

God's Covenant People

M. W. Bassford, 4-10-11

In our day and age, the word “covenant” is not a particularly fearsome term. If anything, it brings to mind the snippy suburban world of housing covenants and neighborhood associations. Those covenants don't speak to anything weightier than what color of taupe your siding has to be, and what the association will do to you if you start keeping cars up on blocks in your front lawn. Regulations like that can be annoying, but they're not terribly consequential.

The covenants that we read about in Scripture, though, are a different matter altogether. Those covenants contained the weightiest promises that could be exchanged between man and man, or even between man and God. When a man entered into such an agreement, he was said to have “cut a covenant”, because part of the ratification process involved chopping animals into two pieces, with the implication that anyone who violated the covenant would be cut in half just like the animals were. We see Abraham following this process to cut his covenant with God in Genesis 15.

Of all of the covenants made before the birth of Christ, the most significant of them all was the covenant that God made with the children of Israel on Mount Sinai. This covenant was so spiritually important that the writers of the New Testament refer to it simply as “the old covenant”. Under the terms of the old covenant, the Israelites agreed to obey the law of God, a law that governed every aspect of their lives. This covenant was so powerful that it bound even God. Under its terms, He agreed to protect the Israelites and establish them in the land as long as they remained faithful. The story of this covenant and how Israel kept or broke it is the story of the whole Old Testament.

In all of history, there is only one covenant more important than that one, and it is the one that binds us today. Our relationship with God is based on a covenant ratified by the death of Jesus Christ, and whether we keep it or not determines our eternal destiny. Let's look to Deuteronomy, then, to see what God expects from His covenant people.

God's Requirements.

In the beginning of this segment of Deuteronomy, God clearly sets out what He requires from the Israelites. This appears in Deuteronomy 10:12-13. Even though we serve under a different law than the Israelites did, these basic rules of covenant-keeping apply with just as much force to us. The first thing that God required the Israelites to do was to **FEAR HIM**. A little bit further down, God explains why, in Deuteronomy 10:20-21. They should fear God because God is fearsome. The Israelites had seen Him do things that terrified any right-thinking man. Today, we learn to fear God both from the record of His miracles and from what we ourselves experience. I don't think I will ever forget the couple of times I ventured outside during the Groundhog's Day blizzard a couple of months ago. The fury of that storm brought home my frailty and insignificance in a way I hadn't really seen before. It taught me to fear its Creator.

Likewise, God requires His people to **WALK IN HIS WAYS**. This doesn't refer to getting up on Sunday morning, going to church, and then doing what we want with the rest of our lives. Instead, it points to a continual pattern of conduct. If we are walking in God's ways, we're dedicated to doing His will everywhere and in everything.

Third, God requires His people to **LOVE HIM**. Just like the fear requirement, this is fleshed out in a slightly later section of the text. Let's look at Deuteronomy 10:22-11:1. The Israelites had been little more than a clan of wanderers, but God took them under His wing and multiplied them into a people that was millions strong, not because they deserved it, but because He was gracious. Similarly, our lives are filled with the evidence of God's favor. In this country, we are ridiculously well off, so much so that most Americans attribute it to their own hard work instead of God's blessing. Nor does that even take into account the much greater spiritual blessings that we know through Christ and His church. We have received all of those things, even though what we actually deserve is death because of our sins. The gap between what we have earned and what we get could not be greater. How, then, could we do other than to love God?

Fourth, God requires us to **SERVE HIM WITH A WHOLE HEART**. In other words, God has to be the priority of our lives. We can't live for God and work, or God and our hobbies. We have to first give God everything that He requires, and then we can use the leftovers however we please. If we don't do that, if we start giving to other things the resources that God expects us to use for Him, we've got a massive spiritual problem on our hands. We might not see it this way, but any time we put something or someone ahead of God, that's idolatry in His eyes. He will not tolerate the presence of those idols in our lives. We need to destroy them if we don't want Him to destroy us.

The last of God's requirements is for His people to **KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS FOR THEIR GOOD**. This is another point that Moses makes repeatedly in Deuteronomy. God does not ask us to do anything that is harmful to us. All of the sins that He warns us away from are sins that will wreck us if we give them half a chance. If we obey Him, we will surely benefit. When we think about that, it's amazing that sin is as big a problem for us as it is. Sure, obedience to God might cost us some momentary pleasures, but those things pale in comparison to the joys of obedience, both here and in the hereafter. Let's be wise about that and learn to keep His commandments for our good.

God and Us.

