

comprehend. Truly we suffer from an embarrassment of promised riches. Because the blessings are so comprehensive, at the end of the next chapter, after discussing our obligations, you will find a succinct summary of the covenant with both its promised blessings and our promised obligations.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Covenant: Obligations, Consequences, and Opportunities to Be Gathered

AS WE HAVE JUST SEEN, the Abrahamic covenant extends beautiful promises of astonishing blessings. While it is important to focus on and recognize the ample and overwhelming blessings that God wishes to bestow upon us through the covenant, we must not overlook that covenants are two-way promises. The blessings are conditional upon our fulfilling our obligations. The conditional nature of covenantal blessings is something ancient Israel seems to have often overlooked. We would be wise to learn a lesson from our ancestors' mistakes and not overlook those obligations ourselves. Yet as we discuss them, we will see that the list of our obligations is shorter than the list of blessings. This is not surprising. We are entering into an agreement with God, and He has a lot more to offer than we do. In any agreement with God, we will come away with much more than we bring. Still, we must make our best effort to bring what He asks of us.

COVENANTAL OBLIGATIONS

Relationship with God

As was said when we discussed the blessings of the covenant, the most important obligation of covenant keepers has to do with their relationship with God. At the beginning of the great sermon in which he explained what the covenant was, Moses told Israel, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). A few verses later, Moses expanded on this.

And it shall be, when the Lord thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not, and houses full of all good

things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full; Then beware lest thou forget the Lord, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name. (Deuteronomy 6:10–13)

At the end of Moses's instructions about the covenant, he again taught Israel of their primary duty. He told them that "the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live" (Deuteronomy 30:6). Moses further explained that he had taught them these things and called witness to their learning of the covenant "that thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the Lord sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them" (Deuteronomy 30:20). Here Moses certainly spoke of the obligation of obedience, yet the concept of obedience is bracketed by teachings about the relationship between covenant holders and God. Covenant holders are to love God and cleave to Him. It is the connection with God that counts. In other words, the defining duty of covenant holders is to remember what God has done for them, to be grateful for it, and to serve God. But above all, both in terms of duty and how it defines them, covenant holders are to love God. This love is to be the primary feeling of their heart, the central emotion of their consciousness, the consuming core of who they are.

President Nelson described this kind of relationship when he spoke of covenant holders who love God and allow Him to prevail above all other things in their lives, making God the most powerful influence in their lives.⁷⁶ This kind of prevailing happens because we love, adore, and worship God. When this is the case, then God has truly become our God. Ultimately, loving God is the fullest realization of what it means for Abraham, Sarah, and their seed to have God as their God (Genesis 17:7).

Still another important aspect of having God as Abraham's (or Israel's, or our) God is that Abraham would not worship any other gods. In the days of Abraham and ancient Israel, worshipping other gods primarily took the form of worshipping false gods such as Ba'al or Molech. The problem with idolatry

has not gone away in our day. Instead, it has shifted to a form that is less easily recognized, making many of us unknowing idolaters. In our day, worshipping false gods primarily comes from putting the values and ideas of the world in place of or alongside the values and ideas of God. This often takes the form of believing what the world says about the value of money, power, fame, or fun. It also frequently happens as we believe the seemingly sophisticated ideas of the world regarding how we should think, what is important in our lives or in society, or how we should view the world. Social issues and how to think about them can easily become the idols of our era. Undoubtedly, we all struggle with some form of idolatry, and if we desire to keep our covenantal obligations, we must actively work to rid ourselves of it.

Obedience

Christ Himself taught a key aspect of the relationship between loving God and fulfilling the covenantal obligation that is most oft repeated in scriptural teachings about the Abrahamic covenant. He told His disciples, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Moses had also spoken of the connection between these two elements of the covenant when he said, "Thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and . . . turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul" (Deuteronomy 30:10). When our relationship with God is such that our burning, overarching, and overwhelming emotion, the yearning of our soul, is a love for Him, then we naturally seek to do His will. We call this keeping the commandments.

