

8. THE GENERATIONS AND THE COVENANT

Some people claim that covenant history begins with Abraham, or possibly with Noah, when the word covenant is used for the first time. We have seen that it is not so. The history of God's covenant, his relationship of love, begins with the creation of man in paradise.

In this chapter we will explore what happens with the first generations that come forth out of Adam and Eve. Will they keep the covenant of God, or will they go their own way, as their parents did in the fall?

There is a pattern. Scripture shows that there are two lines: one which despite all weaknesses is faithful to the LORD, seeking strength in his promises, and the other which is unfaithful to God and lives in hostility to him, seeking strength in its own abilities and resources. One line lives by faith, the other by might.

There comes a time when an unfaithful generation is not considered to belong any longer to God's covenant of love. If we take our cue from the second commandment, it takes only three or four generations for a people to become completely estranged from the service of the LORD. Having broken God's covenant, and refusing to repent, they come to stand outside the covenant, growing increasingly hostile to God. The apostle Paul sketches this process in Romans 1:18-32. The rejection of God's self-revelation leads to idolatry and immorality. The result is terrible perversion, in which natural relations are abandoned.

The faithful generation struggles to keep the faith and must undergo many trials, but, by God's grace, it perseveres in obedience and trust. In the restricted scope of this study, we can give only a brief sketch of the history of these two generations.

Cain and Abel

Adam and Eve continue their life in the new situation of sin and death, but with faith in God's promise. This is evident at the birth of their child, Cain, when Eve

says, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man (Gen 4:1).” Eve expresses her own weakness but also acknowledges God’s help and blessing. This is perhaps a prime characteristic of a true covenant child: being strong in God by faith.

When the second child is born, there is a beginning of a structured family life. It is quite possible that in this time also daughters were born, but they do not play a role in the events narrated.

The two young men receive the same upbringing. We may be sure that Adam and Eve told their sons what had happened earlier in paradise, and how their hope was set on the coming Saviour. But Cain does not accept the Gospel. He does not live up to his name (“with God’s help”) and refuses to expect all things from the LORD alone.

We read about sacrifices that are brought to the LORD. These are mentioned without further explanation. It is clear from Scripture that sacrifices imply atonement for sin and also express thankfulness for God’s blessings. Exactly how the sacrifices are to be understood here is not clear. It is evident, however, that the LORD is recognized as God, great and holy. Bringing sacrifices is a form of worship. Adam and Eve must have been accustomed to making these sacrifices, and their sons grow up knowing that the LORD is to be worshiped.

Cain participates in this worship and brings a sacrifice to the LORD, as does his brother Abel. But Cain’s heart is not in it. Although he does not love the LORD, he becomes envious and angry when he notices that God looks with favour upon Abel’s offering but does not accept his. Hatred develops. Despite God’s warning, Cain continues in his evil way and murders his brother.

There is no remorse. When he is banished by the LORD, Cain is concerned only about his own safety. He goes away and begins his own generation, completely alienated from God. We read in Genesis 4:16, “So Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.” There is now a deep rift in the family of Adam and Eve, and the cause is Cain’s refusal to serve the LORD from the heart according to his will.

Adam and Eve continue in faith. We read that another son is born in their house, and Eve names him Seth because, she says, “God has granted me another child in the place of Abel, since Cain killed him” (Gen 4:25). Abel is dead, and Cain is spiritually dead, but in this new son God will continue the line of faithful generations in accordance with his promise.

This happens by God’s blessing, as Genesis 5 makes clear. So there are two totally different generations of people on the earth, those who live by their own law and in their own strength, and those who obey the LORD and seek his blessing. The latter live in the covenant; the former reject it.

The line of Cain: self-salvation

When we compare these two generations, we soon discover that disobedience

initially seems to pay off. Cain builds a city, a place of safety, and receives sons. He names the city after his son, Enoch, thereby showing his pride in the fruit of his own flesh.

One of Cain's most prominent descendants is Lamech. We note in passing that many of Seth's children have the same names as those of Cain (after all, they come from one family), but they conduct themselves in a manner quite different from that of their worldly cousins. The fact that the names are often similar leads the reader almost involuntarily to compare the two generations. This may well be the purpose of the Holy Spirit.

