

THE POWERFUL GOOD NEWS OF THE NEW COVENANT

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Not one human soul will enter the pearly gates into the New Jerusalem except as a child of Abraham!

That doesn't mean literal Jews only (many of them will repent, thank God!), but when God promised fantastic blessings to Abraham He made it plain that "in Isaac shall your seed be called" (Genesis 21:12). That is, his "seed" will not be literal descendants through Ishmael, the old-covenant son of the second wife, but all who have Abraham's new covenant faith.

Ishmael came "according to the flesh," but "the seed" will come through Isaac, the one who was "the child of promise," "born according to the Spirit" (Galatians 4:28, 29). This means that all of God's promises to His people come through the righteousness by faith that Abraham experienced (seven times in Romans 4 he is identified as "our father").

What is the new covenant?

God's promises to Abraham (and therefore to us as well) are "the new covenant." The first step in understanding the new covenant is to see that when God makes a covenant, it is always a promise on His part. Paul tells us that God's "covenant" with Abraham was His "promise" to him (Galatians 3:17).

Abraham the unbeliever became "the father of us all" when he chose to believe those promises of God. "It is of faith that it might be according to

grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed [that is, all of us], not only to those who are of the law [natural descendants, literal Jews], but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ... the father of many nations" (Romans 4:6-18).

We read those promises in Genesis 12: "[1] I will make you a great nation; [2] I will bless you [3] and make your name great; [4] and you shall be a blessing. [5] I will bless those who bless you, [6] and I will curse him who curses you; and [7] in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (vss. 2, 3). The promises were renewed again in chapter 15 when God called him out of his tent one night and asked him to count the stars: "So shall your descendants be" (vs. 5).

As one reads the entire story through chapters 12-19, the surprising fact emerges that God never asked Abraham to make any promise in return! God's "new covenant" was totally one-sided. Abraham did the only right thing he could do when he responded with faith: "He believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (vs. 6). That is all that God has asked us to do: believe His promise to us. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Those who worry that salvation by grace through faith alone won't produce enough works need to remember that true faith always "works by love" (Ephesians 2:8, 9; Galatians 5:6).

The unique nature of God's covenant.

God's covenant is always a one-sided promise on His part, because He knows that our nature is so weak and sinful that we cannot keep our promises to Him. When we make promises to Him and then inevitably break them later, we feel down on ourselves, "I-am-no-good," "I-am-not-cut-out-to-go-to-heaven," etc. Note how Paul speaks of God's "covenant" and "promise" as being identical: "The law ... cannot annul the covenant ... that it should make the promise of no effect" (Galatians 3:17).

The old covenant "gives birth to bondage," says Paul (Galatians 4:24). Some people in church even give up in despair, and many go through their so-called "Christian experience" under a constant cloud of discouragement.

But the confusion about the two covenants can be resolved very simply. The problem concerns "the law" that was given at Mt. Sinai; does that law alter the "new covenant" that was the straight-forward promise of God to Abraham and thus to us?

Paul was probably the first Israelite who clearly understood the function of the law and of the two covenants in the light of Israel's up and down, discouraging Old Testament history.

In several simple steps in Galatians Paul clarifies the confusion:

a. "The blessing of Abraham" is to come on everyone, "that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:14). Not one human soul is left out.

b. A "will" or covenant that anyone makes (even God's!) cannot be annulled or added to once the testator dies (vs. 15). In God's "will" or "covenant"

He promised (and then swore to it with a solemn oath) to give Abraham the whole earth "for an everlasting possession" (Genesis 17:8). This had to mean after the resurrection, for he could never inherit it that way unless he also was given everlasting life. But since only "righteousness" can "dwell" in the "new earth" (2 Peter 3:13), the promise had to include making righteous those who believe God's promise. Therefore the new covenant has to be the essence of righteousness by faith.

