

THE TWO COVENANTS

"I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people." HEBREWS 8.10.

Theologians have detected several different kinds of covenant in the course of human history, and as depicted in the Bible. But it is sufficient for us to notice the two covenants, Old and New, mentioned in this paragraph. And the basis of the whole argument is contained in Jeremiah 31.31-34, in which there is a distinction made between the covenant made with the fathers-when God took them out of the land of Egypt, and that new covenant, which in the days of Jeremiah, was still future. Moses was the mediator of the first, as Jesus is of the second.

THE MOSAIC COVENANT. It was often reiterated in very gracious and searching tones. Take, for instance, that scene which took place as the vast host {crowded} into the plain beneath the brow of Sinai, in the third month of the Exodus. As yet there was no cloud or fire on Sinai's crest; but a proposition was made to the people by Moses, that if they, on their side, would obey God's voice and keep his word, God, on his side, would do two things: he would regard them as his peculiar treasure above all people; and he would take them to himself as a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exod. 19.5, 6). And the people, little counting the cost, or realizing all that was involved, cried with one glib, unanimous voice, "*All that the Lord hath spoken will we do.*" They thus entered into covenant.

Shortly after, when the Ten Commandments {were} given, the terms of the covenant on God's part were very much enlarged. On the fulfillment, on the part of the people, of the old condition of obedience, God went further than ever before in his promises, which comprehended a vast variety of need, and consisted of many parts (Exod. 23.22-31). And again the people gave one mighty, unanimous shout of assent (24.3).

Nor was this all; for when, . . . they were entered in the Book of the Covenant, and read publicly, amid the solemn ratification of sprinkled blood, the people again said, "*All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient*" (24.7). But how little they knew themselves! Within a week or two they were dancing wildly around the golden calf; and within a few months there was not one who dared affirm that he had kept the covenant in every jot and tittle. No, on the contrary: "*which my covenant they broke, saith the Lord.*" What else could be expected of them! Although Moses did write them a second and detailed statement of the conditions of the covenant in the Book of Deuteronomy, with the reiterated demand, that occurs like a refrain, "Ye shall observe to do."

There were two great defects in that old covenant, which arose out of the weakness of poor human nature; in the first place, it gave no power, no moral

dynamics, to enable the {people} to do what they promised; and, secondly, it could not provide for the effectual putting away of those sins which arose from their failure to carry {out their part of the covenant in obedience} (Heb. 9. 9).

Surely the majority of men, aiming after a {spiritual} life, pass through an experience like this. When first we are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, and brought out into the new life, we seem to stand again under Mount Sinai; or, better still, our conscience becomes our Sinai, and from its highest point we seem to hear the voice of God, engaging himself to be a God to us if we will in all things obey his voice. And this we immediately pledge ourselves to do. We are not insincere, we really mean to perform it; we are enamoured at the ideal of life presented to us. It is not only desirable as the condition of blessings, but it is eminently attractive and lovely.

But we make a profound mistake in pledging ourselves; for we are undertaking a matter which is totally beyond our reach. As well might a paralyzed man undertake to climb Mount Blanc, or a bankrupt to pay his debts. We soon learn that sin has paralyzed all our moral motor nerves. The good we would, we do not: the evil we would not, we do. We are brought into captivity to the law of sin in our members, which wars against the law of our mind. We go out to shake ourselves, as at other times; but we {don't know that we are} powerless and helpless.

It seems a pity that each has to learn the uselessness of these attempts for himself, instead of profiting by the experience of others and the records of the past. Yet so it is. One after another starts to earn the privilege of God's presence and smile and blessing by being good and obedient . . . in complying with rules and forms and regulations. It goes on well for a little while, but soon utterly breaks down. We are baffled and beaten, as sea-fowl who dash themselves against a lighthouse tower in the storm, and then fall wounded into the foam beneath. We are slow to learn that, {in the same way} receive justification, so must we receive sanctification, from the hands of God as his free gift.

If any reader of these lines is trying to keep up a friendly relationship with God on this principle of try and do and keep, the sooner that soul realizes the certainty of failure, not for want of will, but through the weakness of the {old} nature, and yields itself to the grace revealed in the second and better covenant, the more quickly will it find a secure and happy resting place, from which it will not be disturbed or driven, world without end.

