

The New Covenant

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"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31-34). "This is the New Covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20). What is the "New Covenant" that the Lord is speaking about? Who is included in the New Covenant? What are the provisions of this New Covenant? How are we brought into the New Covenant? Answers to these questions form the basis of what God is doing today.

Although this subject is very large and really includes all of the teaching found in what we call the "New Testament," our purpose here is to highlight some important aspects of the New Covenant for our consideration, so that we may not miss the "new and living way." May each one of us be stimulated by the Holy Spirit to go back and search these things out, so that the revelation of what God is doing in Jesus Christ may grow in our hearts. The faith that pleases God must have at its roots the living Word of God which abides forever. May our hearts be hungry to know God in fullness and to walk in His life, that we may glorify His Name.

The Old Covenant

As we look back in a brief overview of the history of God's dealing with man, there are certain things that stand out which form the background for our present relationship with God. It is very clear that God Himself does not change, but that His dealing with men does change. God has been moving with purpose since the beginning of time, and His purpose is to bring many sons to glory and to include them in everlasting fellowship with Himself. The very nature of God is love, and God's love reaches out to include all who will respond to it.

There are many things we may not understand, but it is evident from history that the working of God's purpose takes time. Christ was the Lamb *"slain from the foundation of the world,"* yet he died thousands of years later at the very hour appointed by God. In the Old Testament, the history of God's dealing with man up until the time of Christ, we find that God's dealings were with certain men (such as Noah and Abraham), and then with the nation of Israel. His purpose in dealing with each is clearly stated, and the history we have is evidently what God wanted us to have, to form the basis for our understanding of His present dealing. Reading the Old Testament, we not only learn history, but also see clearly the character of God and how He views things. Through the entire history of God's interaction with man, we see one theme that is of major importance to us: God was moving towards Calvary, and His final provision and work of redemption would be accomplished there. Everything God did was to prepare men for the coming Redeemer.

When we speak of the Old Covenant, we are referring to the covenant which God made with Israel. At the heart of the Old Covenant was the Law. In Galatians Paul tells us why the Law was given--to preserve Israel as a nation until the time of Christ (Galatians 3:19). It was a "schoolmaster" to keep lawlessness in check, and to make sure there was a place for Christ to enter into the human race. It was never intended to bring life (Galatians 3:21), for if it could have, then Christ died in vain. It also revealed man's inability to be righteous in himself (Romans 7), and for those who had ears to hear, it pointed the way to God's provision which was Christ. Before the Law was given, men thought that they could do whatever God asked. God knew differently, but He let mankind come to that realization through experience and failure.

A further aspect of the Law that is important to us at this time is that it was dependent on what man could do. God said, "If you will do such and such, I will do so and so." God did not break His side, but man could not fulfill his commitment. The end of the whole matter was a nation that did not even recognize God when He came to live among them. Their concept of righteousness, justice, and God Himself was so distorted that the very people who were supposed to be a channel through whom God could bless all of the people of the earth plotted to put to death their Messiah.

The Promise

Throughout the entire history of God's dealing with men before the time of Christ, we find constant mention of a future time when the Holy Spirit would be poured out. Consider these promises to Israel: *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you: I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them"* (Ezekiel 36:26,27). *"I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it," says the Lord*" (Ezekiel 37:14). *"And I will not hide My face from them anymore; for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel," says the Lord God*" (Ezekiel 39:29). *"And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days"* (Joel 2:28,29).

As Israel was downtrodden by the nations, imagine the hope this must have created within their hearts. These promises had not yet been fulfilled, and they were constantly looking forward to that future day. The last command that Jesus gave his disciples before He went away is found in Acts 1:4. *"And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which,' He said, 'you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'"* This is clearly referring to what happened on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) when the Holy Spirit came in power, and filled those who were waiting in the upper room. Addressing the assembly, Peter said this was a fulfillment of the promise in the prophecy of Joel: that God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh (Acts 2:17). He also said that it was a direct result of what Christ did on the cross. When Christ was exalted, He poured out *"the promise of the Holy Spirit."* (Acts 2:33)

What we need to see here without a shadow of doubt is that this is the fulfillment of the promises in the Old Testament scriptures quoted above. The work of redemption was accomplished, Christ sat down, and the way was now open for men to partake of the life of God, His Holy Spirit.

