

God and the Covenant

A covenant is an agreement which brings about a relationship of commitment between God and His people. Throughout the Bible we find God taking the initiative to establish relationships with man. In general it is God saying if you do this I will do that. We also observe that God is faithful to His promise and it is man who either deviates from it or totally abandons it. The blessings accrued or the curses handed down were such as to let the people know their current condition and to make amends when necessary.

The people bound themselves, first of all, in general terms, to keep the whole law, "to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord their Lord, and His judgments and his statutes" (ver. 29); after which they went on to particularise certain special points of the law, recently infringed upon, which they bound themselves to observe in future. The support of the temple service by an annual tax upon each adult male, which was fixed for the present at the rate of one-third part of a shekel (ver. 32); and, the supply of the wood requisite for keeping the fire alight upon the great altar, and for consuming the various offerings (ver. 34). It is remarkable that these two latter regulations became permanent national institutions, maintaining themselves into Roman times, when we find them still: The chiefs of the people affixed their seals to the document. At their head was Nehemiah himself, as governor; then followed the heads of the priestly and Levitical houses, and after them the chiefs of the laity. The rest of the people signified their solemn assent by an oath with a curse. There was a general comprehensive promise of obedience to all the law of God (ver. 29). This contained certain special promises.

- 1) Not to intermarry with the heathen (ver. 30), a matter about which both Ezra and Nehemiah were very much concerned (see Ezra 9:10; Neh. 13:23–30). Laxity in this respect threatened to destroy the distinctiveness of Israel, both in its relation to race and religion.
- 2) To observe strictly the Sabbath and other holy days, and the sabbatical year, including the remission of debts (ver. 31; see Deut. 15:2).
- 3) To contribute to the support of the temple, its ministers and services (vers. 32–39). The promised contributions included an annual money payment of one-third of a shekel each towards the expense of the ordinary services: the bringing up in turn to the temple of the wood required for the altar fire; the offering of the first-fruits of all produce, the firstlings of cattle, and the first-born children (*i. e.* the redemption money for them); and the payment of tithes to the Levites, who on their part would pay "the tithes of the tithes" unto the priests.
- 4) Not to forsake the temple, but to continue to support it, and attend its services at the appointed times.

The review of the past was adapted to impress on their hearts the duty and wisdom of serving God. In the service of God, the observance of the Sabbath and the maintenance of public worship are of the greatest importance. As Divine ordinances, and for the well-being of individuals and families, the Church and the State, all should unite in supporting the worship of God. By contributions, attendance, and endeavours to induce others to attend. 4. Solemn and definite engagements are aids to the cultivation and practice of religion. The impressions and purposes of times of peculiar religious feeling may thus become of permanent value. Obligations thus recognised and adopted are more likely to be called to mind in times of temptation. The Christian

settles it thus with himself that he is the Lord's, and must not, will not, depart from him; must and will serve him in all things. In such a definite settlement are peace and safety. Hence the worth of those ordinances by which a profession of piety is made, and from time to time renewed. To these some have added forms of "covenanting" more resembling that recorded in this chapter. They have put hand and seal to a written document. Care, however, needs to be taken lest vows are made which cannot be kept, and so become a snare and burden to the conscience. They should for the most part be simply promises to do what, apart from them, is incumbent upon us, or to avoid what, apart from them, is wrong, or commonly, if not uniformly, leads us into wrong-doing.

Monday

Covenants in History

God made man for relationship and throughout the pages of sacred history He has always taken the initiative to establish His covenants with them. The Bible identifies several major covenants that He made with His people. In the very first chapters of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, chapters 1-3, we have God's covenant with Adam. After God made man He placed him in a garden and delineated his duties, and his obligations. He was to tend the garden and may eat of the fruits with just one exception. They allowed themselves to be tricked by Satan, broke the covenant and was driven from the garden. But God, who is both loving and merciful, made another covenant to send a Messiah to remind and restore them. The second covenant was with Noah. Mankind had become evil in the sight of God and so he commissioned His servant Noah to warn the people peradventure they would turn from their wickedness. Failing this he would destroy them with a flood. Noah preached for one hundred and twenty years but the people continued in their evil ways and God carried out His promise.