c. When we make a covenant, it is always a contract. You do so-and-so, and then I will do-so-and-so. But God never makes such bargains with us humans. His new covenant is always an out-and-out promise on His part.

d. God explicitly said that His promise was made to Abraham's descendant (singular, "Seed") "who is Christ." We are not left out, but we come into the picture only as being "in Christ" by adoption through faith (vs. 16).

e. Since God made His solemn promise to Abraham (which He sealed with an oath), nothing under heaven could change an iota so that the giving of the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai 430 years after Abraham's time could not be an extra feature put into the "new covenant." It could not invalidate in the least God's one-sided sworn promise to him (vs. 17).

f. "If the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise" (vs. 18). The new covenant doesn't specialize in telling us what to do, but it tells us what to believe.

g. Then Paul asks the logical question everybody asks: why then did God speak the ten commandments from Mt. Sinai? It was a terror-inducing demonstration with lightning, an earthquake, fire, and a death boundary (vs. 19). God didn't need to frighten Abraham out of his wits like that! All He had to do for Abraham was to write the ten commandments upon his heart as being so much Good News; then Abraham found his greatest joy in obedience. Why not do the same for Israel when they were gathered at Mt. Sinai on their way to the Promised Land? That would have solved all the problems that Israel had to meet ever afterwards.

h. Paul explains the reason why the law had to be written in stone: "the law ... was added because of transgressions, till the Seed [Christ] should come to whom the promise was made" (vs. 19; the word "added" in the original has the meaning of emphasized, underlined, but not the idea of changing God's "will" made out to Abraham). But what were the "transgressions" that made this new "emphasizing" or "underlining" necessary?

The forming of the old covenant is the answer. Before we get to the fire and earthquake of Mt. Sinai and the writing of the law on stone in Exodus 20, we find that Israel had already made the mistake in chapter 19 of forming an "old covenant." They wanted to substitute it for God's new or everlasting covenant. The story is fascinating, for we can see ourselves in it.

When the people gathered at Mt. Sinai, God told Moses to renew to them the same "new covenant"

promises He had made to their father Abraham: "Tell the children of Israel: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people"" (vs. 5).

When He said "My covenant" He was referring to the same covenant He had made with Abraham—His one-sided promise. "Keep My covenant," He said; that is, cherish it. The Hebrew verb *shamar* is the same word used in Genesis 2:15 where we read that God put Adam in the Garden of Eden "to tend and keep it." It couldn't make sense to say that Adam was to "obey" the Garden! There's a play on words in what God said to Israel: If you will "treasure" My promise to Abraham, I will "treasure you above all peoples." For us to believe as did Abraham makes God very happy!

And the Hebrew verb *shamea* translated as "obey My voice" is rendered in the Old Testament as "hear" 760 times, as "hearken" 196 times, but as "obey" only 81 times. The root meaning of "obey" in either Hebrew or Greek is to listen attentively (in Greek it is to bend the ear down low so you catch every syllable). Any parent knows that if you can get your child to listen to you, you've probably gone a long ways toward obedience.

Thus the Lord said to Israel, "If you will listen to My voice and cherish or treasure the promise I made to your father Abraham, you will be 'a special treasure to Me above all people.'" You will be the head and not the tail; there will be no need for great world

empires such as Assyria, Babylon, Grecia, Persia, or Rome, to tread down the earth and oppress you. You will be above all nations. Israel will embody the truths of righteousness by faith. “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (vs. 6). Israel’s temple would outdo and outlast Greece’s Parthenon!

But Israel did not understand. They did not have the faith of Abraham. Mired in legalistic thinking, they made a vain promise, something that God never asked Abraham to do. “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:8). Thus they formed the old covenant.

What could God do? If they will not keep step with Him, He must humble Himself to keep step with them. A long detour now becomes inevitable.

It was Paul finally who saw the deep significance of this old covenant promise of the people: “Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin [as in a prison of our own choosing], that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:21-24).

