

## LESSON 2

### THE PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT

#### Introduction

In Genesis 12, God presents the call of Abram (Abraham). The passage relates the promises to Abram and the conditions of those promises. The third verse ends with the words, "And in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." The promise was to Abram and his descendants, but God chose the few to bless the many. From the beginning God loved the whole world. The Covenant or pact was repeated to Isaac, to Jacob, and to the children of Israel. In Exodus, the whole people agreed to be God's missionary nation. They became the people of the Covenant. Later, they were to forget the purpose for which they had been chosen, but God continued His plan through a new people of the Covenant.

As we turn to a study of the people of the Covenant, you will feel your involvement, and that is as it should be.

#### The People of God

The term "layman" comes from a Greek expression meaning "the people" (of God). It includes all the people of God, both laymen and clergymen. Our false distinction between laity and clergy comes from the Roman system of government which divided the population into the *laos* (people) and the *kleros* (magistrates). This system of government was utilized by the Roman Catholic Church and so has had a marked influence on church order even in our own day. The division within Christianity, however, wanders far from the New Testament concept of the people of God.

Hendrik Kraemer, in *A Theology of the Laity*, calls to our attention the fact that the word "lay" in most western languages goes back to the Greek *laos*. *Laos* refers to the chosen people of God both in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>1</sup> He reminds us that the Christian Church got its start through the witness of the common man. The fishermen, the tax collectors, and even the less distinguished elements of society witnessed to what they had seen and experienced in their own lives. From the freshness of this personal encounter came the surge that propelled the Gospel message across the inhabited world during the next three centuries.

<sup>1</sup> Hendrik Kraemer, *A Theology of the Laity* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958), p. 49.

First God made the Covenant (promise) with \_\_\_\_\_ . Then He repeated it with \_\_\_\_\_ , \_\_\_\_\_ , and the children of \_\_\_\_\_ . Later the Israelites forgot their promise in the Covenant, and God continued His plan through a new \_\_\_\_\_ .

(Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, people)

"Layman" means the \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ and includes both \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ .

Today's false distinction between laity and clergy comes from the \_\_\_\_\_ system of government which, in turn, influenced the Roman \_\_\_\_\_ Church.

(people, God, laymen, clergymen, Roman, Catholic)

In the Old Testament, God considered the whole of Israel as the people of God. Thus, when some member of the people of God sinned, as in the case of Achan, all of the people of God suffered. "There is no hint of an idea that the people of God are 'Israel minus the priests. . .'"<sup>2</sup>

In the same fashion the Church is the whole people of God. It is to be "the people of God called out of the world, placed in the world, and sent to the world."<sup>3</sup>

The involvement of all of God's people in spreading the good news at home will create a spiritual fervour that will assure its outreach to the next nation, or the next island, and to the end of the earth.

The concept of the people of God is closely related to the Bible concept of the Covenant. By examining passages in both the Old and New Covenants, we can better understand the implications of being a son of God in the fellowship of the people of God.

### The Covenant People

#### Genesis

The Hebrew word for covenant appears quite often and has much importance throughout the Old Testament, especially in the Pentateuch and the Prophets. As early as Genesis 6:18, we find God establishing a covenant with Noah. He promises again in Genesis 9:11-12 that He will not destroy all living beings again by flood. He puts the rainbow in the sky as the reminder of the promise.

In Genesis 12, God makes a more explicit covenant with Abram. God makes great promises but demands total loyalty in return. Peters mentions that God's purpose in making the Abrahamic Covenant was to begin "a divine counterculture designed both to arrest evil and unfold the gracious plan, salvation, and purpose of God."<sup>4</sup> Here we have the picture of God searching for and reaching down to man. God chooses a single man and a single nation, but it is for the purpose of reaching the whole world with His message and love plan.

In Genesis 17:7, God expands the Covenant and states the fact that it is meant for Abraham's descendants too. Again in Genesis 22:16-18, after Abraham had proved that he would not withhold even his son Isaac, God repeated the promise. In Genesis 26:24, in an hour when Isaac sorely needed comfort, God repeated His promise to him. And even Jacob, in an hour when he was very discouraged, heard God's great promise (Gen. 28:13-15).

In the Old Testament, who were the people of God? \_\_\_\_\_

(All Israelites)

Today, who are the people of God? \_\_\_\_\_

(Compare your answer with the text.)

