

What Is a National Covenant Renewal?

2 Chronicles 34:29-33; Joshua 24:25

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When a National Covenant (made with God) has been grievously broken by a nation, does that bring to an end all duty and obligation to that National Covenant? If the magistrates prove to be covenant-breakers (and even outlaw that Covenant), does that annul all duty and obligation to that National Covenant? If all of the people within the nation after hundreds of years should forget that such a Covenant was made in the first place, can that National Covenant be set aside as having no moral standing in the Law of God? We have concluded from past sermons that there is a perpetual obligation to all posterity that attaches itself to a lawful National Covenant made with God. No matter what degree of lawlessness performed by the nation, the church, the magistrates, or posterity, God will not forget the obligations sworn to Him in either personal vows or national vows.

So what is to be done by those within a nation or by those who are posterity when they realize their covenant-breaking? They should mourn and repent of their sin against the God they have offended and against their fellow man. They should seek by faith alone the forgiveness of God through the only Mediator, the Lord Christ Jesus, and through His perfect righteousness alone. They should own for themselves the perpetual obligation of such solemn National Covenants. They should seek to renew a lawful National Covenant made with God. Dear ones, a covenant renewal demonstrates that the obligation of the original covenant yet binds the original covenanters (if they are still living) and likewise binds all posterity that follows. For why would anyone renew a covenant obligation that no longer binds? It is only because the intrinsic obligation of a covenant continues to bind posterity that posterity would renew a covenant to uphold that obligation even if that obligation had been renounced and “annulled” by magistrates or ignored and forgotten by posterity. Thus, the renewal (or renovation) of a lawful National Covenant confirms the perpetual obligation of all such covenants to all posterity. Let us consider today some questions related to the renewal of lawful National Covenants.

I. The Scriptural Warrant for Covenant Renewal (2 Chronicles 34:29-33).

A. Here in our text, we find a particular occasion of renewal of a National Covenant with God. The circumstances leading to this covenant renovation were marvelous indeed. For while the Temple was being purged and cleansed of all the idolatrous innovations in it, Hilkiah, the High Priest, found either the original covenant written by the hand of Moses (Deuteronomy 31:24-26) or a faithful copy of it.

1. Does this mean there was no copy of God’s original covenant available to Josiah at all (at least until this one was found by Hilkiah in the Temple)? We don’t know for sure, but I will submit to you the following response.

a. If the original covenant written by Moses had been hidden in the Temple by faithful priests in order to preserve it from those in the Kingdom who despised it (and subsequently was lost for a brief time), and if wicked magistrates or idolatrous priests had likewise destroyed all the known faithful copies of God’s Covenant with Israel, then we would have some reasonable explanation why Hilkiah responded with such surprise upon finding the Book of the Law of Moses (in 2 Chronicles 34:15) and why Josiah seemed so overwhelmed with a godly fear upon hearing the words read to him from that original covenant written by Moses (in 2 Chronicles 34:19-21). Without the explanation suggested above, it is hard to explain why Hilkiah responded with such surprise, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD” (2 Chronicles 34:15), and why Josiah responded with such mournful surprise in tearing his garment upon hearing the covenant and law read to him (2 Chronicles 34:19-21). However, if Josiah had a general knowledge

of God's Law passed down to him by word of mouth through godly tutors, prophets, and priests, he would have acquired sufficient knowledge to enact the reformation that he did prior to the original covenant being found in the temple (as we see in 2 Chronicles 34:1-13).

b. And on this point of Josiah's reformation, it is worthy to note that these verses (in 2 Chronicles 34:1-13) do no record anything to the effect that the reformation was accomplished according to the commandments of God as recorded in the Law given by Moses (or something to that effect) as we see in other portions of God's Word where such words are used (2 Kings 18:6; 2 Chronicles 23:18; 2 Chronicles 24:6; 2 Chronicles 25:4; 2 Chronicles 30:16). However (and this is worthy to note as well), after the discovery of God's covenant in the Temple by Hilkiah, we do find a reference to reformation based upon the Law that Moses had written (2 Kings 23:21,25). I would also suggest that if this explains the noteworthy reaction of Hilkiah to finding the Law of God and of Josiah to the hearing of God's Covenant and Law, then it was not likely a situation that had existed for very long—perhaps since the apostasy and idolatry of Josiah's grandfather, Mannaseh (before he repented of his gross idolatry and sin), or since the reign of Josiah's father, Amon, who followed in the idolatrous paths of Mannaseh.

2. How many servants of Satan have sought to destroy the Scripture, but God has preserved it faithful even to the present time. What a blessing is ours, dear ones, that we have a faithful version of the Scripture in the Authorized Version, translated into our own language. How we need to have the astonishment of Hilkiah that we have God's Word, and how we need the mourning of Josiah that we have not kept it. Have we lost a love and amazement for the Holy Scriptures? Are they read daily with faith, love, fear, and practiced in our lives? It is no wonder that the Scripture is not practiced by us if we do not see the infinite value of it, and if we do not stand astonished before God that He would preserve it for us (though we have not obeyed them as we ought).

