

The Covenant

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God's Covenant

God's covenant is something Scripture speaks about often. What is that covenant? Why does Scripture speak of it so often? These questions we wish to explore in the next few chapters.

We should remember, first, that the covenant is *God's* covenant. That means that it is a covenant which He has in Himself and with Himself. When He makes a covenant with us, therefore, it is but a revelation of something that He has even without us.

This, of course, is true of all that God reveals. Whatever He reveals to us is a revelation of Himself - His Being, His glory, His power and His works. That is a very humbling thought. In reference to the covenant, it means that God does not need us to be a covenant God. He is a covenant God in Himself!

We believe that God's covenant is the relationship between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We will be showing in future articles that the covenant is a relationship or bond. But if that is true, it is first of all the bond that makes the three Persons of the Trinity One God.

There are Scripture passages, however, that describe the relationship between the three Persons of the Godhead in the Trinity. Proverbs 8:22-31 is one such passage. Wisdom in this passage is the Son (cf. I Cor. 1:24). He is described in relation to the Father as being "by Him, as one brought up with Him...daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him." That is God's covenant as it exists eternally in God Himself between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Other passages that describe this relationship are John 10:15, "As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father;" and I Corinthians 2:10, "The Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." What a blessed life God lives in Himself!

When God establishes His covenant with us, then, He takes us into that relationship and makes us part of it—takes us into His own Family and becomes our Father through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. What a wonder!

The Bible talks about this in II Peter 1:4, which says that we are made partakers of the divine nature! That is the realization of God's covenant with us, something so wonderful that we would not even dare think it if the Bible did not say it. Jesus speaks of it also in John 17:23; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them as thou hast loved me."

Into that blessed relationship we are taken when God establishes His covenant with us. But we may never forget that He does not need us to be a covenant God. His covenant with us, therefore, is always a covenant of grace—pure and undeserved favor.

Do you know that covenant God? Do you know what it is to be made partaker of the divine nature? To live apart from Him is death (Ps. 73:27). To know Him is life eternal (Jn. 17:3)

God's Everlasting Covenant

Scripture speaks often of the fact that God's covenant is an everlasting covenant. It is *from* eternity because it is first of all the relationship between the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. But it is also *to* eternity because God takes us into that blessed Trinitarian relationship and makes us partakers of the Divine Nature (II Pet. 1:4). That relationship of fellowship and love shall never end. God will be our God forever and ever and we shall always be His people (Rev. 21:3).

Believing this, we do *not* believe that God's covenant can be an agreement or contract, as is so often taught. It is not an agreement between the Three Persons of the Trinity to bring salvation to God's people, nor is it an agreement between God and His people in Adam or in Christ.

Why cannot the covenant be an agreement?

An agreement or contract is not lasting! When its terms, whatever they may be, have been fulfilled, then the agreement itself is finished and can be discarded. It may continue to be a matter of historical curiosity, but it does not continue in force!

To put it a little differently, an agreement or contract is only *the means to an end*. A bottle of medicine is also a means (a way) to an end—renewed health. When we are healthy again we no longer need the medicine. No more would we need God's covenant to continue after salvation is finished if the covenant is only a means to salvation, i.e., an agreement to provide salvation.

Since the covenant is everlasting it cannot end or become unnecessary. It is not the means but the end (goal) itself. It is not the way of salvation but salvation itself! It is not a contract, which when fulfilled will fall away, but a blessed relationship that will continue forever—a relationship between God and His people in Christ.

Is not the essence of salvation the relationship that God establishes with His people in Christ? Is not Revelation 21:3 talking about the highest glory of salvation when it promises a day in which God will be our God and we His people? That, we believe, is God's covenant with His people. And it is everlasting. It will not end but will continue into eternity to come!

Eternal life, Jesus says in John 17:3, is to know God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. That is God's everlasting covenant with His people! Truly, there could be nothing more wonderful. Even streets of gold could not compare with that! It, and it alone, is the true glory of salvation, of heaven and of eternal life.

Not all shall enjoy it, however. Only they shall see God and know Him who have believed in Jesus Christ, for He is the Way into the presence of the Father. That is why John 17:3 speaks not only of knowing God, but also of knowing Jesus Christ. Do you?

One Covenant

If God's covenant is everlasting, and Scripture says often that it is, then there can only be one covenant. A temporary covenant can be annulled or replaced. God's covenant is not temporary.

Also, if the covenant is unbreakable, there can only be one. That it is unbreakable, Scripture testifies in Judges 2:1, Psalm 89:34, Jeremiah 33:20, 21, and many other passages.

If the covenant is first of all God's covenant and if God's covenant is the relationship between the Three Persons of the Trinity, then, too, the covenant must be One, because God is One.

We hold to *one* covenant over against: (1) Dispensationalism, with its many covenants; (2) the Baptist position, which distinguishes between the Old Covenant and the New, at least as far as the sign of the covenant is concerned; and (3) the older teaching that there is a separate and distinct covenant of works with Adam.

We believe that the many Scripture passages that speak of a covenant (singular), which is *everlasting*, prove this. We would refer our readers to such passages as Genesis 17:7, II Samuel 23:5, Psalm 105:8-10, Isaiah 55:3, Ezekiel 16:60-62, and Hebrews 13:20.

But what about all the passages that speak of covenants in the plural (Gal. 4:24; Rom. 9:4; etc.)? And, what about the passages that speak of an old and a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-33; Heb. 8:6-13)?