Once Moses leaves that section of the text, he continues on to highlight several aspects of God's character and what our logical reaction should be. First, he examines the relationship between **GOD'S FAVOR AND OUR HUMILITY**. Let's read about this together, from Deuteronomy 10:14-16. Moses begins this discussion by pointing to God's greatness. It's not like God is some pipsqueak God who opportunistically grabbed hold of the Israelites because they were the best people He could aspire to. Instead, God is the ruler of heaven and earth, both things that are seen and things that are unseen. He had His pick of all the nations of the earth. He could have taken the Egyptians, the Babylonians, or the Chinese to be His chosen people, and all of those nations were far mightier than the Israelites were. However, He chose the Israelites to be His, because of the love that He had for them and for their fathers.

In response, though, Moses has to implore the Israelites not to be dumb about it. They've received this incredible chance to be the chosen people of the one and only God, and what do they do about it? They stiffen their necks and fight with Him daily for 40 years. What a foolish decision! Instead, Moses urges them to circumcise their hearts, to dedicate themselves to God in the way that they should have all along. It's the only reasonable response.

Likewise, friends, simply because we are Christians, we have received incredible blessings and stand in line to receive even more incredible blessings. Why, then, are we often so stubborn in our dealings with God? Why do we withhold things in our lives from Him and only give them up to Him grudgingly, bit by bit, like we're doing Him a favor? Don't we know who we are? Don't we know who He is? It's like we're some pimply-faced teenage dork who gets asked out by a movie star, except we start putting conditions on it. We say, "Oh, all right, if you insist, but only if you're ready by seven. At 7:05, I'm going home and playing Call of Duty." All too often, we're like that, and we take the best thing that has ever happened to us for granted. Let's be wise instead, and react appropriately to what we have received.

Similarly, we need to pay attention to the connection between **GOD'S NATURE AND OUR MERCY**. Moses examines this briefly in Deuteronomy 10:17-19. God is the ultimate have. He is supreme in the universe, and there is no one who can even think of challenging His power. However, He is also just as good as He is great. He doesn't show partiality to the rich. He can't be bribed, which is bad news for all of those people who think they can backdoor their way into heaven by buying prayers for their soul after they've passed. Instead, He exerts His power on behalf of all the have-nots of the world. He protects the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. If God, with all of His greatness, is so concerned for the most marginal members of society, then His people ought also to be concerned for those whom others overlook.

This is something, I think, that Christians can really struggle with today, especially in the non-institutional churches of Christ. Based on my reading of the Scripture, I do not believe that it's appropriate for churches to use their money to relieve the suffering of the world's poor. However, too many Christians also conclude that they don't have any individual responsibility to the world's poor, and that is blatantly false. We are to do good first to the household of faith, it is true, but then, as we have opportunity, we are to do good to all men, whether Christians or not. We don't have the right to climb up onto the throne of judgment, divide the poor into the deserving and the undeserving, and sit there and wait until some poor person comes along whom we believe is sufficiently deserving. Where would we be if God waited to save only sinners who deserved to be saved? We'd all be bound for hell by the fastest train, is where we'd be! As Christians, we should be a merciful people, because our Father in heaven has been so merciful to us.

Finally, we need to put some thought into the link between **GOD'S INSTRUCTION AND OUR BLESSING**. Moses reminds the Israelites about this in Deuteronomy 11:2, 8-9. Once again, he's appealing to those who were witnesses of all that God had done in the past 40 years, who had seen all of His object lessons. As an object lesson, God took on Pharaoh, the ruler of the mightiest nation on earth, and the object lesson ended when He sank Pharaoh and all of his army to the bottom of the Red Sea. Of course, God's people weren't immune. When a group of people led by Dathan and Abiram rebelled against Moses, God made the ground open up at their feet and swallow them up alive. His power was so great that He could punish those who displeased Him in any way He saw fit.

The point for the Israelites was plain. Stay on God's good side by keeping His commandments, because if you do, good things will happen to you. He will strengthen you so that you will be able to go in and take possession of the land of Canaan, and He will confirm you in that land for as long as you remain faithful to Him. As Moses makes clear elsewhere, though, once the Israelites began to disobey, the deal was off. The divine power that had worked so mightily to bring them from captivity into the promised land would work to remove them from that same land.

This is a very simple lesson, and it doesn't really get much more complicated in our lives. If we obey God, He will bless us. He will give us all we need to maintain our physical existence, He will protect us from temptations that are too great to bear, He will answer our prayers, and He will conduct us to an eternal home with Him in heaven. Nobody can stop Him from doing those things, because nobody is more powerful than God. However, if we become arrogant and start to disobey, we will run into the same problems that the Israelites did. We will nullify our covenant with God, and we will lose the benefit of all of His blessings. The choice is really no choice at all. The only wise choice is to obey.