



Covenant in Conflict:
God's Promises for David's Day, and Ours
[Fall 2026 Devotional + Study]

"Never be afraid to trust an unknown future
to a known God."
– Corrie ten Boom

introduction: the covenant at the heart of scripture

In his song "Promises," Eric Clapton seems to almost groan while singing, "We made a vow we'd always be friends / How could we know that promises end." Even a surface-level Internet search with the terms "Quotes about Promises" will reveal just how cynical most people are when it comes to the reliability of each other's promises. For many, the common wisdom seems to be that we shouldn't trust anyone but ourselves—and, for still others, such distrust includes God.

Trust is hard. Hard to earn and harder to keep. Hard even to hold on to in the midst of life's many storms and griefs. And even in the one instance where someone is worthy of complete and utter trust, God himself, broken humans find ways of doubting that his plan is best.

God's "covenant" with Israel, established in the Book of Exodus before they crossed the Jordan River into Canaan, was his attempt to anticipate the brokenness that would inevitably emerge from human culture and distrust. Baked into that covenant were means and methods for restoring relationship and establishing repair. Like any relationship, there are rhythms of rupture and repair between ourselves and God. Unlike any other relationship, one party in this dynamic is perfect, warranting of perfect trust, wholly and unconditionally good.

So, to embark upon a study of *covenant* is to embark upon a study of *relationship*. What does it mean that we are "in relationship" with God? What grace might we lend ourselves for the ways we fall short, knowing that God has not only accounted for that inevitability, but also prepared a path toward restoration? What challenges might we face in trying to feel an intimacy with the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator of our world and ways?

This study will take us into the heart of the Old Testament: **1 and 2 Samuel**. These two books reside at a major turning point in the history of God's people, revealing the ways that God works through and even in spite of our social and political designs. In these pages, we learn how God wanted to be Israel's king, but Israel demanded a human king. That same tension is still at play for us today, even personally: God wants to be the Lord of our life, but waiting in the mystery of his timing and provisions can sometimes tempt us to look for lordship elsewhere—in other people or in other things.

Consider this study an invitation to trace a thread between the days of David and the days we share here and now. Ultimately, what Israel didn't understand was that even at the zenith of his power and in the most faithful of his actions, David could never be the king that we really need. David's life, from its highest highs to its lowest lows, serves as a reminder that only a supernatural force could possibly turn the tide of our broken histories.

But 1 and 2 Samuel are about far more than the life of David. In this journey, we'll meet Hannah, Eli, Samuel, Saul, Jonathan, Absalom, and many more. Each of these figures play a role, some positive and some negative, in navigating God's covenant promises with Israel. In the midst of great conflict, God's promises are greater. That was true then, and it is true now.

overview: how to get started

This study will move in four parts, each with three weeks of materials for reflection and discussion.

- I. God's Covenant with Israel (1 Sam. 1–8)
- II. The King We Ask For (1 Sam. 9–31)
- III. God's Covenant with David (2 Sam. 1–9)
- IV. The King We Need (2 Sam. 10–24)

1 and 2 Samuel covers a lot of ground—and is made up of a lot of words. Each week, our City Groups will be discussing only a part of the full reading. If you would like to follow along and read both books, we will be distributing weekly emails with devotional questions and opportunities for reflection.

Each week, you will receive a short devotional with opportunities to respond and reflect. Each week, you will also see discussion questions that will be used by our City Groups when they meet. If you would like to check out one of our City Groups, which meet all over the city, [search for a group](#) on www.citychurch.org/city-groups/, or email our Congregational Life Director, Kai Chen (kai@citychurch.org).

PART I – GOD’S COVENANT WITH ISRAEL

How would you define the word “covenant?” How is it similar to or different from a “promise?”

The Hebrew word *berith* (“covenant”) is drawn from the verb *barah*,¹ meaning “to cut or draw,” signaling a compact between two parties. This verb has a number of uses, also meaning “to make” or “to select.” There is a fascinating moment in 1 Samuel when the giant Goliath taunts the armies of Israel, saying, “Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? *Choose* a man and have him come down to me” (1 Sam. 17:8). Goliath is saying, “Cut out a man from your armies to be cut down by me.” While Goliath is trying to strike a bloody “covenant” (of a sort) with Israel, the God of Israel is standing by the covenant he struck with the people long before this moment.

God remembers. When others forget, or when the conflicts of our life crowd out our commitments or our prayers, God still remembers. Even when Israel fled from his protection, when they demanded kings and worshipped other gods, when they abandoned his law and his promises, God still remembered them. All along, he was preparing the path and the lineage through which Jesus would come—a line that is cut through the life of David and his kingship.

As we begin this study, focusing on the life of Samuel and Israel’s insistence upon a monarchical rule, we should reflect on the historical context. God has freed them from Egyptian slavery, led them into the promised land of Canaan, and helped them navigate the decades of conflict that arose from their arrival—sending judges and prophets along the way to restore the people’s belief and behavior. However, at the end of Judges—directly preceding 1 Samuel—we read these words: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judg. 21:25).

Some translations say, *Everyone did what was right in their own eyes*. When facing Judges’ stark final words, we should note the ambiguity of the narrator’s reference to kingship. Does the lack of a king mean that the people have turned aside from the proper kingship of their God, or is the narrator implying that the people needed a human ruler in order to redirect their attention? It’s a cliffhanger of an ending, and it leads directly into the rise of Samuel, a great prophet and the final “Judge” in scripture. Will he be the ruler the people need, or will he help find the ruler the people need? More to the point, do the people really need a ruler?

The birth of Samuel is more than a narrative device designed to introduce us to the main characters of our story. God’s covenant almost always works through those that others fail to notice. Whether it’s a young shepherd boy that couldn’t possibly defeat a Philistine giant, or whether it’s a humble carpenter who claims to be able to forgive sins, God’s ways continually mystify any who feel they’ve arrived at the sum of things. 1 Samuel begins with a woman named Hannah, unable to have children, grieving the burden of waiting and hoping for something to change.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel invite each of us into God’s covenant anew: to consider his promises for those who are waiting or watching, for those who are in grief or confusion, for those who simply want their relationship with him to feel more intimate and less formal. Join us in a journey into the heart of one of scripture’s greatest themes: *the Covenant of God*.

1. The word is similar to the very first verb in the Bible: “In the beginning, God created...” (*bara*).