The idea of "keeping" the commandments is notable. The word we translate as "keep" in both Hebrew and Greek has an important range of meaning, all of which seems to be intended when it comes to what we do with the laws and charges God has given us. Keep (*shamar* in Hebrew, *tereo* in Greek) means to guard, or watch over, observe, to execute carefully, to protect, or devote oneself to.⁷⁷ "Keeping" isn't just something we do, it is something we feel; it is part of who we are. It comes not because of a determination to observe a tedious list of dos and don'ts, but because we desire with all our heart to please God and to want the same things He wants. Keeping covenant, or obedience, is a labor of love that happens naturally when our hearts are truly full of love for God, and we fully make Him our God.

⁷⁷ I am grateful to Rebekah Call for reminding me of the applicability of this semantic range of meaning to this discussion.

Obedience, or keeping commandments/covenant, is the obligation that is most often the center of focus in scriptural texts about the covenant. Israel is told that they must keep the commandments (Exodus 19:5; Leviticus 18:5, 24–30; 25:18; 26:3; Deuteronomy 5:1, 33; 6:1–2, 17; 7:11; 28:1, 9, 14–15; 30:8, 10, 16, 20).⁷⁸ This idea is sometimes stated in other ways. Abraham was told, “Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations” (Genesis 17:9). Covenant holders must be willing to seek and follow instructions from God (Abraham 1:2). Abraham was told that covenant promises were only efficacious for him and his descendants “when they hearken to [God’s] voice” (Abraham 2:6). The receiving of instructions and hearkening to God’s voice seems to reach beyond obeying the commandments as they are related in the scriptures, though it certainly includes that. This language seems to also include the need to follow personal revelation, an idea that President Nelson has tied into the covenant and the gathering of Israel.⁷⁹

Covenantal blessings are clearly tied to both commandment keeping and loving God, the interrelationship of which we have just discussed. In a powerful and succinct summary of the covenant, Moses told Israel, “I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it” (Deuteronomy 30:16).

Relationship with Fellow Man

To some degree, the importance of the law, or commandments, is reflected in the various terms by which it is referred. Israel is told that they are to “obey,” “keep,” “hear,” “hearken,” “walk in,” and “do” the law. Further, the commandments which they must obey are referred to not just as the “law,” but also as the “commandments,” the “ordinances,” the “statutes,” and the “judgments” of the law. These various terms serve to emphasize the importance of obeying the commandments and to fill out many nuances of what the law is and how it must be kept. It is likely that different words for the law, such as “statutes” and “commands,” refer to various aspects of the law of Moses, such as the laws regarding sacrifices, a code of social interactions, etc.

78 Frank H. Seilhamer, “The Role of Covenant in the Mission and Message of Amos,” *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers*, H. N. Bream et al., eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974), 437–38. These pages point out that the statutes and commandments are the laws of the covenant or the stipulations of how to act within the covenant.

79 See Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” October 2020 general conference.

One of the terms for the commandments, *judgement*, may help us more fully understand another element of the covenant. In the Old Testament, the word we translate as *judgment* does not mean exactly what we think of when we read that word. For us, *judgement* carries either connotations of a judicial nature or of how we evaluate someone else’s actions or character. The way the word is used in the Old Testament is more closely aligned with the concept of making things right. Bringing about judgment means that things are made the way they are supposed to be. It has connotations of correct leadership, connected with the idea that good leaders take care of their people—especially those who cannot take care of themselves.⁸⁰ Thus when the prophets frequently accuse Israel of not bringing about judgment, it is almost always in connection with the idea that their leaders are not taking care of the poor, orphans, widows, and foreigners.⁸¹ These are all groups who lack the ability to be fully represented in society and the ability to take care of themselves. It was the obligation of Israel’s leaders to bring about judgment on their behalf or, in other words, to take care of them. Therefore, it is likely that the term *judgment*, when it is used in connection with how the Israelites keep the law, is usually associated with the laws that pertain to taking care of those in need.