Unless we are willing to accept the idea that the Bible can contradict itself (and that God can contradict Himself) we must reconcile these two kinds of passages. Scripture helps us do that by some of the language it uses.

Scripture speaks of God remembering His covenant (Lev. 26:42; Lk. 1:72), giving His covenant (Num. 25:12; Acts 7:8), declaring it (Deut. 4:13), and keeping it (I Kings 8:23). These expressions help us see that when He establishes His covenant with someone or makes a covenant with someone, He is not discarding the old and bringing in an entirely new covenant, but only giving a *new revelation* of His *one* covenant of grace. In that sense only are there old and new covenants, or more than one covenant.

Nor can His covenant ever be anything but a covenant of grace. There is no other basis on which we can live in a relationship with God but undeserved favor. Even Adam, though he by his obedience could continue to enjoy a covenant relationship with God, was not in that relationship by merit.

We reject, therefore, the teaching that the covenant with Adam was a distinct covenant based on merit, not on grace. Especially we reject the idea that in that covenant Adam could have merited eternal life by his obedience.

Luke 17:10 destroys every possibility of merit when it says, "So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable

(unmeriting) servants: we have done that which was our duty to do." The everlasting covenant of God is all grace.

The Covenant of Grace

If God's covenant is a relationship or bond between God and His people then it can only be a covenant of *grace*.

That we should live in a relationship of friendship, fellowship and love with the living God must be *undeserved favor*. This is especially true for us as sinners. It is almost unthinkable that God should dwell with *us* and be our God, but He promises nevertheless; "I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (II Cor. 6:16). How wonderful!

But what is true for us was also true of Adam. Who would dare say that Adam's creation as one who knew and loved God was anything but undeserved favor! Certainly it was not based on merit, for until he was created in such a high position he was not and had no opportunity to merit with God. Nor can *anyone* ever merit with God as we learn from Luke 17:10.

We reject, therefore, any talk of a covenant of works that was based on merit. We are not unwilling to speak of the covenant of works as a description of God's covenant with Adam, though we would very carefully qualify any such talk. It should be clearly understood, if we are to speak of a covenant of works, (1) that this is not *another* covenant but only a revelation of the *one* covenant of God, and (2) that Adam's obedience and good works were not the basis or reason for the covenant, but only the means by which Adam continued to enjoy that covenant.

This is just another way of saying that the covenant is made and kept by God alone without man's help or co-operation. It is to say that the covenant never depends on man, though he has duties and responsibilities in the covenant.

Perhaps an analogy will help. We know that we must eat to live, but we recognize that our life does not depend on food and drink, nor do we receive our life from the food and drink. Our life depends on God from whom we receive it every moment. Food and drink are only the means, not the reason for life.

So it is in the covenant. Obedience is only the means by which we enjoy the blessings and privileges of God's covenant, but never the reason for the covenant. Otherwise, grace is no more grace.

Because the covenant is of grace it is a sure and everlasting covenant that cannot be broken. Though Adam was unfaithful and we with him, yet God remains faithful, never breaking His covenant or altering the thing that is gone out of His lips (Ps. 89:34). Great is His faithfulness! To Him alone be glory!

The Covenant Promise

One of the most precious aspects of God's covenant is the promise by which He makes His covenant known to us. In that promise He shows that His covenant really is a covenant of grace. By that promise He multiplies mercy and adds grace to grace.

That promise is found repeatedly in Scripture and is a kind of covenant formula. With minor word changes it is this Word of God, "I will be your God and ye shall be my people" (Gen. 17:7, 8; Deut. 7:6; II Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3).

One could not imagine a greater promise than that or anything better than having God as our God, knowing Him, loving Him, and having fellowship with Him. Yet God adds grace to grace and blessing to blessing, for that is not the whole promise of the covenant.

God in mercy adds to it the promise that He will also be the God of our children. We ourselves do not deserve anything from Him and He not only promises *us* salvation, but He promises it also to our *children*. What unspeakable grace!

That Word of God regarding the children of believers is part of the covenant promise both in the Old and the New Testament. It is found first in Genesis 17:7, 8 at the beginning of God's dealings with Israel and their father Abraham. It is found again at the beginning of the history of the New Testament Church in Acts 2:39.

We must understand that promise never was and never will be a guarantee that God will save every one of our children. There are always Esaus and Cains in the families of God's people, to their great grief. But it is a promise that God will continue His covenant with His people and their families and that they, with their families and in their generations, will not be cut off.

This is the promise that is commemorated and signified when the infants of believers are baptized. This is the promise that motivates all covenant instruction and discipline and gives assurance that these will be effective. It is the promise by which God shows us just how great His grace is.

We would emphasize, too, that it is a *promise*—an oath sworn by God who does not change and who does not lie. That is something for parents to hold on to through all the trials and tribulations of rearing a family. It is a reason for them to continue to pray when a son or daughter is wayward and disobedient.

May God by this most precious of all promises show to many the grace and faithfulness of His covenant (Ps. 25:14).

God's Covenant in Christ

The union of Christ's two natures is very important as far as some of the most precious promises in Scripture are concerned. He is the fulfilment of those promises because He is Immanuel, *God with us*.

