

Jesus Christ and His New Covenant

History is marked by crucial moments of the Lord God entering into covenantal relationship with man. That is, He enters into a relationship which consists of the establishment of privileges and obligations. Adam and Eve had the wonderful privilege of life with the Lord's unmitigated presence and the happiness of a creation fashioned just for them. They also had responsibilities, or obligations, to the Giver of life; they were responsible to watch over and care for God's creation and not to eat from a particular tree. The continued enjoyment of these privileges was conditional upon their continued keeping of their responsibilities or, obligations. *If* they remained faithful to the Lord, *then* they would remain in God's abundant blessing.

We saw the same conditional relationship with Abraham. He had the wonderful privilege of a great future of blessing. A great nation would come from his descendants and they had the promise of a vast and fruitful land to enjoy. As with Adam, these privileges were conditioned upon keeping obligations. Abraham had to obey the Lord God when He spoke. The promises would be his *if* he obeyed God and left his home, *if* he obeyed the Lord in circumcising his descendants, and last but not least, *if* he would be willing to sacrifice his one and only son. *If* Abraham was willing to trust the Lord and walk in faithfulness, *then* the promises would be his.

This was the same covenantal arrangement that the Lord made with Abraham's descendants at Sinai. Through Moses, the Lord promised to remain as their Lord; the Lord who would carry Israel as on eagle's wings. He would be their very own shield and their very great reward. The people of Israel would likewise continue to be the Lord's "treasured possession." This was the covenantal privilege. They would remain a blessed people *if* they would in turn be faithful to the Lord and keep His commands and His ways.

These were the covenantal obligations. This is how a

relationship with the Lord functioned under the Old Covenant. Does the New Covenant function in the same way? Do we continue to understand our relationship to the Lord to be a conditional one in which the enjoyment of the privileges are dependent upon the keeping of obligations? To answer this crucial question we must join Jesus with His disciples in the upper room only a few hours before He would be sacrificed by Roman crucifixion.

The final hours before Jesus' death were thick with the intensity of His final preparations for His departure. First, Jesus taught self-surrendering love as His will for the disciples in the shocking demonstration of the washing of their feet before the Passover meal, when Jesus took on the role of a slave (Jn. 13:1-17). Second, He celebrated the Passover, but now investing the Passover feast with new meaning, which was something no mere man could conceivably do. Two of the elements used in the Jewish Passover celebration, unleavened bread and wine, were employed by Jesus to remind the disciples of His broken body rather than the exodus events of the Old Covenant. Third, Jesus engaged them with teaching, consisting of commands and promises.

Nowhere, except in the Sermon on the Mount, is there recorded in the Gospels such a sustained discourse from Jesus as there is from John 14 through John 16. This is most appropriate, because Jesus had just done something that would have caught the ear of any first century Jew and have them sitting up straight. He had just ratified a New Covenant during the eating of the Passover meal. As we have seen, with covenant making comes the issuing of covenant privileges and obligations. If Jesus had just announced a New Covenant without the announcement of privileges and obligations, then the disciples would have been left in a fog. So just as the Lord had set promises and commandments, privileges and obligations before Adam, Abraham and Moses, so now Jesus, the Lord in human flesh, does the same.

Just as Moses reminded the Israelites of God's unfailing love generations earlier, in the few hours before his death, the Lord Jesus reminded His disciples of His constant love shown to them over the past three years. They have had the tremendous privilege of being called to Him, and to share in His power, protection and provision. The Lord did this for the twelve tribes of Israel in summary fashion at Sinai when He said, "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Ex. 19:4). This statement summarizes all that the Lord had done to protect and provide for Israel.

In the upper room, Jesus reminded the twelve disciples, in the same way, when He said, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (Jn. 15:9). Jesus’ love for them had been experienced in tangible acts of calling, protection, provision and the revelation of God’s will. “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world... For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them” (Jn. 17:6,8). Also, Jesus prayed to the Father, “While I was with them I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me” (Jn. 17:12). So just as in the Old Covenant, the New Covenant begins by recalling the Lord’s history of faithfulness and love. Jesus had demonstrated His love for His people and they were now His “treasured possession.”

Next, Jesus instructs them on how they are to remain His treasured possession, or as He put it, how they are to remain in His love. “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in His love” (Jn. 15:10). Here we find the covenantal obligations. Jesus’ words to His disciples are His commands to them, that are to be kept and by which they are to remain in the privilege of His love. We must note that *remaining* by virtue of their call to follow is not what is taught by Jesus. Jesus presents the need to remain as a *command*, which is something they are to do *subsequent to their call to follow Him*. Jesus said, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you” (Jn. 15:4). They were to remain in Jesus by obeying His commands. As they obey Jesus, His love will continue to be theirs. The logic of Jesus’ reasoning is covenantal in nature, and is exactly the same as what we have seen before in the Lord’s covenant with Adam, Abraham and Moses. Note the obvious parallels in the following passages:

I will make you descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, *because* Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws (Gen. 26:4).

I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments (Ex 20:5).

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain

in my love. If you obey my commands you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you (Jn 15:9-14).

