

Chapter 3 – Dying and Living in the Covenant of Grace

Scripture: Hebrews 12

Confessions: Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 31

Let me briefly review what we have learned thus far. In the first chapter, we saw that the essence of the covenant is a relationship. Believers **and** their children are in a covenant relationship with God. Christ is the Mediator of this relationship. It is only through his intercession that this relationship functions in a healthy way. It is only through Jesus that a sinful people can be in a peaceful relationship with a holy God and be under his blessings.

Last chapter we went further and learned about the promises and obligations in the covenant of grace. Both the promises and the obligations can be summed up with that expression found throughout Scripture, "I will be your God and you will be my people." That can be teased out further. The covenant promises are everything that is promised to us in the gospel. The first and foremost covenant obligation is faith, to trust God and his promises in Jesus Christ. There is nothing automatic in the covenant. God's people are called to believe him and take him at his Word. I used the illustration of a cheque. If you do not cash the cheque, you do not receive what the cheque promises. Similarly, in the covenant of grace, you need to cash the cheque, so to speak. The way you do that, the way you receive what is promised, is through faith. Moreover, as we saw, true faith will and must always bear fruit in holy living. This is what God expects to see from his covenant people. He wants to see people who believe what he has promised and then bear the fruit of godliness. Now in this chapter we are going to take what we have learned so far and build further on it.

The key thing to understand in this chapter is that there are two ways of relating to God in the covenant of grace. The first is the way of faith, the way to life and blessing. The other is the way of unbelief. This is the way to death and curse. God holds out both these ways before us in his Word. One is held out to us to attract and entice us -- to woo us, if you will. The other is held out to warn us, even to threaten us.

The Way to Death and Curse

It might not seem very pleasant to read about death and curse. Yet perhaps there may be some readers who need to hear this message. Perhaps some who are reading are presently living unrepentantly in unbelief and this is the day that God is going to wake them up. Maybe this is the moment when someone living in the way of death finally hears the voice of God calling him or her to the better way, the way of life and blessing. It would be a cruel kindness to be silent about these important things.

Lord's Day 31 clearly outlines the two ways of relating to God in the covenant, particularly in QA 84:

Q. How is the kingdom of heaven opened and closed by the preaching of the gospel?

A. According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest on them as long as they do not repent. According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come.

The two ways of relating to God are found in what we confess there. When the gospel is preached, people react. There is always a response to the preaching of God's Word. Sometimes the response is good; people take it in like they are hearing it for the first time. Sometimes the response is bad; some do not even make the effort to look like they are listening, while others look like they are listening but

in their minds they are off somewhere else. Sometimes it varies. Yet there is **always** some kind of response. No one walks away from the preaching of the gospel without some response one way or another.

Sadly, there are those who hear the preaching of the gospel, but they do not believe and do not repent. According to our confession, it should be proclaimed and testified to unbelievers and hypocrites in the church that they are under the wrath of God. They have eternal condemnation resting upon them. God will be their judge. Preachers are called to give the solemn warning of God's Word: if you are going to be saved from the coming wrath, you need to turn away from your sin and turn to Jesus in faith. You need to believe in him and him only. If you do not, if you remain in sin, you are going to hell. Without true faith in Christ, you are facing an eternal conscious torment under God's wrath.

Being a covenant child does dramatically change things here, but not for the better. If you were born to believing parents, you are in the covenant of grace. God has promised many wonderful things to you. However, there is the reality that some in the covenant slap God in the face, they spurn him. They turn away from his promises and his claims on them. They say, "At my baptism, you publically said I belong to you. But I say I belong to me. I'm going to live life my way, not yours. I'm not going to believe your promises; I'm going to follow my own path. God, I really want nothing to do with you." In some instances, the person saying this leaves everything behind. They leave the church and plunge headlong into a life of sin. They strive for some kind of consistency in their unbelief. After all, why go to church on Sunday and waste your time listening to a message you do not even believe? Yet others hang on. For whatever reason, they continue going to church, even if only irregularly. They continue to be members of the church, at least on paper. Perhaps they do it to please their parents or grandparents. However, the reality is that their heart is stone-cold to God. In private or with non-Christian friends, this person lives in sin and acts like the unbeliever that he or she really is. They may have covered it up well enough that they can remain a member in good standing in the church. Yet God knows the heart (Luke 16:15). He sees and he knows. Moreover, he will judge. As Jesus pointedly says in Luke 12:48, "Everyone to whom much is given, of him much will be required".

That means God will judge the covenant child who lives in unbelief **far more harshly** than the average vanilla unbeliever. This teaching is also clear throughout the book of Hebrews. In 12:24, the author of Hebrews warns his readers to not refuse God who is speaking to them "a better word than the blood of Abel." The God who is a consuming fire is warning us from heaven, calling for faith. If we refuse him, there will be serious consequences. Earlier in Hebrews, this gets worked out in more detail. In Hebrews 6, the author says that if you fall away and refuse to believe, you are crucifying again the Son of God and holding him up to contempt. You are spitting in the face of Jesus – a horrible thing to do. We are warned that this is the way of covenant curse.

