

THE TWO COVENANTS AND SIN

Here I am not going to look *closely* into the nature of the Old and New Covenants, or even at the relationship between them, or of the place of Israel in God's plan of salvation. Although these will of course be touched upon. It is written as a short overview of the Covenants with particular reference to how they dealt with the issue of sin.

The Bible contains what is called the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT). But the Bible is one. There are 66 books in the Bible (39 in the OT and 27 in the NT) but the Bible itself is one Book. The *whole Bible* represents God's dealings with mankind – from his creation of man and woman on earth to the final judgement day and eternal life as children of God. It is *one* story. There is no tension, conflict or contradiction between the OT and the NT. It is the account of why God created man and how He fulfilled His purpose in man. He is the same God in both and He works out His purposes throughout this Book.

The Bible depicts God's purpose for creating man and woman, "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." (Genesis 1:26). God's eternal purpose was, and is, to make us like Himself and to 'bring many sons to glory' (Hebrews 2:10), so that we, as sons of God who share His nature, should serve Him and live with Him forever – as Christ's Bride. This is the great divine purpose of everything. (Romans 8:29; 2 Peter 1:4; Ephesians 5:25-27; 1 John 3:2).

But the problem was sin. Sin resulted in the creation of more than one covenant with man. The covenants represent the different stages through which God revealed the extent and strength of sin in the human heart and how God would finally **deal** with sin in the human heart and bring true salvation! Through Adam's disobedience in the garden of Eden at the beginning, sin and death were introduced into mankind. Essentially, from one perspective, all the major covenants that God made with man were God's way of dealing with sin and fulfilling His purpose to make men and women like Himself. The story or history of the Bible is how sin came into the world and how God provided a way for men and women to be saved from sin so that they could dwell with Him for ever. The different covenants represent the different stages in how God brought salvation from sin to mankind. It is one 'story'. It is one history - with different stages, yes; but still one history. It is God's plan of salvation from the beginning of time to the final judgement day and beyond. It is wrong to think that the OT and the NT are somehow 'different' stories and that there is a conflict or tension between the parts or that one has to 'choose' between them! The whole Bible represents God's word. God did not change His mind about things half way through.

Let me interrupt myself here, to make one thing clear. People sometimes confuse themselves and each other by talking about different things when they think they are talking about the same thing! Concerning salvation, freedom from sin and living righteously, it is clear that the NT teaches us that we cannot be justified by the works of the (Mosaic) Law nor can the Law make us righteous. It cannot because of the power of sin in our lives. We need a new power in our lives! We need to be born from above! This comes by faith and through grace. The righteousness that is required by the Law is fulfilled in the Christian by faith in what God has done through His Son on Calvary and by the life of Christ within him - it is not fulfilled by us, in our own efforts, trying to keep a Law that is written 'outside of us'. God does something *in us* that gives us the ability to live as He has commanded. Because of the cleansing of the blood of Jesus, because of his victory over sin, death and the devil, salvation is by faith in what He has done. Of course we are to live righteously - *that* is why Jesus died, but it is by faith and through grace. However, to say we still need to 'keep the Law' as Christians, is to oppose the teaching of the NT - because in the NT the Law of Moses is always seen as something outside of us that we have to try and keep in our own efforts! Through Jesus' death and the New Covenant, God puts His Spirit in us and gives us grace and power to live righteously - by faith in Him! In this sense we are not under the Law, nor do we live by the Law. According to the teaching of the Bible, the Law addresses itself *to our own abilities*, which woefully fall short of the glory of God! That is why Paul is so adamant about this matter – to say you are 'under the law' is to say that you are living, not by the grace and salvation of Christ, but by your own strength! The whole of the NT is clear on this. However, to say that the books of the OT are not important anymore, is of course, not true. The Bible is the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Christians

worldwide recognise this and it is not really a matter of debate. The value and importance of the OT is something we will now go on to look at and how inseparable it is from the NT.

Why is the NT called the NT - because it replaced the OT. As we shall see, what God did in the OT (particularly in saving Israel out of Egypt and through the Tabernacle sacrifices) shows us in type or picture what He was going to do through Christ! In this way, the OT gives us a greater or deeper understanding of the work and ministry of Jesus Christ. There are wonderful prophecies in the OT concerning Jesus Christ, which show how God had chosen His Son to be the Messiah and Saviour of the world. These scriptures in the OT are a great source of blessing, comfort and teaching for the Christian. As a follower of Jesus you will want to read the Word of God and learn as much as you can about Christ and his salvation.

As I said, the problem is sin. God made Adam from the dust of the earth after His own image, but through this 'one man sin and death entered the world.' (Romans 5:12, 'Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned'). Sin changed the spiritual condition of Adam (Genesis 2:17) and he was cast out of the garden with Eve. Because of sin even the environment in which Adam had to labour had changed (Genesis 3:18).

