

Study 6 — God's Covenant Fellowship

I want to do three things in this final study on God's covenant. First, we will note how the covenants are one revelation and create one people. Second, we will see how the New Covenant in particular reveals God as Father, Son and Spirit, drawing us into their own relationship or communion. Thirdly, we will look at some practical out workings of living in this covenant with God.

Jesus gave his blood to seal the new covenant, and Paul, preaching the gospel, says he is a minister of the new covenant, so this is the covenant we may say we are under, but this covenant delivers what was promised in the earlier ones and so we are beneficiaries of the accumulated revelation and maintenance of all the covenants. They form one whole revelation and relationship in which we live. God relates to, or is bonded to, his world, and to believers in particular. He calls men and women to relate to him through faith in the promises he has made and oaths he has sworn, and by the blood in which both he and we acknowledge that there are penalties for non-compliance.

We may say that the covenants coalesce to provide a coherent picture of the God who comes to relate to sinners. They show us what to trust God for, how we are to live and what we should expect. While each covenant has its elements that are specific to its own time, they point to one reality that is fulfilled in Christ and it is in him that the oneness of the covenant operates. This is summarized in the following paragraphs, and I will use the word 'covenant' as a verb to remind us that God is wholly in charge of his covenant relation with us.

To Noah, God covenants to preserve the world. In so doing, he preserves his reputation as a trustworthy God who should be sought after. The whole world continues to be in this relationship of preservation with God. This covenant also continues as a witness to his faithfulness to do a greater work for his people. For example, after the Servant bears the sins of his people, God says he will never again bring judgement on them as he did to the world in Noah's day (Isa. 54:8-10). The power of this is seen in God calling this new situation a 'covenant of peace'—even though it is the covenant Israel has broken.

To Abraham, God covenants to provide a blessing for the world. He shows his faithfulness to this in numerous ways over some 13 centuries, and in ways that have provided us with a large part of our Bible, not least, the Psalter with its many songs of faith, hope and love. However, this covenant anticipates 'his Servant' Jesus, who gives repentance to Israel and then to the nations (Acts 3:25-26). We are living in the fulfillment of this covenant and every Christian has Abraham as father.

To Israel through Moses, God covenants that he will be their God and shows himself faithful to this promise. He redeems them and requires them to live as his people by keeping his law. This is then recognised to be a necessary precursor to revealing himself fully—Israel, and all of us, need to know we are sinners so as to appreciate the grace of the actual relationship we have with him. Christ comes to fulfill this law—both its curses and its blessings, by bearing sins and writing the law on human hearts. Of itself, the Mosaic covenant is surpassed—we died to it in Christ's death, but what it reveals about the God we trust and what we are to be is eternal and fulfilled by Christ.

To David, God covenants to provide an enduring dynasty (Psa. 89:3-4), and later renews his covenant to enact 'the sure mercies promised to David...a leader and commander for the peoples (Isa. 55:3-4). This covenant is being fulfilled as Christ's kingdom is announced, as its blessings are received and its future anticipated.

To Jeremiah, God covenants to secure both his and our side of the covenant obligations. He forgives our sins and writes the law on our hearts. It is this covenant that Jesus comes to

enact and it is this covenant, the fullest expression of the covenant keeping God that is preached to us in the gospel (2 Cor. 3:6). By this gospel, the veil is lifted from our hearts so that we see something of the glory of God (2 Cor. 3:18), in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

We now come to the heart of God's covenant: that he is God to us and we are his people. God is God to us, first, by doing things for us—making promises, sending deliverance, forgiving and renewing us. But there is more. He wants to be known and loved so that he can give himself fully to his people and draw them fully into his plan for the ages to come. In the new covenant, God reveals his glory—as Father, Son and Spirit in communion, and draws us into this.

I have often wondered why the New Testament does not use the word 'covenant' frequently, even if its ideas are everywhere to be observed. I think the reason is that, with the full revelation of the Father, the covenant community is consciously a family and this terminology takes over the 'territory' occupied by covenant to this point. This is suggested by the theme song of covenant in the Old Testament developing from 'I will be your God and you will be my people' (Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23 and often; also in Ezekiel) to 'I will be a father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to me' (2 Cor. 6:18).

Another adaption of Israel's covenant theme comes at the end of the book of Revelation: 'I will be his God and he will be my son' (Rev. 21:7, cf. v. 3). The fact that these familial terms can apply to the church at Corinth, and then to God's people at the end times, shows that we live in this reality now but with a view to the new heavens and earth in which this reality will be fully realised.

There are numerous intimations of a Father/child relationship in the Old Testament (eg. Exod. 4:22; Deut. 32:6; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 1:10 and especially Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:19) but it comes to the fore in the New. We can see this development as we hear Paul talk about Gentiles coming into Israel's covenant blessings in his letter to the Ephesians.

Paul tells Gentiles they were 'strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world' (Eph. 2:12). But not any longer. He writes...

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:13-18).

There are many points that could be followed here but we note, first, that God is establishing a bond with us on the basis of Christ's blood being spilt. There is an 'understanding' between the Father and Son, or rather, a love of the Father for us, a love of the Son for his Father's will and for us so that the sanctions involved in covenant breaking are entirely dealt with by God. Second, Christ himself is our peace. This reflects the promise made to the Servant that he would 'be given as a covenant to the people'. Alec Motyer writes,

'In biblical thought the covenant is a unilateral pledge and consequent work of God. To speak of the Servant as the covenant means that while, as we know, it is through his work that covenant blessing become available, it is only in him, in the union of personal relationship, that these blessings can be enjoyed' (The Prophecy of Isaiah, p. 391).

