

CHAPTER 11.

COVENANT: GOD'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS PEOPLE

The coronation of a new monarch is always marked by ceremony and symbolism. For example, at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom on June 2, 1953, she was given not only a crown but also a royal orb, two different sceptres, and a coronation ring that was placed on the fourth finger of her right hand. Interestingly, this special ring is also called the “Wedding Ring of England.” It is a stunning ring glistening with gems of sapphire and ruby.

What does this ring symbolize? And why would it be called the “Wedding Ring of England”? In part, the answer revolves around the key word in this chapter: *covenant*. As we all realize, the queen has an official relationship with, and a solemn responsibility toward, the citizens of her kingdom. According to Scripture this kind of relationship can also be described as a covenant. For example, in the days of Joash the king and Jehoiada the priest, the royal leader and his people were bound together in a covenant agreement (2 Kgs 11:17). In a similar fashion, when a husband and a wife agree to be married, to love and help each other for as long as they both shall live, then the two are united as one in a covenant bond. That is why the prophet Malachi speaks of a wife as joined to her husband “by covenant” (Mal 2:14). So, realizing that both marriage bonds and the relationships between monarchs and their nations can be described as covenants, it is no surprise that the Queen Elizabeth’s coronation ring is also called the “Wedding Ring of England.”

Right from the start this teaches us a few important things about covenants. First, a covenant relationship is as solemn as it is sacred. Marriage is not a casual agreement; neither is God's relationship with his people. It is special, serious, legally binding, and long-term, indeed lifelong. It is also a delightfully blessed relationship, and that is the second key thing. To be sure, there may be difficult moments, both in marriage and in the relationship between royalty and their nations. However, the LORD has specifically designed a covenant to cultivate and protect a rich, joyful, and deeply meaningful relationship.

Finally, although every covenant involves certain stipulations and ceremonies, let us not forget that, in the end, covenants in the Bible involve personal relationships. In fact, those relationships are the heart and soul of any covenant. For example, in order to be officially married, people need to sign a wedding certificate, but marriage is all about the groom and his bride loving and living together, not just signing a piece of paper. Similarly, a coronation day, with all its pomp and circumstance, is an appropriate event, given the occasion. Yet, what really counts in the long-term is the relationship of mutual loyalty and respect between the ruler and those who are ruled. Bearing this in mind as we look more closely at the details of God's covenant with us, let us always remember: it is not a pragmatic business agreement. Rather, it is a precious, unique marriage relationship (Ezek 16:8).

COVENANT: WHAT IS IT?

The first time that we find the word *covenant* in Scripture is in Genesis 9:9. Paying some attention to the context of this first occurrence is helpful. In short, the LORD had sent the Flood to punish and cleanse the evil society of that time (Gen 6–7). All living creatures, both human and animal, died, except Noah, his family, and the animals they had taken with them in the ark (7:23). However, months later the LORD sent a strong wind, and slowly the floodwaters receded (8:1–5). When all the occupants of the ark finally stepped back onto dry ground, they thanked the LORD with a sacrifice (8:20). The LORD also had some strict instructions for Noah and his family, so that they would not fall back into the sins

that originally caused the LORD to send the Flood in the first place. They were to be fruitful and increase in number as well as show respect for each other's lives, steering away from all murderous intentions (9:1, 7).

Needless to say, Noah and his wife, along with his three sons and their wives, must have been more than a little nervous as they made this new beginning in a vast and now mostly unpopulated world. What if they made a mistake? What if they fell back into the old sinful ways? Would there be another flood, and would they be the ones drowning this time? Anxieties such as these must have been swirling around in their thoughts. Therefore, in order to calm their minds and steady their hearts, the LORD makes a covenant with Noah and his children, and indeed, with all living creatures. Here are the LORD'S own words:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations (Gen 9:8–12).

There are a number of noteworthy items here. First of all, God reveals himself here as the God of initiative: "Behold, *I* establish." In fact, so strong is God's initiative that he calls it "*my* covenant." Normally speaking, when a covenant is made between two parties (in this case, God and Noah's family), it would be referred to as *our* covenant. However, here the LORD maintains ownership of the covenant; he calls it "my covenant."

Second, God's covenant immediately includes Noah's descendants. The word used here, *descendants*, refers not only to his own sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—but also to any grandchildren and great-grandchildren who would be born in the family over time. In other words, this covenant establishes a relationship that endures through the generations.