In all three passages we are able to clearly discern that the privilege of being loved and blessed by the Lord is dependent upon meeting the obligations of the covenant. It was *because* Abraham obeyed the Lord that he was able to receive the promise (Gen. 26:4). It was *by* loving God and keeping His commandments that Israel would experience God's love and not His hatred (Ex. 20:5). Jesus taught His disciples in the same way.

It was *by* obeying Jesus that the disciples would not experience His hatred, or as He graphically put it, be "cut off" and "thrown into the fire and burned," but rather, they would "experience His love, and be filled with joy" forever (Jn. 15:2, 6, 11). As the writer of Hebrews proclaims, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). The covenant Lord does not change like shifting shadows. God relates the same way with His people in every age. He demonstrates Himself as an infinitely faithful Lord, committing Himself in total to His people, even dying for them as necessity dictates. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down His life for His friends" (Jn. 15:13).

However, the covenant *requires* faithfulness in return. This was true of the Old Covenant and is equally true of the New Covenant. On this Jesus is abundantly clear. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Mt. 16:24, 25). The writer of Hebrews states, "You *need to persevere* so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (Heb. 10:36). In these passages we hear very clear echoes of the total allegiance required in the Old Covenant. The reason is equally clear; God's covenantal requirements are the same—total allegiance from both parties is required. He guarantees faithfulness to us, even to the point of His own death. We must be faithful in return, even to the point of experiencing our own death, if required, in allegiance to Him.

Once again, total allegiance does not imply sinless perfection. The Lord covenants with His people knowing that we are sinful by nature. Both the Old and New Covenants take our sinful condition into

account. God's covenant is fundamentally a gracious one and based on mercy. God was merciful in calling Abram, Israel and His disciples to be His people. Under the Old Covenant, as we have seen, sin offerings were made, along with confession of sins committed, and the people would then receive God's gracious pardon. This was part and parcel of what it meant to have total allegiance to the Lord, by confessing sin and subsequently turning away from that sin to the ways of the Lord. This expression of total allegiance was to be repeated according to the dictates of the covenant and according to individual necessity.

According to Hebrews 7:26-28, the New Covenant requires the same pattern of confession, except there is now no longer any need to present a sin offering. Jesus, as the New Covenant Passover makes clear, is the once-for-all spotless lamb, the final and all-sufficient sin offering. Heb. 6:13-20 explains how the Lord Himself would take on the guilt and punishment for our sins as the fulfillment of His covenantal vow to Abraham described in Genesis 15; the Lord Jesus Christ would bear the penalty of our unfaithfulness. From Heb. 9:13, 14, we now know *how* the Lord is able to forgive sins, and our consciences can be cleansed and set at rest, as they could not be under the Old Covenant.

It is wonderfully true that since Jesus presented Himself as the final all-sufficient sacrifice we no longer have need to present offerings. Nevertheless, it remains a covenantal mandate to confess and turn from sin as an expression of our total allegiance to the Lord within the covenant. That aspect has not changed. This is why Jesus instructs his disciples to pray asking for their sins to be forgiven as part of a covenantal prayer. "Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors" (Mt. 6:12). This is why John instructs the church, God's New Covenant people, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9). That is why the writer of Hebrews exhorts the church to "draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodied washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:22).

It is a mistake to think that we don't need a sacrifice or a High Priest anymore; we still need both. In the New Covenant, this means we need Jesus, who now functions as both the High Priest and as a cleansing sacrifice for His people. And it is not to say that we don't *need* on-going confession of sin in order to remain in Christ's love. That aspect of the covenant remains a fundamental expression of covenant loyalty to our Lord as Jesus, as John and the writer of

Hebrews makes abundantly clear.

The conditional nature of the New Covenant is explicit, “*If* we confess our sins, [*then*] He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins...” (1 Jn. 1:9). *If* we are faithful to confess, to be honest and not deceitful toward the Lord, *then* He in turn will be faithful to do what He has promised, He will forgive us. We will keep the commands of Jesus in the same way that Abraham kept the commands of the Lord, by faith in all that the Lord has promised. Abraham obeyed by faith in the promises of the Lord and we are to do the same. Abraham had to obey in order to receive the promise, and so must we.

The only way we will obey Jesus even to the point of dying, if necessary, is by having confidence in the truthfulness of Jesus when He promises us,

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house there are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going there now to prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am (Jn. 14:1-3).

Jesus intends us to rest by faith in those words, so that we would obey all Jesus said, no matter what opposition comes our way. The worst thing anyone can do to someone who is faithful to Jesus is to send them to the very place they most want to be - with Jesus in His kingdom, as the writer of Psalm 27 proclaims, “One thing I ask of the Lord, that is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, and gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his holy temple” (Ps. 27:4). Since this is true, then the Psalmist can also speak with confidence, “The Lord is the stronghold of my life - of whom shall I be afraid” (Ps. 27:1)? These are covenantal words of faith in the Lord’s perfect faithfulness. These expressions of faith are able to be expressions that are reflective of both Old and New Covenant loyalty and desire, because both covenants require loyalty to the Lord, and uphold God Himself as the chief object of our desire.