We refer to such promises as those of II Peter 1:4; "That by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature:" II Corinthians 6:16; "I will dwell in them, and walk in them:" Ephesians 1:19; "That ye might be filled with all the fulness of God:" Ephesians 5:30; "For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones:" and Galatians 2:20; "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." All these promises suppose what Calvin called the "mystical union" between God in Christ and His people.

That this union is more than just a figure of speech is clear from the passages themselves and even from the way faith is described in Scripture. Faith is, literally, faith *in* Christ or even *into* Christ.

These passages describe, therefore, the closest possible fellowship between God and His people, fellowship in which God's people are actually joined and united to Him and share His own blessed life. They are received into His family and become by grace partakers of the divine nature. Wonderful, is it not?

This union is realized in Christ Himself. He is, on the one hand, our own flesh and blood, and yet is also really and fully God in one Person. In Him God and man meet and are united, for we are *in Him* by faith while in Him also dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9, 10).

He is, therefore, by virtue of His incarnation, Immanuel, God with us, not just because God visits us in Him, but because God comes to dwell with us and live in closest fellowship with us through Him.

Christian marriage is a faint picture of this in that man and woman in marriage become "one flesh." In fact, in Ephesians 5 where Paul talks about Christian marriage and says that man and woman become one flesh, he adds, "This is a great mystery; but I speak *concerning Christ and the church*."

That marriage of God and his people in Christ whereby they become one flesh is the realization of God's covenant of grace. God's covenant is a covenant of friendship and fellowship in which God promises to be our God and to make us His people. It is realized when we are one with God in Christ.

So we wait for the wedding feast of the Lamb—not merely as a picture of heaven's joys, but as a description of that union with God in Christ which will be the realization of all our hopes and the beginning of all our joys.

The Nature of the Covenant

What is the covenant? Scripture speaks of it often, and it is necessary, therefore, to know what Scripture is talking about.

Most would define a covenant by speaking of a contract or an agreement. They would say that God's covenant with man is of the same sort as a human covenant, such as that between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 21:27-32), with various duties, promises and penalties.

Such a covenant is made by two parties or sides, depends to some extent on each, and can be broken by either. Adam, so it is said, was the original covenant-making party with God, but now that Adam has fallen, Christ has replaced him.

God's covenant with men is *not* such a covenant. Man can never be a party with the living God in making a covenant of that sort. Because God is GOD and man is a creature, owing his very existence to God, there are no duties man can assume by way of a special agreement beside those duties that he is already obliged to perform. The creature cannot contract with the Creator.

Nor can man ever merit anything with God in such a covenant by his own works or by fulfilling certain conditions. When he has done all that is required of him he is still an *unprofitable* servant (Lk. 17:10). Certainly he could not, as some teach, merit eternal life in the covenant. Eternal life comes only through Him who is the Lord *from heaven*, our Lord Jesus Christ (I Cor. 15:47, 48).

Scripture, then, teaches that the covenant is not an agreement, but a sovereignly established *bond* or *relationship* between God and His people in Christ. This is clear from those often-repeated words of Scripture by which God reveals His covenant, "I will be thy God and ye shall be my people" (Gen. 17:8; Ex. 6:7; II Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3).

These words, found in slightly different forms, become a kind of covenant formula throughout Scripture. They show us that a particular passage is speaking of the covenant and remind us, too, that the covenant is a relationship between God and His people.

Other passages actually describe such a relationship between God and His people. We would ask our readers to look up such passages as Genesis 5:22-24; 6:9; 18:17-18; Psalm 25:14; James 2:23; John 17:23 and I John 1:3. All of them show that God's covenant is the blessed relationship of fellowship and friendship which He establishes with them by grace alone and through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

This relationship is sovereignly established by God—He makes and guarantees the relationship. In no sense of the word does it depend on man as a second party, but is wholly the work of God and all of grace, that is, of undeserved favor. The covenant is always a covenant of *grace*.

The Covenant With Adam

There is only one passage of Scripture that speaks explicitly of a covenant with Adam, Hosea 6:7. The word there means either "man" or "Adam" (they are the same word in Hebrew). But however one translates it, the verse speaks of a covenant with Adam by referring either to a covenant that Adam transgressed personally or that mankind transgressed in him.

We believe that this covenant with Adam was not a separate covenant but the first revelation of the one, everlasting covenant of grace. Indeed, if the covenant is everlasting, there can only be one covenant, and Adam, too, was in that covenant.

This first revelation of the covenant showed what the covenant is all about. In it God showed that He is the divine Friend of His people and how He lives with them in blessed fellowship. In that first revelation of the covenant God revealed man's calling in the covenant—the calling to live in thankful (not meritorious) obedience.

That this was only a revelation of the one covenant is clear from the fact that Scripture speaks of our being *reconciled* to God after Adam transgressed. The word reconciliation is very much a covenant word and not only implies a previous relationship which has been damaged, but implies that the relationship *has not been completely destroyed*. It is possible to speak of reconciliation only where the previous relationship has not been ruined entirely and is being restored and renewed.

If it were not so, we would have to speak of God being frustrated and having to change. His first covenant and purpose would have been utterly ruined and He frustrated, made to change His purpose, and forced to start over again with a new covenant.

But how could the covenant with Adam, before he fell into sin, be a covenant of grace? We should remember that grace is undeserved favor. All that Adam was and all that he had were by the undeserved favor of God. What had Adam done to deserve anything when God established His covenant with him? What could he ever do to deserve anything from God when he owed his whole existence to God?