Third, this covenant contains a specific promise in which God assures Noah and his descendants that he will never again destroy the earth with a flood. This is exactly the assurance that Noah and his children needed to hear at this particular moment in history, and in his grace and compassion for this family, the LORD provides it. Now they could step forward into this post-Flood era with courage instead of crippling anxiety.

Moreover, should doubts about this promise ever arise in their minds, the fourth element of the covenant would help them, namely, the rainbow, which is the visible sign attached to this covenant. Of course, at times it would still rain very hard, perhaps even to the point of some local flooding, but whenever they saw that rainbow, God was showing them, and us, that no matter what, he would never send another worldwide flood.

Finally, when the LORD makes a promise, he does not go back on his word. He will do as he has promised, and for this reason he describes his covenant as “everlasting” (Gen 9:16). The warranty on God’s covenant is not merely a lifetime guarantee; it is an assurance for all time. So, in sum, there are five important aspects in God’s covenant with Noah: 1) God’s initiative, 2) a relationship that continues through the generations, 3) a specific and gracious promise, 4) a visible sign that confirms the truth of the promise, and 5) an everlasting guarantee.

Later in the book of Genesis, particularly in Genesis 15 and 17, the LORD makes another covenant, this time with Abram. Abram is anxious because he and his wife Sarai have no children (Gen 15:3–4). In this context the LORD comes with assuring words and makes a covenant with him. Remarkably, each of the five above-mentioned elements returns. In the first place, Abram had not asked for a covenant; he had not even mentioned the word. He was yearning for a child, not a covenant. So again, it was entirely the LORD’S initiative to appear to Abram and make a covenant with him (Gen 15:18). A little later, in Genesis 17, when he confirms this covenant with Abram, who is now renamed Abraham, he also indicates that it belongs to him when he calls it “*my* covenant” (Gen 17:2, 4, 7, 9). Second, even though Abraham and Sarah do not have any children of their own yet, the LORD still applies the covenant through

the generations. The LORD clearly says that it is “between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen 17:7). Third, this covenant contains two special promises. In due time Abraham would have many descendants (Gen 15:5; 17:6), and the LORD would give the land of Canaan to Abraham’s family as their own possession (Gen 15:7; 17:8). Fourth, a sign was attached to this covenant: circumcision (Gen 17:10–14). Fifth, this covenant is also described as being “everlasting” (Gen 17:7, 13). The structural similarities between the covenant with Noah and the one with Abraham are striking, although not entirely surprising. Since the LORD is a God of order and faithfulness, we expect this kind of consistency in his work.

There are still more occasions in Scripture when the LORD makes or confirms a covenant with someone and his family (2 Sam 7, with David and his sons) or with an entire nation (Exod 24, with the Israelites). However, the two examples above give us enough revelation to establish a basic definition of God’s covenant. A covenant is *a binding, everlasting relationship between God and his people in which he makes specific gracious promises and gives a visible sign to confirm those promises*. Given the gracious manner in which God established and maintains this covenant, it is often called the covenant of grace. As described earlier, the closest comparison we can make to human agreements is to the marriage covenant (Mal 2:14), a lifelong relationship between a husband and wife, which is often accompanied by a visible sign such as a wedding ring.

COVENANT: HOW DOES IT WORK?

Even though the covenant is initiated by one party, namely God, it obviously involves two parties: God and his people. In the covenant both parties have their own parts to do. This is especially clear in the language of Genesis 17. The LORD says, “*Behold, my covenant . . .*” (v. 4), and he immediately promises Abraham descendants (vv. 5–6) and land (v. 8). However, then the LORD continues and says to him, “*As for you . . .*” (v. 9), and he gives Abraham the solemn obligation to continue adminis-

tering the sign, circumcision, without fail from generation to generation (vv. 10–14).

A similar pattern is found in Deuteronomy 28. In this chapter the LORD is renewing his covenant with his people just before they enter the promised land. As for himself, he promises many blessings for his people: children, crops, livestock, security, and much more (vv. 2–12). However, with the LORD'S promises also comes the obligation to obey and serve him alone (vv. 1, 13–14). Furthermore, the LORD warns his people that, if they do not obey him, their disobedience will be punished with a most severe curse (vv. 15–68).

