down the generations.

*'I will establish my covenant . . . to be God to you and to your descendants'*  
(Gen 17:7)

The same is true for the covenant God made with David.

The Pentecostal theologian, Gordon Fee, reminds us that:

*'God chose, and made a covenant with, not individual Israelites but a people who would bear God's name and be for God's purposes.'*<sup>1</sup>

As such, covenants concerning God are characterised by two components. It had a vertical component that concerns our relationship with God. And it also has a horizontal component that concerns each of us, who, in community, share in this covenant with God.

Because you and I share in the same covenant with God, we are linked. We are linked by the fact that both of us carry the identity of God, the calling of God, and are engaged in the purposes of God. As such we belong to each other. God calling us into a covenant with himself compels us into unity, compels us to share our identity, and unites us in purpose and character. That is why Jesus' prayer for unity within the church in John 17 is so significant. He asks that we have the same sort of unity that exists within the very community of God – that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, a covenant with God concerns our vertical relationship with God *and* our horizontal relationship with each other. Vertical and horizontal, you can't have one without the other. It is the shape of the cross on which Jesus (who perfectly represented both) died.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, (Hendrickson, 1996) p.65.

God made his covenant with Abraham (Gen 26:3-4) was confirmed with his son Isaac (Gen 17:10,19) who, in turn, passed it on to Jacob (Lev 26:42).

## WHAT WAS ON GOD'S MIND?

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Some of the main covenant agreements between God and his people listed in the Bible include the covenant between:

- Noah and all of humankind (Gen 9:1-17)
- Abram and his descendants (Gen 12:1-3)<sup>2</sup>
- Moses and the Hebrew people (Ex 20:1-20; 24:1-8).  
God sums up this arrangement in Exodus 6:7, *I will take you for my people, and I will be your God*  
This was a covenant that needed to be renewed a few times, as the people were often very unfaithful (Ex 34:1-28; Josh 24:1-27 [Shechem]; Neh 8-10). God's people had to repeatedly be led back to the 'Book of the covenant,' (Ex 24:7), or the Law of Moses (Josh 1:8; 23:6; 2 Chron 34:14; Neh 8:3)
- David and his descendants (2 Sam 7:12-23)
- Christ and all of humankind (Mat 26:28; Luke 22:20)

### Jesus

It is significant that the very last covenant made, (and ever would be made), was that made by Jesus.

The coming of this 'new' covenant of Jesus was prophesied by the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, some 600 years before Jesus came. He wrote:

*'The time is coming', declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them' declares the Lord.*

*'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the Lord. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, saying, 'know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.' declares the Lord. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more'. (Jer 31:31-34)*

So, when Jesus lifted up the cup of wine at the last supper and said that the cup represented a new covenant made possible by his blood, Jesus was saying a number of things.

1. First, he was making it plain that the last supper was, in fact, a covenant meal.
2. Second, he was saying that if anyone dies to self and chooses to live for Christ, then the outstanding debt of your sins (which keeps you from a holy God) will be paid for. It will be paid by Jesus dying on the cross for you. If you like, Christ's blood became the covenant blood that was shed. This, therefore, was a 'blood covenant'.

## WHAT WAS ON GOD'S MIND?

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There is a very real sense that all the covenants previously made (with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David) meet together and have their final perfect expression in the covenant of Jesus.

- The covenant with Noah concerns the salvation of creation
- The covenant with Abraham concerns God's commitment to his people
- The covenant with Moses is a call to holiness
- The covenant with David was a promise to reign in glory

All of these have their final definition and resolution in Jesus who makes all these possible.

The question is, have you accepted that covenant?

Will you?

### Prayers for others

Pray with passion for those things God has placed on your heart, remembering the persecuted church, world events, the sick and our leaders.