B. Now upon hearing the reading of God's original covenant with the nation of Israel, and having mourned over the aggravated sin of covenant-breaking with God, Josiah takes the next step to renew that original covenant with God. Josiah gathers together the leaders of both Church and State (as well as the people within Jerusalem). King Josiah then proceeds to read God's Covenant to them. He then covenants with God "to walk after the LORD, and to keep his commandments, and his testimonies, and his statutes, with all his heart, and with all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant which are written in this book" (2 Chronicles 34:31). Using the authority of God entrusted to him as the minister of God to the people for good, King Josiah caused all of the people to take the covenant as well. This did not impose some new obligation upon Josiah and the people that was not already imposed by virtue of the original National Covenant made at Mt. Sinai. This covenant renewal was rather intended to deepen and make the original covenant duties more sensible and lasting upon the consciences of both king and people. Dear ones, when you have broken a lawful promise to someone, is it not just and right to repent of breaking that promise, to seek forgiveness for breaking that promise, and to own that promise anew as one you should have kept and shall endeavor to keep by God's grace? If that is not our response to covenant-breaking, then no covenant, no contract, no promise, no oath, and no vow will be sacred to us at all. We will go on our merry way breaking covenant, making excuses why we are justified for doing so, and eventually forgetting that a covenant was ever made in the first place. And each time this happens, it will be easier to do it the next time and correspondingly harder to repent of and to renew the next time.

C. The renovation of the National Covenant made with Israel (at Mt. Sinai in Horeb) occurs on several occasions in recorded biblical history: with Moses in Moab (Deuteronomy 29:1-15); with Joshua (Joshua 24:25); with Asa (2 Chronicles 15:12); with Jehoida and Joash (2 Chronicles 23:16); with Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29:10); with Josiah (2 Chronicles 34:31); with Ezra (Ezra 10:3); and with Nehemiah (Nehemiah 9:38). If it is a duty for a nation to covenant with God that He would be their God and that they would be His people,

then it is likewise a duty for a nation to own anew that covenant with God when it has been seriously violated. We ought to use the same moral principle in all sacred covenants that we seriously violate if we are truly repentant for our covenant-breaking.

II. Some Objections That Arise in the Matter Of Covenant Renewal.

A. **Objection #1:** Since a National Covenant is distinctive to Israel, so likewise is the renewal to a National Covenant. All of the examples of covenant renewal cited above from the Scripture relate to Israel rather than to Gentile nations. Thus, it has not been shown from Scripture that covenant renewal relates to any other nation than Israel.

1. It is true that all of the examples of covenant renewal cited above from Scripture specifically related to Israel. However, this objection proceeds from a false premise—namely that national covenanting itself is distinctive to Israel; therefore, renewing a National Covenant likewise is distinctive to Israel. However, if it can be demonstrated from Scripture, that national covenanting is not distinctive to Israel, then it can likewise be shown by parity (or equality) of reason that renewing a National Covenant is not distinctive to Israel. For a lawful promise that is broken is a sin called covenant-breaking (Romans 1:31; 2 Timothy 3:3) and should be repented of, should seek forgiveness for, and should be owned anew to be a lawful promise that one endeavors to keep by God’s grace (otherwise one continues to be a covenant-breaker).

2. We have already noted in a previous sermon the following two National Covenants involving Gentile nations—National Covenants God Himself owned as binding.

a. In Isaiah 19:18-25 the Gentile nation of Egypt will swear as a nation to be God’s people and for God to be their God (just as Israel did at Mt. Sinai). Thus, if Egypt as a nation can enter into such a National Covenant with God, it can and should also renew that National Covenant with God (just as Israel did on various occasions) if the nation should violate it.

b. In Amos 1:9 the Gentile city-state of Tyre swore a brotherly covenant of peace with Israel (in 1 Kings 5:12) and broke it—thus, incurring the judgment of the Lord (hundreds of years later) for their covenant-breaking. Again, if the Gentile city-state of Tyre could engage in a binding National Covenant and break it, then they not only can renew it, but morally should do so (just as Israel should have done if she had broken the same brotherly covenant of peace with Tyre).

B. **Objection #2:** A similar objection follows, namely, that since a lawful National Covenant that perpetually binds posterity can only be initiated by God with a nation (and not by a nation with God), no lawful renewal of a National Covenant can occur where God did not initiate the original National Covenant (as God did with Israel at Mt. Sinai).

1. Again, I must say that this objection proceeds from a false premise and consequently makes the conclusion false as well. For it is not true that a lawful National Covenant that perpetually binds posterity can only be initiated by God with a nation (and not by a nation with God); and therefore, it is also not true that a lawful National Covenant that perpetually binds posterity can only be renewed if God initiated the original covenant with the nation.