Evil and sin increased so much on the earth that God sent a flood to destroy everyone except Noah and his family who went into the ark that God had commanded Noah to make. God made a covenant with Noah that He would no more destroy the earth with a flood. Later, God made a covenant with Abraham, whom he had taken from among the nations and from whom the nation of Israel descended. This covenant with Abraham revealed how God was going to bless the nations of the world. God promised that he would make a great nation of Abraham and that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Although it seemed impossible, 'Abraham believed God and He counted it to him for righteousness.' (Genesis 15:6). This truth and these promises to Abraham would become the basis of Salvation under the New Covenant. The New Covenant and Salvation through Christ is the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham – but not yet!

God told Abraham that his descendants would be slaves in a foreign country but that He would save them and bring them into the promised land. God did so through Moses and Joshua. (At this stage there is much that could be said but I will concentrate on the issue of the Covenants.) Having delivered His people Israel out of Egypt to make them His own inheritance, God gave them the Law at Mount Sinai. 'The Law was given by Moses.' (John 1:17). The NT explains the purpose of the Law. We are told that the Law was added *because of* sin. 'Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made.' (Galatians 3:19). God was going to reveal the depth and extent of sin through giving the Law. The Law was given to reveal how incapable we were living a holy, righteous life. The Law exposes our inward sinfulness and how we are enslaved to it. 'Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound....' (Romans 5:20). Did God want us to sin? No! But through the Law He would show us that we had no power to keep the Law because of the power of sin in us. The NT reveals that the purpose of the Law was to convince us that we are guilty before God and completely unrighteous as far as His nature is concerned; 'Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.' (Romans 3:19) You notice here that Paul says 'the whole world'. In other words, although the Law was given to Israel, *anyone* trying to live righteously will find that they will fall far short of this! 'As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one.' (Romans 3:10). Paul further writes, 'Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.' (Romans 3:20). Again we see that the purpose of the Law was to make us realise that we are sinners. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners, because of the power of sin in us. If you tell a snake to walk on four legs, to grow wool and to make the same noise as a lamb, the snake can try as hard as it wants, but it will completely fail to become a lamb. This is exactly how it is between 'the law' and 'man'. The Law tells us what we should do and how we should be, but it cannot impart to us the power to live in that way, it only reveals to us how bound to sin we are as we try to live according to God's standards. This was the purpose of the Law according to the teaching of the NT. But God purposed to provide Salvation from sin, 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be

lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.' (John 3:14,15).

So the purpose of the Law, which included the 10 commandments written on stone, was to make man aware of his need of salvation! The Law had no power to make us righteous or give us *life* (Galatians 3:21). By making us aware of our own sinfulness the Law prepared us for the message of Christ's salvation, so that is why Paul says, 'Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.' (Galatians 3:24,25). Now of course, in the first instance, this would refer to the Jews to whom the Law was given. But it goes further than this – it refers to anyone who tries to live righteously without faith in Christ. Romans chapter two tells us that because we were created by God, there is a recognition of His standards of righteousness in our hearts and consciences. Anyone who tries to live a holy, righteous life will soon discover that there is darkness, bitterness, uncleanness, hate and envy in his heart – if he is honest and if he listens to his conscience! Whether we are a Jew or not by birth, the temptation of man is to think he can be righteous by himself, or that he is righteous. Especially in the area of faith, it can be easy to fall into the trap of thinking religion is trying to do the right things outwardly. That is why Paul had such a problem with some of the churches - they wanted to return to following the Law instead of believing in Christ for righteousness. It is always easier to believe in outward actions of religion than to follow Christ! Paul says, 'For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.' (Romans 10:3). Paul writes this about the Jews, but it can be true of anyone – even a Christian! And of course this was exactly the kind of problem he had to deal with in the churches of Galatia; 'This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?' (Galatians 3:2,3)

So, Paul says we were under the Law (left to our own efforts to be good) until faith came, 'But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed.' (Wagalatia 3:23). But the Law *could not prevent* the promise that God had made to Abraham from coming into effect, namely, that the nations should be blessed through him and his 'seed', which is Christ (Galatians 3:17,18). Salvation from sin would be brought in another way, in a different way – not by sinful man trying to keep, in his own efforts, a righteous law which is outside of him, but through Jesus Christ (who was the promised 'seed' to Abraham) and through faith in Him. The NT teaches that it is not through the Law but through faith, through faith in Christ, that the nations shall be blessed. This is why Paul says, 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree; that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.' (Galatians 3:13,14). The NT clearly teaches us that we are justified and saved *by faith*, and in this sense, 'we are the children of Abraham' (Galatians 3:6,7). Abraham *believed* God, and it was accounted to him as righteousness. This blessing of having righteousness reckoned to us through faith is to be ours through believing on Him whom God had promised to Abraham – Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But it doesn't stop here! What is the purpose of this blessing according to verse 14 of chapter 3? It is 'that we might receive the *promise of the Spirit* through faith!'