It was grace, too, that maintained the covenant relationship and insured that it would not be destroyed by Adam's fall. As soon as Adam fell into sin, God came to Him and put enmity between the devil and woman, thus renewing the covenant relationship of friendship between Himself and His people (Gen. 3:15). They, in Adam, had chosen the friendship of the devil, but God who had chosen them to be His own, would not allow them to continue as friends of Satan. Therefore, too, He clothed them with the skins of animals, offering Himself the first sacrifice and pointing to Christ who was to come (Gen. 3:21).

God's dealings with man are always and only of grace. There is no other basis on which the eternal God can deal with us.

The Covenant With Noah

We believe that the different covenants of the Old Testament are in fact only different revelations of the *one* covenant of grace. If the covenant is everlasting (Gen. 17:7) there can only be one covenant.

In each of these revelations God shows something new and wonderful about His covenant of grace. Thus, in the first revelation of the covenant to Adam, God showed that His covenant was a covenant of friendship.

After Adam, the next great revelation of the covenant was to Noah. In that revelation of His covenant God showed its *universal* character, i.e., that the covenant would embrace the whole of the world He had created. The covenant, you see, is not just made with man, but with "every living creature of all flesh" (Gen. 9:15). It is a covenant with the day and with the night (Jer. 33:25). The universality of God's covenant, therefore, is not a universality which embraces all things or all men *without exception*, but it does embrace all things *without distinction*, so that in the end all things shall be renewed and represented in the new heavens and earth.

That covenant is well symbolized by the rainbow as it arches over the whole of God's creation. It is a covenant that will finally be consummated in the new heavens *and new earth*. It is a covenant in which even the *creature* "shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21).

That revelation of the covenant was given in the days of Noah because it was then that God destroyed the earth. He made it clear, however, in His judgments and in the covenant with Noah that the destruction of the earth then or in the future would not be the end of the earth, but only its cleansing and the beginning of its renewal. It will be the same at the end when God destroys this present world with fire.

This, we believe, is one of the reasons why the Bible, in speaking of God's purpose, speaks of His purpose concerning the *world* (the cosmos—Jn. 1:29; 3:16-17; etc.). In the end the whole of God's world will be redeemed and saved, though not every single creature or person.

This must be so. God will not allow His purposes to come to nothing. He will not allow man, by his sin, to steal away from Him the world that He created for His own glory. He saves His world.

All this is very important in understanding such passages as Isaiah 11. Reading such a passage, many conclude that there will be a future *earthly* kingdom in which some of the effects of sin will be overcome, but Scripture promises no such thing. It is speaking of the *new* heavens and the *new* earth in which righteousness dwells—a kingdom in which the wolf will indeed dwell with the lamb, for "the creature also shall be delivered...into the glorious liberty of the children of God." And what a glorious day that will be.

The Covenant with Abraham

Scripture shows clearly that the covenant with Abraham is the same as the covenant with Israel. When God made His covenant with Abraham He made it also with his seed (Gen. 17:7), and when God established His covenant with Israel He made it clear that he was only keeping the covenant that He had already made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ex. 3:15, 16).

This is important because it means that what was true for Abraham in the covenant was also true for Israel. And, since *all who believe* are the true seed and children of Abraham, what was true for Abraham is also true for us.

There are, then, several notable features about the covenant with Abraham. The first, and most important is that the covenant with Abraham (and thus also with Israel) was very much a covenant of grace. This was displayed in the great revelation of the covenant in Genesis 15.

To understand Genesis 15, one must know that in those days a covenant was sealed, not by drawing up a contract and having it legally attested, but by walking together between the cut-up pieces of an animal or animals. Jeremiah 34:18 also describes this solemn ceremony.

That ceremony was only used for important matters and was a warning that anyone who violated the covenant deserved to be cut in pieces and his body cast out as food for the beasts and birds. God threatened Israel with that when they broke a covenant they had made among themselves (Jer. 34:19).

Since a human covenant is between equals, it is also an agreement (a bilateral or two-sided covenant) and therefore all those who were involved in making the covenant walked together between the pieces of the animals. God's covenant is different because God and man never act as equals in the covenant. The covenant between God and Abraham shows this.

That covenant, according to Genesis 15, was very much a one-sided (unilateral) covenant established by God *alone*. When God covenanted with Abraham by walking between the pieces of the animals, then Abraham was fast asleep. Abraham had nothing to do with the making of that covenant. In no sense did it depend on him. It was, indeed, a covenant of *grace*.

Not only that, but by passing between the pieces of the animals God declared symbolically that He alone would suffer the consequences of any covenant breaking, as indeed He did in the death of His Son (cf. Is. 53:8; Gal. 3:13). For our sins in the covenant, God, in Christ, suffered the penalty by being cast out and cut off. Christ expressed that when He said: "My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?" Thus, the covenant of grace, revealed to Abraham, was fulfilled in Christ.

The Covenant and the Land Promise

Genesis 15 shows clearly that God's covenant with Abraham (and through Abraham also with true Israel and with us) is a covenant of grace. That same chapter, however, reminds us of another notable feature of the Abrahamic covenant, i.e., that it involved a promise of the *land*.

The land promise, however, is very often misunderstood. It is that land promise which leads many to look for some future restoration of the nation of Israel *in the earthly land of Canaan*. We believe this to be a vain hope.