The word “tutor” is *pedagogue* in the Greek, from *paideuo* which means to exercise stern, harsh discipline. Paul saw the old covenant that the people voluntarily put themselves under as

functioning like a stern disciplinarian, a policeman if you please, keeping the people of Israel under custody until such time as they could find their freedom again in the kind of justification by faith which their father Abraham enjoyed.

Since they brought the old covenant upon themselves, God must let them learn through their own history how vain were their promises to keep His law. The law written in tables of stone imposed upon them a burden of “ought,” a never-ending obligation they could not fulfill, never giving liberty, but always threatening punishment if not kept perfectly. It must serve in this long national detour now as a kind of jailer, driving them “under the law” until at last they come to the experience of their father Abraham to be justified by faith and not by their “works of law.”

Thus the difference between the new covenant and the old covenant is simply “who makes the promise.” In the new covenant, it’s God; in the old covenant, it’s the people. And the keeping of the promise depends entirely on who makes it.

In the new covenant, the foundation is solid Rock; in the old, it’s sand. Our salvation (and Israel’s) does not depend on our making promises to God (or keeping them) but on our believing His promises to us.

Believing God’s new covenant promise delivers us from the “yoke of bondage” Paul speaks of. No longer do we serve Him through fear of punishment, or even from hoping for some great reward. The new covenant delivers from the constant sense of futility, that nagging sense of “ought,” “I-must-be-

more-faithful, I-must-do-better, I-must-be-more-
unselfish, I-must-study-more, I-must-read-my-Bible-
more, I-must-give-more, etc., etc.,” all without end.
All this sense of compulsion is summed up in Paul’s
expression of being “under the elements of the
world,” the health-destroying angst or anxiety that
all humans know by nature (Galatians 4:3).

The “tutor” or “jailer” of the old covenant drove
Israel through the centuries on a relentless history
of ups and downs from Sinai all the way to their
crucifixion of their Messiah. Prophets, judges, and
some kings tried earnestly but in vain to bring in
permanent reformation and revival. Samuel’s
blessed ministry ended in the people’s clamor for a
king like the nations around them; Saul nearly
ruined the nation; David may have believed the new
covenant; kings such as Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah,
and finally Josiah tried their utmost to set the
people on the right course. But their revivals always
were frustrated by the old covenant mentality that
produced backsliding and apostasy.

Finally, Josiah was the last good king of Judah,
determined to do everything exactly right as “the
spirit of prophecy” of his day (the writings of Moses)
enjoined. He would save the nation from ultimate
ruin. But the youthful king in his 30’s failed. His
revival and reformation came to nought, for he
rejected the living demonstration of God’s “spirit of
prophecy” in the message that came to him through
the most unlikely source he could think of—the
mouth of the pagan Pharaoh Necho of Egypt (a
warning to us how easily we can reject divine truth!
see 2 Chronicles 35:20-25).

From Josiah it was old covenant history down-hill
all the way for God’s people until under King
Zedekiah Jerusalem and their beautiful temple had
to be destroyed and the people taken captive to
Babylon. What a vivid demonstration of how the old
covenant “gives birth to bondage”! They never truly
recovered the new covenant until they finally lost
their nationhood through the crucifixion of their
Messiah and the rejection of His apostles. In
Galatians and Romans Paul correctly delineates
their history, “written for our admonition, on whom
the ends of the ages are come” (1 Corinthians
10:11).

What do the two covenants mean to us today?

The two covenants are not hemmed in by matters
of time, as though people living anciently were
automatically under the old and we today are
automatically under the new. There were people in
Old Testament times who lived under the new
covenant (Abraham, for example); and we today
can be living under the old covenant if we don’t
clearly understand and believe the freedom-giving
gospel.

