

10.

Paul, the Apostle of the New Covenant

The Apostle Paul considered himself to be a “minister of a New Covenant” (2 Co. 3:6), the same covenant that Jesus instituted through the Passover meal with his disciples in the upper room. Even though Paul had not been present at that meal, he was personally taught by Jesus, the Resurrected Lord, about the meal and its significance for God’s people. Paul wrote, “For what I received from the Lord I passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he has given thanks, he broke it and said...” (1 Co. 11:23, 24). In Acts 9, we learn that Paul, who was named Saul at the time, experienced the Lord, when on the road to Damascus to persecute those who belonged to the Way. Jesus knocked him off his horse and blinded him, after which Saul spent considerable time being taught, not by men, but by the post resurrection Lord (Gal. 1:17,18). This first-hand experience with Jesus qualified him to be an apostle of the New Covenant, along with the original eleven apostles and Matthias.

We have seen how the Lord has related to His people covenantally from the very beginning. We have also seen that the Lord communicates with His people in covenantal ways as an expression of that relationship. This covenantal relationship is reflected at Mount Sinai, in the Old Testament, where the Lord calls the people to remember His power and provision as tangible expressions of His faithfulness in the past. He did this in order that they trust in the Lord for their future, and by trusting Him, keep His commands and requirements during the present time.

We saw how Jesus, in the upper room, did the same thing. The previous three years of His ministry served as a reference point of Jesus’ faithful ability to keep His promises for the future. In view of His mercies in the past, He commands His followers to obey Him, in the present, as they trust Him for the future. So what we see taking shape is a three-fold communication that captures the *past*, *present*, and

the future.⁷

Looking back at God's past actions, enables us to have faith in God's word for the future, so that we are free to obey in the present. "I run in the paths of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (Ps. 119:32). The focus of the covenant is on the day to day faithfulness, which is crucial in order to remain in God's love. To put it another way, looking back, to see God's faithfulness in the past, serves to uphold and enable faith in God's word of promise for the future. Faith in God's word of promise for the future serves to uphold today's obedience. Or, to put it more succinctly, faith serves to establish obedience.

Let me illustrate this covenant dynamic. When my daughter was little she would stand on the stairs and jump into my arms. After jumping into my arms, she would climb up a little higher and jump again. Finally, she would reach a point where she was very nervous about jumping. She would hold her arms out, but she wouldn't quite dare to take that leap. In order to encourage her to jump, I would remind her that in the past I caught her every time that she had jumped. Then I would promise her, that if she jumped from this height that I would catch her this time as well. I was motivating her to jump by having her recall the past, and on the basis of the past, I was encouraging her to trust me for her future safety. The point was to produce the action of jumping in the present.

Likewise, the covenantal structure serves the purpose of establishing the daily walk of faithfulness. This daily walk is all-important in our relationship with God. Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me" (Lk. 9:23). The writer of Hebrews, in quoting the Psalms, teaches this day to day covenantal focus of both covenants, "*Today*, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 4:7b; Ps. 95:7,8).

The apostle Paul understood his ministry to be one which establishes people in this daily faithfulness to Jesus. He understood faith to be crucial for enabling obedience to the commands of Jesus. This perspective is revealed in a succinct phrase used by Paul to open and close his letter to the church in Rome. Paul understood his mission from Christ to call the Gentiles to, as he puts it, an "obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5; 16:26; 1 Th. 1:3). He saw it as his task to call the Gentiles into a covenant with the living God. "Through him and for his name sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all

⁷ I am particularly indebted to Scott Hafemann for this observation, which can be found in *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith*. Crossway, 2001, 56-59.

the Gentiles to the *obedience of faith*” (Rom. 1:5). The fact that Paul uses this phrase in the opening paragraph of his letter and again in the final paragraph indicates the importance of this concept for Paul, and points to the main theme of his letter to the church.

When Paul wrote his letters to the churches, he was either addressing a particular problem in a church, or he was writing a more general teaching that was to be circulated to all the other churches. In these more general letters we see an implicit covenantal structure emerge. We see this structure in Paul’s letters to Rome, Ephesus, Colosse, Philippi, and Thessalonica in particular.⁸ There is a pattern to his writings that reflects our covenantal relationship with the Lord, just as the Old Covenant writings reflected this relationship.

