God’s Covenant with man

Chapter 13 – “The Cross and the Covenant”

We come now to our last gathering for the discussion of the Covenant of God. I hope that you feel the summer has been usefully spent in the discussion of this important topic, and though we’ve not had nearly enough time to exhaust the subject, that you have been as edified by it as I have.

Tonight, we’ll tie everything back together under the rubric of the New Covenant – we’ll look in general at issues which have arisen through the study, and specifically at how Jesus Christ works as the mediator and guarantor of the new covenant. As such, He is the culmination of all things promised in the various covenantal relationships God has made with His people. We did only about half of our previous study, so we’ll start first with a re-worked version of that which we didn’t cover last time. We shall then consider both what it means to be in the new covenant through Christ, both individually and, equally importantly, as a corporate community.

The New Covenant promised

1. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34 –
   a. We spoke a little last time about what is said in verse 32 – that Israel broke the Mosaic Law – by both disregarding it, or by formalizing it. What is God’s response, as described in verse 33, and what does it mean for us?
b. Though there is clear contrast, how do verses 32 and 33 also show continuity between the new covenant and the old? Is the new covenant simply a reiteration? Are the terms & promises of the old done away with? Each of these positions is commonly held today in the church: but is there a *via media*?

c. A central feature (Robertson argues this is the primary feature) of the New Covenant is the forgiveness of the sins of God’s people, and his cleansing of them. (See also Jeremiah 33:8) How are these central to the covenant idea, and how is this promise a realization of old provisions? ¹

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¹ For discussion, see this passage from Robertson (Christ of the Covenants, p. 283): “*But how can the prophet make so much of the forgiveness of sins as an integral aspect of the new covenant? Was not elaborate provision made under the Mosaic covenant for the forgiveness of sins? Did not Solomon encourage the people at the time of the dedication of the temple to pray toward the temple that their sins might be forgiven? In what sense may Jeremiah suggest that the unique foundational principle of the new covenant will be the forgiveness of sins?*”
d. The humility of those in the face of God's forgiveness is summarized by Ezekiel in 16:60-63 of his prophecy.

i. How does this section illustrate the humility required of those in covenant with God?

ii. On a slightly more practical note, how should this humility flavour our outreach & witness to people outside the covenant community?

_The New Covenant practiced_

2. Given the things we’ve spoken of during this study, we have a few resources from which to draw in answering: With these things in mind: “Why did Jesus Christ have to shed his blood to cover sins?” i.e. what role does Jesus play in the ‘new covenant’? What does he fulfill in the forgiveness of sins?
3. How do you answer those who would say that the Old Testament faithful were saved through keeping the Law? Who, in fact, saved them? Remember, apply our ‘covenantal lenses’... what have we spoken of, what passages have we touched upon in our study of covenant, that would help answer this question?

4. Let’s think about our covenant community for a bit. Several of the important characteristics\(^2\) that have run throughout the covenants of God point toward an increased appreciation for the community of Christians – the new Israel.

   a. How might we apply the understanding of covenant blessing of families to our lives in the church?

   b. Robertson asks (in a paragraph heading in Christ of the Covenants) a pertinent question: what is biblical corporateness? As we close our discussion, how would you answer this question?

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\(^2\) Notably, these are the eternality of the covenant and the passing of covenantal blessings from God to the line of one’s descendants.
A few readings for further thought-provoking…

