

8. God and the Covenant (4Q 2019—Ezra and Nehemiah)

Biblical Material: Neh. 9:38; 10:1–29, Gen. 4:8–19, Heb. 13:20, Joshua 24, Neh. 10:30–39, Heb. 8:1–7.

Quotes

- A covenant is an agreement between God and man, an accord whose terms are set by God. *D. Todd Christofferson*
- In the Hebrew Bible, the covenant (Hebrew: *berit*) is the formal agreement between Yhwh and the people of Israel and Judah, in which each agrees to a set of obligations toward the other. *Marvin A. Sweeney*
- God doesn't want us to have rigid rituals with Him. In the new covenant, He is more interested in having a relationship with us. *Joseph Prince*
- When we realize that we are children of the covenant, we know who we are and what God expects of us. *Russell M. Nelson*
- The new covenant is God's pledge to forgive the sins of his people and to put his laws within us and to write them on our hearts, and to be our God and to make us his people. *John Piper*
- As the gospels present it to us, the mission of Jesus of Nazareth is about the way in which the community of God's people—historically, the Jewish people who had first received the law and the covenant—is being re-created in relation to Jesus himself. *Rowan Williams*

Questions

How do we understand the term “covenant”? How does the later law relate to the earlier promises given by God in his covenant with Abraham? In what way do we see covenant as a legal contract? How do we relate such concepts to us in our day? What is the basis for trusting God and his promises? Is it all based on such a “transaction”?

Bible Summary

Nehemiah 9:38 and 10 describe the covenant, or solemn agreement, entered into by the people as they responded to God. In particular it records the promises made by the people in regards to the keeping of God's instructions to them. Gen. 4:8–19 is the story of Cain and Abel, and God's reassurance to Cain. Heb. 13:20 speaks of the “blood of the eternal covenant,” without explain what this means. In Joshua 24 Joshua reviews the history of the Israelites and they recommit themselves to their covenant relationship with God. Heb. 8:1–7 references the second covenant.

Comment

The word “covenant” today sounds old-fashioned or “legal.” However as it is used in Scripture it describes God's intentions to humanity. It's interesting that God has to make promises, agreements, and covenants. Why? Because God is feared, and human beings need reassurance. In fact throughout the Bible God has to tell people they do not need to fear him, and to make promises to convince them. Firstly with Adam and Eve. Then with Noah and his descendants. Then Abraham, and the other patriarchs. Down on through the prophets, God is still trying to win his people over—that there is nothing to fear.

Yet despite all his promises, his people persistently reject God and turn away to their own desires. They misunderstand the basis of the covenants, and spurn his promises. The book of Isaiah is all about a God who has been rejected by his people, a Being who is seen as being “paid off” by sacrifices and offerings, a ritualistic deity that needs to be placated. But God rejects such meaningless worship. He desires an intimate relationship, not some burdensome business contract. “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.” Isaiah 1:11 NIV. Does God take pleasure in any kind of sacrifice, in a heathen kind of way? Could the sacrifice of Christ also be viewed in this way? Has not even the cross been made a “meaningless sacrifice” (1:13)?

God’s invitation is to “argue it out” with him (1:18)—he wants to reason with us. God does not seek to impose arbitrary rules; rather he seeks our agreement and understanding that his ways are true and right, and in our best interest. He is also not appealing to mystical thoughts or non-rational concepts. God wants us to use our reason—the mind he created that works in ordered and logical processes to achieve a wise and considered result. This is not rationalism or humanism, but it does uplift as the essential methodology the only tool we really have to establish truth. In matters of religion like everything else, we can be very fervently and decidedly mistaken. God wants us to reason with him, to use our minds to examine the evidence so that we are not deceived.

Thoughtless rituals and symbols cannot save. God is not some kind of machine to be fixed or used. The reason he instituted the whole sacrificial system was not for his benefit, but for ours. The cross is the same—not some mechanism by which he can fix it for himself to save us, but designed for our benefit and appreciation. The problem with seeing religion as rules and requirements is that you do not come into the relationship that God most wants—one in which there is mutual understanding, love and acceptance of truth and right. You just do as you’re told.

You make sure to apply the “blood of the covenant” (Ex. 24:8). However in and of itself, the physical blood had no significance of itself. Blood was seen as the source of life (Lev. 17:14; Deut. 12:23 etc.); and became a very meaningful metaphor in mankind’s relationship to God, but there was nothing in the actual blood that did anything. *Sacrifices cannot save. Blood cannot save. Covenants cannot save. Only God can save.* Nor is the covenant any better than the true relationship at its heart—for a mere legal agreement does not answer the issues in the great controversy. As always, it’s what it means that counts!

Ellen White Comments

In the gospel of Christ Jesus, proclaimed by the angels as glad tidings of great joy, the terms of salvation were fully revealed. The law stands in all its original force and purity; not one jot or tittle was to be set aside or altered; for the law is the transcript of the character of God. But the Lord made a covenant of grace whereby his mercy is extended to fallen man, and provision is made so ample and powerful that souls ruined by the fall may be uplifted to glory, honor, and immortality. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Encircling the throne of God is the rainbow of the covenant, a symbol of the pledged word of God that he will receive every sinner who gives up all hope of eternal life on the ground of his own righteousness, and accepts the righteousness of the world’s Redeemer, believing that Christ is his personal Saviour, able to save him from his sin, and to keep him from falling. Unless Christ is the ground of our hope, we shall not inherit eternal life. {ST, September 5, 1892 par. 3}