

2. Covenant Primer (2Q 2021—The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant)

Biblical Material: Gen. 9:15; Isa. 54:9; Gen. 12:1–3, Gal. 3:6–9, 29; Exod. 6:1–8; 19:5; Jer. 31:33, 34.

Quotes

- A covenant made with God should be regarded not as restrictive but as protective. *Russell M. Nelson*
- As the gospels present it to us, the mission of Jesus of Nazareth is about the way in which the community of God’s people - historically, the Jewish people who had first received the law and the covenant - is being re-created in relation to Jesus himself. *Rowan Williams*
- *God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God.* If you have never thought of Him in these terms, then you have not yet begun to think about Him in the way he wants you to. God’s Word describes those covenants, proclaiming Him to be a covenanting God. In a sense, the Bible is the book of His covenant. We even call it that – the Old and the New Covenants (Testaments)! *Sinclair Ferguson*
- He does not love us *if* we love him. He loves us with an unconditional love; *therefore*, we should love him. The message of the covenant is one of God’s totally free grace to his people. Of course, it calls for a response of total commitment. But notice the order: God’s covenant love is not the *result* of our commitment; it is the *cause* of it. The pattern is, ‘I will, *therefore* you should;’ *not* ‘I will, *but only* if you will first.’ *Sinclair Ferguson*

Questions

How do we explain the concept of a covenant today? Does the idea of covenant tend to make the plan of salvation a legal concept? What was God actually promising? How did Jesus re-envision the covenant? What would be another way of explaining what God really wants for people in our world? How does this fit into the great controversy?

Bible summary

The rainbow is the sign of the promise not to flood the earth again (Gen. 9:15), also referenced in Isa. 54:9. In Gen 12:1-3 God promises to bless the whole earth through Abraham, affirmed by Paul writing to the Galatians (Gal. 3:6–9) with the added conclusion. “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s children, and you are heirs of the promise!” (Gal. 3:29 FBV). Through Moses God confirms to the Israelites the promise he gave to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them the land of Israel (Exod. 6:1–8), and that they will be his people (Exod. 19:5). God sums up his agreement: “This is the agreement I’m going to make with the people of Israel at that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws inside them and write them in their minds. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Jer. 31:33 FBV).

Comment

We need to identify a problem from the beginning. The word “covenant” is not one with which people today are familiar, unless it’s in a legal setting. That colors the perspective by which we view God’s covenant. We must consider what kind of meaning we give to words like “covenant.” Is our relationship to God contractually-based, or is it more a question of principles? Covenants are especially helpful for suspicious people. It provides some kind of guarantee,

rather than simply trusting others to do the right and honorable thing. Trouble is, if we are doubtful or suspicious of God, and so want the covenant, what does that say about us and our relationship with God? Perhaps it is simply better to use the meaning of covenant as promises so that we do not become sidetracked by the contractual obligations concept.

A new kind of covenant is described by Jesus, and the same terminology is found in Hebrews 8. Here the quote is from Jeremiah 31:31-34—which in itself is interesting, for it shows that the “new” covenant is not so new after all! And what is the intent of this new covenant? It is clearly defined as *not* being like the previous covenant. It is to be based not on legal formulations and prescriptions, but on laws in minds and hearts—in other words, a relational covenant based on doing right because it is right, and is so recognized and accepted by thinking people. The intent, says God, is “that they will all know me.” This is not some ceremonial relationship, but one of individual, personal trust.

The way to live right is to stay close to God—to spend time with your heavenly Father, to think about the implications of the truth about God in your own personal life. If your thoughts about God and his loving grace do not make a difference in the way you live, what is the point? John wrote, “Everyone who does what is right has been born of God.” (1 John 2:29 FBV.)

And if you need a summary, Jesus explained the law as love for God and love for your neighbor. James comments on this by saying: “If you really observe the royal law of Scripture: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” then you do well. (James 2:8 FBV.)

So what *does* God want? “Get rid of your sins—I don’t want to see them! Stop doing evil! Learn to do good; strive for justice, condemn those who oppress others; support the rights of orphans, take up cases to defend widows Isaiah 1:16, 17 FBV. Instead of relying on some ritualistic system, *do right!* Instead of “taking care of sin” in some legal way, God tells his people to learn and accept the ways of *right doing* and *right being*.

Instead of a preoccupation with legal status, what is far more important in God’s eyes is a life that is lived right. He would far rather you spend time in doing right for others than in fulfilling what you believe are significant religious niceties. For you can be wholly wrong even as you try to observe the religious laws. How? Because of the way you are thinking.

What God is looking for is a meaningful relationship. He identifies what he really wants: “Those I look favorably on are humble and repentant.” Isaiah 66:2 FBV. Respect, honor, acceptance—a serious attitude that is thinking Godwards; not a blind following of the rules that will “fix” any problems with this demanding deity.

Ellen White comments

Encircling the throne of God is the rainbow of the covenant, a symbol of the pledged word of God that he will receive every sinner who gives up all hope of eternal life on the ground of his own righteousness, and accepts the righteousness of the world’s Redeemer, believing that Christ is his personal Saviour, able to save him from his sin, and to keep him from falling. Unless Christ is the ground of our hope, we shall not inherit eternal life. {ST, September 5, 1892}

It makes every difference how we do service for God. The boy who drudges through his lessons because he must learn will never become a real student. The man who claims to keep the commandments of God because he thinks he must do it will never enter into the enjoyment of obedience. The essence and flavor of all obedience is the outworking of a principle within—the love of righteousness, the love of the law of God. The essence of all righteousness is loyalty to our Redeemer, doing right because it is right. {TMK 118}