The covenant with Abraham shows just how vain that hope is. For if the covenant with Abraham was a land covenant, involving the promise of an earthly land, then that promise was *never* fulfilled to Abraham himself.

The Word tells us in Acts 7:5 that God gave Abraham *no* inheritance in the land, not so much as to set his foot on. Yet as Acts 7:5 says, God promised it not only to his seed, but also to *him*. There cannot be, we believe, clearer proof, that the land promise and all such promises in the Old Testament had a *spiritual* fulfilment. The promise of the land was always essentially the promise of a *heavenly* inheritance and not really the promise of any earthly land or inheritance.

Hebrews 11:8-16 confirms this. When Abraham, by faith, left Ur to go to the *land God had promised him*, he "looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (vs. 10). Isaac and Jacob, too, always "confessed that they were *strangers and pilgrims on the earth*" (vs. 13) and declared that they were seeking "a better country, that is, an *heavenly*" (vs. 16). In fact, if they had been looking for an earthly inheritance they might have had opportunity to go back to the land from which they first came (vs. 15), but that was not their hope. Nor is it ours.

Because the land promise to Abraham was really a promise of spiritual and heavenly things, all the true children of Abraham (Rom. 3:28-29; 4:16-17; Gal. 3:29), those who believe in Abraham's God, both Jews and Gentiles, shall enjoy the fulfillment of that promise and of all the other promises of the covenant that God made to Abraham and his seed. Not one shall fail to obtain what was promised; not Abraham himself, not those believing Jews who were scattered after the captivity and never returned to Canaan, not the Gentile believers who are also true children of Abraham by faith.

Thus all Abraham's children inherit with Abraham something far better than the hills and rivers and cities of the earthly land. They enter that blessed inheritance of which Hebrews 13:22-24 speaks, and there is none better.

The Covenant with Israel

That God had a covenant with Israel is clear from Scripture. How that covenant is to be understood is a matter of much dispute.

The great question is whether the covenant with Israel was a different covenant from the covenant God establishes with His people in the New Testament, and how the Old Testament (Covenant) and the New Testament (Covenant) are related to each other. Are they old and new in that they are *different kinds of covenants* made with two different groups of people or are they older and newer revelations of *one covenant*?

Dispensationalism answers such questions by teaching that the old and new covenants are completely distinct from one another, that they concern different groups of people, have different promises, and different fulfillments. In its most extreme forms it even teaches different ways of salvation for Israel in the old covenant and for the church under new covenant (cf. the Scofield Bible notes).

There are also those who reject dispensationalism, but who still hesitate to identify completely the two covenants. Some find a difference between the promises of the old and new covenants and their fulfillments (premillennialism and postmillennialism), that is, that at least some of the Old Covenant promises have a fulfillment that is earthly, in distinction from the promises of the New Covenant which are spiritual and heavenly.

Others (the Baptists) make some distinction between Israel and the church especially as regards the covenant *and its sign*. They would say, for example, that Israel is only a type of the church and would refuse to identify circumcision and baptism, the signs of the old and new covenants.

Others makes the disjunction between law and grace. They teach in one way or another that the law has no place in the life of a New Covenant believer (antinomianism).

In contrast to all of this the Reformed faith insists that there is only one covenant, one covenant people (Israel is the church of the Old Testament—Acts 7:38), one sign of the covenant (circumcision and baptism are essentially the same—Col. 2:11, 12), one Savior and one way of salvation (Acts 4:12), one promise (of eternal life in Christ—Acts 2:38, 39), and one spiritual fulfillment of all that belongs to the promise (Heb. 11:9-10, 13-16). It even insists that there is unity between law and grace under both covenants (Rom. 7:12).

The Reformed faith insists on a complete unity of the two Testaments (Covenants) as a reflection, finally, of God's own unity. No more than there is division in God can there be any essential division between the Old and New Covenants.

One People of God in the Covenant

Many would vehemently dispute the teaching that Israel is the church of the Old Testament and that therefore God's covenant with Israel is the same covenant that He has with His church in the New Testament. For this reason we need to prove carefully from Scripture what we have said.

That Israel and the church are the same is clear. True Israel in Scripture is not an earthly people and a carnal nation, but *the spiritual people of God*, as is the church.

In Romans 9:6-8 the Word of God tells us that they are not all Israel that are of Israel. It makes a clear distinction between those who are only *of Israel* and those who truly *are* Israel. Everyone who belonged to the nation was *of Israel* but only those who were born by the power of the promise (born again by the living Word of God) were counted as the seed, that is, as children of Abraham and children of God. They were a spiritual people.

Romans 2:28, 29 confirms this in a remarkable way. It says plainly that *they are not Old Testament Jews* who are only Jews outwardly. A person is a Jew who is one inwardly, that is, who is circumcised in heart and spirit (compare Col. 2:11).

This should mean, according to the Biblical definition of a Jew, that even the believing Gentiles are counted as children of Abraham and as Israelites. That, too, Scripture teaches. Romans 4:11-16, makes it clear that Abraham is not only the father of believing Jews, but of believing Gentiles as well. He is the father "of us all," that is, of one spiritual people. Galatians 3:7 plainly says, therefore: "Know ye therefore that they which be of faith, the same are the children of Abraham."