Biblical scholars often refer to this aspect of the law as “social justice.” I find that term somewhat problematic because in our day it tends to call to mind all sorts of ideas such as that of creating equal social classes, changing social structures, or just creating the kind of social structure a segment of society currently sees as desirable. This is not what was intended by the law as God gave it. Instead it was intended to protect groups of people who were at an inherent disadvantage. It was not designed to change who they were in society, but rather to help them in ways that they could not help themselves. These groups of less-fortunate people had a special claim on supporting help.

80 Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995), 35–36), argues that the term “righteous judgment” in the prophets and Psalms is primarily about taking care of the poor and needy and is connected with kindness and mercy.

81 As I have looked at the use of the Hebrew word we translate as judgment, *mishpat*, I examined the times when prophets spoke of Israel either not bringing about judgment, or when they told Israel what kind of judgment they should bring about. I count 40 such times. Of those, 13 were specifically about how they cared for their fellow man, especially those in some kind of special need. Eight more were not as specific, but the context strongly suggested that this was the issue. The other 19 had no context at all in which we could determine what was being spoken of. In no instances was it clear that this was not what was being spoken of.

It was the duty of the nation in general, and its leaders in particular, to make things right for these people—or to perform *judgment* for them.

All people were to fulfill their obligations to help the poor in specific ways. Israel's leaders were tasked with doing for each and all in Israel what the people could not do for themselves, whether that be providing the opportunity for food or supplying an army and fighting for them. The principles behind being a judge or bringing about judgment include the idea that those who were able had an obligation to try to make life as close to the ideal as possible for others, meaning that they provided for others what those people could not reasonably provide for themselves. This care for the welfare of others applied most especially to the protected categories spoken of earlier: the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. This was an important part of the covenant, as expressed in Deuteronomy's covenant summation chapters: "Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land" (Deuteronomy 15:11).

The law of Moses had a great many laws that were specifically about taking care of the poor and the struggling. The law of the jubilee and the law of the redeemer (Leviticus 25) dealt with this. So did the laws associated with gleaning (Leviticus 19, 23; Deuteronomy 24), providing tithes (Deuteronomy 14:28–29), and providing food for the poor at festivals (Deuteronomy 16:1–14). Providing a tithe to care for the needy was so important that Israelites had to swear that they had fulfilled it, almost in a temple-recommend style affirmation (Deuteronomy 26:12–13).

When Israelite prophets accused Israel of breaking the covenant, their most common complaints were of idolatry (not having God as their God) and of not bringing about judgment for the widow, the stranger, and the fatherless. This makes it clear that performing judgment, or taking care of the poor, was an important part of the covenant.

In fact, there is evidence in the Bible that after receiving *hesed* from God, mankind was supposed to extend *hesed* to each other, which was both necessary and only possible when in a covenant relationship with God and each other. The idea seems to be that when men are in a covenant relationship with God, they receive various forms of prosperity and they experience His *hesed* toward them. This enables them to share their prosperity and to understand *hesed* and in turn extend it to others within their covenant community.⁸² Our covenant bond with God creates within us the ability to honor our covenant

⁸² Lockhart, "Toward a Unitive Understanding of *Hesed*," 9–10.

bond with each other. In this way the connections forged by a covenant bond extend both upwards and outwards. We must not forget that our relationship with others is a key element of the covenant. One reason the path God has chosen for us is the covenant path is that it cyclically binds us ever closer with Him and with each other. Increasing either bond increases the other.

We see this idea expressed elsewhere. When Christ was asked about the greatest commandment in the law (which his audience would have understood to mean the most important element of keeping the covenant), the replies were that loving God was the most important aspect, and loving others was second (Matthew 22:36–40). This is, in fact, the commandment that is presented in the law as the concluding part of the laws regarding gleaning: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18). In the Book of Mormon, it is presented in phrases such as "bear one another's burdens," "mourn with those that mourn," and "comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:8–9).