Lamech, the descendant of Cain, is fast-tracking to power and wealth. It is recorded in Genesis 4:19, 20 that he married two women. The LORD had intended monogamy, but Lamech's agenda is a different one. He wants to show his prowess and enhance his image as a man. Having two wives also leads to more offspring in a shorter period of time, and children meant an increase of power. This man, Lamech, is quite able to defend himself. We read of his boasting in the verses 23 and 24: if Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times. It may be that some young man had attacked and wounded Lamech (Gen 4:23), and that he in revenge had exacted a high toll, perhaps wiping out the young man's entire family without mercy.

It is not without reason that the Lord Jesus later, when asked how many times we should forgive our brother, spoke of "seventy times seven." The world does not know of forgiveness and mercy, but often goes overboard in revengeful killing sprees. The nature of the ungodly world is violent, and this will become more evident as time progresses (see Gen 6:11: the earth was full of violence).

The sons of Lamech appear to be skilled and successful in every way. Jabal becomes an expert farmer who cultivates herds of livestock. Jubal excels in the arts, specifically the making of musical instruments. Tubal-Cain is a master smith, who can make all kinds of tools and weapons out of bronze and iron. In every way, in basic farming, in developing arts, and in craftsmanship, Cain's generation appears to make great strides. One is almost inclined to complain with Asaph in Psalm 73:3, "...I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

This generation will take care of itself, save itself, and build its own future. It has no need for God, and recognition of the covenant of God and desire for a Saviour are completely lacking. Names and situations may change over time, but the attitude of Cain and his sons prevails in the world of man.

The line of Seth: serving the LORD

In contrast to the history of Cain, developments in the line of Seth seem slow and unspectacular. We read in Genesis 4:26 that Seth also had a son and that he named him Enosh. The meaning of this name is similar to the meaning of Adam. It can be translated as: weak man. This does not necessarily mean that Enosh is to

be seen as a weakling or as someone who cannot take care of his affairs, but it does suggest that Seth has seen the limitations of fallen man, and that in this name there is a confession and a plea: our help is in the Name of the LORD! Seth and his generation will reach out to the LORD, who gave them his promise in the covenant of love.

In Genesis 4:26 we read also, “At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.” Whereas Lamech, descendant of Cain, brags of his own ability, the faithful generation seeks the LORD, and calls upon him, asking him for his blessing and help. There is here the beginning of a structured form of worship, which will be carried on by future generations.

In Genesis 5 we have the account of Adam’s line (5:1). It is remarkable how in 5:1 and 2 the special creation of man and his high position are recalled: “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them.” These words tell us that in his covenant God begins anew, as it were, and the line now officially goes from Adam to Seth and his children. Cain and his line have been cut out.

Another important feature of the account of Genesis 5 is that very little is told us about the feats of this faithful line. They are born, live, and die, and nothing spectacular is mentioned. God’s children apparently live quietly and peaceably.

Still we notice some important elements. These generations receive a long life, so that the earth may be filled with God’s obedient people. There is in this line also evidence of a *closeness to God*. Religion is not simply a formality. We read of Enoch that he “walked with God...” (Gen 5:22). This denotes a true and sincere fellowship with the LORD, a love for him and his commandments.

We are told with respect to the same Enoch, “...then he was no more, because God took him away” (Gen 5:24). Enoch did not die, but was taken up to heaven as a sign that he was faithful to God and favoured by him. In Hebrews 11:5 we read: “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.” What a mighty testimony this must have been.

We also read that when Lamech, the descendant of Seth, the *obedient* Lamech, receives a son, he names him Noah. “He will comfort us in the labour and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed” (Gen 5:28). Lamech’s confession is one of humility and hope: life is hard, but God will deliver. God’s children cling to God’s covenant promises, which afford comfort in life’s hardships.

This righteous generation, then, worshipped God publicly, walked with him closely, and served him according to his will. Their life was a clear testimony to the unbelieving and unrepentant generations of Cain. They went further than this and spoke openly against the sins of the world of their time. Of Enoch it is written, “Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men [the ungodly]: ‘see,

the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him” (Jude:14,15). It has been suggested that Enoch was taken up by God precisely because his enemies plotted to kill him. They couldn’t find him, because God had rescued him.