In fact, the New Testament makes it clear that believing Gentiles are more truly Jews and more truly circumcised than unbelieving descendants of Abraham. Those who are only Jews according to the flesh are called in Philippians 3:2, "the concision," that is, mere "mutilators," because though circumcised outwardly, they are unspiritual. In contrast, the Philippians (who were Gentiles) are called "the circumcision" (vs. 3). Jesus, too, makes it clear that some of the Jews were neither true children of Abraham, nor children of God (John 8:33-40, 41ff).

But there are other passages as well. Galatians 4:1-7 tells us that the church of the Old Testament and New Testament are one by comparing them to *one person*, growing from infancy to maturity. Galatians 3:16, 29, shows that there is only *one* seed, that is, Christ and those who are in Him. Hebrew 13:22-24 identifies Jerusalem, Mt. Zion, and the church of the living God. To come to one is to come to all.

This is critical. Our participation in all the blessings and promises of the covenant depends upon it. Only true Jews have any right to the promises and to what was promised. Those promises are not for all who have the name, either of Jew or Christian, but for those who believe.

Law and Covenant

The unique feature of the covenant with Israel was, of course, the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. What is the relationship between the law and the covenant?

Fundamental to an understanding of this relationship is Galatians 3:17-21. This passage shows (1) that the covenant with Abraham (400 years before the giving of the law) is the covenant that was "confirmed in Christ," that is, the one everlasting covenant of God; and (2) that the giving of the law could not disannul this covenant (vs. 17), indeed, that it is not even against the covenant (vs. 21).

Exodus 24:7 goes so far as to call the law the "book of the covenant," i.e., the book in which God makes known His covenant with His people. If the covenant to which it belonged is the covenant that was confirmed in Christ, the same covenant to which we belong, then the law is still the book of the covenant, though much has been added to that book since.

According to Galatians 3:19, this written law was added to the covenant because of transgressions, until Christ should come. This means that the law, by revealing sin, shows us our need for Christ. It was, in that way, "our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (vs. 24).

Romans 10:4 says much the same thing. It does not say that Christ is the *end* of the law in the sense that He takes it away, but that He is the end of the law as *goal and purpose* of the law. The law was given with Christ as its goal, and it accomplishes its purpose, when by discovering sin, it showed true Israel its need for Christ and for justification through faith in Him.

That it continues to have this function Romans 7:7 shows clearly: "I had not known sin, except by the law." Galatians 3 also proves this when it says that the law was not only the Jews's schoolmaster but *ours also* (vs. 24).

We have no difficulty, therefore, in saying that the law was and is part of the covenant. It certainly was in the Old Testament. According to Galatians 3:19, it was added to the covenant at that time. That it still belongs is implied in the fact that it continues to have the function for us. The only thing that has changed is our relationship to the law within the covenant, but that is another subject entirely, the subject of Galatians 4:1-7.

This is not to deny that there were "rudiments of the world" attached to the law and elements that were purely ceremonial. These have ceased, but even in the Old Testament, they were part of God's covenant in that they pointed to Christ and functioned as a "schoolmaster" to bring Israel to Christ.

The point is that there only one covenant, a covenant to which the law has always belonged, a covenant to which we as well as the true Israel belong, a covenant of grace in Christ. The law was not, is not and never will be against that covenant.

The Law's Place in the Covenant

In the last chapter we showed from Galatians 3:17-21 that the law was given as part of the covenant of God and that it still remains part of the covenant. This is to say, of course, that law and grace are not against each other (Gal. 3:21). The law is not against the covenant or its promises.

We also showed that in the covenant the law has the function, first, of discovering sin (Gal. 3:19, 24). With this few would disagree.

But that is not the only function of the law as "the book of the covenant" (Ex. 24:7). In the covenant the law also functions as a guide for the life of thankful obedience that Christians are called to live as God's covenant people.

According to this function of the law the believer calls the law "a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path" in Psalm 119:105 (cf. also Prov. 6:23). It is a sure and safe guide along life's pathway.

For this reason it can also be called "the royal law of liberty" (James 1:25; 2:8, 12). That this royal law of liberty is the law of the Ten Commandments is clear from James 2:8, 11. It is not a different law, as some say. As the royal law of liberty, given by the King of kings, it defines and sets boundaries to our liberty and thus keeps our liberty in Christ from becoming licentiousness (Gal. 5:13, 14).

Even in the Old Testament God first gave the law, not to a people still enslaved in Egypt, but to a people whom He had redeemed and brought forth from bondage (Ex. 20:1, 2). He did this not to bring them back into bondage, but to set bounds about their life as His own covenant people, and to organize their life that they might better serve Him and shew their gratitude to Him for so great deliverance.

This is always the case. In a free country, liberty is guarded by law. It is law that set bounds to liberty, so that liberty is not destroyed by every man doing what is right in his own eyes. When law is discarded, as it is today, and every man does as he pleases, as they do today, then finally a person does not even have the liberty to leave his own house and walk the streets without fear, as is more and more the case today.

It is the law, therefore, which gives structure and order to the life of God's covenant people. It defines their relationship to Him so that He is glorified by their life. The law is able to do this because it reveals the nature and attributes of God and so shows what a God-glorifying life is.

The law does *not* bring them into a covenant relationship to God, nor does it give the necessary grace to live a God-glorifying life. For this they must always go to Christ (Gal. 3:24). Nevertheless, it is still the "book of the covenant" revealing how God's covenant people may please Him and be thankful to Him, not only in word but also in very deed.

