

Chapter 6: God's Covenant Promises

Connection

The first and second questions of the form for profession of faith are closely connected. The first question deals with the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the creeds of the church. The second question deals with God's covenant promises which have been signified and sealed to us in our baptism.

Some people have *made* these two questions into opposites. They claim: the first deals with general things, the doctrine of the church. We're not really personally involved yet. At least, we don't have much to do with the doctrine. But, they continue, in this second question the more *personal* aspects come to the fore: the covenant promises as they are signified and sealed to us in our baptism.

But this antithesis is wrong. The first question is also directed to us personally: you are a member of the church, you want to be a living member, you also want to *stay* with the church and with the doctrine of the church.

That is all very personal

As far as the second question is concerned: the covenant promises mentioned there are not personal, they are the substance of the faith and of the doctrine. When the question is asked in the Heidelberg Catechism: what must a Christian believe? The answer is: "All that is *promised* us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary." (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 7, Q&A 22)

It is very clear: the Apostles' Creed, one of the creeds mentioned in the first profession question, is called a summary of God's *promises*. That is exactly what this second question is all about: these covenant promises of God.

When do we receive God's promises? We must realize without a doubt that God's covenant promises are for *life*. We didn't just receive these promises at a later age. These promises don't become ours only when we make profession of faith. No, we received these promises before we ourselves knew anything about them. For we are *born* in God's covenant. When we have believing parents, or a believing father or mother, we are included in God's covenant, and God's covenant promises are meant for us.

That is the tremendous thing about God's covenant: the LORD knows us in the *generations*. When the LORD God made his covenant with Abraham, he did not make it only with the father of all believers, but also with his descendants: "I will establish my covenant 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." (Genesis 17:7) So the promise of God's covenant passes from father to child, from one generation to the next. That is why the form for baptism mentions the Old Testament covenant promise at the same time as quoting Peter after Pentecost. Peter says: "The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." (Acts 2:39) That is the richness of God's covenant: children may know they are included, together with believing parents.

The LORD takes the initiative!

This is all from the LORD's side. We say that the covenant was originally one-sided. That means: it originated with God alone. He thought of it, and he made it with us. Man contributed nothing. We had no input at all. The covenant with God did not originate from man. Man didn't have the least thought of making a covenant with God, nor the slightest inclination to.

Neither did God and man simultaneously have the idea of making a covenant with each other. No, man did not make it with God, and they did not make it together. The sovereign LORD made that covenant with man. It was his sheer good pleasure, his free grace, that moved him to make a covenant with man. The LORD took the initiative!

Two-sided

But once the LORD had made the covenant with man, it became what we call two-sided. Once God initiated it, it did not remain one-way, but became two-way. The LORD promised: "I am your God". Then he also demanded: "Be my child!" So actually the promise and the demand of God have the same contents. The LORD demands what he promises, and he promises what he demands.

Only after man's fall into sin, everything now depends on God's *grace*. That is why the covenant God has made with us is a covenant of *grace*.

The Father's promise

The LORD God has signified and sealed to you in your baptism, the promise of the covenant, the reverse side of the obligation to the covenant. The LORD called you by name, and joined your name to his Name. When you were baptized into the Name of God the Father, God the Father testified and sealed to you: "I establish an eternal covenant of grace with you. I adopt you for my child and heir. Therefore I will provide you with all good. I will avert all evil or turn it to your profit."

God the Father assured you at that time: "I am establishing my covenant also with you. You belong just the same, even if you do not yet understand any of this. According to my covenant promises only good will come to you. I will keep evil away from you or, if necessary, change it into benefit for you".

And once you have matured, and now do understand, God the Father says: "Remember well that I will take care of you completely, totally. Not a hair will fall from your head needlessly. I will keep you from day to day."

This does not mean that now your heavenly Father will take care and you'll have a good life, without worries or difficulties. No, the heavenly Father says: "however things may go against you, you may always hope in my goodness." In my goodness - that means: in the faithfulness of God's covenant. You will never stand alone, not even when you are in the deepest trouble. Because Jesus stood alone, as no one else stood alone, utterly forsaken, now you get the guarantee that all things, also trouble and misery, will work together for good.

That means that no one can tear you out of the protection of your heavenly Father. Your Father surrounds you like a fortress, to lead you to your *goal*. Throughout all your life his covenant, his covenant promises, go with you.

Jesus Christ's promise

The promise of the covenant is signified and sealed in your baptism. That was not only a promise of God the Father, but also of God the Son. For your name was joined to the Name of the Son at that time. And when you were baptized in that Name, Jesus Christ assured you: "I wash and cleanse you from all your sins. I unite you with me in my death and resurrection, so that you are freed from your sins and counted righteous before God."

You did not yet understand all that when you were baptized. But when you are no longer a child and you do understand it, then Jesus Christ assures you: "You may with body and soul, with your whole being, in life and death, share in my communion!" And when you feel small and powerless there is the comforting promise of the Saviour: "I have made the covenant, and you may firmly believe that you belong to this covenant of grace, and that you are my possession. You don't have to manage this all for yourself, for you are not on your own account, you are on my account!"

The Holy Spirit's promise

Then God the Holy Spirit assures you completely of the promise of the covenant. Twice the apostle Paul assures the Corinthians that God has given

us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge. (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5) He even adds that God has put his seal upon us. A pledge speaks of a guarantee and expresses a certainty. And a seal reminds you of the surety of your baptism, for then your name was joined to the Name of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit promised: "I will live in you and make you a living member of Christ. What you have in Christ I will make your very own: the washing away of your sins and the daily renewal of your life."

With the promise of the Holy Spirit it was the same: at the moment of your baptism you could not yet understand. But later you were given insight, and the Holy Spirit repeats it every day: "I will bring you what in Christ is ready and waiting for you: covenant grace. Appropriate it, using the means of grace."

Use your baptism, in which you received the sign and seal of the covenant. Listen carefully to the sermon. Hear God's Word. Attend the Lord's Supper obediently. In all these you will receive the cleansing from your sins and the daily renewal of life.

God the Holy Spirit gives you that certainty in your life. You can't do that yourself. This is not a psychological process, which you must manage yourself, for you cannot talk yourself into feeling sure. But the comfort of God's covenant is that the Holy Spirit assures you and makes you able every day to live for the LORD.

Faith

You must *believe* that promise of God's covenant, of God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is asked of you at your profession of faith: "Do you believe in God's covenant promises?" God's covenant promise is linked to the covenant demand. Therefore: you cannot just take it or leave it when the LORD comes to you. No, you *must* have faith!

Is that possible? Isn't faith a gift of God? Of course! But you may accept that gift. You may *rest* in the reliable promise of God. That also means: you must let go of all means of support within yourself and around you. You may and must trust in the LORD, who did not err when he called you by name and covenanted himself to you. May you believe? Yes, certainly. Someone once said: "If I did not believe, I would add yet another to all the sins I have done: that of turning my back on God and his promise!"