Loving our fellow man and caring for them is central to the covenant, and this centrality is expressed in Moses's summary of the covenant as found in Deuteronomy. There, Moses tells Israel that by paying their tithes (and presumably also after providing opportunities for gleaning, etc.), they had "given it unto the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within thy gates, and be filled: Then thou shalt say before the Lord thy God, I have brought away the hallowed things out of mine house, and also have given them unto the Levite, and unto the stranger, to the fatherless, and to the widow, according to all thy commandments which thou hast commanded me: I have not transgressed thy commandments, neither have I forgotten them" (Deuteronomy 26:12–13). After this, Israel was to include a list of things they had not done, such as not using for unclean purposes these things they were to dedicate to God and His people. When they could say all of this was the case, they could ask God, saying, "Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Israel, and the land which thou hast given us, as thou swarest unto our fathers, a land that floweth with milk and honey" (Deuteronomy 26:15). The reference to God swearing to give the patriarchs a land is a clear reference to the covenant. Moses was teaching Israel that when they had cared for the needy as they were obligated to, they could then claim their covenant promises from God.

As a result, Moses went on to instruct Israel that when they could thus "avouch" to the Lord that they were walking in His commandments and judgments, then God would honor His part of the covenant and transform

them. Moses said that God “hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee . . . to make thee high above all nations . . . that thou mayest be an holy people unto the Lord thy God, as he hath spoken” (Deuteronomy 26:17–19). Clearly keeping the covenantal obligation to care for others was a central component to being a covenant people and receiving covenant blessings.

Sharing the Covenant

When we have truly developed a love for our neighbors, we will naturally want to share the great blessings of the covenant with them. Therefore, it is not surprising that this was an important part of the covenant, though it seems to have been forgotten at times. If it were not for Restoration scripture, we would not fully understand this part of the covenant obligation. Due to the Book of Abraham, we understand it very well.

When the obligation to share the great blessings of the covenant with neighbors was first outlined to Abraham, God tied it into the idea of God being Abraham’s God. God told Abraham that He would lead him by the hand, put His name upon Abraham through the priesthood and its ordinances, and through these things place God’s power upon Abraham (Abraham 1:18). God further instructed Abraham that “through thy ministry my name shall be known in the earth forever, for I am thy God” (Abraham 1:19). Our relationship with God dictates that we share that relationship with others; our love of others dictates the same thing. Each element of the covenant is intertwined.

In fact, the idea of receiving a promised land was interwoven with the idea of spreading the gospel. God told Abraham, “I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make of thee a minister to bear my name in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice” (Abraham 2:6). Note that we have just spoken of several overlapping principles. Abraham’s relationship with God was entwined with obedience. Both of these principles were connected with caring for others. Caring for others and our bond with God are tied to sharing the covenant with others. That, in turn, is meshed with inheriting the promised land. The covenant truly is a beautiful set of interlocking and interwoven principles, all naturally connected to each other and all leading from one aspect to another cyclically so that they all help bind us to God.

Much of how Abraham would make God’s name known throughout the earth forever was through the ministry of his seed. God made the obligations

of Abraham’s seed (us) known to Abraham in this regard: “In their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood [ordinances] unto all nations” (Abraham 2:9). Further, Abraham was told that all the inhabitants of the earth would be blessed by the priesthood ordinances that Abraham and his seed would carry to them (Abraham 2:11). God then specified how this would happen by telling Abraham that “in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal” (Abraham 2:11). Hence, one of our clear obligations is to bring the gospel and its saving ordinances, which administer covenants, to all the world. This is known as gathering Israel and gathering everyone to Israel. As President Nelson has taught, any time we do anything to help anyone on either side of the veil to make and keep covenants, we are gathering Israel.⁸³ As we will see, this means bringing the covenant to all the world on both sides of the veil. This is a solemn obligation under the covenant.