What did God promise in His covenant with Noah? \_\_\_\_\_

(He would not destroy all living beings again by flood.)

In Genesis 12, God selected one man and one nation for the purpose of reaching the whole world with His m \_\_\_\_\_ and l \_\_\_\_\_ p \_\_\_\_\_.

(message, love plan)

<sup>2</sup> Bliss, *We the People*, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962), p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 90.

*Exodus*

God redeemed His pledge which He made to His people. He heard the groaning of Israel and "remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Exod. 2:24). God mightily delivered His people from slavery and set before them at Mount Sinai the conditions which they were to fulfil if they were to be the people of the Covenant.

What was the Covenant? It was a pact or contract between God and the people of Israel stating the promises that He made to Abraham. God was to be their God—to bless them, to protect them, and to bless all of the earth through them. Israel, on her part, was to serve God alone and to follow Him in love and obedience. She would observe certain ceremonies, rituals, and a manner of life that would mark her as God's people.

God took the initiative, chose the people, and set the conditions. Israel was not to bargain or modify the conditions but to accept them and become His people or to reject them. The Israelites formally bound themselves to this acceptance as they stood before Mount Sinai in Exodus 19 and 20. The Covenant was similar to the modern "last will and testament." A single party was to accept or reject the conditions and subsequent benefits. Once she had accepted the conditions, Israel became bound by them. On this ground, when Israel began to mix in other religions and to follow false gods, God charged her with spiritual adultery.

The Covenant meant that God would be their God and that they would be His people—His own people as no other people on earth. For this privilege, they were to reject all false gods and to give Jehovah God their unswerving loyalty. God chose, sheltered, and protected Israel so that she might reveal Him to the nations of earth. Only the most spiritually perceptive prophets understood Israel's mission to the whole world, but the seed of truth was there from the very beginning.

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy (set apart) nation. (Exod. 19:4-6, RSV)

God had clearly told them that they could walk with Him, work with Him, and be used of Him for His glory. No grander promise was made until New Testament times when God promised Christians—the new people of God—that they would be a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). Israel failed to understand her responsibility and heard only her privilege; hence she became selfish, nationalistic, and arrogant. Most of all, she lost her possibility of serving all the earth. God, however, was not frustrated in unfurling

God delivered the Israelites from \_\_\_\_\_ and brought them to Mount \_\_\_\_\_ where He set forth the requirements for their being the people of the \_\_\_\_\_.

(slavery, Sinai, Covenant)

A covenant is a \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_.

The Covenant was between God and \_\_\_\_\_.

He was to be their \_\_\_\_\_, and they were to be His \_\_\_\_\_.

(pact, contract, Israel or the children of Israel, God, people)

God called Israel to be a kingdom of \_\_\_\_\_ and a \_\_\_\_\_.

(priests, holy nation)

Israel failed to understand her \_\_\_\_\_

and heard only her \_\_\_\_\_.

(responsibility, privilege)

His love plan for humanity. He worked first through the faithful remnant and through the true prophets who called the people back to their first love. Finally, He brought His love plan to complete fruition in Jesus Christ of the tribe of Judah and family of David. There is a lesson here for Christian churches: any time that we become concerned only about our own affairs and forget God's love for the whole world, we make the same mistake as Israel, and it brings the same consequences. A church must be evangelistic and missionary to be faithful to its high calling and nature.

*Isaiah*

Isaiah presents the broad picture of Israel in her calling as the missionary nation to the peoples of earth. The prophet presents the covenant relationship between God and Israel in a very clear form.

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
 I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
 I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
 a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind. . . .  
 (Isa. 42:6-7, RSV)

The latter part of this verse clearly shows Israel's missionary calling. Isaiah caught the vision, but few of his contemporary fellow Israelites did. In another remarkable passage, he includes eunuchs and foreigners, who were outcasts to Israel, in the people of God (Isa. 56:3-4).

God's blessings upon Israel were to become a light to Gentile nations concerning the true God.

Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.  
 (Isa. 60:1-3)

Israel became content and waited for others to come to her to learn of God rather than reaching out to them to share the living God.