The testimony given about Noah is similar. “Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God” (Gen 6:9). Also, Noah is said to have built an ark in holy fear (Heb 11:7). These men earnestly believed in God and ardently sought him in prayer. In word and deed they manifested themselves as faithful covenant children, showing in their walk their love of the LORD and the neighbour. Looking at their lives, one is reminded of God’s covenant demand later proclaimed by Micah, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). This is a beautiful summary of our covenant obligation.

By their godly lifestyle and prophecy these men testified against the sins of their time. It is no wonder that the world hated them. Evangelism has been conducted from the beginning of time by God’s children by both their talk and their walk.

The lines converge: the enmity forgotten

In the course of time, however, the two lines move toward one another and begin to merge. The children of God (“the sons of God,” Gen 6:2) become attracted to the “daughters of men.” We read that mixed marriages are the result: “They married any of them [the daughters of men] they chose.” The basis for such a marriage was not spiritual commitment (to God) but physical beauty and sexual attraction. The enmity, which God had proclaimed in paradise, was forgotten, except by a few.

It is noteworthy that this alliance between the sons of God and the daughters of men appears to be successful from a genetic point of view. We read of the *Nephilim* (6:4), mighty giants and fierce warriors who control and terrorize everyone, men whose goal is self-enrichment and whose method is violent. It can be inferred from the text that these “Nephilim” are the product of the union of the two generations. When church and world go together, they can form an almost invincible power.

The situation becomes so bad and the violence so widespread that God is deeply grieved and decides to destroy the wicked through a mighty flood. At this point there is hardly anyone who still serves the LORD. When God searches for a righteous man, only Noah is left. It is through him that the human race and the line of Eve and Seth will be continued. God’s covenant of love still stands, even as the waters of the flood begin to rise: there is escape in the ark.

Mixed marriages

We learn some important lessons here. The people of God's covenant have often jeopardized their relationship with God by forgetting the enmity between believer and unbeliever and engaging in mixed marriages. Throughout Scripture, both in the Old and the New Testament, there is a consistent teaching that a covenant child should not marry an unbeliever. Those who do this compromise their own faith and harm God's cause. When the enmity, placed by God, is forgotten, the church is swallowed up by the world. What is not achieved by persecution, is realized by assimilation. As Balaam advised: don't fight them, invite them! (Num 25:1).

Therefore Isaac commanded Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman (Gen 28:1). Esau's Hittite women were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 26:34). It should be noted at this point that in the Bible marriage is called a *covenant* (Mal 2:14, "...your marriage covenant"). Our covenant of marriage must be in keeping with God's covenant of love. We may marry only those who love him. The LORD warns Israel that the peoples of Canaan will seek to make treaties with them. "And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same" (Exod 34:16).

Mixed marriages did happen in Israel, even in the case of prominent men such as Samson and Solomon. The effects were disastrous. We read of Solomon: "King Solomon. . . loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter – Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, 'You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.' Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been." The conclusion is: "So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done" (1 Kgs 11:1-6). The command not to intermarry is not racially motivated but founded on the principle of the covenant to serve only the LORD.

Mixed marriages were also among the causes of the exile. After the exiles returned from Babylon, the laws concerning marriage became very strict. Ezra and Nehemiah, for example, took strong measures in this respect lest the sins of the past be repeated. It was agreed that making a marriage covenant with heathen women meant breaking the covenant of love with the LORD: "Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children..." (Ezra 10:3).

The New Testament is no less explicit in the matter of mixed marriages. God's covenant with us determines our covenant of marriage, for marriage now is to reflect the mystery of the unity of Christ and his church (Eph 5:32). The rule is that

the marriage partner must “belong to the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39). We read that we may “not be yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Cor 6:14). While this may be taken in a broader sense than only the marriage relationship, it is clear that it applies especially in the case of marriage. “What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” (verse 15). Also, sexual sins are now of a more serious nature, for believers are since Pentecost “the temple of the living God” (verse 16; see also 1 Cor 6:18-20, “...your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is within you”).

The enmity which God proclaimed in paradise remains. We may not make a covenant which threatens our covenant with God, to whom we belong with body and soul, bought with the precious blood of our Saviour. This is the consistent teaching of the Bible in Old and New Testament.