

Chapter 2 – Promises and Obligations

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:1-7:1

Confessions: Heidelberg Catechism QA 94

In this chapter we want to look at the terms by which the covenant relationship functions. What is the framework of this relationship as it gets lived out between God and his people? This is where we encounter those familiar words: promise and obligation. Where do those words come from? It might surprise you, but we do not find those words in our confessions anywhere. They are not in the Heidelberg Catechism or Belgic Confession or Canons of Dort. One might argue that the idea is there in some form, but the exact words are not. The exact words come from our Forms for Baptism (Infant and Adult). Our Forms for Baptism both give a time-tested and well-formulated overview of biblical teaching on the sacrament. We read that “every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation.” This is precisely right and this is what we are going to look at in this chapter. What does God promise in the covenant of grace? What is expected of us in the covenant of grace?

The Promises of the Covenant of Grace

We begin with God and what he graciously promises us. In the last chapter, I said that we want to keep things as simple as we can when it comes to this doctrine. When it comes to the divine promises in the covenant of grace, we can summarize them with one sentence: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Those words are found throughout Scripture in relation to the covenant relationship.¹ Those words are also found in 2 Corinthians 6:

¹⁶ What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,

“I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.

¹⁷ Therefore go out from their midst,
and be separate from them, says the Lord,
and touch no unclean thing;
then I will welcome you,

¹⁸ and I will be a father to you,
and you shall be sons and daughters to me,
says the Lord Almighty.”

Paul quotes from Leviticus 26:12, “I will be their God and they shall be my people.” Right there you basically have what God promises in the covenant. He promises to be our God and he promises that we will be his people. He promises himself to us, he promises that he will be ours and we will be his. He promises an eternal bond or connection between himself and us, a bond of fellowship and love.

But we can go further than this basic summary. In fact, why would you not want to? Surely you want to hear more of what God promises us in the covenant. After all, this is entirely gospel grace. It is all beautiful and encouraging for believers. So let me unpack what it means that God promises to be our God and what it means that God promises that we will be his people.

We can do that with the help of the Heidelberg Catechism. As I mentioned, the exact words “promise and obligation” are never used in the Catechism. Yet promise by itself is definitely there! In Lord’s Day 7, we hear about true faith in QA 21. Then QA 22 goes on to ask, “What, then, must a Christian

¹ For example: Exodus 6:7, Jeremiah 7:23, Jeremiah 11:4, Jeremiah 30:22, and Ezekiel 36:28.

believe?” The answer: “All that is promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary.”

While that is a good answer, you might be thinking to yourself, “What does that have to do with the covenant of grace? One minute you’re speaking about the promises of the covenant and then the next about all that is promised us in the gospel. Isn’t that a leap?” No, that is not a leap at all. The promises of the covenant of grace **are** the gospel promises. What God promises us in the covenant of grace is everything bound up with the good news.

Certainly that is the way things were viewed by Zacharias Ursinus, the main author of our Catechism. As mentioned in the last chapter, the Heidelberg Catechism was first written for children. It was written to instruct the youth of that German-speaking region known as the Palatinate. However, Ursinus also wrote two other catechisms. His Large Catechism was used for the training of seminary students. It follows the basic structure of the Heidelberg Catechism. It also works out some of the teachings of the Heidelberg Catechism in more detail. QA 35 of Ursinus’ Large Catechism reads,

Question: What does the gospel teach?

Answer: It teaches what God promises us in the covenant of his grace, how we are received into it, and how we know we are in it; that is, how we are set free from sin and death and how we are certain of this deliverance.²

Do you see it? The promises of the gospel are the promises of the covenant of grace. The gospel is covenantal.

So what does God promise us in the gospel? Let us review with the help of the biblical summary found in Lord’s Days 9-22 of the Heidelberg Catechism.³ Let us be reminded of how beautiful and precious all these promises are.