A gourmet chef can prepare a delicious seven-
course dinner with good wholesome food, but if he
puts in even a tiny amount of arsenic, it is spoiled.
Even if it doesn’t kill us, it will cause paralysis. Even
a tiny amount of old covenant ideas mixed in with
otherwise gospel concepts can paralyze a healthy
spiritual experience and produce the lukewarmness
that so characterizes the church in these last days.
Lukewarmness in His people is a mixture of hot and
cold that produces the nausea that Jesus says

makes Him so sick at His stomach that He feels like throwing up (Revelation 3:17, 18). The healing can come only through a full recovery of the new covenant “truth of the gospel.”

It’s astonishing how old covenant ideas can penetrate into our thinking. Even our hymns are sometimes examples, like the beautiful one, “O Jesus, I Have Promised To Serve Thee To the End.” But we can turn it into a new covenant hymn by simply changing one word so it reads, “O Jesus, I Have Chosen.” Well-meaning teachers can fasten innocent children into old covenant spiritual bondage by inducing them to make promises to God, which He has never asked them to do. They promise; and then later perhaps in forgetfulness they break their promise, and then the syndrome of “bondage” develops into spiritual discouragement. Parents sometimes weep their eyes out wondering why we lose so many youth who get discouraged spiritually and leave our churches. All kinds of tragedies can develop in an atmosphere permeated with old covenant “Christian experience.”

But repentance is possible.

Both Abraham and Sarah waded through the discouragement of old covenant thinking. His marriage to Hagar was one such tragic step. Sarah cherished bitterness against God in her heart because she could not get pregnant. “The Lord has restrained me from bearing children,” she complained (Genesis 16:2). Her solution: the old covenant idea of adopting Ishmael as her son, so as to help God fulfill His promise. Finally, we read in Hebrews 11:11 that Sarah had an experience of

new covenant repentance. Her heart was melted somehow, by the grace of God. “By faith Sarah conceived.” And finally, Abraham’s faith triumphed when he offered up Isaac as an object lesson, sensing a little of what it cost the heavenly Father to offer up His only Son (Genesis 22).

Correctly understood, the message of the new covenant is part of the light which is yet to “lighten the earth with glory” in the closing hours of this world’s history (Revelation 18:1-4). The message will be centered in a true understanding of righteousness by faith which alone can prepare God’s people for the final time of trouble (see 19:1-14). Many, when they hear its Good News will awaken as from a dream. All of God’s biddings will become enablings, and the Ten Commandments will become to them ten precious statements of Good News. Nothing will be able to stop them from responding to God’s gracious last call, “Come out of her [Babylon], My people” (Revelation 18:4).

Those under the Old Covenant, no matter what their profession of religion might be, are in “bondage,” says the Book of Galatians. Spiritually speaking, they are slaves (4:21-25). Their spiritual condition is identical to that of ancient Israel after Mount Sinai. They profess to be God’s people, they try to keep His commandments, they think they worship Him, but their “Christian experience” is up and down, often down. Ancient Israel were constantly backsliding, repenting, asking for forgiveness, trying again, enjoying only brief interludes of revival. Jesus describes the Old Covenant experience of His last days’ church as

being “lukewarm.” He says the situation is so acute that it makes Him feel like throwing up (Rev. 3:14-19).

The only possible way that we in these last days can become fully reconciled and “hot” in our devotion to Him, is to trade in our Old Covenant way of thinking for New Covenant truth. It is embarrassing to Jesus to have to confess before the vast unfallen universe that He seems unable to bring His church out of its lukewarm condition. Surely the great sacrifice He made on His cross should elicit from His people on earth a greater devotion! The problem that Jesus has is like that of a bridegroom who loves a bride-to-be but can't motivate her to go to the altar with him and say “I do.”

In fact, the Book of Revelation specifies that to be precisely the logjam that is holding up the finishing of God's great plan of salvation (19:1-8). Only a clear understanding of the glorious New Covenant can set us free from our lukewarm, half-hearted devotion. May the Holy Spirit make the truth clear!