**From Haldane, Commentary on Romans: Romans 1:8**

*My God.* — Paul calls God his God, indicating a lively and ardent feeling of love to Him, of confidence in Him, and of liberty of access, which includes a persuasion that his thanksgivings will be agreeable to God. It is also a confession of his duty, and of the obligations he is under to render thanks to God, because He is his God. It is, besides, an intimation of his own character, as walking in communion with God. This is an example of the working of the Spirit of adoption, and of a believer taking to himself, in particular, the blessing of having God for his God, and of being a partaker of all the blessings of the New Covenant, flowing from that most gracious declaration, ‘I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’ Of such appropriation there are numerous instances recorded in the Book of Psalms. ‘I will love Thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer: my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower,’ Psalms 18:1. Job says, ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth.’ ‘I live,’ says Paul, by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.’ Such language it is the privilege of every believer to use, and he will do so in proportion as the love of God is shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost, which is given unto him. The Christian can thus address God as his own God, and often he should do so even in his public declarations. This displeases the world, because it condemns the world. They affect to consider it as presumption, but it is only a proper expression of our belief of God’s testimony with regard to His Son. Studiously to avoid such expressions on proper occasions, is not to show humility, but to be ashamed of the truth.

Paul thanked God, through Jesus Christ, who is our Great High Priest, and presents the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar before the throne. It is through Him alone that all our worship and all our works in the service of God are acceptable. Thus, not only must our petitions ascend to the Father through the Son, but our thanksgivings also, according to the precept, ‘By Him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the faith of our lips, giving thanks to His name,’ Hebrews 13:1, 5. We can have no intercourse with God, but through the one Mediator between God and man, John 14:6; and except through Him, we are not permitted even to return thanksgivings to God.

**From Calvin, Commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-33**

*JEREMIAH 31:31-32 Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; (which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord)*

…Now, as to the new covenant, it is not so called, because it is contrary to the first covenant; for God is never inconsistent with himself, nor is he unlike himself, he then who once made a covenant with his chosen people, had not changed his purpose, as though he had forgotten his faithfulness. It then follows, that the first covenant was inviolable; besides, he had already made his covenant with Abraham, and the Law was a confirmation of that covenant. As then the Law depended on that covenant which God made with his servant Abraham, it follows that God could never have made a new, that is, a contrary or a different covenant. For whence do we derive our hope of salvation, except from that blessed seed promised to Abraham? Further, why are we called the children of
Abraham, except on account of the common bond of faith? Why are the faithful said to be gathered into the bosom of Abraham? Why does Christ say, that some will come from the east and the west, and sit down in the kingdom of heaven with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? (Luke 16:22; Matthew 8:11) These things no doubt sufficiently shew that God has never made any other covenant than that which he made formerly with Abraham, and at length confirmed by the hand of Moses. This subject might be more fully handled; but it is enough briefly to shew, that the covenant which God made at first is perpetual.

Let us now see why he promises to the people a new covenant. It being new, no doubt refers to what they call the form; and the form, or manner, regards not words only, but first Christ, then the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the whole external way of teaching. But the substance remains the same. By substance I understand the doctrine; for God in the Gospel brings forward nothing but what the Law contains. We hence see that God has so spoken from the beginning, that he has not changed, no not a syllable, with regard to the substance of the doctrine. For he has included in the Law the rule of a perfect life, and has also shewn what is the way of salvation, and by types and figures led the people to Christ, so that the remission of sin is there clearly made manifest, and whatever is necessary to be known.

As then God has added nothing to the Law as to the substance of the doctrine, we must come, as I have already said, to the form, as Christ was not as yet manifested: God made a new covenant, when he accomplished through his Son whatever had been shadowed forth under the Law. For the sacrifices could not of themselves pacify God, as it is well known, and whatever the Law taught respecting expiation was of itself useless and of no importance. The new covenant then was made when Christ appeared with water and blood, and really fulfilled what God had exhibited under types, so that the faithful might have some taste of salvation. But the coming of Christ would not have been sufficient, had not regeneration by the Holy Spirit been added. It was, then, in some respects, a new thing, that God regenerated the faithful by his Spirit, so that it became not only a doctrine as to the letter, but also efficacious, which not only strikes the ear, but penetrates into the heart, and really forms us for the service of God. The outward mode of teaching was also new, as it is evident to all; for when we compare the Law with the Gospel, we find that God speaks to us now openly, as it were face to face, and not under a veil, as Paul teaches us, when speaking of Moses, who put on a veil when he went forth to address the people in God’s name. (2 Corinthians 3:13) It is not so, says Paul, under the Gospel, but the veil is removed, and God in the face of Christ presents himself to be seen by us. This, then, is the reason why the Prophet calls it a new covenant, as it will be shown more at large: for I touch only on things which cannot be treated apart, that the whole context of the Prophet may be better understood. Let us then proceed now with the words.