Covenant Loss and the Opportunity to Return, or the Gathering of Israel
 In the scriptural passages that speak of God establishing the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, God only speaks of the blessings, or covenantal benedictions, that were to be theirs. While we have a large amount of detail regarding establishing this covenant with Abraham and Sarah, nowhere do we find record of God telling them of the recission of blessings (sometimes called penalties or covenant maledictions) that follow breaking the covenant. Perhaps this was because on that occasion He was dealing with only two people, and they were two people who He knew *would* keep the covenant. Perhaps the lack of covenant maledictions was because God was setting forth the covenant in a manner that was familiar to Abraham and Sarah, and in their day treaties and mortal covenants were not frequently accompanied by a list of the penalties that would be applied when the treaty was broken.⁸⁴ Perhaps the maledictions symbolically implied in cutting the animals in two were enough warning for these two. Whatever the reason, the covenant as outlined to Abraham did not contain a long list of consequences for breaking the covenant.⁸⁵

⁸³ See Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” October 2020 general conference.

⁸⁴ John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2017), 107–112.

⁸⁵ See also William D. Barrick, “Inter-covenantal Truth and Relevance: Leviticus 26 and the Biblical Covenants,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 21/1 (Spring 2010): 81–102.

The covenant as outlined at Sinai was very different in that regard. It contained a long list of penalties for those who broke the covenant. Perhaps this was because the covenant was being administered to a large group of people, many of whom would surely break the covenant, as would their descendants. Perhaps it was because in Moses's day, treaties often had such consequences carefully delineated. It is probably a combination of both.

Whatever the reason, when God made the covenant with all Israel at Sinai, He included with it a description of covenant reversals.⁸⁶ When Israel kept the covenant, the blessings outlined previously would be received. When they did not, the exact opposite of those blessings would come about. Instead of having a land, they would be forced away into bondage; instead of yielding abundantly, the earth would barely produce; instead of protection, Israel would experience destruction; instead of numerous posterity, they would shrink as a nation, and so on. These opposing pairs of consequences are often referred to scripturally as covenantal blessings and cursings. The cursings, or reversals, are more the natural consequences that follow losing God's protection. It is not so much that God had to punish Israel; it is more that when God's blessings or protection were withdrawn because Israel had not kept their end of the bargain, the conditions of a Fallen world would naturally overcome them.

Part of what is at issue here is God's hesed. Once Israel made a covenant with God, they left neutral ground forever. Because He is willing to continue to extend mercy to Israel, and to unceasingly give Israel further opportunity, God will never quit working with them. This means that when we break a covenant, He will do what is necessary to bring us back. This often means that we, as Israel, need to be humbled. The covenantal maledictions bring us to the point where we cease to rely on ourselves and come to realize that we need to rely on God.⁸⁷ None but He stands as the judge to determine whether we have broken the covenant in such a way that only His efforts to humble us will work. This is important, for none but God, with His all-knowing and all-loving nature, knows when we are in need of humbling; and only He knows the manner and timing of humbling that will best reach into our hearts and change us. What is clear is that when we lose sight of our need for Him and His covenant, He will remind us of it because He wants us to return to Him. This reversal of blessings, or humbling, works for Israel as a whole and for each

Israelite individual. God is determined to extend merciful chances to us but knows that we only take that opportunity when we realize how much we need it. The terms of the covenant have built within them a mechanism to help covenant breakers return to being covenant keepers. That mechanism is the covenantal penalties. This is one of the reasons the path God has chosen for us is the covenant path, because it inherently helps correct us when we wander from it.

The Lord was serious about these covenantal maledictions. Moses instructed Israel to dramatically teach the two-edged nature of the covenant memorably and powerfully. When Israel came into the promised land, they were to build an altar on Mount Ebal. They were to write the law of the covenant on the stones of an altar on which they would offer sacrifice. Half the tribes would stand on Mount Gerzim, across the valley, and shout aloud the blessings that came from keeping the covenant. Then the six other tribes, on Mount Ebal, led by the Levites, were to answer by shouting aloud the cursings that came from breaking the covenant (Deuteronomy 27:4–13).

