

Sabbath School Lesson #11 – The Covenant – 5-11 December 2015

Christ promises in His Covenant to save us if we would let Him. “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31). To understand “The Covenant” we need to understand the distinction between the “New Covenant” and the “Old covenant.” The New was before the Old, and the New is The Covenant – it seems confusing, but it needs not be.

The New Covenant is God’s one-sided promise to write His holy law on human hearts – the Old covenant is the vain promise of the people at Mt Sinai to obey perfectly. The New is ‘Believe and live’ – the Old is ‘Obey and live.’ The New says that salvation is totally by God’s grace through faith – the Old says salvation is by faith but it is also by our good works. The New Covenant is a heart-appreciation of the love (*agape*) which constrains to perfect heart obedience (2 Corinthians 5:14-15) – the Old is egocentric ‘trust’ motivated by hope of reward or by fear of punishment. The New Covenant is everlasting – the Old covenant is temporal. The New Covenant produces ‘under grace’ motivation – the Old is the spiritual experience of being “under the law,” or under reward/fear motivation, it “gendereth to bondage” (Galatians 4:21-24). The New Covenant says justification is entirely of grace – the Old says justification is by our obedience. The New is righteousness by a faith ‘which works’ – the Old is by our own ‘sanctified works.’ The New wants Christ to return for His honour and vindication – the Old covenant wants Christ to return for our own reward, ‘so we can go home to glory.’

The New Covenant begun in Eden. The New Covenant in its simplicity is God putting “the Spirit of His Son into your hearts” (Galatians 4:6) which causes you to fulfill His Law of Love – “for without Me,” Christ declared, “ye can do nothing” (John 15:5). As soon as Adam and Eve sinned, the Covenant – the one-sided promise of God – was made. “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15). “The covenant of grace was first made with man in Eden, when after the Fall there was given divine promise that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent’s head. To all men this covenant offered pardon and the assisting grace of God for future obedience through faith in Christ” {PP 370.2}. “This same covenant was renewed to Abraham in the promise, ‘In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.’ Genesis 22:18. This promise pointed to Christ. So Abraham understood it (see Galatians 3:8, 16), and he trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. It was this faith that was accounted unto him for righteousness. The covenant with Abraham also maintained the authority of God’s law” {PP 370.3}. Note that Abraham made no promise in return; all he did was believe the Lord’s promise (Genesis 15:6). The Lord’s promise was the ‘new’ covenant.

Before the giving of the law at Sinai with “thunders, and lightings,” earthquake, fire, and the death boundary, the Lord tried to re-establish the same ‘new’ covenant with Abraham’s descendants: “Now therefore, if ye will obey [*listen to*, in Hebrew] My voice indeed, and keep [*cherish*, in Hebrew] My covenant [His new covenant promise to Abraham], then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people: for all the earth is Mine” (Exodus 19:5). Of all nations in the world, they were to be “the head, and not the tail” (Deuteronomy 28:13). But Sinai was the turning point in the nation’s destiny, for they refused the Lord’s new covenant of justification by faith. Instead of humbly saying “Amen” to God’s promise as Abraham did (the Hebrew word for “believe” is *Amen*), the people promised a works obedience, “All that the LORD hath spoke we will do” (Exodus 19:8). That was the ‘old’ covenant. They bound themselves to a detour that would finally lead them to the terrible deed of Christ’s crucifixion.

“Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:11-12). For centuries there has prevailed an erroneous idea that God has one covenant for the Jews and another for the Gentiles – or that the Jews were saved under the old covenant and the Gentiles under the new. These verses show this idea is a great error.

As a matter of fact, Gentiles, as Gentiles, have no part whatsoever in God’s covenants of promise. In Christ is the yea. “For all the promises of God in Him is the yea, and in Him

Amen, unto the glory of God by us" (2 Corinthians 1:20). The Gentiles are those who are without Christ, and so they are "strangers from the covenants of promise" (Ephesians 2:12). No Gentile has any part in any covenant of promise. But whosoever will may come to Christ, and may share in the promises; for Christ says, "Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). A Gentile who does that, no matter what his nationality may be, he ceases to be a Gentile, and becomes a member of "the commonwealth of Israel" (Ephesians 2:12).

But let it be noted also that the Jew, in the common acceptation of the term, that is, as a member of the Jewish nation, and a rejecter of Christ, has no more share in the promises of God, or the covenants of promise, than the Gentile has. That is only to say that nobody has any share in the promises, save those who accept them. For whoever is "without Christ," whether he be called Jew or Gentile, is also "without God in the world," and is a stranger from the covenant of promise, and an alien from the commonwealth of Israel. This the text in Ephesians 2:11-12 quoted teaches us. One must be in Christ in order to share the benefits of "the covenants of promise," and be a member of "the commonwealth of Israel." To be "an Israelite indeed" (John 1:47), therefore, is simply to be a Christian. This is as true of the men who lived in the days of Moses, as of those who lived in the days of Paul, or who live today.

The covenant of God with Abraham assured to him and his seed the righteousness of the law by faith. Not by works, but by faith. That covenant was wholly of faith, and that is why it assures salvation, since "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The history of Abraham makes very emphatic the fact that salvation is wholly of God, and not by the power of man. "Power belongeth unto God" (Psalm 62:11); and the Gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Romans 1:16). From Abraham, Isaac to Jacob, we know that only God Himself can fulfil the promises of God. They got nothing by their own; everything was a gift from God. He led them, and He protected them. This is the truth that had been made most prominent in the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt. God introduced Himself to them as: "The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:15); He charged Moses to let them know that He was about to deliver them in fulfilment of His covenant with Abraham (Exodus 6:4-8).

The Covenant with Abraham was, as we have seen, a Covenant of faith, and Israel could keep it simply by keeping the faith. God did not ask Israel to enter into another covenant with Him, but only to accept His covenant of peace, which He had long before given to their fathers. The proper response of the people therefore would have been, 'Amen, even so, O Lord, let it be done unto us according to Thy will.' On the contrary they said, "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do," and they repeated their promise, with additional emphasis, even after they had heard the law spoken. It was the same self-confidence that led their descendants to say to Christ, "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" (John 6:28). Think of mortal men presuming to be able to do God's work! Christ answered, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent" (verse 29). Even so it was in the desert of Sinai, when the law was given and the covenant made – assuming they could work out the works of God showed lack of appreciation of His greatness and holiness.

It is only when men are ignorant of God's righteousness, that they go about to establish their own righteousness, and refuse to submit themselves to the righteousness of God (see Romans 10:3). The Sinai promises were good for nothing, because Israel had not the power to fulfil them. The Old covenant, therefore, which was based on Israel's promise was utterly worthless, so far as giving them life was concerned. But God did not give Israel up, "for He said, Surely they are My people, children that will not lie: so He was their Saviour" (Isaiah 63:8). He knew that they were moved by impulse in making that promise, and that they did not realise what it meant. They had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. He had brought them out of the land of Egypt, that He might teach them to know Him, and He did not give them up simply because they were so slow to learn the lesson. He had borne with Abraham when he thought that he could work out God's plans, and He had been very patient with Jacob when he was so ignorant as to suppose that God's promised inheritance could be gained by sharp bargains and fraud. He bore with their children's ignorance and lack of faith, in order that He might afterwards bring them to the faith. Believe and Live now!