2. Let us consider the same two examples from Scripture mentioned above.

a. In Isaiah 19:18-25, it is clearly the nation of Egypt that initiates this National Covenant with God; and yet by parity of reason, if Egypt (as God’s covenanted people per Isaiah 19:25) breaks covenant with God, she should renew it (just as we see Israel as God’s covenanted people).

b. In Amos 1:9, if Israel should break her National Covenant of peace with Tyre, should she not repent and renew that National Covenant? Of course she should do so. Then likewise if Tyre

should break her National Covenant of peace with Israel, should she not repent and renew it? Of course she should.

C. **Objection #3:** All the original covenanters must be present at the renewal of a National Covenant if any alterations (in the least) are made to the words or to the outward historical circumstances; otherwise it is not a covenant renewal of a previous National Covenant, but rather a new National Covenant that is being made.

1. This objection proceeds from the false premise that unless all of the original covenanters are present to approve any changes (in the least) made to the covenant, it is not the same covenant and therefore it cannot be renewed—it is rather a new covenant entirely distinctive from the original covenant.

2. It is clear that in Deuteronomy 29 there is a renewal in Moab of the National Covenant made with God at Mt. Sinai. For we see these two covenants mentioned in Deuteronomy 29:1, and we also see that the substance or essence of the covenant renewal is the same as that of the original covenant (“That he may establish thee today for a people unto himself, and that he may be unto thee a God, AS HE HATH SAID UNTO THEE” Deuteronomy 29:13). Now was it not in the original National Covenant at Mt. Sinai that God had previously made this promise unto Israel (in Exodus 19:5-6)? This demonstrates that the National Covenant in Moab was a renovation of the National Covenant made at Sinai. Furthermore, the clear repetition of the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20 at Mt. Sinai as a part of the covenant renewal in Moab in Deuteronomy 5 indicates that the National Covenant in Moab is a covenant renewal of the original National Covenant made at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 20. But let us note two points which cause us to reject this third objection.

a. First, there is an alteration of the actual words used in the covenant renewal as found in the Fourth Commandment (Deuteronomy 5:12-15 when compared to Exodus 20:8-11), as found in the Fifth Commandment (Deuteronomy 5:16 when compared to Exodus 20:12), and as found in the Tenth Commandment (Deuteronomy 5:21 when compared with Exodus 20:17). Even though there are changes in the actual words found in the covenant renewal, it is still a lawful covenant renewal which binds posterity.

b. Second, there were many of the original covenanters who were present at Mt. Sinai that were not present for the covenant renewal in Moab, for the Lord had destroyed all those twenty years old and above in the wilderness (Numbers 14:29). So here in this covenant renewal (in Moab) we have alterations made in a National Covenant with God and most of the original covenanters are not present at the covenant renewal, and yet the renovation of the National Covenant of Israel in Moab is a lawful covenant renewal (though changes in the wording were made in the renewal of the National covenant in Moab). This third objection is likewise groundless.

D. **Objection #4:** If it is a National Covenant, it cannot be lawfully renewed without the national representatives of Church and State being present. This objection states that when an incomplete portion of the national representatives are not willing to renew a National Covenant, then a faithful remnant that is willing to do so cannot lawfully do so because they are not the national representatives of Church and State.

1. When God is one party to a National Covenant, any violation of that National Covenant (by one member, several members, or several thousand members of that nation) ought to be followed by repentance for the sin of covenant-breaking, forgiveness sought for the sin of covenant-breaking, and the broken National Covenant ought to be owned anew for themselves (rather than for the whole nation). For when any one breaks covenant with God (even when it is a National Covenant) and does not repent for himself, does not seek God’s forgiveness for himself, and does not own anew the broken covenant for himself, he is simply avoiding and neglecting his own personal duty to God.

2. If there is to be a lawful renewal of a National Covenant on behalf of the entire nation, it

must include the nation's official representatives in Church and State. However, if one faithful person or a faithful remnant of that nation renew that lawful National Covenant for themselves, the official representatives of Church and State are not required to be present. For each person is obligated to take all steps necessary to deal with his/her own sin as is taught in Ezekiel 18:4.

E. In conclusion, dear ones, how often do you think to renew solemn covenants (whether personal covenants with God, whether marital covenants, whether ecclesiastical covenants, whether the Solemn League and Covenant, or whether the Covenant of Grace as you worship your Covenant God each Lord's Day or as you witness a Baptism). Covenant renewal ought not to be a foreign concept to redeemed sinners who stand continually in need of God's gracious forgiveness. It ought to be a regular duty we embark upon even when it is done informally in our own personal words before the Lord or in family worship or in our prayers we offer to the Lord collectively on the Lord's Day. For the thankful and loving expression of all those who have been saved through the Covenant of Grace (wherein Christ has become our Covenant-Keeper) is one of regular covenant renewal to be God's people and for God to be our own God in all of His glorious power, mercy, righteousness, wisdom, and love. A people who do not renew covenant with God (whether informally or formally as the occasion presents itself to them) are a thankless and proud people who live in continual covenant-breaking before God.

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