

23.11.2019 GOD AND THE COVENANT

“And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it’. ... we will not neglect the house of our God” Nehemiah 9:38; 10:30

Nehemiah 8 and 9 describe the spiritual reformation of the Jews after the physical restoration of Jerusalem. Having read the Law and been convicted of their sin, they repent and confess their unfaithfulness. They then enter into a covenant with God.

This week we study the covenant made by a repentant Israel. Will it be successful? Will Israel be faithful to the terms of the covenant? It is a **conditional** covenant...they promise to obey God’s Law and accept that disobedience would bring a curse upon them.

“And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it” Nehemiah 9:38.

Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding— these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes. Nehemiah 10:28, 29

In spiritual terms, there are 2 types of covenants described in the Bible – conditional and unconditional. It is important to distinguish between these two types of covenants in order to have a clear picture of what the Bible teaches.

As we saw in our earlier studies, a covenant is legally binding.

A conditional covenant is an agreement between two or more parties that requires certain terms to be met. If the terms are met, there will be one kind of result (favourable). If the terms are not met, there will be a different result (unfavourable).

An unconditional covenant is an agreement between two or more parties that involves no stipulations (conditions) of any kind for fulfilment of the agreement.

Review of Nehemiah chapters 8-10:

The people have returned to the word of God. They have gone over their history before God, and discovered that the reason for their present problems lies in their failure to obey the word of God. Having clearly seen and owned their past failure, they seek to provide against its repetition. The means they adopt to accomplish this desirable end, is to enter into a sure covenant, written and sealed (Nehemiah 9:38). Nehemiah, twenty-two priests, seventeen Levites, and forty-four chiefs of the people, sign the covenant (Nehemiah 10:1-27). By this covenant they bind themselves by a curse and an oath (10:28, 29).

They make 4 promises:

1. **With regard to their personal walk**...it should be in obedience to the law of God given by Moses (10:29).
2. **With regard to the surrounding nations**...they would maintain a holy separation (10:30)
3. **As to Jehovah**, they would devotedly render to Him His due by the observance of the Sabbath, the holy days, and the law of the seventh year (10:31).
4. **With regard to the house of God**, they promise to maintain the service and not neglect it (10:32-39).

These promises are excellent. They are the outcome of hearing the Word, repentance and confession of their sins. Not only did they make these promises (a promise is not legally binding), they bound themselves legally to keeping these

promises by entering into covenant with God. If they failed to keep the promises, there would be an unfavourable outcome for them – the curse.

Did they remain faithful to their Covenant promises?

Nehemiah and Malachi are written in the 4th century BC; the last books chronologically of the Old Testament. Until the New Testament there was no further revelation during the 4 centuries till Christ came. Had the Israelites been faithful to the covenant they made in Nehemiah's and Ezra's time? The answer is "No".

Below is a description of the Jewish nation at the time of Christ's first coming...

"Satan had for ages turned men away from God; but he won his great triumph in perverting the faith of Israel. By contemplating and worshiping their own conceptions, the heathen had lost the knowledge of God, and had become more and more corrupt. So it was with Israel. The principle that man can save himself by his own works lay at the foundation of every heathen religion; it had now become the principle of the Jewish religion. Satan had implanted this principle. Wherever it is held, men have no barrier against sin.

The message of salvation is communicated to men through human agencies. But the Jews had sought to make a monopoly of the truth which is eternal life. They had hoarded the living manna, and it had turned to corruption. The religion which they tried to shut up to themselves became an offense. They robbed God of His glory, and defrauded the world by a counterfeit of the gospel. They had refused to surrender themselves to God for the salvation of the world, and they became agents of Satan for its destruction.

The people whom God had called to be the pillar and ground of the truth had become representatives of Satan. They were doing the work that he desired them to do, taking a course to misrepresent the character of God, and cause the world to look upon Him as a tyrant. The very priests who ministered in the temple had lost sight of the significance of the service they performed. They had ceased to look beyond the symbol to the thing signified. In presenting the sacrificial offerings they were as actors in a play. The ordinances which God Himself had appointed were made the means of blinding the mind and hardening the heart. God could do no more for man through these channels. The whole system must be swept away." *Desire of Ages p. 36*

The lament of Jesus over Jerusalem:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" Matthew 23:37

What was the issue? Why did they fail?

The people were sincere and earnest in their desire to keep their promises. Why did they fail?