He promises that for the sake of Christ, he will be our God and Father. He promises to provide us with everything we need for body and soul. He says that he will turn to our good whatever adversity he sends in this life of sorrow (Lord’s Day 9). God promises us that no creature shall separate us from his love (Lord’s Day 10).

He also promises that through Jesus he will save us from all our sins (Lord’s Day 11). He will make sure that the penalty is paid for our sins, and perfect obedience is offered in our place. He promises us that in Christ we have a prophet who will teach us all we need to know about our redemption. He promises that in Christ we have a priest who will redeem us with his sacrifice and intercede for us forever before him in heaven. He promises us an eternal King in Christ who will rule us with his Word and Spirit and defend and preserve us in our salvation (Lord’s Day 12). These are truly wonderful promises! They are full of grace and designed to give us comfort and joy.

The promises go on. He promises that we are his beloved adopted children through his grace in Christ (Lord’s Day 13, QA 33). We are promised that we have been ransomed with the precious blood of Jesus so that we can be his own possession (Lord’s Day 13, QA 34). He promises that this is a good place to be. God promises that our original sin is covered with the innocence of our Mediator (Lord’s Day 14). Moreover, he promises that by the suffering of Christ, our body and soul have been redeemed from everlasting wrath. He promises us incredible gifts: the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life. We are promised freedom from the severe judgment of God that we deserved; the curse which lay on us has been taken by another, by Jesus (Lord’s Day 15).

² Bierma, *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, 168.

³ For the biblical support for each of these promises, refer to the Lord’s Day mentioned.

The covenantal gospel promises that when we die, our death is not a payment for sin, but gives us entrance into the life that lasts forever. Death has died in the death of Christ. God promises that our old nature too has been dealt a death blow. He promises to give us a new identity, a new nature whereby we can offer up living sacrifices of gratitude to him (Lord's Day 16).

How about more promises? The covenantal gospel promises us that death has been overcome by Christ in his death and resurrection. God promises us a resurrection hope, a new life now already, and later our own glorious resurrection (Lord's Day 17). He promises us that at this very moment we have a voice in heaven on our behalf. We have someone speaking for us, one who is our Advocate. Some day he promises to take us to himself in glory. But, for now, he promises us his Spirit who gives us power to seek the things that are above (Lord's Day 18). Additionally, he promises us that someday he will come again to deliver us and all his people (Lord's Day 19).

There are also promises connected with the Holy Spirit. God promises to give his Holy Spirit so that we can share in Christ and all his benefits, so that we can be comforted (Lord's Day 20). He promises us a place in his holy Church and in the communion of saints. The gospel promises us that we can have communion with Christ and share in all his treasures and gifts (Lord's Day 21, QAs 54 and 55).

Then, of course, there is the forgiveness of sins. God promises us forgiveness through Christ of all our sins, past, present and future. He promises to take them out of the way, to forget them, to throw them in the depths of the sea, to remove them as far as the east is from the west. This is all because of our Saviour Jesus (Lord's Day 21, QA 56). Also through him, we are promised the resurrection of the body. On his great day, he promises that our bodies will be raised in glory to live forever in the new heavens and new earth. (Lord's Day 22, QA 57) The gospel promises us perfect blessedness in the life everlasting. A perfect blessedness is held out to us that no one has yet seen or heard of and in that blessed state all of God's people will praise him forever (Lord's Day 22, QA 58). There are so many riches bound up with the covenantal gospel promises! Is it not amazing what God holds out to us in his grace?

Now I want to emphasize as clearly as I can that all of that is promised **to every single person** in the covenant of grace. There are **no** exceptions. These promises come to all believers and their children, head for head. The covenantal gospel promises are widely distributed to one and all in this relationship.