This is what the Jews did to Jesus. These covenant people heard his preaching and then the preaching of the apostles. Some believed, but many refused the call of the gospel. In Matthew 11, Christ addressed this unbelief among the covenant people. There were towns of covenant people like you and me -- towns like Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. They did not repent. They refused to turn from their sin and believe in Jesus. This is where we find those earth-shattering words of Jesus in Matthew 11:23-24:

And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.

Those are weighty words and you need to feel their weight. We need to hear those words in the light of Jude 7, "...just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in

sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” Sodom was notorious as a city of sin, a place where unnatural desires ran wild. A modern-day comparison might be San Francisco. Jesus is saying, “You people think that Sodom is going to be punished for its immorality? That’s nothing compared to what you unbelieving covenant people are facing if you do not repent and believe.”

Let me put it bluntly: Jesus is saying that there is a sin far worse than sodomy. There is something far worse in God’s eyes than homosexual behaviour. It is being a covenant child and then living in unbelief. Much worse than living a homosexual lifestyle is being a covenant member and then living in sin, never repenting, never turning. Such a person will receive far harsher treatment at the last judgment. God has a special measure of wrath in store for those who hear his promises and then spurn them, slapping him in the face.

You sometimes hear of Christian parents fretting over their kids and whether or not they might turn out gay, as if that would be the worst thing that could possibly happen. What Jesus says in Matthew 11 should be of far greater concern to Christian parents. A Christian who experiences same-sex attraction can fight that.¹ They must be encouraged to fight that. As they do, they can be a true child of God living out of faith in Jesus Christ. They can be heaven-bound because of God’s gospel promises. It is not the end of the world. Christian parents should be far more concerned about what their children are doing with the promises of the covenant. If you are a parent, you should be praying constantly that your children be given the gift of faith so that they embrace those promises. You should be praying that none of your children will be a hypocrite or an unbeliever and fall under the dreadful curses of the covenant. You should pray that their baptism will not testify against them in the Day of Judgment.

You see, there is a way of death in the covenant of grace. If you refuse the LORD, it is not as though he turns away from you and just walks away. He takes it personally when you slap him in the face with unbelief – and well he should. You would expect a just God to do exactly that. Yet he is also a loving God. In his love, God holds out these warnings to his children. He says, “Don’t go in the way of unbelief. Don’t even flirt with it. It is the way of death; stay far away from it.” That is what a loving Father does. He warns his children about danger. He even threatens them, “If you go down that path, there’s a cliff and it’s going to be your ruin. That way will destroy you forever.” Listen to his warnings. Turn from the way of death to the way of life within the covenant of grace.

The Way to Life and Blessing

He wants all of us to do that and keep on doing that. He wants us to see the better way of relating to him in the covenant of grace and pursue that way. It is the way where you say, “Yes, he is my God and I am his child, part of his people. He is bound to me in love and I am bound to him in love.” It is the way of faith and blessing.

If we think back to Lord’s Day 31 again for a moment, we see this way described in QA 84, especially in the first paragraph:

According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ’s merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel...

When the gospel is preached, there is to be an announcement that whoever believes will have all their sins forgiven. When you by true faith accept the promise of the gospel, you receive all that is

¹ A helpful book on this subject is Sam Allberry’s *Is God anti-gay? And other questions about homosexuality, the Bible, and same-sex attraction* (Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2013).

promised in the covenant of grace. When a believer sits in church and hears God's Word and says, "Yes, that's my God, that's my Saviour. I believe in him, I trust him, I love him, I want to submit to him," then that is indeed the way of life and blessing in the covenant of grace.

There are incentives drawing us to this way of life. In the Bible, God has many different ways of making the way of life attractive to us. He wants us to see that this is the better way and then respond accordingly. So, what are some of those incentives drawing us to faith in God within the covenant of grace?

We can begin with forgiveness (Colossians 1:14). What could be more important than being forgiven by God? When you know that you have offended him in every possible way, what could you long for more than forgiveness? In the covenant of grace, there is forgiveness when you believe God's promises. It is a promise that God is not going to hold your sins against you – ever! Forgiveness results in reconciliation. Reconciliation means peace with your holy, almighty and just Creator. The way of faith holds out peace to you. You can have the full assurance of peace both outwardly with God **and** inwardly in your conscience.

In that peace, you can not only live out your days, but you can also face physical death. You can face death without fear of what comes afterwards (1 Corinthians 15:56). The way of faith promises the blessing of a peaceful death. You can leave this world knowing that you are safe in Christ – no fear of judgment. Imagine one day being on your death-bed. Perhaps you will still be conscious and be able to speak to your family and friends. If so, you can assure them of your confidence in Christ. Think of how encouraging it would be for your loved ones to hear you affirm that your death is not a payment for sin, but it puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life. This will be all because of Jesus, the Mediator of the covenant. The way of life in the covenant of grace makes all the difference at that crucial moment. It is the difference between a family comforted in your absence and a family left with questions and doubts. Faith gives a whole different perspective to the death of a Christian, a healthy and enriching perspective. In the way of life, the Christian can boldly say with Paul in Philippians 1:21, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

So there is peace in life and death for the Christian who relates to God with faith in the context of the covenant of grace. There is also an abiding sense of joy. This is not the superficial happy-face type emotion. It is something that runs far deeper. It is an unshakable satisfaction in God, knowing that you are his beloved child and he is your God.