The fact that they had rebuilt the walls, set up the gates, and returned to the word of God, confessing their sins, apparently deceived them into thinking that in the future they would do better than their fathers. Hence, forgetfulness of their own weakness, and carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment, they enter into a covenant for their future good behaviour.

"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Matthew 26:41

Romans 8:3 "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh"—it could not justify man, because in his sinful nature, he could not keep the law.

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them"... Yet the law is not of faith, but "the man who does them shall live by them." Galatians 3:10, 12

"Many have an idea that they must do some part of the work alone. They have trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, but now they seek by their own efforts to live aright. But every such effort must fail." *Steps to Christ* p. 69

The Jews should have recognised that with their sinful nature it was not possible for them to be faithful to God. They had the evidence of their own history. How many times had their fathers bound themselves by law (legally), entering into covenants to obey God and keep His commandments? And every time they had miserably failed.

Some examples of their promises and failures:

1. At Sinai (the Old Covenant). Exodus 19:5-8. *"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; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.* So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the LORD commanded him. Then all the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do."

..the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord." Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. And the Lord said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. Exodus 32:1-7

2. Josiah. 2 Kings 23:1-3. *The king went up to the house of the Lord with all the men of Judah, and with him all the inhabitants of Jerusalem—the priests and the prophets and all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant which had been found in the house of the Lord. Then the king stood by a pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people took a stand for the covenant.*

And the Lord God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy. 2 Chronicles 36:15, 16

Below is a wonderful commentary on why God allows His people to make promises to Him when He knows we cannot keep them no matter how sincere or earnest we may be. The problem is that we, His people, do not recognize our total inability to keep His Law. So God lets us make promises and when we fail again and again, He wants us to recognize that our only hope in keeping the Law is not to try to produce it in our own strength, but through the '*grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*'.

'Why was another covenant formed at Sinai? In their bondage the people had to a great extent lost the knowledge of God and of the principles of the Abrahamic covenant. In delivering them from Egypt, God sought to reveal to them His power and His mercy, that they might be led to love and trust Him. He brought them down to the Red Sea--where, pursued by the Egyptians, escape seemed impossible--that they might realize their utter helplessness, their need of divine aid; and then He wrought deliverance for them. Thus they were filled with love and gratitude to God and with confidence in His power to help them. He had bound them to Himself as their deliverer from temporal bondage.

But there was a still greater truth to be impressed upon their minds. Living in the midst of idolatry and corruption, they had no true conception of the holiness of God, of the exceeding sinfulness of their own hearts, their utter inability, in themselves, to render obedience to God's law, and their need of a Saviour. All this they must be taught.

God brought them to Sinai; He manifested His glory; He gave them His law, with the promise of great blessings on condition of obedience: "If ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then . . . ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." Exodus 19:5, 6.

The people did not realize the sinfulness of their own hearts, and that without Christ it was impossible for them to keep God's law; and they readily entered into covenant with God. Feeling that they were able to establish their own righteousness, they declared, "All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient." Exodus 24:7. They had witnessed the proclamation of the law in awful majesty, and had trembled with terror before the mount; and yet only a few weeks passed before they broke their covenant with God, and bowed down to worship a graven image. They could not hope for the favor of God through a covenant which they had broken; and now, seeing their sinfulness and their need of pardon, they were brought to feel their need of the Saviour revealed in the Abrahamic covenant and shadowed forth in the sacrificial offerings. Now by faith and love they were bound to God as their deliverer from the bondage of sin. Now they were prepared to appreciate the blessings of the new covenant.

The terms of the "old covenant" were, Obey and live: "If a man do, he shall even live in them" (Ezekiel 20:11; Leviticus 18:5); but "cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them." Deuteronomy 27:26. The "new covenant" was established upon "better promises"--the promise of forgiveness of sins and of the grace of God to renew the heart and bring it into harmony with the principles of God's law. "This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, *I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts . . . I will forgive their iniquity, and will remember their sin no more.*" Jeremiah 31:33, 34.