The benedictions and maledictions they were to shout were made plain in two powerful passages. The covenant, with both its blessings and cursings, is most clearly, powerfully, and beautifully laid out in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. These passages are too long to quote here, but it is worth the reader's time to pause, open the scriptures, and read these chapters in full.

In both chapters there is a long list of penalties. In both chapters the curses represent a comprehensive and repeated reversal of the blessings. Strikingly and importantly, both chapters end not with the curses but with the promise that after Israel experienced the maledictions that came from breaking covenant, God was always willing to accept Israel back and restore their covenantal benedictions when they returned to Him. To be sure, there are consequences for breaking the covenant, but the love and mercy of God are always waiting on the other side. Accordingly, these chapters end with a remarkable demonstration of God's hesed. He is never unwilling to work with the penitent. His patience and willingness to forgive are unending. As a result, He will gather Israel to Himself.

In Leviticus 26, God states that when Israel had experienced all the terrible maledictions that were the result of breaking the covenant, and as they wasted and pined away in the land of their enemies, He would give them another chance: "If they shall [then] confess their iniquity . . . and that also they have walked contrary unto me," and if they acknowledge that their woeful state is the result of having been punished by God, and "if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity:

⁸⁶ My gratitude to Rebekah Call and Camille Fronk Olson for their help with this section.

⁸⁷ See Muhlestein, *Return Unto Me*.

Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land" (Leviticus 26:39–42). "I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God" (Leviticus 26:44–45). In other words, God will keep His covenant, and He will gather Israel, no matter how often or how far they stray.

In the Deuteronomy account, after the chapter that outlines the obligations and promises of the covenant, Moses spends an entire chapter speaking to the people about how they can return when they have strayed. He tells them that such straying will lead to captivity, but that after they have fully experienced the covenantal cursings, if "[thou] shalt return unto the Lord thy God . . . thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul," God will "turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee" (Deuteronomy 30:2–3). Moses tells the children of Israel that all of this is to happen so that "thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the Lord sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them" (Deuteronomy 30:20). In other words, whenever Israel does not keep the covenant, they will naturally be humbled. And once they are humbled, hopefully they will be ready to return to God with all their hearts, at which point God is willing to fully honor His covenant with them. It is never too late for Israel. As God told the prophet Samuel when it seemed that Israel was rejecting both Samuel and God, "For the Lord will not forsake his people for his great name's sake: because it hath pleased the Lord to make you *his people*" (1 Samuel 12:22, emphasis added). This concept is integrally interlocked with the idea of gathering Israel when they have strayed and been scattered as a result.

Ultimately, the real way to return to God is to repent. Daily and consistent repentance is the key for Israelite individuals and Israel as a whole to return to God; then He will gather Israel, modern and ancient, to Him. Remember, what God asks of Israel in order for them to return to Him—in all the ways He wants us to return to Him—is that they "confess their iniquity" (Leviticus 26:40). When we do that, He will, in His own good time, remove the covenantal cursings and bestow upon us all the grand blessings of the covenant. It is never

too late. All Israel as a whole and Israelite individuals have to do is let God prevail in their lives. As Elder Gong said, "With infinite love, He beckons us to come believe and belong by covenant."⁸⁸

Covenant benedictions and maledictions can create an interesting pattern we often see in the scriptures. As we experience the great blessings of the covenant, we often easily forget that those blessings are the result of keeping the covenant. Thus, we have a tendency to start to take credit for those blessings ourselves, and we start to rely on ourselves or the ways of the world rather than on God. That usually creates a situation where we stop keeping the covenant. As a result, covenantal reversals follow. Because those reversals happen within a covenant context, they are designed to help us realize that our loss of blessings is a result of not keeping the covenant. Hopefully, then we return to God, who is willing to receive us back and gather us to Himself through covenant.