Someone might hear that and conclude, "Then everyone in the covenant must be saved. If God proclaims his gospel promises to one and all, then all in the covenant must be saved. You must be saying that salvation is automatic." Unfortunately, this is the way that the doctrine of the covenant has sometimes been seriously misunderstood. Some have used that misunderstanding to justify living in sin. They think to themselves, "I can live however I want, because I'm a covenant child. God has given me these promises and God is God, so I'm saved no matter what I do. I can live like the devil and it really doesn't matter because I'm in the covenant and I have the promises." This is a most wicked and sinful way of thinking. It is a complete perversion of the biblical doctrine of the covenant of grace. Those who think that way are on the broad road that leads to destruction.

You must read carefully here. It would be easy to misunderstand what you are about to read. We must distinguish between **extending** the promise and **receiving** what is promised.

An illustration might help. It is not a perfect illustration, but it will get the point across. Imagine if I were to give you a cheque for \$10,000. Another name for a cheque is a promissory note. It is a promise from me that you will receive \$10,000 from my bank account. But say that you take my cheque and put it in your pocket and then forget about it. Next week you pull those pants on and you put your hand in your pocket and there is a crumpled wad of paper. It has been through the washing machine, and you are not quite sure what it is anymore. You throw it in the garbage.

Did I extend a promise of \$10,000? **Yes**, I wrote the cheque and gave that promissory note to you.

However, did you receive \$10,000? **No**, because you did not take the cheque to the bank and deposit it or cash it. You did not do anything with that cheque and so you missed out on what was promised.

Do you see the difference now? It is the difference between extending a promise and receiving what has been promised. It is the difference between giving a cheque for \$10,000 and getting \$10,000 in your hand.

That is what happens in the covenant of grace. God proclaims the promises of the covenant to all in the covenant. **Every single person** -- and that needs to be stressed. However, not every single person receives **what** is promised in the covenant: the blessings. That is because there is a human responsibility within the covenant relationship. Everybody needs to bring the cheque to the bank, so to speak. The big question is: How do we do that? That brings us to the covenant obligations.

The Obligations of the Covenant of Grace

We are in a dangerous spot here. To get to Vancouver Island, most people take a ferry from Vancouver. If you go from Tsawwassen to Swartz Bay, the ferry goes through this rather narrow passage of water called Active Pass. It is an L-shaped passage, a dog-leg with Mayne Island on one side and Galiano Island on the other. To get a large ferry through Active Pass is not easy – the people at the helm have to be paying careful attention. It would be easy to get ship-wrecked on one side or the other. Something similar can happen when we are discussing obligations in the covenant.

On one side, there is this view that there are no obligations in the covenant. You are in and you are automatically saved and you can believe and live however you want. We could call this the Godless Rocks. You could get ship-wrecked on this wrong view of covenant obligations; you could get ship-wrecked on the Godless Rocks.

On the other side, there is this other view that your covenant obedience to God's law merits salvation. God does his part, you do your part, and the result is salvation. You get in the covenant by God's grace, but you stay in by your works of faithful obedience. This is a legalistic view of covenant obligations. We could call this the Legalistic Rocks. You could get ship-wrecked on the Legalistic Rocks too. While insisting that you hold to the doctrines of grace as outlined in the Canons of Dort, you could be blindly living by a sort of practical Arminianism through your doctrine of the covenant. Your view of covenant obligations could make you essentially into an Arminian, a walking contradiction. Salvation is all by grace, but it still depends on you.

So, on the one side there are the Godless Rocks. On the other are the Legalistic Rocks. Both are dangerous and destructive. We need to safely and carefully steer a course between these. How do we do that?

We do that by keeping first things first. What the Bible puts first is what we put first. In terms of human responsibility before God, the first thing God calls for is **faith**. He calls us to take him at his Word and believe his promises. Do you remember how I wrote that the promises of the covenant could be boiled down to what God says in 2 Corinthians 6:16, "I will be their God and they shall be my people"? Well, the obligation of the covenant can also be boiled down to that. It can be boiled down to our responding with, "He shall be our God and we will be his people." That is the response of faith.