Then there was the covenant with Moses and the Israelite nation. After leaving Egypt they came to the foot of Sinai and rested there. While there, God called Moses to meet with Him on the mountain where He gave Him the Moral law of Ten Commandments which would re-establish His covenant with them. God also gave Moses a set of moral laws which would further serve to regulate man's relationship with each other, as well as the environment.

Next God made a covenant with a man called Phinehas. On their journey from Egypt they came to Acacia Grove, there the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab, and served their gods. Israel was joined to Baal of Peor and God was displeased and commanded Moses to kill the perpetrators. One of their numbers brought a Midianite woman into the camp. A plague broke out but it was healed after Phinehas slew both of them with a javelin. God was pleased with his action and gave him a covenant of an everlasting priesthood.

Then we have the covenant with David. David, being settled in his kingdom and furnished with a permanent place of abode, is dissatisfied that the ark of the Lord should remain in a frail tent. God through His prophet, Nathan, revealed to David His desire to build a house fitting for Himself. However, the prophet declares to David that because of past sins he could not build the house but he would have a seed who would build it for the Lord, and that this successor shall be regarded as a son, and, shall not be cast off as was Saul, but the house and kingdom that is established would endure forever. David in return acknowledges the condescension and bounty of God in what He had done and promised for Him and for the people, and concludes with a

prayer, based on the faithfulness and goodness of God, that grace may be bestowed on the house of David, so that it may fulfill the purpose so graciously formed and now more explicitly revealed. Although there is much talk about the Old, and the New, covenants, as found in the Old and the New Testaments, they basically have the same components. Both in Jeremiah 31:33 and in Hebrews 8:10 God says, He will put His laws in their minds. He will be their God and they shall be His people.

Tuesday: **Covenantal Structure**

Since God is not a God of confusion it is safe to say there is a definite structure to all His dealings with men. There is a preamble in which He states who he is. This can be clearly seen in Joshua 24. In verse 2 He presents Himself as the Lord God of Israel. This is followed by a historical account of God's dealings with His people. Next we have an enumeration of the laws and entreaties given to their ancestors and of which they/we are recipient. Including in these laws are blessings to be received by obedience and curses which are handed down because of disobedience. Joshua also entreated the people to put away their false gods, which were not really gods; and serve the Lord the true God of their fathers. Because God is not only Just but must also be seen to be just, He has also provided witnesses to the covenant relationship between Him and the people. It is interesting to note that the very people in the relationship are the witnesses, but should they fail in their duties, then He would raise up the very stones to be witnesses. Although occasions may arise, as during periods of Israel's history, when the signs of God's working are obscured (Isa. 45:15), our faith should rest on the general revelation. 4. However unable we may be sometimes to see the unity of God's working, Providence will throw light upon it, and by some explicit "I have walked," "I took thee," our confidence will be confirmed. All our desires and efforts and methods should, in their nature, have reference to the great issues of God's goodness to us and His habitation of the Church through the Spirit.

Wednesday **Pledges**

The children of Israel having recognized their pitiful state made a covenant with the Lord and had it sealed by their leaders. They had been chosen as His people by virtue of His covenant and promises, but they had forfeited it by unfaithfulness. They reflected on the manifold goodness of God to them as a nation throughout their history, and this was a powerful influence in their current witness. They recalled the long succession of their national departures from God, the punishments inflicted upon them for which they now needed a safeguard. Recognising that they had numerous reasons for conformity to the Divine law, they decided to adopt whatever measures were likely to secure their former covenant relationship.. To this end they unite in a solemn public vow, written and sealed, by which they engage, not only to God, but to each other, to obey the Divine laws and maintain the Divine worship. And doubtless such a transaction was adapted to strengthen their good resolutions, and promote the fulfillment of them.

Nehemiah charged them to formally and solemnly pledge themselves to the purer and worthier service of God, turning from evils which had grown up, and returning to duties which had been neglected. He was well sustained by all in this movement, and we have a long list of the influential men who added their seals to his, committing themselves and all whom they represented to a renewed and revived national holiness. They publicly and audibly swore to

"walk in God's law," thus sustaining all that the leaders initiated. All movements of revival, and indeed of any religious action or undertaking, must be orderly; there must be leaders who will give direction and counsel; also general followers who will give practical and cordial consideration. All must join, from the ushers, singers, men and women, young and old, every one that has understanding is invited to work for the Master. These Jews pledged "to walk in God's law, to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our God, and do His judgments and His statutes." But they were not content with such a general statement and pledged a renewal of the covenant to include: abstaining from forbidden marriage alliances, from Sabbath breaking and usury. They also agreed to discharge particular obligations, for example, (1) payment of money for the temple service, (2) provision of wood for the fire that never went out, (3) and the rendering the first-fruits and tithes according to the law. There are times of revival and reconsecration in the lives of men and the history of Churches that calls for genuine refection and reconsecration.