We see this pattern throughout every book of scripture. We often refer to this pattern as the pride cycle, but it could be just as accurate, or perhaps more accurate, to refer to it as the covenant cycle; perhaps more precisely it could be called the covenant corruption cycle. Recognizing the covenant aspects of the pride cycle helps us understand it even more. This recognition should also help us be even better at breaking that cycle, because it reveals that one of the keys to breaking the cycle is to consciously keep the covenant, no matter what. The elements of avoiding pride—or covenant-breaking—lie in focusing wholeheartedly on keeping the covenant. We do not forget God if we love Him with all our hearts and focus on keeping that love and our relationship with God as our highest priority. We do not persecute others in a prideful way if we love them as we are commanded to within the covenant and care for them as the covenant says we should. We do not focus on ourselves if we keep in mind the communal aspect of the covenant, and so on, and so on. A zealous keeping of covenant allows us to avoid swinging to the bottom of the covenant corruption/pride cycle.

Because of our fallen natures, it is inevitable that from time to time Israel will stray from God. Because of Israel's covenant relationship with God, it is equally inevitable that they will just as often be humbled and scattered. Because of God's hesed, it is covenantally certain that God will gather Israel back to Him. There is no doubt that at some point God will help Israel to allow Him to prevail in their lives, and in this way He will prevail in fulfilling all His covenant promises.

⁸⁸ Gong, "Covenant Belonging," 80.

Covenant Summary

As we have explored the covenant together, hopefully some of its logic and interconnectedness has become apparent. Blessings, obligations, and the reversal of blessings (cursings) all stem from God's love for us and His desire to reforge a close, personal, and intimate relationship with us. All that He is willing to give us, and all that He asks us to do, comes from His love and this longing desire. An extensive list of blessings interlaces and grows from His love and this desire, as does a shorter but still substantive interwoven group of obligations. After having elaborated on all of this, perhaps a succinct summary of those blessings and obligations would be helpful.

Covenantal Blessings	Covenantal Obligations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special relationship with God • Access to special mercy and love • Prosperity • Promised land • Protection • Rulership • Posterity • We will be a blessing to posterity • Access to the gospel and its ordinances for us and our posterity • We will be gathered • Exaltation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love God • Worship no other Gods • Let God prevail in our lives • Obedience • Love and care for others • Enter into covenant ordinances • Share the covenant, its ordinances, and the gospel (gather Israel) • Return (repent) when we stray

CHAPTER SIX

How to Be a Covenant People

KEY COVENANTAL CONCEPTS AND PHRASES

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOD AND HIS people is emphasized in the story of the exodus and the establishment of the covenant at Sinai. The primary way God did so was in letting Israel know that they had a different connection with Him than others did. God called Israel His people eighteen times in the Exodus narrative (between Exodus 1 and Exodus 15). In the midst of that narrative, God told Israel that He had remembered the covenant He made with their fathers and that in order for them to inherit the land He had promised them, He would bring them from Egypt. As part of this, God said to Israel, "I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God" (Exodus 6:7; emphasis added). This is a promise to establish the covenant at Sinai and a succinct summary of it. It also highlights that Israel needs to be somehow different from everyone else.

When God established that covenant at Sinai, He told Israel that if they kept their part of the covenant, "I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people" (Leviticus 26:12; emphasis added). This phrase, my people, became one of the most beloved and intimate names for the house of Israel.⁸⁹ Many regard this as the climax of the covenant-making process with Israel at Sinai.⁹⁰ The expression captures the special relationship between God and those who enter into a covenant with Him. The phrase my people helps us understand better what that special relationship is. When we enter into and keep a covenant with God, we each become His in a very personal way and experience a deep

⁸⁹ Francis I. Anderson and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible Series, Vol. 24*, William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, eds. (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1980), 197.

