

4. An Everlasting Covenant (2Q 2021—The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant)

Biblical Material: Exod. 3:14; Gen. 17:1–6; Gen. 41:45; Dan. 1:7; Gen. 15:7–18; Gen. 17:1–14; Rev. 14:6, 7.

Quotes

- Though the moral law has ceased as a covenant, it remains as a rule of life. It will forever continue as the standard of holiness. *Charles Backus*
- Every prophet, every ancient writer, every revolution of the state, every law, every ceremony of the old covenant points only to Christ, announces only him, represents only him. *Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263–339?)*,
- In legal language, a covenant generally denotes an agreement between two or more parties. But in a religious context, a covenant is much more significant. It is a sacred promise with God. He fixes the terms. *Russell M. Nelson*
- 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*
- A covenant is an agreement between God and His children upon the earth, and it is important to understand that God determines the conditions of all gospel covenants. *David A. Bednar*
- Christians must be Jews. The truth of what we believe depends on the truth of Judaism, depends on the first covenant. *Michael Novak*

Questions

How are we to understand the covenant ritual of the divided animal carcasses? In what way was God’s promise to Abraham really “an everlasting covenant”? In what way do such rituals point forward to the “new covenant” that Jesus spoke about? What are the possible dangers here? How can we talk about God’s covenant without making it all about legal issues?

Bible summary

When Moses asked God for his name, he was told, “I AM WHO I AM.” (Exod. 3:14). Gen. 17:1–6 is the account of God’s covenant with Abraham, promising him that he would become the father of many nations, and giving him the land he was then living in. Joseph is given an Egyptian wife (Gen. 41:45). Daniel and his three friends are renamed by Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1:7). Gen. 15:7–18 is the covenant ritual with Abraham. Circumcision is given as a necessary component of God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:1–14). Rev. 14:6, 7 is the first angel’s message.

Comment

If God’s covenant with Abraham is “an everlasting covenant,” why are aspects of the covenant no longer applicable? For example, in Genesis 17:13 FBV circumcision is forever: “You must circumcise those born in your household or bought from foreigners as a sign in your bodies of my eternal agreement.” The early church struggled with this, since Jesus never rescinded this requirement—there no “thus saith the Lord” ending God’s clear demand for circumcision. It’s interesting when the Jerusalem Council met (see Acts 15) there is no mention of Gentiles being required to be circumcised.

From this we can deduce that even “everlasting covenants” can be modified and changed. In fact there are many repetitions of the covenant in the Old Testament, that while they may

contain similar language and promises, certainly do relate to the immediate situation. We can also see that specific promises can be added, and then when Jesus comes, the “new covenant” (which in essence is still the same “old covenant” of God promising to save his people) sums up the giving of God for us.

So what do we make of the ritual in Genesis 15, which actually comes before the more detailed exposition in Genesis 17? Clearly this has elements of ritual and symbolism that are lost on us today. Some elements are apparent, as shown in Jeremiah 34:18,19 that reveal that the cutting of the animal bodies in half is symbolic of what will happen if the covenant is broken: “They have broken my agreement, and have not kept the terms of the agreement they promised before me. So I’m going to cut them up just like the calf they cut in half to pass between its two pieces” (Jeremiah 34:18 FBV).

In many ways this sounds very much like some transaction based on a contract, and this ended up as a big part of the problem in the experience of Israel before the exile. The thought was that God just wanted them to fulfill the demands of the covenant, understood by them as participation in the sacrificial system. But they missed the main point that the system was meant to encourage thought and reflection on the meaning of sin and God’s healing salvation. Instead they chose to believe that God wanted the sacrifices and the blood and the fat, and that by fulfilling the sacrificial requirements then God was obligated to save them. They saw no need of anything more than observing the detailed requirements of the sacrificial system.

As a result this “covenant relationship” in their eyes was just a legal mechanism that met the needs of both parties. This is why Isaiah and other prophets delivered God’s messages of rejection of such a covenant-based concept. God makes it clear he doesn’t want all the meaningless sacrifices—that they might as well be offering pigs and dogs!

Here we see the great danger of emphasizing some kind of reciprocal demands based on a covenant. What God really wants, as he makes clear in the later prophets, is not the minute observance of rituals and sacrifices, but a relationship that is based on love, truth, and trust: “What should I take with me when I approach the Lord, when I bow down before the God of heaven? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I sacrifice my firstborn child for my rebellion, my own flesh and blood for the sins I have committed? The Lord has told you what is good, and what the Lord asks from you: to do what is right, to love kindness, and to walk in humility with your God.” Micah 6:6-8 FBV.

Ellen White comments

The Bondage of Legal Religion.--The spirit of bondage is engendered by seeking to live in accordance with legal religion, through striving to fulfill the claims of the law in our own strength. There is hope for us only as we come under the Abrahamic covenant, which is the covenant of grace by faith in Christ Jesus. The gospel preached to Abraham, through which he had hope, was the same gospel that is preached to us today, through which we have hope. Abraham looked unto Jesus, who is also the Author and the Finisher of our faith. {6BC 1077}

We ourselves owe everything to God’s free grace. Grace in the covenant ordained our adoption. Grace in the Saviour effected our redemption, our regeneration, and our exaltation to heirship with Christ. Let this grace be revealed to others. {COL 250}

We must learn in the school of Christ. Nothing but His righteousness can entitle us to one of the blessings of the covenant of grace... We must not think that our own grace and merits will save us; the grace of Christ is our only hope of salvation. {FW 36}