This is not to deny, however, that the believer's relationship to the law has been changed by the coming of Christ. He is no longer "under the law" but under grace. But that is another subject for another chapter.

The Covenant with David

The last great Old Testament revelation of God's covenant was that made to David in II Samuel 7. As a revelation of the covenant, it also has some notable features.

For one thing it shows again the marvelous grace of God (it is a gracious covenant). The revelation came in response to David's desire to build a house for God. God told David he might not do that, but in His great grace promised that *He would build David a house* (vs. 27)!

What is more, that house was the house in which not David but Christ is Lord. Psalm 89, which commemorates these events, makes that clear. The Psalm speaks of God's covenant with David (Ps. 89:3), but tells us that it is Christ especially with whom that covenant is made (Ps. 89:26, 27). David is only a type of Christ.

Second, we have here again that covenant formula that shows, in spite of all the different circumstances, this is still the one, everlasting covenant of God. In that covenant He promises to be the God of His people and to take them as His own people (vs. 24). That is always what the covenant is all about.

This revelation of the covenant is unique, however, in several respects. For one thing, it brings together covenant and kingdom and shows that they are very closely related.

That relationship of covenant and kingdom shows the orderly structure of the covenant. In that covenant God's people are citizens of a kingdom, and have each his proper place. That whole structure centers in the throne (vs. 13), which is really always God's throne, even when a man like David sits on it.

On that throne Christ now sits (Lk. 1:32). He was the one through whom that throne was established forever and the King whom God promised. As king He is the cornerstone of the kingdom, the one upon whom the whole "house" is built, and the one in whom each citizen has his proper place.

It is in this revelation of the covenant, however, that God reveals more clearly than ever before that the great King who was promised and now sits on that throne forever (vss. 13, 16; Lk. 1:32) would enter His kingdom not in the way of battle with sword and spears, but in the way of suffering and shame (vs. 14; Ps. 89:30ff). It is not armies and weapons that must be defeated but sin!

That word that hung over Christ's head, therefore, on the cross, spoke truly, though those who put it there meant it in mockery. He was in His suffering, *the King* of the Jews, that is, of all true children of Abraham. As such He is also the Head of the covenant!

The New Covenant

The New Testament is called the new covenant in Hebrews 8:6-13 (indeed the word "testament" is the same word as "covenant"). According to Hebrews 8 the new covenant replaces the old.

From this many conclude that there is some essential difference between the old and new—that they are different covenants. The Baptists come to this conclusion in their defense of believer's baptism (the covenant sealed by circumcision is not the same as the covenant sealed by baptism). The futurists come to the same conclusion in defense of their belief that there is still a special earthly future for Israel (one covenant promise for them, another for us).

We believe that the new covenant replaces the old only as a newer and fuller revelation of the one everlasting covenant of God. The differences are only differences of administration. Hebrew 8 itself makes this clear. Notice:

(1) Verse 10 uses the ordinary covenant formula (thy God, my people) to show that the new covenant is not essentially different from the old. At that most important point they are the same.

(2) The reference to the law confirms this. In the new covenant the law is not removed, but *rewritten* on different tables—the fleshly tables of the heart (II Cor. 3:3). Law and covenant still go together. In fact, the giving of the law (though differently written) is the "giving" of the covenant, both in Deut. 4:13 and here in verse 10.

(3) Also, in both, according to verse 11, the essential thing is knowing the Lord, though there is a difference in *how* we do know Him. Verse 11, we believe, speaks of the New Testament as a time of realization and fulfilment. It is a time, therefore, in which God's people know Him directly and not anymore through the "teaching" of priests and Levites (cf. Mal. 2:5-7).

The new covenant, then, is not something completely different, but new in the same way that the heavens and earth shall be new when Christ comes again. The heavens and earth are not *annihilated*, but *renewed*.

The passing of the old covenant does not, therefore, bring in an entirely new covenant, but the last revelation of that one covenant in which God is the God of His people and takes them to be His own. It is the last and fullest revelation of the covenant through the coming of the things promised, rather than through pictures and types. To that covenant belongs the law, not as a renewed bondage, but as a help which shows how we may the better glorify and thank the great God of our salvation in word and *deed*.

That new covenant is "better" and more glorious because it brings us Christ instead of the types of Christ. Only the final consummation of the covenant shall be more glorious.

The Old and New Covenants

In the previous article we have shown from Hebrews 8:6-13 that the old and new covenants are not two separate and different covenants. At all essential points they are the *same*.

The differences between them are only in administrative details. It is only in respect to these details that one is "old" and the other "new" and that the old perishes and passes away.

How, then, are they different? According to Hebrews 8, in three ways:

(1) There is a change of mediator (vs. 6). Christ replaces Moses. This is not an essential difference, however, because Moses was a *type* of Christ. In chapter 3:5 he is even called "a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after." Also in Deuteronomy 18:15 he himself speaks of Christ as one "like unto me."

This difference, therefore, is only administrative. A new prime minister is a change of *administration*, and a new government in that sense, but not in the sense of a change in the type of government or of the constitution.

(2) There is also a change in the way the law is written (vs. 10). As we pointed out in the last chapter, the law itself is not taken away, only rewritten on fleshly tables of the heart instead of tables of stone.

But this, too, is only an administrative change, though it has great significance for the New Testament believer. Something *rewritten* is not something different and separate from what went before.