This is the way it works within the covenant. Not only are there two parties involved, there are also two parts, which correspond to the two parties. On the one hand, for his part, the LORD makes his gracious promises. Knowing him, we can always count on him to keep his word. On the other hand, for our part, the LORD lays on us the solemn obligation to live in accordance with his holy will. Failing to fulfil our part of the covenant leaves us under the burden of his curse rather than the bounty of his blessings.

However, this immediately places us in a crisis of the covenant. All of God's people are sinful by inclination and depraved in heart and mind, as we discovered in the previous chapter. Given the reality of inherited sin, undoubtedly disobedience will occur and inevitably the curse will be deserved. In short, the urgent question is this: how can such a sinful people live in a covenant relationship with such a holy God? Surely, this is impossible or, at least, can only end with many curses being heaped upon the heads of God's people! Thankfully, there is an answer to this pressing question. The answer is this: God's covenant contains not only two parties and two parts, but also one mediator.

In the Old Testament the mediator of the covenant was Moses. When the LORD and his people were together at Mount Sinai, the Israelites committed a grave sin. They made a golden calf as an idol (Gen 32:1–4), thereby disobeying the clear command of the LORD (Exod 20:4, 22–23).

The LORD is sufficiently angry with them to wipe out the whole nation and start over with Moses (Exod 32:9–10). Hearing about this, Moses is so angry that he smashes to pieces the tablets with the Ten Commandments, which are also known as the words of the covenant (Exod 34:28). All in all, the covenant seems to be teetering on the brink of obliteration. But just at that moment, Moses steps forward and appeals to the LORD, reminding him of the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 23:13). This mediation is effective. The LORD relents, the people survive, and the covenant still stands.

What began with Moses is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the mediator of the new covenant (Heb 9:15, 12:24). He stands between the Holy Father and his sinful people and, on the basis of the shedding of his blood on the cross, the blood of the new covenant (Luke 22:20), he intercedes for his people. With Christ and his atoning work, the covenant does not merely continue but it grows into a relationship full of abundant blessings (Eph 1:3–14). After all, the LORD designed the covenant to be a relationship in which people would flourish, above all spiritually. However, we should not be deluded: without Christ the covenant would result in curses for all God's people. It is not for nothing that we call it the covenant of *grace*. Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ our Lord and our Mediator (Rom 7:25)!

OLD AND NEW COVENANT

As noted above, God's covenant is everlasting (Gen 17:7). Yet through the prophet Jeremiah the LORD heralds the arrival of a new covenant (Jer 31:31) and “in speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb 8:13). So, how can the covenant be everlasting and yet obsolete at the same time?

In order to answer that question, we need to identify precisely what prompted the LORD to make this transition from the old to the new covenant. As the LORD declares in Jeremiah 31, a new covenant was necessary because his people broke his covenant even though he was a husband to them (v. 32). In other words, the problem was not with the

covenant itself. The covenant was a good arrangement; in fact, it was a splendidly gracious relationship. The problem, though, was with the people with whom the LORD had made this covenant. Even though God was patient, compassionate, and loving toward them—more than the finest earthly husband ever was toward his wife—his people rebelled, repeatedly running off to worship idols. In reality God’s bride, the people of Israel, was a serial adulteress, repeatedly breaking the marriage covenant with her heavenly Husband.

Added to this was the fact that the sacrifices for sin in the old covenant were not truly effective in removing the sin. It is “impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:4), and, therefore, all those animal sacrifices only amounted to “a reminder of sins every year” (Heb 10:3). So, in short, the situation was as follows: a stubbornly sinful and spiritually adulterous nation was living in a binding covenant relationship with a holy God on the basis of sacrifices that could not truly take away even one single sin. Surely, such a situation is unsustainable! Yes, and this is why God, in his good time, made the transition from the old to the new covenant. It was not because the old covenant was a mistake that needed to be corrected. Rather, it was because sinful people need substantial and lasting forgiveness, not merely a shadowy and temporary pardon (Col 2:17; Heb 10:1, 16–18).

This also means that moving from the old to the new is a transition of shadow to substance, of promise to fulfilment. It is *not* a transition from one kind of relationship to a fundamentally different kind of arrangement. The basic structure of the old covenant is continued in the new. Both old and new belong to the same covenant of grace. It simply becomes “a better covenant” (Heb 7:22; 8:6). The five characteristics of the covenant, mentioned earlier, return in the new covenant. It is still initiated by God (“I will make a new covenant,” Jer 31:31), continued through the generations, (“the promise is for you and for your children,” Acts 2:39), filled with even more gracious promises (“enacted on better promises,” Heb 8:6), confirmed by a visible sign (“having been buried with him in baptism,” Col 2:11–12), and guaranteed forever (“it is impossible for God to lie,” Heb 6:13–20). In this way the everlasting

covenant of Genesis 17:7 is also the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31. The new is not radically different, but it is substantially better. Since the new fulfils the old, the everlasting nature of the old covenant is simply absorbed by, and confirmed in, the new.