Just as with the promises, however, we can and should go deeper. God calls us to believe in him, to trust his Word, especially to take all his gospel promises and make them our own. This is really what the first commandment comes down to. We sometimes call the Ten Commandments "God's covenant law." As you know, God's covenant law begins with "I am the LORD your God who brought you out

of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” It begins with a word of grace and deliverance. Then it immediately follows with the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” That is another way of saying, “He shall be our God and we will be his people.” We will not entrust ourselves to anyone else; we shall not look to anyone else in faith. We will depend on no one else but God only.

The explanation of the first commandment in Question and Answer 94 of the Catechism is excellent on this:

Q. What does the Lord require in the first commandment?

A. That for the sake of my very salvation I avoid and flee all idolatry, witchcraft, superstition, and prayer to saints or to other creatures. Further, that I rightly come to know the only true God, trust in Him alone, submit to Him with all humility and patience, expect all good from Him only, and love, fear, and honour Him with all my heart. In short, that I forsake all creatures rather than do the least thing against His will.

Not only are we to steer away from anything that might replace God, but we are to rightly know him and **trust** in him alone. We are to love, fear, and honour him, submit to him, and expect all good only from him. All these are different ways of speaking about faith; they are faith considered from different angles. What does the first commandment really call us to? It calls us to faith in the true God; to believe him and have him only as our God. That is our all-important starting point when it comes to the obligations of the covenant. Take God at his Word and trust him. Specifically, believe all that he has promised you in the gospel. Believe that in Jesus Christ, he is your Father to whom you are inseparably bound. When he says, “I am your God and you belong to me,” our reply is, “Yes, LORD, you are my God and I do belong to you through Jesus. I believe what you say about yourself and about me. I am yours, save me.” You see, faith is the way we take the cheque to the bank, so to speak. We receive all that is promised us in the gospel when we believe that these things are true for us individually and personally. God calls us to faith and by that we can see that there is nothing automatic in the covenant of grace. You do not receive all that is promised in an automatic way – you need to believe God for yourself and take those promises and apply them to yourself in faith.

When we have true faith, there will always be fruit. When you are truly united to Christ through faith, you are grafted into the vine, and you will bear fruit (John 15:5). Within the covenant relationship, God wants us to believe in him and take him at his Word, and so expects to see this fruit from those who believe in him. That means that he wants his children in Christ to embrace not only what he has promised in the gospel for our deliverance, but also what he commands in the law for our growth in holiness. Moreover, within the covenant of grace, those with true faith actually more and more **desire** to do this. Therefore, this obedience to God’s law is not a legalistic obligation imposed on us, but something that wells up from hearts that have been touched by the grace of God. It comes from hearts that are being shaped by his grace. As we read and hear God’s Word, we increasingly **want** to live in holiness before God already in this life. True faith bears the kind of fruit that God expects. It bears the fruit of holy and godly living.

In 2 Corinthians 6, that was worked out in regard to a particular pastoral issue. The issue was marriage between believers and unbelievers. Of course, that is an issue that is still around today. Paul says that the LORD is your God and you are his people. There is a bond between you and him. Believe that and then let that bear fruit in your life, also when it comes to whom you marry. Because the LORD is your God and you are his people, you will not be yoked with (hitched up to) an unbeliever – you cannot. You will not get into romantic relationships with unbelievers, because you know that this does not follow from your faith in what your covenant God has said about you and him. Here the covenant does not lead to “I can do whatever I want and it doesn’t matter because salvation is automatic.” Instead, the covenant relationship leads to “I want to follow the LORD because he has graciously

entered into fellowship with me and given me rich promises in Christ and I believe him.” It leads to what Psalm 119:97 says, “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.”