In the sixty-first chapter, Isaiah described the ministry of the Messiah. Jesus told the people of His home town of Nazareth that He was the fulfilment of that prophecy. (Compare Luke 4:18-21.) The words also describe the ideal calling of Israel and of the Church in our own day.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. . . .  
 (Isa. 61:1)

Isaiah presents God's love for the whole world. He also presents the missionary responsibility to the whole world, but in a very beautiful way. He also presents a prophecy of the ministry of Jesus and of His followers.

God worked first through the faithful \_\_\_\_\_ and the true \_\_\_\_\_ who called the people back to their first love.  
 God brought His love plan to complete fruition in \_\_\_\_\_.  
 (remnant, prophets, Jesus Christ)

Isaiah understood that Israel was called to be a m \_\_\_\_\_ nation to all p \_\_\_\_\_ of the earth.  
 (missionary, people)

Jesus used the words of \_\_\_\_\_ (scripture reference) to describe His ministry.  
 What was the occasion of Jesus' repeating Isaiah's prophecy in Luke 4:18-21? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Compare your answers with the text.)

Although in times past, or even at present, your church, convention, or union may have received missionaries and fraternal workers, it is your responsibility as a Christian to witness first among your own people. But you also have a responsibility to other people. Today there is no single missionary nation as in the Old Testament, but all of God's people are called to join forces in making known the good news of Jesus Christ.

### Jeremiah

The prophet Jeremiah forms something of a bridge between the Old and New Covenants. (A covenant is a pact or agreement between two or more parties.) In troubled times Jeremiah, guided by the Spirit of God, saw in the future a more perfect covenant. The New Covenant (called the New Testament) would be enduring; it would complete the beginnings of the Old. Study carefully the words of the New Covenant as Jeremiah so beautifully describes it.

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . . For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31-34, RSV)

There it is, the promise of a new covenant, and the spiritual people in Israel longed for its day. The new people of God are all Christians everywhere.

### Jonah

The Book of Jonah is a missionary drama in four acts. It is the most thoroughly missionary book of the Old Testament. Had you thought of it in that way? Many people concentrate on how the great fish could swallow Jonah and keep him alive but miss the spiritual message on world-wide missions that the prophet so aptly presents. The Book of Jonah teaches a great lesson on our spiritual responsibility to declare the truth of God to all peoples. It strikes at the heart of racial and nationalistic prejudice to show clearly that God is the God of the whole world and that He loves all people. Let us see in Jonah missions illustrated in four acts.

#### 1. The Divine Commission (chapter 1)

We begin with a God-given message: "The word of the Lord came unto Jonah . . ." The call from God was personal and was direct. It came to Jonah personally just as it comes to those who feel God's special call to become ministers of His word. The call was to go to

Jeremiah saw in the future a more perfect covenant. The Lord told him that--

1. He would put His \_\_\_\_\_ within them and would write it upon their \_\_\_\_\_;
2. He would be their God, and they would be His \_\_\_\_\_;
3. He would forgive their \_\_\_\_\_ and remember their sin no more.

(1. law, hearts; 2. people; 3. iniquity)

Jeremiah spoke of a new \_\_\_\_\_ with a new people-- \_\_\_\_\_ everywhere.

(covenant, Christians)

The Book of Jonah is the most thoroughly \_\_\_\_\_ book of the Old Testament.

(missionary)

It is a missionary drama in four acts. Read each chapter or act in the Bible as well as the comments in the text.

Then write the title of each chapter.

Chapter 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Nineveh (v. 2) to cry out against it and to call for repentance. To understand the impact of this call to Jonah, we must understand his feelings about Nineveh. The Assyrians had been the enemies of his people for as long as Jonah could remember. Nineveh was the capital of the nation that had so long oppressed his people. We can imagine how glad Jonah was that God was going to destroy Nineveh for its wickedness, but he wanted no part of preaching to it in order to give the enemies of his people a chance to repent and to turn to God. Nineveh represented the country that oppressed Jonah's people, and thus Jonah hated them, but God said that Jonah had a responsibility to them. Let us look at Jonah's reaction.

The Bible says, "But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof . . ." (v. 3).

Human rebellion enters and momentarily interrupts God's plan to call Nineveh to repentance by Jonah. By looking at a Bible map, one sees that Tarshish is exactly opposite to Nineveh where God had told him to go. Joppa is a port town in Jonah's flight from God's presence. When Jonah rebelled against God and sought to go in the wrong direction, he found abundant company. There is much in the phrase, "He paid the fare thereof." We can rebel against God, but such rebellion always carries a price tag.