⁹⁰ Anderson and Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation*, 197–198.

GOD WILL PREVAIL

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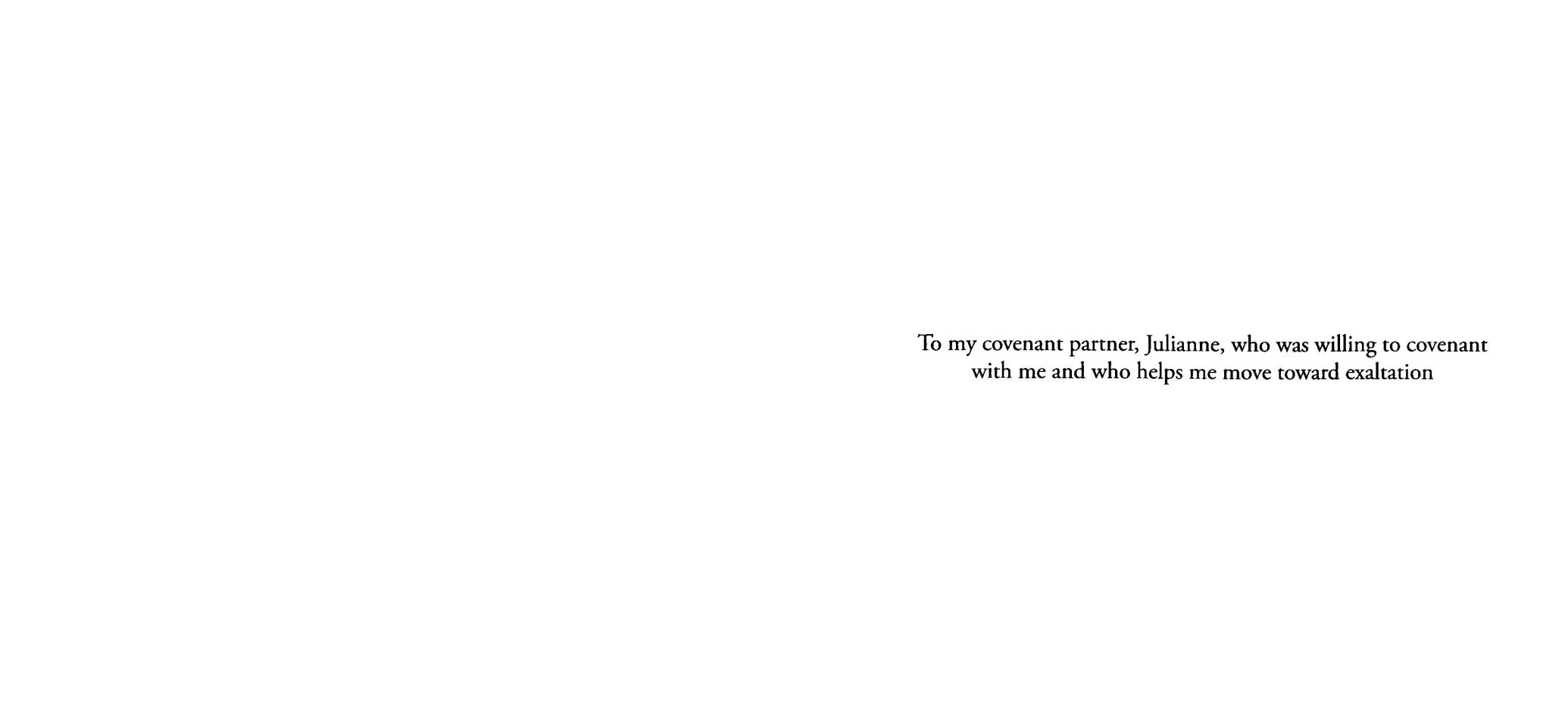
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To my covenant partner, Julianne, who was willing to covenant
with me and who helps me move toward exaltation

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