In Paul’s letters, the first portion describes God’s past acts of faithfulness on behalf of the world and His people. A cursory reading of Ephesians 1-3 reveals this emphasis. In the first portion of his letter, Paul spends most of his energy describing what spiritual condition the people were in before Christ, and all that Christ has done for them. “As for you, *you were dead* in your transgressions and sins, in which *you used to live*... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, *made us alive with Christ*...” (Eph. 2:1, 4). The past is the focus. In fact, in Ephesians, Paul reaches back to the pre-creation past in describing the Lord’s great love. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, *who has blessed us* in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For *he chose us in him* before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Eph. 1:3, 4).

However, in chapter 4 we can discern a pronounced shift in focus. The focus now shifts to commanding the Ephesians’ present obedience and faithfulness to the Lord.

As a prisoner of the Lord, therefore, I urge you *to live a life*

8 It is interesting to note that Paul was generally pleased with these churches, and he was not caught up in the pointed and polemic demands of churches in danger of going astray, as in Corinth and Galatia. James Dunn notes this in reference to Paul’s letter to Rome, “...there is one letter of Paul’s which is less caught in the flux and developing discourse of Paul with his churches than the others... in short, Romans is still far removed from a dogmatic or systematic treatise on theology, but it nevertheless is the most sustained and reflective statement of Paul’s own theology by Paul himself” (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Eerdmans, 2006, 25). This, I believe, can be said of other letters as well. It is with these “sustained and reflective statements of Paul’s own theology” where the covenantal structure is most clearly visible.

worthy of the calling you have received.... So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that *you must no longer live as the Gentiles do*, in the futility of their thinking....*Be imitators of God* therefore, as dearly loved children and *live a life of love*, just as Christ loved us... Be very careful *how you live*... Finally, *be strong in the Lord* and in his mighty power (Eph. 4:1, 17; 5:1, 15; 6:10).

From chapter 4 onward, the behavior of God's people in the present is front and center. The emphasis becomes what the Ephesians must do *now* in light of God's past mercies.⁹

Paul closes his letter with a patently covenantal statement, "Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love" (Eph. 6:24). Who is to receive the grace of Christ's love? Those who love Christ! What emerges is Paul thinking and writing covenantally. He celebrates God's past faithfulness in the first portion of his letter, then he exhorts the people of God to be faithful to their Lord with such words as "be worthy of the calling." How are we to be "worthy" of God's faithfulness? The same way the Israelites were to be deemed worthy under the Old Covenant, by being faithful to our Lord in loving God and neighbor. Then Paul closes the letter with a promise of grace for those who love Jesus in this way. This is identical to what was written in the Ten Commandments, "but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me" (Ex. 20:6).

This very same pattern is seen in Paul's letter to the church in Rome. The first eleven chapters of Romans review the world's fall into sin, and the Lord's faithfulness in acting powerfully through Christ to save and redeem the resulting rebellious world. Paul highlights those men of the past, Abraham and David, who lived lives of faith, rejoicing in God's righteousness. "Against all hope, *Abraham in hope believed* and so *became the father of many nations*" (Rom. 4:18). Paul highlights Adam as a man of unfaithfulness, and describes how sin entered the world through him. "Therefore, just as *sin entered the world* through

⁹ Typically, this shift in Paul's focus has been called a shift from theological or theoretical material in the first section of Paul's letters, to pastoral, practical or ethical material in the latter portions. This is not how we should think about Paul's writings. The first portions are every bit as pastoral, ethical and practical as the latter portions, and the latter portions are every bit as theological as the first. The covenant reveals why and how this is true, since the first portions report God's faithfulness to us, and the latter portions require our faithfulness to Him in response.

the one man, and death through sin, and in this way *death came to all men....*" (Rom. 5:12).