At this juncture we should note the view of the *dispensationalists*, those who teach that there is a more radical difference between the old and the new covenants. There are different varieties of dispensationalists, but the vast majority of them teach that while the old covenant carried on through the generations, the new covenant is made only with the elect, not with believing parents and their descendants after them. Close attention to the wording of Scripture proves, however, that dispensationalism is incorrect. In Genesis 17:7 God says to Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and *you and your offspring* after you.” These words are almost identical to Acts 2:39, where God makes the promises of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit “for *you and your children*.” The similarity is too great to be merely a coincidence, especially since the same Holy Spirit inspired both passages.

Moreover, in 1 Corinthians 7:14 the apostle Paul specifically states that the children of believing parents are holy, that is, separated from the world and included among God’s people. Added to that, the words of the Lord Jesus Christ himself are significant: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Matt 5:17). When we pull all these passages together, it should be clear that both covenants, the old and new, continue from generation to generation.

WAS THERE A COVENANT IN PARADISE?

There is an interesting verse in the prophecy of Hosea: “Like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me” (6:7). This verse seems to suggest that just as the Israelites were in covenant with the LORD (see Exod 24:8), so was Adam, and that both parties broke their respective covenants. But the curious thing is that when we turn to the account of Adam and Eve in Gen 1–3, we do not read anything

about a covenant. Certainly, the word *covenant* does not appear in the first three chapters of the Bible. Therefore some theologians look for elements or aspects of the covenant in those chapters. They identify the command to stay away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as the obligation of the covenant (Gen 2:17). They point to the implied gift of eternal life as the promise of the covenant (Gen 2:17). Some even suggest that the two special trees—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life (Gen 2:9)—were signs of the covenant. This covenant in Paradise is mentioned in the Westminster Confession, where it is called the *covenant of works* (Ch 7.2), and in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which refers to it as the *covenant of life* (Q&A 12). In the course of history, other names have been given to this covenant, such as covenant at creation, covenant of favour, and covenant of love.

This discussion is an example of a matter in which Christians may hold slightly different opinions without accusing each other of false teaching. It is true that the term *covenant of works*, although well known, can be misleading. It might leave the impression that in the Garden, Adam had to merit or earn eternal life. However, even before the fall, whatever Adam received, he received as a gift from God. God does not owe us anything, whether inside or outside of Paradise. At the same time, using terms like *covenant of works* and *covenant of grace* helps to highlight the fact that something fundamental changed with the fall into sin. After Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree, it was most certainly not business as usual within the covenant. As explained earlier in this chapter, sinful people and a holy God can co-exist in covenant relationship only if God graciously provides a mediator, Jesus Christ, in whom people must believe for their salvation (Acts 4:12). Thus, the term *covenant of grace* applies. It was for the same reason—that is, for highlighting the difference between the pre- and post-fall situations—that others have distinguished between the *covenant of favour* in Paradise and the *covenant of grace* after sin entered the world. Rather than insist that one particular term or another must be used, it is more important to understand what people mean by these terms and to ensure that the way they use them lines up with what Scripture teaches.

Beyond discussing the pros and cons of various terms related to the covenant, it is helpful to step back and remind ourselves of what we do know, clearly and confidently. The relationship between God and Adam and Eve is clearly established in Genesis 1:26–27 when human beings were created in the God’s image. In chapter 9, we discovered that by looking at Genesis 1:26–27 along with 5:1–3, it becomes evident that the image of God speaks of a Father-children relationship.

Now the relationship between Father and children does have some covenant-like qualities to it. First, like a covenant, the Father-children relationship is not a temporary, fleeting arrangement. Once a father, always a father. Once a son or daughter, always a son or daughter. Both the covenant and the image of God have a certain enduring permanence about them. Second, in the bond between Father and children, the Father makes promises, and the children have an obligation to honour him. Third, as the covenant continues through the generations, so does the image of God (Gen 5:1–3). It is also true, however, that the image of God is not the same thing as the covenant. A special ceremony or sign, such as circumcision (Gen 17:11) or sprinkling of blood (Exod 24:6–8), accompanies a covenant, but there is no comparable symbol for the image of God.