### Benediction

*So then brothers (and sisters), stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*

*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (2 Thess 2:15-17)*

*This service was provided by Nick Hawkes for HopeNet SA*

**KID'S CHURCH or KID'S TALK or SUNDAY SCHOOL**

**A fishy tale – Jonah 1 - 3**

You will need:

- 1) A whale. This can be made quite simply using a 3-metre length of black plastic. The black plastic is sold quite cheaply in hardware stores as 4-metre wide doubled over plastic for use in gardens. Keep the plastic doubled over and trim one end so that it tapers to a point. Staple the sides together but keep the end (the whale mouth) open. Use some of the plastic that has been trimmed off to cover a tail made from a cardboard packing box. Sticky tape will hold the plastic on. Staple the tail onto the tapered end of the whale. Finally, cut a small blow hole (big enough for the muzzle of a water pistol to poke through (see diagram)).
- 2) A water-pistol = whale water spout
- 3) Blue sheet or blanket = sea
- 4) Cardboard box (or church pulpit) = ship

Enact the story of Jonah. Prepare some children:

- Ask two children to spread out a blue sheet or blanket and hold it horizontal just above the floor in front of the pulpit. They then flip the blanket (or sheet) up and down to simulate waves on the sea.
- Another child crawls inside the whale with a water pistol stuck in his/her waist band (otherwise they lose it in the dark). Try and hide the water pistol so that it becomes a surprise. He/she fires a water pistol from the middle of the whale from time to time.
- Have two "crew" in the pulpit to make Jonah go over the side of the ship.
- Jonah.

This play is easy because the children have no lines to learn and take their queue from what you say. (It's O.K. to give stage directions out loud. This is meant to be a humorous amateur skit.) The following is an example of what you might say:

*Once there was a man called Jonah who lived in a peaceful little village 20 kilometres West of the sea of Galilee in Israel. (Jonah comes forward.)*

*"One day God said to Jonah, "Go to the great city of Ninevah and tell them that unless they stop hating, lying and being cruel, I will destroy the city."*

*Jonah said "No way! I'm not going to tell that hairy mob of cut-throats in Ninevah that God is going to blast them off the face of the earth unless they change their ways. They'd chew me up into little pieces and spit me out!"*

*(Jonah walks around the front of the room)*

*So Jonah ran away in the opposite direction, all the way to the seaport of Joppa. But even that wasn't far enough away from Ninevah, so he caught a ship that was going further West - all the way across the sea to the Spanish coast. After all, it had lovely beaches and a good casino.*

## WHAT WAS ON GOD'S MIND?

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(Jonah climbs into the pulpit/ship)

*He thought he could run away from God and run away from the things God told him to do - but God had got other plans.*

*Pretty soon the ship was caught in a fierce storm ...*

(Children wave the sea vigorously)

*...and the sailors found out that the storm was caused by God being angry at Jonah, so they threw him overboard.*

(The "crew" in the ship push Jonah out of the ship - safely!)

*Well... the storm stopped, which brought great relief to the sailors but it was not quite so good for Jonah. If things weren't bad enough swimming around in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea in a storm, it took a turn for the worse when a great big whale came and swallowed him up.*

(Your whale operator quickly slips into the whale that you have previously laid out in position with the concealed water-pistol).

The whale then swallows Jonah, who is lying on the floor with his feet conveniently near the mouth of the whale.)

*It was not nice! He was squashed inside the tummy of a big whale alongside a half chewed tuna whilst some mackerel were tickling his feet. The smell was terrible!*

*Inside the whale, Jonah came to his senses. "God", he said, "I have reviewed the situation - and decided that going to Ninevah isn't such a bad idea. I really am sorry that I tried to run away from what you wanted me to do. I've been very foolish."*

*Well, ...God heard Jonah's prayer.*

*Meanwhile, the poor whale was resting its head on a beach, because Jonah had caused him to have a bad case of indigestion. The whale then gave an enormous burp - and out popped Jonah onto the beach.*

(Jonah leaves the whale. An added refinement may be the whale then spitting out Jonah's shoes.)

*The whale swam off gratefully vowing to keep clear of all litter thrown from ships.*

*Meanwhile Jonah marched all the way to the city of Ninevah on the banks of the great river Tigris and told them how unhappy God was with their wicked ways. (Jonah then stands up and marches down the isle to the door of the room.)*

*And do you know what? Something wonderful happened. The people of Ninevah didn't pound Jonah into dust. They listened to him, stopped doing the evil things they had been doing - and became friends with God.*

After the play, call the children together and remind them not to run away from doing the things God wants us to do. (If time permits, ask for suggestions as to what some of these things might be).

End with prayer.