He says that the covenant which he will make will not be such as he had made with their fathers. Here he clearly distinguishes the new covenant from the Law. The contrast ought to be borne in mind; for no one of the Jews thought it possible that God would add anything better to the Law. For though they regarded the Law almost as nothing, yet we know that hypocrites pretended with great ardor of zeal that they were so devoted to the Law, that they thought that heaven and earth could sooner be blended together, than that any change should be made in the Law; and at the same time they held most tenaciously what God had only for a time instituted. It was therefore necessary that the Law should be here contrasted with the new covenant, that the Jews might know that the favor in reserve for them would be far more excellent than what had been formerly manifested to the fathers. This, then, is the reason why he says, not according to the covenant, etc.
JEREMIAH 31:33 – “But 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; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

…He afterwards says, I will put my Law in their inward parts. By these words he confirms what we have said, that the newness, which he before mentioned, was not so as to the substance, but as to the form only: for God does not say here, “I will give you another Law,” but I will write my Law, that is, the same Law, which had formerly been delivered to the Fathers. He then does not promise anything different as to the essence of the doctrine, but he makes the difference to be in the form only. But he states the same thing in two ways, and says, that he would put his law in their inward parts, and that he would write it in their hearts. fF54 We indeed know how difficult it is that man should be so formed to obedience that his whole life may be in unison with the Law of God, for all the lusts of the flesh are so many enemies, as Paul says, who fight against God. ( <450807> Romans 8:7) As then all our affections and lusts thus carry on war with God, it is in a manner a renovation of the world when men suffer themselves to be ruled by God. And we know what Scripture says, that we cannot be the disciples of Christ, except we renounce ourselves and the world, and deny our own selves. ( <400624> Matthew 6:24; <421426> Luke 14:26, 27) This is the reason why the Prophet was not satisfied with one statement, but said, I will put my Law in their inward parts, I will write it in their hearts.

We may further learn from this passage, how foolish the Papists are in their conceit about free-will. They indeed allow that without the help of God’s grace we are not capable of fulfilling the Law, and thus they concede something to the aid of grace and of the Spirit: but still they not only imagine a co-operation as to free-will, but ascribe to it the main work. Now the Prophet here testifies that it is the peculiar work of God to write his Law in our hearts. Since God then declares that this favor is justly his, and claims to himself the glory of it, how great must be the arrogance of men to appropriate this to themselves? To write the Law in the heart imports nothing less than so to form it, that the Law should rule there, and that there should be no feeling of the heart, not conformable and not consenting to its doctrine. It is hence then sufficiently clear, that no one can be turned so as to obey the Law, until he be regenerated by the Spirit of God; nay, that there is no inclination in man to act rightly, except God prepares his heart by his grace; in a word, that the doctrine of the letter is always dead, until God vivifies it by his Spirit.

He adds, And I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people. Here God comprehends generally the substance of his covenant; for what is the design of the Law, except that the people should call upon him, and that he should also exercise a care over his people? For whenever God declares that he will be our God, he offers to us his paternal layout, and declares that our salvation is become the object of his care; he gives to us a free access to himself, bids us to recumb on his grace, and, in short, this promise contains in itself everything needful for our salvation. The case is now also at this day the same under the Gospel; for as we are aliens from the kingdom of heaven, he reconciles us by it to himself, and testifies that he will be our God. On this depends what follows, And they shall be my people; for the one cannot be separated from the other. By these words then the Prophet briefly intimates, that the main object of God’s covenant is, that he should become our Father, from whom we are to seek and expect salvation, and that we should also become his people.