As we reflect further on this with an open Bible, we realize that this too is God’s work of grace in our lives. He not only gives the covenant obligations, he also enables us to meet them. After all, faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit according to Paul in Ephesians 2:8. The fruit of our faith – holy living – is also Christ’s work in us through his Word and Spirit. While we insist on the reality of human responsibility within the covenant of grace, we also recognize that God’s grace is behind everything good that happens in this relationship. This is why we call it the covenant **of grace**. So in the covenant, it is never a matter of “we get in by grace, and we stay in by works.” Why? Because on the one hand, once God has placed you in that covenant relationship, you are always in that relationship. It does not mean that this relationship always works to your blessing, but it is always a reality. On the other hand, when it does work to your blessing, it is entirely by grace. God’s grace determines everything good. He gives you the Mediator of the covenant and he gives the means by which you take hold of that Mediator – he gives the gift of faith. Therefore, you can never take any credit for yourself. All the glory belongs to God within the covenant relationship.

Yet there might be a lingering question in someone’s mind. What if there is no fruit? Someone says, “What if I look at my life and there’s no desire for holiness? I don’t want to grow as a Christian and I have no interest in the Bible or spiritual things. I don’t like being told about my sin and I don’t want to change. To tell you the truth, I don’t really like going to church. But I still believe in God.” Can such a person receive what is promised in the covenant of grace?

To answer that, we should first go to the words of Christ in John 15:4-5.

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

When you are in Christ by faith, you bear fruit. If you are apart from Christ, you do nothing fruitful before God. If there is no fruit, then you are not in Christ. That is the logical conclusion of what we read here. Christ was speaking to his disciples who claimed to believe in him. He insists that the evidence of faith is in its fruit. Everyone who has a true faith will bear some fruit, and the design is to bear increasingly greater fruit. However, if there is no fruit, then there cannot be any faith either. If there is no faith, that person cannot receive what is promised in the covenant of grace. That does not mean that they are cast out of the covenant. Rather, it just means that they are not receiving what is promised and the covenant relationship is not blessing them. There are consequences attached to being in the covenant and being unbelieving, but we will learn about that in the next chapter.

For now, notice what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7:1. He says, “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” Notice how the application follows from the promises. We hear those promises, we believe them, and then we want to live accordingly. We want to be living in holiness according to the Word of God. When that desire is not there, then we need to hear the warning of Hebrews 12:14, “Strive for peace with everyone, **and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.**” You will never see the Lord without holiness, that is abundantly clear. Where does personal holiness begin? It begins with faith, with believing in the Lord’s promises. Personal holiness is always a fruit of true faith. Personal holiness, even in the smallest measures, never exists apart from true faith in Christ. If there is no fruit, there is no faith. And if there is no faith, there are no covenant blessings.

Each reader needs to personally take hold of what God promises in the gospel. That is first and foremost. Let me say it one more time in case anyone missed it: there is nothing automatic in the covenant. You are not going to be saved just because you were born in the covenant to believing parents. If you are going to live in sin, you are going to hell whether or not you are a covenant child. You will be saved when you repent of your sins and turn to Jesus Christ in faith, believing in the Mediator of the covenant, and resting and trusting in him alone. God has said, "I am your God, you are my people." Believe him. Walk with him.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Prove from Scripture the statement that every church member (youngest to oldest, believer and unbeliever/hypocrite, elect and reprobate) is included in the covenant of grace and therefore a recipient of all the promises.
2. Which is a more dangerous threat today, the Godless Rocks or the Legalistic Rocks? Why? How should we address the one you identified as most dangerous?
3. We saw that faith is the first and foremost obligation of the covenant. How would you evaluate an approach which agrees that faith is primary, but then includes obedience to the law in the definition of faith?
4. What is the connection between the means of grace (preaching and sacraments) and the promises and obligations of the covenant of grace? Why is this connection so important and what bearing should that have on your life?
5. It has been said that "the covenant of grace is one-sided in its origin and two-sided in its existence." Is this an accurate statement? Why or why not?

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