Peace, that is, an entire absence of hostility and a full flow of affection and cooperation is what obtains between the Father and Son, and now, obtains between the Father and us who are in union with this Son.

Third, the barrier between Jews and Gentiles implicit in the old covenant is abolished because the way of us coming to God is identical—through Christ's body on the cross. An

entirely new mode of relating across this divide has been created by what God has done in Christ. Jews had made 'their' law a basis of division between themselves and the Gentiles and God's intention that they be a light to the Gentiles and their temple a place of prayer for all nations was obscured. Paul's phrase is emphatic—Christ has killed this hostility. We find out elsewhere (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11) that this includes other social, sexual, and ethnic divisions. Every culture and sub-culture tends towards divisions by its insistence on its own law as the only way to be right. God, in bringing himself to us through Christ has abolished the occasions of our hostilities.

Fourth, by one Spirit, we come to the Father. Here is the objective of the covenant—the fellowship of a family under one Father. Paul says we are a household of God, a temple in the Lord (Jesus) and a dwelling place for God (Eph. 2:19-22). Our access to the Father is by the Spirit (v. 18)—by nature of the case, a one by one action, but then, the Spirit has constituted us as a community that is a temple for God. We are a covenant community—a fellowship or communion, a family.

This brings us to note that Father, Son and Spirit share in making us this family. Many observe that this indicates the heart of the covenant, that God himself is a community of persons. For example, Herman Hoeksema writes,

'If this communion of friendship in the Trinity implies a perfect knowledge of one another, then also the covenant life of man must consist in this, that God reveals Himself to him, causes man to know Him, reveals His secrets to him, speaks to him as a Friend with His friend, walks with him, eats and drinks with him, lives with him under one roof. If the covenant life in God consist in this, that the Three Person of the Holy Trinity are united in the bond of perfect love, then also the covenant relation between God and man must originate in this, that God opens His heart for man. Then the life of the covenant is eternal life itself. For this is life eternal, that they know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent. Thou in Me, and I in them, that they may be perfect in One' (*Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 322).

Jesus teaches us that we will know the Father, know the Son and know the Spirit. We know them by their actions: the Father cares for his people, and he sends his Son to be our Saviour; the Son does the works of the Father on earth and lays down his life for his friends; the Spirit blows and we see the results of his blowing. The Father, Son (now) and Spirit are unseen but not unknown. The Spirit takes the things of Christ and shows them to us. He is the Spirit of the Son and breathes the cry of Father into our hearts. As God is, in himself, a community of persons, this becomes the way he makes himself known to us.

Returning to Ephesians, Paul prays for believers to know this Father and Son by the Spirit.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:14-21).

The result of Gentiles inheriting Israel's covenants is that they worship and trust the Father, through inward Spirit given strength, characterized by Christ dwelling in their hearts, and so coming to a life of love, comprehending Christ's love and being filled with God himself. The fruit of this will be more than we can imagine—God is glorifying himself by being God to us and us being his people. The life of the covenant into which all peoples are now summoned is a radically God-centred life in which Father, Son and Spirit give all of themselves to the whole of human need so as to create a fellowship where the nature of God is seen among his people.

To spell out what this life may mean for us would be to expound the entire New Testament, or Covenant (*diatheke*). Early in its history, the church recognised that what was going on as the gospel was preached was that the new covenant was being made known. However, a few observations may be helpful here, if only to 'earth' some of the points we have noted. I will limit myself to parenting, pastoral care and proclamation.

Children in Christian families, including those where only one of the spouses is a Christian are called 'holy', rather than 'unclean' (1 Cor. 7:14). The 'unclean' terminology was understood to imply severance from the covenant in Jewish thought. Children are included in the new covenant their parents or parent keep—that is until proven otherwise. If you like, they need to prove their own calling and election (2 Pet. 1:10) but our emphasis should be on the promise of God and his anticipation that they will want to share in his blessings. There is much to be said and done with children to assure them that God is in the picture of their growing up—a wonderful, warm, firm, purposive God who can be trusted. The task of parents is to represent the Father's grace and law and wisdom to their children so the children have God's favour and future in their minds.

Leaders of churches feed and lead God's own family. Its members live by every word that comes from his mouth. For this reason, it seems to me that churches need to pray and work more with a view to a fire at the centre of their work, a living Christ revealing the Father in the power of the Spirit, rather than boundaries at the edges of it. There are boundaries and sometimes leaders need to meet, with Christ among them, to decide if someone needs to be warned or excluded. But then, the emphasis should be on gaining a brother rather than getting rid of them (Matt. 18: 15, 20).

Who can know the boundaries of God's covenant? Elijah got it wrong once and needed correcting by God (1 Kin. 19:18), a point not lost on Paul (Rom. 11:4) and because of his enlarged heart, enlarged by the nature of God in his covenant, Paul endured much to gather in these covenant members. We remember the cry of Hosea: 'How can I give you up O Israel?' (Hos. 11:8).

Third, our proclamation is of a Father who does everything through his Son and by the Spirit inspiring the cry of 'Father!' and Lord!' in his people. By nature of the case, the going out of the gospel will have a decidedly family feel about it. This can be seen in the emphasis Paul makes about his fellow workers and the intimate care that is shown one for another. To the extent that it is true that 'the medium is the message', the gospel should not be so much a crusade (certainly not of the infamous kind) but a going out with joy, as a community, to gather in those whom the Lord is adding to his people.