This second point is especially important because the giving of the law is called the "giving" of the covenant both in Deuteronomy 4:13 and in Hebrews 8:10. One cannot, then, argue that though the law was the same the covenants are different. They are *identified* in Deuteronomy and in Hebrews.

(3) Finally, the new covenant also brings a fuller and more complete revelation. This is what verse 11 is talking about. That fuller revelation is of such a kind that all God's people know Him *directly*, and not any longer through the intervention of earthly mediators. There is not under the new covenant the need of teachers like the priests and Levites of the Old Testament (cf. Mal. 2:6, 7 for proof that they especially were the teachers of the Old Testament).

This is also an administrative change. The new covenant does not bring a new (different and separate) revelation of God, but a better revelation (Heb. 8:6), that is, one that is completed and which reveals the realities which were only prophesied under the old covenant.

There is only one, everlasting, covenant of God.

The Consummation of the Covenant

One reason we do not believe that the covenant is an agreement or contract by which salvation is brought to God's people has to do with the consummation of the covenant. The consummation of the covenant is its final realization and glory in the everlasting and heavenly kingdom of Christ our Lord.

If the covenant is a contract or agreement to bring salvation, then at the consummation, when we receive the fulness of our salvation, the covenant is cast aside and discarded in the same way that any other contract would be finished and done with when all that had been contracted was completed.

But this cannot be. For one thing the covenant is *everlasting*. It is not something that is only useful for a time and then set aside as a contract or agreement would be. It must, then, be something else.

We insist, therefore, that the covenant is a relationship or bond between God and His people in Christ. That relationship is described in Scripture by the covenant formula: "I will be your God and ye shall be my people."

If that is indeed the essence of the covenant, that God is ours and we are His, then in heaven the covenant will not be left behind or set aside but fully realized. That is what heaven is all about—that we will be with God to glorify Him and to enjoy Him forever.

And that is exactly how Revelation 21:3 describes the glory of the new heavens and the new earth. When all is new there will be no more tears, no more death, no more crying or sorrow or pain. How wonderful that will be!

But even more wonderful is that which the voice from heaven foretells: "Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, *and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God.*"

Notice that this passage has in it the same covenant formula that is used throughout Scripture: "I will be your God, and ye shall be my people." There is nothing more desirable or wonderful than that!

Notice, too, that the passage speaks of God's tabernacle. In the Old Testament that was the place of His covenant, the place where He dwelled with His people and revealed Himself as their God (Ex. 29:42-46).

That Old Testament tent was a type and shadow of better things, for it pictured the Lord Jesus Christ himself, in whom and through whom God dwells with us and is our God, and by whom He reveals Himself to us in all His glory. In Christ He meets with us and speaks with us. In Christ He dwells among us. In Christ we know Him as the Lord our God.

The Covenants

We believe that we have showed from Scripture in previous chapters that the different covenants mentioned in Scripture are not separate covenants, but different revelations of the one everlasting covenant of God. In this last chapter on the doctrine of the covenant we wish to summarize what we have written in previous articles, listing the different covenants and what each of them shows as a revelation of that one covenant.

(1) The first revelation of the covenant was to Adam in paradise. That covenant might be called The Covenant of Life, since it revealed the essential character of the covenant. It showed what the covenant was, revealed God as the sovereign Lord of the covenant and clearly delineated man's place in the covenant (cf. Gen. 1-2 and Hos. 6:7).

(2) The second great revelation of the covenant was to Adam after the fall. That covenant could be called The Covenant of Promise. It revealed God as the faithful covenant-keeping God who maintains His covenant with His people by the power of sovereign, redemptive grace (cf. Gen. 3, esp. vs. 15). In it Christ is revealed as the promised Seed and the great Sacrifice (Gen. 3:15, 21).

(3) The third important revelation was to Noah. The covenant is best remembered as the Covenant of Creation. In it God revealed the universal character of His covenant (not all men, but all creatures) (cf. Gen. 9:1-17). In it Christ is revealed as Reconciler and Lord of all (Gen. 9:15, 16; Col. 1:20).

(4) The fourth revelation was to Abraham. That covenant could well be called The Covenant of Families, since it showed more clearly than ever before that God's covenant is very much a family covenant (cf. Gen. 15 & 17). Here Christ is revealed as the Elect and the one in whom all God's people are chosen and called (Rom. 9:6-13).

(5) The fifth great revelation was to Israel. Since the giving of the law was the main feature of that revelation, that covenant should be called The Covenant of Law. In it God revealed that law and covenant are not opposed, but belong together (cf. Ex. 19-20 and Gal. 3-4). Here we see Christ as Mediator (Gal. 3:19, 20).

(6) The sixth and last revelation in the Old Testament was that to David, and might well be remembered as The Covenant of the Kingdom. In it God revealed especially the orderly structure of His covenant (cf. II Sam. 7 and Ps. 89). In this revelation Christ is shown to be the Sovereign Head and Lord of the Covenant.

(7) The whole New Testament itself is called in Scripture, the New Covenant. It is this, not because it is an entirely different covenant, but as a new revelation of the covenant, not of types and shadows, but of the realities to which those types pointed (cf. Heb. 8). Here finally Christ comes with all His blessings and fulfils the types and shadows.

(8) Finally, we wait yet for the day when the covenant will be realized in all its fulness, when the tabernacle of God will be with men, when He will dwell with them and be with them as their God, and they shall be His people (Rev. 21:3).