THE BETTER COVENANT. It is so much better than that of Moses, in this way: while it pledges God to even better promises (ver. 6) than those of the earlier covenant, promises which for a moment demand our attention, there is no pledge or undertaking of any kind demanded from us. There are no *ifs*; . . . no conditions of obedience to be fulfilled. From first to last it consists of the *I wills* of the Most High. Count them up in this marvelous {passage} (vv. 10, 11, 12), and then dare to claim that each should be fulfilled in your personal experience; because this is the covenant under which we are living, and through which we have access to God.

"I will write my laws into their minds." That refers to the intellectual faculty, which thinks, remembers, argues. It will be of inestimable value to have them there for constant reference; so that they shall always stand inscribed on the side posts and lintels of the inner life, demanding reverence, and compelling daily attention.

"I will write them upon their hearts." That is the seat of the emotional life and of the affections. If they are written there, they must engage our love. And what a man loves, he is pretty certain to follow and obey. "A little lower," said the dying veteran, as they probed for the bullet, which had sunk deep down into his breast, "and you will find the Emperor"; and in the case of the Christian who has been taken into covenant with God, the law is inscribed on the deepest affections of his being. He obeys because he loves to obey. He stays in his Master's service, not because he must, but because he chooses it for himself, saying, as his ear is bored to the door, "I love my Master, I will not go out free."

"I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people." The last clause is even better than the first, because it implies the keeping power of God. His chosen people so wandered from him that he once called them "LoAmmi" *Not my people* (Hos. 1.). But if we are ever to be his people; people for his peculiar possession then it can only result from the operation of his gracious Spirit, who keeps us, as the sun restrains the planets from dashing off into space to become wandering stars.

"All shall know me." Oh, rapture of raptures! can it be? To know God! To know the deep things of God. To know him, or to be known of him. To know him as Abraham did, to whom he told his secrets; as Moses did, who conversed with him face to face; or as the Apostle John did, when he beheld him in the visions of the Apocalypse. And that this privilege should be within reach of the least!

"I will be merciful to their unrighteousness." In the old covenant there was little room for mercy. It was a matter of voluntary agreement; if one of the covenanting parties failed in the least particular, there was no obligation on the other to remain faithful to their mutual agreement. The failure of one party neutralized the whole covenant. But there is no such stringency here. On the contrary, mercy is admitted into the relationship, and exercises her gracious sway.

"I will remember their sins and iniquities no more." As a score is forgotten when blotted from a slate, so shall sin be, as if obliterated from the memory of God. It will be forgotten, as a debt paid years ago. It will be so entirely put out of mind that it shall be as if it had never been. If sought for, not found. . . The stone dropped into ocean depths. The cloud absorbed by the summer heat, as it fades from the deep blue sky. Joseph's brethren, in their last approach to Joseph, after their father's death, betrayed a fear that though his resentment was cloaked, it was not thoroughly relinquished. But their fears were entirely groundless. They discovered that the offense had utterly passed from their brother's thought, and Joseph wept when they spoke to him. In {the} same way as this God ceases to consider our sins, and grieves if we do not believe the thoroughness of his abundant pardon.

Are you enjoying the terms of this covenant in your daily experience? God is prepared to fulfill them to the letter. Count on him to do as he has promised. Reckon on his faithfulness. Claim that each pledge shall be realized in you to the fullest limits of his wealth, and your need. Do not try to invent conditions or terms not laid down by him; but gladly accept the position of doing nothing to earn or win, and of accepting all that God gives, without money and without price.

Do you ask how God can call this a covenant, in which there is no second covenanting party? The answer is easy: *Jesus Christ has stood in our {place}*, and has not only negotiated this covenant, but has fulfilled in our name, and on our behalf, all the conditions which were necessary and right. He has borne the penalty of human weakness and transgression. He has met all demands for a perfect and unbroken obedience. He has engaged to secure, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, a holiness in us, which could never have been obtained by our own efforts. And as he has become our Sponsor and Surety, so God is able to enter into these liberal terms with us, saying nothing of all the cost to his Son, but permitting us to share all the benefits; on this condition only, that we identify ourselves with him by a living faith, intrusting all spiritual transactions into his hands, and abiding by the decisions of his will. This is the new and better covenant, which has replaced the old.