

## 10. The Two Covenants (4Q 2011—Galatians)

**Biblical material:** Gal. 4:21–31; Gen. 1:28; 2:2, 3; 3:15; 15:1–6; Exod. 6:2–8; 19:3–6.

### Quotes

- The whole covenant is a bundle of promises. *Thomas Brooks*
- The bond of the covenant is able to bear the weight of the believer’s heaviest burden. *William S. Plumer*
- A covenant made with God should be regarded not as restrictive but as protective. *Russell M. Nelson*
- Christians must be Jews. The truth of what we believe depends on the truth of Judaism, depends on the first covenant. *Michael Novak*
- One may preach a covenant of grace more clearly than another... But when they preach a covenant of works for salvation, that is not truth. *Anne Hutchinson*

### Questions

What is a covenant? How does Paul contrast the two covenants? How do we understand the place of law in a covenant? How does this fit into the whole great controversy scheme? Is God saying we have to have a contract with him before he will save us? What is the basis for the divine covenant? Who is the covenant for?

### Bible summary

In Gal. 4:21–31 Paul continues his argument that portrays the law as slavery and Jesus as freedom. He even uses the patriarchal story of the two sons—Ishmael born to the slave-woman Hagar, and Isaac born to the free woman Sarah. These are the “two covenants” according to Paul. He even states that Jerusalem is following Hagar and not Sarah, since they rely on the law given at Sinai. This must have been very offensive to any Jews who heard this analogy! In the same way as we want to retain the rule of law as part of our religious system, so too the Jews. But if we do that, we are not following the free son of promise (Isaac) but the slave son (Ishmael).

In contrasting these two covenants, Paul is not saying the covenant based on law at Sinai was wrong. He is simply pointing to the better covenant of the promised Messiah Jesus, which has superseded the old rule-based covenant. Why should you go back to that superseded covenant? Paul asks. We are children of the free!

The texts in Genesis take us from the beginning to the covenant promise God made with Abraham. In the story recorded in Exod. 6:2–8, God again shows that he wants to liberate us through the powerful image of freedom from slavery in Egypt. God’s desire is to carry us on eagles’ wings as we trust in him (Exod. 19:3–6).

### Comment

A covenant is an agreement—an exchange of promises, set in the form of an oral or written agreement. In human terms we usually do this because we need something concrete to give us confidence. It is because we find it difficult to trust.

Question: who is the covenant with God for? It is primarily for us—to reassure us that God will keep his promises. It also makes us more aware of our responsibilities too—that we have also made promises as part of this covenant agreement.

Why can't we take God at his word? Because we are doubting, suspicious people who need to be reassured about the nature and character of God. In fact it is only when Jesus comes that we have a perfect revelation of God as he is. This is why Jesus is the foundation of the true covenant—because through him we see and know God, and can have absolute confidence in him that he is not hostile, but friendly.

At the heart of the matter is the question over the trustworthiness of God. Having seen God demonstrate his trustworthiness in its totality, then the question comes back to us—are we trustworthy? Can we keep our side of the covenant, can we keep our promises? Knowing our feeble fallibility, God helps here too.” Just hold on and trust,” he tells us. For the power is not in us, but in the graciousness of God himself.

Here is the central theme of the great controversy: the trustworthiness of God that is demonstrated and vindicated before the whole universe. And we can be part of that as we say Yes to God, and trust in his ability to help us trust!

Can we keep our promises as part of a covenant? Not exactly! For all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags, and there is none righteous, no not one... But God takes our feeble attempts to trust in him, wanting to do what is right, and through his grace remakes us in his image as his true and trusted children.

We do not need to follow the legal covenant as servants, following the line of Hagar and Ishmael. We children of Sarah and Isaac, free children of promise that trust in the wonderful healing salvation of our loving Lord.

### **Ellen White Comments**

If all would only learn the simple lesson that they must take and wear the yoke of Christ and learn of the Great Teacher His meekness and lowliness of heart, they would better fulfill their covenant to love God supremely and their neighbor as themselves... They must begin at the very beginning. Christ says, Take My yoke of restraint and obedience upon you, and learn of Me... The heart will then be made right with God, through the creative power of Christ. Partakers of the divine nature, they are transformed. {HP 162}

Nothing but the righteousness of Christ can entitle us to one of the blessings of the covenant of grace. There are many who have long desired and tried to obtain these blessings, but have not received them, because they have cherished the idea that they could do something to make themselves worthy of them. They have not looked away from self, believing that Jesus is an all-sufficient Saviour. We must not think that our own merits will save us; Christ is our only hope of salvation. {PP 431}

The covenant of grace is not a new truth, for it existed in the mind of God from all eternity. This is why it is called the everlasting covenant. There is hope for us only as we come under the Abrahamic covenant, which is the covenant of grace by faith in Christ Jesus. {FLB 77}

We have God's pledge that He will bind men closely to His great heart of infinite love in the bonds of the new covenant of grace. All who will give up their hope of paying for their salvation, or earning it, and will come to Jesus just as they are, unworthy, sinful, and fall upon His merits, holding in their plea the pledged word of God to pardon the transgressor of His law, confessing their sins and seeking pardon, will find full and free salvation.--Letter 148, 1897. {7ABC 468}