The same law that was engraved upon the tables of stone is written by the Holy Spirit upon the tables of the heart. Instead of going about to establish our own righteousness we accept the righteousness of Christ. His blood atones for our sins. His obedience is accepted for us. Then the heart renewed by the Holy Spirit will bring forth "the fruits of the Spirit." Through the grace of Christ we shall live in obedience to the law of God written upon our hearts. Having the Spirit of Christ, we shall walk even as He walked. Through the prophet He declared of Himself, "I delight to do Thy will, O My God: yea, Thy law is within My heart." Psalm 40:8. And when among men He said, "The Father hath not left Me alone; for I do always those things that please Him." John 8:29. *EG White: Patriarchs and Prophets.p.371-372*

The law was our tutor (guardian) to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. Galatians 3:24

God's Unconditional Covenants

Ever since the Fall, Man is totally incapable of producing a righteousness that pleases God, for his righteousness arises from a selfish and self-centred heart. God's righteousness in contrast, arises from His unconditional, self-giving love. Since Man fell, God has come to him and offered him unconditional covenants of grace. These are covenants that are fulfilled by God with no conditions attached to man except that of believing and accepting the unconditional promises of God.

Examples are:

1. The Covenant of Grace – the unconditional promise of a Messiah. Genesis 3:8-15
2. The Covenant with Noah – the unconditional promise that the earth will never again be destroyed by water *'although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth'* Genesis 8:21; 9:1-17
3. The Abrahamic Covenant. "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" Genesis 12:3; 15:5. And Abraham believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. Genesis 15:6
4. The New Covenant – Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-29; Hebrews 8:8-13.
 1. Covenants 1, 3 and 4 are essentially the same covenant. God promises Himself to cleanse us from our sins and deliver us from unrighteousness through the life, work, death and resurrection of His Son...*'For I will forgive their iniquities and remember no more their sin'.*

Based on Christ's redeeming work, God makes the following unconditional promises to every believer:

1. "I will forgive their iniquities and remember their sin no more."
2. "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts."
3. "I will be their God, and they shall be My people."
4. "No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD', for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them." *Jeremiah 31:33,34 and Hebrews 8:10, 11*

At the very outset of the Christian life every believer should be taught in foundation principles. He should be taught that he is not merely to be saved by Christ's sacrifice, but that he is to make the life of Christ his life and the character of Christ his character. *EG White: Christ's Object Lessons p.57*

Conclusion:

Will the tragedy of the Jews be also our tragedy? Or will we learn from their mistakes and turn from trusting in ourselves to produce our righteousness to trusting God to keep His promises of the New Covenant and provide us with His righteousness?

God has made an everlasting covenant with us. Through His Spirit, He promises to live out His life within us and make us partakers of His righteousness.

To us, in these last days, He comes and says, "My people are those who keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus Christ." *Revelation 14:12*

What is our response to God? We have 2 choices:

1. We can enter into an Old Covenant agreement with Him...*'all that the Lord has commanded we will do and be obedient'*. No matter how sincere or earnest we may be, we will find, like the Jews of old, that we will never be able to keep His commandments, perfectly and continually by ourselves and in our own strength.
2. Or we can rest upon the New Covenant promises of God and by the faith of Jesus (the faith that depended and trusted God for everything), we can invite the Holy Spirit daily to make real in our lives the promises of God; to live out His life within us and produce in us His righteousness. Then Christ will indeed be *'in us, the hope of glory'* *Colossians 1:27*

For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Romans 8:3, 4

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Galatians 3:13, 14

Additional Note:

Sin shall not have dominion under you, for you are not under the law but under grace.

Romans 6:14

To be under the law means that you are judged by God based on your keeping of the law. You are justified, or declared righteous only when you keep the law perfectly. If you fall short, you come under the condemnation of death. Sin and death have dominion over you. This is the lot of all humanity who are Adam's seed.

To be under grace means that you have accepted Christ by faith as your personal Saviour; as your only hope of being justified 'declared righteous'. Since you are now the seed of Christ (Isaiah 53:10, 1 John 3:9), in Him you stand righteous, you have a converted mind that desires to do righteousness and you live by faith in Him who will produce His righteousness in you through His in-dwelling Spirit. Not only are you 'in Christ', but the in-dwelling Spirit will reveal 'Christ in you' through the fruit of the Spirit. Sin and death no longer have dominion over you because under grace, Christ is now not only Saviour but Lord and Master. He has dominion over your life. And all who believe in him 'have crossed from death to (eternal) life and will not come into condemnation at the judgement' John 5:24.

The issue in salvation by faith is never about whether we are to be righteous. Righteousness is non-negotiable. The issue is about whether that righteousness is produced under law (self-righteousness) or under grace (the righteousness of God).