Paul then records how Christ in His obedience redeemed the world through His death and resurrection, which was a powerful and redemptive event. "For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more *did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow* to the many" (Rom. 5:15)! Just like in the letter to the Ephesians, in Romans 9, Paul reaches back in time to God's electing grace as being God's decision to save whom He will, "Just as it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'" (Rom. 9:13). So we see that Romans 1-11 is, for the most part, a chronicle of the Lord's past righteousness and faithfulness, just like the first chapters of Deuteronomy. The following comparison of Moses' covenantal communication and Paul's in Romans, should clearly show the strong similarity.

In the first three chapters of Deuteronomy, Moses wrote a chronicle of God's past faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness. This is done intentionally as a covenantal way of inspiring faith in the Lord, as if to say, "Look at all that the Lord *has done* for us!" This is exactly what Paul is doing in Romans. He is writing a letter in which the first portion is to inspire the Christians in Rome to have faith in God. The Israelites under the Old Covenant were to look back at God's wonders since their exodus out of Egypt. "The Lord your God *has blessed you* in all the work of your hands. He *has watched over* your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the Lord your God *has been with you, and you have not lacked anything*" (Deut. 2:7). Paul has the people think back to Jesus. "He who *did not spare* his own Son, but *gave him up* for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things" (Rom. 8:32)? Notice how Paul directs the people to remember God's profound faithfulness in surrendering Christ to death on their behalf in order to inspire faith in God for the future. In other words, "if God has acted in this way in the past, how can we *not* trust Him for our future?"

After Moses spends the first three chapters of Deuteronomy in remembrance, the focus noticeably shifts in chapter 4. Moses shifts from describing God's faithfulness in the past, to commanding Israel's faithfulness to the Lord in the present. "*Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them* so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you" (Deut. 4:1). This is precisely what Paul does in Romans chapter 12. The focus shifts from God's faithfulness in

the past, to commanding the church's faithfulness in the present. "Therefore, *I urge you*, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to *offer your bodies* as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - *this is your spiritual act of worship*" (Rom. 12:1). From chapter 12 onward, the focus is on the commands to be kept.

Love must be sincere... share with God's people who are in need... Practice hospitality... Do not be conceited... Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good... Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities... Give everyone what you owe him... pay taxes... Accept him whose faith is weak... let us stop passing judgment on each other... let us make every effort to do what leads to mutual edification... Accept one another as Christ has accepted you... I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way... keep away from them (Rom. 12:9, 13, 16, 17, 21; 13:1,7; 14:1, 13,1 9; 15:7; 16:17).

As this comparison makes clear, the structure of the New Covenant is exactly the same structure as in the Old Covenant. In both covenants, the past provides the reference point from which we are able to trust the Lord's promises for the future. Faith in God's Word to us is the means by which we are to obey the Lord's commands. And, it is by obedience to the Lord that He fulfills His promises to us, just as He did with Abraham.

The Lord Jesus promises to love us as His people, *if* we love Him by obeying His commands. He promises to forgive us as we forgive others in obedience to His command to forgive. He promises to be merciful as we are merciful to others. And, Jesus promises us forgiveness, mercy and steadfast love. How are we to experience this forgiveness, mercy and steadfast love? *By* obeying His commands to be forgiving, loving and merciful. He will forgive us *because* we have forgiven others. He will be merciful to us *because* we have been merciful to others. And, He we love us *because* we have loved others. We will be loved, forgiven and be shown mercy on the basis of our faithfulness to Jesus. How will we be able to obey Jesus in forgiving others, in being merciful to others, in loving others?¹⁰ We will be able

¹⁰ I assume that it is by the gracious work of the Spirit alone, that we both believe and obey God. This book is about how the covenant functions, but I grant joyfully and wholeheartedly that "God works in us to will and to do" (Php. 2:13).

to obey Jesus by trusting His promises to bless us with forgiveness, mercy and love! Our own lives are at stake in the way we deal with others.

The covenant motivates us to faithfulness as we understand that God's faithfulness to bless us is dependent upon our faithfulness to Jesus. As the apostle Paul wrote, "Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love" (Eph. 6:24). Who will experience the grace of Jesus' love, mercy and forgiveness? All who love Jesus by obeying his commands. Because Jesus Himself says, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (Jn. 14:21).