These should be used for a solemn and thorough devotedness of ourselves and our possessions to God; and they should comprise the deliberate separation of ourselves from worldly entanglements, from neglect of ordinances, and should show a deliberate resolution to worship the Lord and to dedicate a good share of our material resources to His service and the glory of His name. Those who are first in a position of influence and are capable should be leaders in caring for God's house. There should be no distinction of rank in the unity and dedication of God's service. The Jew placed himself under the oath and curse and while we are in a dispensation of liberty we should not use our liberty as license to do whatever we feel. The bond of love is the strongest of all bonds and our love for God frees us to separate ourselves from the world that we may be faithful to Him. Let us take care that with our higher privilege, and our larger knowledge, and our more spiritual principles, we do not fall below their standard. It is well to systematize our giving for our own sake for human nature requires every possible assistance, and habit holds up principle and fortifies feeling. The effect of a universal recognition of duty in giving to God's house would be immeasurable.

Thursday **The Temple**

God had commanded the people to build Him a house where he would always be with them. This house or temple began in the wilderness a movable tent but later upgraded to a permanent building. The Temple was ministered by the Levites who was given no possession in the distribution on their return from Egypt. While special provisions were made for their upkeep, the Jews here further charged themselves to greater giving. The "half-shekel of the sanctuary," as it is called, being only payable on the rare, and forbidden, occasion of a census of the whole people (Exod. 30:13–16), could not possibly have served for the ordinary support of the temple service; but it was calculated to suggest to thoughtful minds the need of some regular fund, and the persons on whom the obligation lay to provide it. While the Jews were an independent nation, with their own kings and their own revenue, no difficulty had been felt in keeping up the service, since the kings easily provided for it; but the conditions in captivity did not allow for that. The third part of a shekel was determined as being sufficient at the time; but they soon returned to the standard set by the law and an ample provision made for the maintenance of the established rites in full completeness and efficiency (Matt. 17:24–27).

The shew-bread or the bread of God's presence was placed first in order of importance. There was the service of burnt offering morning and evening, as well as the other offerings and sacrifices which were required of every Jew. There were set feasts such as Passover, Pentecost, tabernacles and trumpets; provision was made for the internal "work" of cleansing and keeping in proper order the apparatus of worship, as well as for the wood offering for the temple. Texts such as Exod. 22:29; 23:19; Levit. 23:10, 17, show that the bringing of the first fruits was a matter of religious obligation. However, it seems that this obligation had for some time been disregarded. First-fruits were required not merely of wheat and other grain, but also *expressly* of wine and oil, the produce of the vine and olive, and by implication of all other fruit trees (Num. 18:12; Deut. 18:4.). The first born children were also to be "redeemed (Exod. 22:29 It also appears that there was a general neglect of tithe paying. Consequently, they now covenanted afresh, on the part of the people, to resume the legal practice, at any rate to the extent of paying what has been called "the first tithe," or that due to the Levites for their sustentation. In all the farming communities the Levitical tithe was not taken to Jerusalem, but stored up in some neighbouring Levitical, city. Some representative of the priestly order was to be present whenever the Levites received their tithes, to take note of the quantity, and prevent the Levites from depriving the priests of their due share, which was a tithe of the tithe. The priests were not to be troubled with the conveyance of any of the offerings. The first-fruits and other oblations of the people were to be brought to the temple by the people themselves; and the "tithe of the tithe," which was the priests' due, by the Levites. Thus the priests would not be drawn away from their duty of ministering in the temple by secular employments and matters of mere worldly business. They promised not to allow any interruption of the continual service of the temple, we will not be parties to any neglect or slovenliness in the conduct of it. With this emphatic declaration of their intentions the people concluded the engagements by which they voluntarily bound themselves.