2. *The Heavenly Discipline (chapter 2)*

In this experience Jonah finds there is no place to flee from the presence of God. We may shirk our duties, including our missionary assignments, but we are still there, and God is still there. Review quickly chapter 2, and note the situation on the ship—the heart searching, Jonah's being cast overboard. In dire distress, Jonah remembers God: "I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me . . ." (v. 2). In spite of rebellion, in spite of his unwillingness to share God's message, Jonah knew who God was and turned to Him in time of need. Grace enters as the Bible says, "He heard me." From his experience, Jonah comes to a triumphant faith, declaring, "Salvation is of the Lord" (v. 9b).

3. *The Second Chance (chapter 3)*

Having been rescued from the dire consequences of his rebellion, Jonah receives a second commission from God: "And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh . . ." (vv. 1-2a). God's nature and His commission were unchanging, and Jonah, by God's mercy, received a second opportunity to go to Nineveh and to discharge his missionary responsibility. Jonah declared that within a

*Continue listing the titles of the chapters of Jonah as you read.*

Chapter 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Chapter 3: \_\_\_\_\_

short space of time God would destroy the city because of its wickedness. Then a remarkable thing happened. Both the king and the people repented. What a revival! Some one hundred and twenty thousand turned to God in repentance, and He spared the city. Jonah should have been delighted, but he was not.

4. *The Stern Rebuke (chapter 4)*

Instead of being pleased that God had powerfully used him to turn a great city to repentance, "it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry" (v. 1). God had to teach Jonah some stern lessons, among them the fact that people are more important than gourds, or, as a principle, people are more important than things. God told him that He loves people, even those whom we may consider our enemies (v. 11). The tiny book of Jonah is missionary to the core.

In summary, we may say that the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, is a missionary book.

Chapter 4: _____

## Home Study Exercise

### Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3)

After reading the study guide text, answer the following questions.

1. To which of Abraham's heirs did God repeat the promise? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Give the root meaning of layman. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Where did the division between clergy and laity arise? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Who were the people of God in the Old Testament? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Describe God's covenant with Noah. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Why did God select one man in Genesis 12? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. How did God's promise to His people influence His actions when the children of Israel were in Egypt? (See Exodus 2:24.) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Give the meaning of covenant. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. To what purpose did God call Israel? (See Exodus 19:4-6.) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. How did God bring to fruition His love plan? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. What vision did Isaiah have that was shared by few of his contemporaries? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. What passage in Isaiah did Jesus use to describe His ministry? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. What was the occasion? (See Luke 4:18-21.) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
14. Give three parts of the prophecy Jeremiah presented in 31:31-34. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
15. List chapter titles for the four chapters of Jonah. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
16. What can we say of the Old Testament with reference to missions? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3)

1. What do you think has been the purpose of God for mankind from the beginning?
2. Explain the meaning of the following Scripture passages.  
Genesis 18:17-18  
Genesis 22:15-18  
Genesis 26:1-5  
Genesis 28:12-17  
What do you conclude is the central missionary implication of these passages?
3. Compare Exodus 19:4-6 with 1 Peter 2:9-10.
4. Compare Isaiah 61:1 with Luke 4:18-21. What do these passages say to the Church today?
5. Summarize the message that Lesson 2 in the study guide communicates to you.

### Advanced activity (Level 3)

1. Prepare a Bible study lesson for prayer meeting on each chapter in the Book of Jonah that will teach the members of your church what the book says about missions. (If you are not a pastor, prepare the lessons as though you were the pastor of a congregation.)
2. How does the missionary emphasis in Isaiah 56:1-8 differ from the message of 60:8-16?

## Seminar Discussion

1. What were the elements of the Covenant between God and Abraham?
2. In what way is this Covenant still being fulfilled through Christ Jesus?
3. What are some of the ways in which a false distinction between the clergy and laity can be overcome in churches?
4. Discuss the relation between Exodus 19:4-6 and Exodus 20:1-6.
5. Discuss the responsibility of Christians as the new people of the Covenant in light of 1 Peter 2:9.
6. Why has Jonah sometimes been called the most missionary book of the Old Testament?