Perhaps we can best sum it up in this way. Being created in God’s image established a Father-children relationship between God and Adam and Eve. Like all Father-children relationships, this bond was permanent, and since there was no sin yet, it was a bond completely full of bliss. Since they were God’s children, Adam and Eve had an obligation to obey their Father’s commands. Again, since there was no sin yet, this obligation was a pure delight to them. Fulfilling this obligation did not merit or earn anything, but it did honour the Father, and that, after all, is the goal of being created in God’s image.

Tragically, Adam and Eve disobeyed their Father. The image was corrupted; the relationship was broken. Yet, thankfully, God the Father graciously took the initiative to restore what his children had destroyed. God uses the bond of the everlasting covenant of grace to begin this restora-

tion work. Through the covenant, God’s chosen people are brought back into close communion with him. Through the covenant, the blessings of forgiveness and eternal life are extended to them. Through the covenant, sinful people even receive the blessing of being adopted as God’s children (Rom 9:4, “to them belong the adoption [and] the covenants”). In short, through the covenant, in Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, God restores what Adam and Eve forfeited in Paradise. Miraculously, stubborn sinners can once again be called “children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:16–17). You might even say that in the marriage covenant between Christ and his church (Eph 5:32) we are born anew by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5), according to the image and likeness of God’s eternal Son (Rom 8:29), to be the Father’s dear children and heirs, who will one day receive the new creation as our own—most certainly unmerited—inheritance (Rev 21:5, 7).

Suggested Readings: Genesis 17:1–14; Hebrews 8:1–7

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. The fact that God always takes the initiative in redeeming his people says something about his nature or his perfections. Look back at the list of God’s perfections in chapter 5 and identify which ones shine forth most brightly in the initiatives that God takes in Genesis 3, 6, and 12.
2. The LORD also made a covenant with David (2 Chron 21:7). This covenant is described in detail in 2 Samuel 7:1–17. Of the five characteristics of a covenant identified in this chapter, how many can you find in this covenant with David? Briefly describe each element that you find.
3. Identify the two parts of every covenant. What happens if God’s people do not keep their part of the covenant? Some passages speak of God’s people breaking the covenant (e.g., Lev 26:15; Deut 31:16; Ezek 16:59). Yet, at the same time, the covenant is everlasting (Gen 17:7; Heb 13:20). So, how do those two fit

together? How can an everlasting covenant be broken, yet still exist?

4. List two things that remained the same within the covenant in the transition from old to new. Then list two things that changed. How do we give full recognition to the significant progress that God has made in moving from old to new without slipping into the error of dispensationalism?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Read Ezekiel 16. In verses 1–58 the LORD tells something like a parable in which he describes finding an abandoned girl whom he eventually marries (v. 8). Sadly, she is unfaithful to him and runs off after other lovers. At the end of the chapter, in verses 59–63 the LORD goes on to apply this to his covenant relationship with his people. List and discuss three things that you, after having meditated on this chapter, appreciate more about being part of God’s covenant of grace.
2. The new covenant, as well as the old, includes the children of believers. What comfort does this give to parents? Refer to Canons of Dort 1.17. What responsibilities does this bring to parents? On the one hand, when the privileges of the covenant are emphasized, it sometimes happens that covenant children develop a false sense of security and assume that they will be blessed no matter how they live, even if they indulge in an ungodly lifestyle. On the other hand, when the need for holy living is stressed, covenant children are sometimes led into doubt, or even despair, about their salvation. How do parents find the right balance? Give practical suggestions, if possible.
3. We often speak about God’s covenant with believers and their children. But what about God’s covenant with “every living creature” (Gen 9:10) and “with day and night and the fixed order of heaven and earth” (Jer 33:25)? What are the implications of this covenant? What assurance does it provide? Discuss how the following three things are related to, or opposed to, each other:

God's covenant with creation, stewardship, and the green movement (ecology).

4. Do you think the relationship in Paradise between God and his first two children, Adam and Eve, is best described as a covenant relationship? If so, what is the best term to describe it: covenant at creation, covenant of works, covenant of life, covenant of favour, or covenant of love? Or do you have a better suggestion of your own?

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