This is now a vital truth! Because of the blood Jesus shed on Calvary, we are to receive the promise of the Spirit by faith (Galatians 3:2). Since the time Adam sinned, all of mankind were kept out of the place where God dwelt. The tabernacle in the wilderness showed us that no one could enter into the presence of God because of sin – only the high priest once a year who had to bring the blood onto the mercy seat. 'The Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing.' (Hebrews 9:8). When Jesus Christ cried, 'It is finished' on Calvary the veil in the temple was torn in two! This shows us that the way into the presence of God was now open to the believer in Christ. Hebrews 9 and 10 teach us this very clearly. 'Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; (Hebrews 10:19,20). This is an amazing truth! What a great work God has done in cleansing and saving us from sin to bring us to Himself to where He is! We, who 'were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man,

but of God.' This is the great truth of the New Covenant. God makes of us a *new creation*! 'Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new, and all things are of God.' (2 Cor. 5:17,18) So Paul says, 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.' (Galatians 6:15).

We have to be born again; we must be made a new creation, otherwise all our works are in vain and all our efforts to be righteous will fail! Jesus said, 'At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you.' (John.14:20). This is the New Covenant! It has replaced the Old Covenant given on Mount Sinai! Hebrews 8:7-13 explains this well, especially where it says, 'For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts:and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people:' (v.10).

It's not just that God by His Spirit has put his law in our hearts, but Christ and the Father have now come to live in us! (John 14:23). Paul declares, 'I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me:and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.' And then he makes this declaration which shows the limitation of the Law that was given on Mount Sinai, 'I do not frustrate the grace of God; for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.' (Galatians 2:20,21).

Some people today, just like in the days of Paul, say we should 'keep the Law' although the New Testament clearly teaches against this language and this idea? They say we must follow the Law given to Moses and if we don't it suggests we are not serious about living an obedient holy life. This was exactly the accusation that was made against Paul (Romans 3:8). Paul makes it clear they are mistaken! 'What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.' (Romans 6:15). At the end of Romans 3 Paul makes it clear that it is *by faith in Christ* that we *establish the law*! 'Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid. Yea, we establish the law.' As I have explained above, the question is not if we should live righteously or not – of course we should. But why does the New Testament teach that we are not 'under the law'? As I have shown above, it is because the Mosaic Law was given by God to show man that he is incapable of keeping the Law, to show him his weakness and sin. He was enslaved to sin, and the Law was outside of him and could not change him. Therefore the Bible teaches we cannot be saved or become righteous or holy by trying to keep the Law. This Life, which God requires us to live, is fulfilled in us because of His enabling grace and life in us – and this is accessed by faith. Romans 8:2-4 explains all this very clearly.

'For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could *not do*, in that it was *weak through the flesh*, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be *fulfilled in us*, who walk not after the flesh, but after *the Spirit*.'

Please be aware again in these verses that justification by faith is the blessing which comes upon us as it did on Abraham – that we might receive the Promise of the Spirit! It is by receiving the Promised Holy Spirit that we are empowered to live free from sin.

So Paul makes it clear that the righteousness required by the Law is fulfilled in us who live by faith and in the Spirit. It is not that the standard of righteousness is lower under the New Covenant - on the contrary – but the way we achieve righteousness has been changed! So why do some people want to insist we must 'keep the Law'.

We all agree that we are to live holy godly lives and that faith does not mean we can sin because of grace. Is it just an argument about words, but basically we mean the same thing? Perhaps, but probably not. It is strange to argue about the use of words ('to keep the Law') when the Bible rejects this thought! As in Paul's day, so today, there are those who are 'religious'. They focus on outward things and on keeping rules. Paul said to the Galatians he was afraid that they had believed in vain and that they had fallen from grace if they returned to the Law. What is the problem with this? The problem is this - it can mean that there is *a lack or absence of an inward change* in the person's life, or that the saving inward transformation has

not taken place that empowers a person to live as Jesus on this earth. This is what the New Covenant brings! If a person lacks this, they will of course depend on outward things and stress the need to 'keep rules'. They try to keep or follow something that is 'outside' of them! For example, a person can say, 'I go to church. I believe in Jesus. I try to keep the commandments.' A person may say this and not be converted at all. This is the case with millions around the world today. This was the case with a driver who took me to villages in Tanzania where I preached the Gospel. He said he was a Christian and that he was saved. I knew from his conversation and conduct that he wasn't! I challenged him but he said he believed in Jesus and that he went to church and believed what the priest said and that the priest would forgive his sins when he confessed them! I told him clearly he was not saved but everything I said seemed to have no effect on him. But several months later when I phoned him he said he had been to another church and that his life had changed and that he was now saved! He realised that what he had before was an outward religion that had not changed his life to live righteously. I am not saying this is the case with everyone who says we must 'keep the Law', but it raises the question how much of the inward transforming power of the Spirit of God such people know who say such things. The power of this Gospel sets us free from sin and empowers us to live as Jesus lived! What a great salvation and what great love God has shown towards us, that we should be called the sons of God! If you say you must 'keep the Law of Moses', make sure you are not lacking the power of Christ's life within you!

© David Stamen