There once was this man who had been a slave to sexual sin. His mother Monica was a Christian and she had tried to lead her son to the gospel, but to no avail. Her son broke her heart with his unbelief. He was now 31 years old and living life his way. He had been co-habiting with a woman for several years. There he was one day in a garden in Milan, Italy when his eyes were miraculously opened by the Spirit. He was finally subdued by God and brought to the way of life in the covenant of grace. Who was this man? One of the greatest theologians in the history of the Christian church: Augustine of Hippo. He later wrote about this in his book, *Confessions*. He wrote,

How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose...! You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure...O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation.²

Augustine came to know the joy that comes from the way of life, the way of faith in God within the covenant of grace. God holds out that same joy to you as an incentive. He says, "Come live with me

² *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (Westwood: The Christian Library, 1984), 138-139.

in this relationship, and I will be your joy.” David says in Psalm 4:7, “You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.” David knew the deep joy of living with God in faith.

David also knew what it was to be chastised or disciplined by God. We do not normally think of discipline as a good and positive thing. It is somewhat counter-intuitive to regard discipline as an incentive to the way of life in the covenant of grace. Yet if we look at it in the light of what Hebrews 12 says, we should look at it as an incentive. When we take hold of the LORD’s promises by faith and live within the covenant of grace, we have the promise of God’s fatherly love. This is a love that will not let you go. This is a love that will not let you go on in sin and destroy yourself. According to Hebrews 12, God treats us as sons, and that means that he disciplines us and this is a good and desirable thing. At the moment you get it, discipline seems painful, “but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11). Think about it: would you want a God who just let you go? No, if we reflect carefully on it, we want a God who cares enough about us to discipline us when we need it. He not only puts us on the way to life, he also keeps us there.

Another incentive to life in the covenant of grace has to do with following God’s will. As we saw in the last chapter, true faith in Christ always bears fruit. Those who really believe in Christ want to obey God’s law. They do not do it perfectly or constantly. The obedience of even the godliest Christians waxes and wanes, it goes in fits and starts. Yet the Holy Spirit does his work. Slowly and steadily, he leads believers to grow in holiness and Christ-likeness. This growing holiness is honouring to God. That is what we were created for. So the way of life gives that increasing sense of satisfaction that we are living the way we were created to.

There is more, because God promises that living in his ways is good for us. When you strive to follow God’s will, it will be a blessing for you. It will not be a blessing in the sense of getting all kinds of material things or what have you. But it will be in the ways that really matter, such as our growing closer to the LORD, being better parents for our children, living in closer harmony with our neighbours in the world and brothers and sisters in the church, and so on. God’s law is designed not only for his glory, but also for our good. That message is really driven home in the book of Proverbs. Wisdom and blessing can be expected to follow when believers submit to God’s Word. It says in Proverbs 14:27, “The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death.” So faith leads to fruit, and fruit is glorifying to God and a blessing to us. That is another eminently good incentive to the way of life.

The Scriptures call you to embrace **life** in the covenant of grace. This is God’s will for you. Another way of saying that is that you are called to believe God and all his promises. Hear what he holds out to you in Jesus Christ and embrace it for yourself. Then you will be relating to God in a wonderful way. He will be your heavenly Father who assures you every day of his love. He will be your Father who will someday take you into his blessed presence forever.

God’s Word holds out to us these two ways: a way of death and a way of life. This is not an academic discussion of some fine theological point. What is on the table here is of enormous importance for each one of us. Eternity is at stake. There is a choice to be made. In Joshua 24, Joshua was addressing the covenant people of God as they were about to enter the Promised Land. There was a covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem. The people were pointedly challenged about their commitment to the LORD. Joshua told them, “Choose this day whom you will serve...” The choice was put before them: serve the LORD and live, or go back to paganism and die. Live with faith under the blessings of the covenant of grace, or be damned under its curses. Take your pick. The people insisted that they would follow the way of faith and live. This is what each one of us is called to do for ourselves: relate to God in the way of faith. It is the only way of life and blessings eternal.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Think of someone in Scripture who was a covenant member but chose the way of death. What led to that choice? How did that choice manifest itself? What consequences did this choice have? What else can we learn?
2. Why are some people (also believers) so resistant to speaking of warnings and threats within the covenant of grace?
3. What would you say to someone who says, “I can be serious about being a Christian later in life. Right now, I’m young and it’s time to live it up. Besides, I belong to the covenant, so I have nothing to worry about”?
4. We saw some of the incentives to the way of life in the covenant of grace: forgiveness, peace in life and death, joy, discipline, and blessings which follow from obedience. Can you think of at least three other incentives that God holds forth in his Word?
5. Who magnifies the glory of God more: the unrepentant covenant breaker who goes the way of death or the repentant believer who goes the way of life? Explain your answer from Scripture.

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