In considering these scriptures, some may feel that since the Old Testament prophecies were addressed to Israel, this New Covenant, too, only affects Israel. Peter, speaking under the direction of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, said that the Promise was also to *"those who were far off."* (Acts 2:39) Later, in the household of Cornelius (Acts 10), God made it very plain to Peter and to everyone else that the distinction between Jew and Gentile was finished. It took a dramatic working to communicate the message, but God knows how to communicate to man. The separation of Israel as a nation through which God would move was finished (at least for now), and the door into the life of God was open to all. Some may hold that some distinction should continue to be made, but we can only say that Paul laid down his life for the absolute truth that in Christ there is neither Jew or Gentile, circumcision nor uncircumcision, slave nor free. Let us get firmly in our minds that God knows no man according the flesh and we should not either. The New Covenant is a covenant in life for all who will come. God shows no favorites.

Life

The importance of what happened on the Day of Pentecost cannot be overemphasized. God had been moving toward this day from the beginning of time. For the first time in the history of mankind, man could now partake of life. Ever since Adam turned away from God and chose to move separately from God in his own ability, the way to the tree of life was closed (Genesis 3:24). But because of the work Christ did as Redeemer, paying the price of sin for the whole Adamic race, the way to life was open. No man had ever partaken of the life of God before Pentecost. This was a completely new working, never before experienced.

There may be a question in our minds about what the Old Testament saints experienced. We are told that they pleased God by faith, but that they did not receive the Promise (Hebrews 11:39). The distinction here is very important to us. God communicated His Word to them in many ways (Hebrews 1:1), and those that heard and obeyed the Lord pleased Him. They served God in their generation, and God was glorified. The Holy Spirit came upon men at different times, moving on and through them to accomplish His purposes. But as good as all this was, they still had to stand outside the veil behind which God dwelt. The door to unhindered fellowship was not open, because the price of sin had not been paid and the Holy Spirit was not yet given (John 7:39). If one man could have partaken of the life of God on his own merit, then the possibility was there for any man, and the sacrifice of Christ would not have been necessary.

Although we may know these truths, we must let the reality and implications of them grip our hearts and expand our revelation. Men before Calvary did not partake of God's life. The whole working of God now is based on the fact that Jesus is now glorified, the way is open, and the Holy Spirit is given!

The Work of Christ

At this point, it may help us to back up and consider the work of Christ on the cross. It is clear that what Christ did opened the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit, but do we know what He did? We can only touch on the subject here, but let us be stirred to continually inquire into this area so that the revelation of who Christ is and what He did may grow in our hearts.

In Romans, Paul speaks much about the work Christ did on the cross. In chapter 5, he compares Adam and Christ, saying that Adam is a type of Christ. The whole human race descended from Adam, but it descended in death. God began another race in Christ, but this time it is in life--that is, His life. Paul refers to these two races as the "old man" (all who are in Adam) and the "new man" (all who are in Christ). The difference between the two is life.

When Christ came to earth, He took on Himself the form of man. In so doing, He became permanently identified with mankind. He was not born into death like others, for God was His Father. When He died on the cross, Paul says that *"our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with"* (Romans 6:6). Thus the whole human race (our "old man" or "body of sin") was crucified with Christ. This was God's doing, and since we were all in the "old man," we died with Christ. This has tremendous implications to us. If the old man has been crucified or put away, then God is no longer dealing "in Adam." God no longer considers what we are according to the flesh. We find this truth throughout the entire New Testament. Paul refers to this same truth in Galatians 2:20 when he says, *"I have been crucified with Christ"* (past tense). It is a historic fact. In Christ, God judged the entire human race, and put away the body of sin from His sight. All God's dealing now is in Christ (the new man), and every promise is to those who are in Christ by the Spirit. This is God's beginning place, a place of life.

The work of Christ as Savior was all necessary preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit. He became the sacrifice for sin, and our reconciliation to God. He is able to forgive our sins because of who He is and what He did. We are cleansed from sin by His blood, and prepared as vessels to receive the life of God. All of this is only preparation, however, for partaking of life. We see many types in the Old Testament that speak of this. The blood was always applied first (speaking of the work of redemption and cleansing) and then the oil (speaking of the Holy Spirit).

The important thing for us to see here is that what Christ did as Savior was to open up the way to intimate fellowship with God by the Spirit. When Christ died, God Himself tore the veil in the Temple from top to bottom. The old order was terminated. It had done its work. The new order was being ushered in. Christ was the true Passover Lamb, and there was never to be another. The work of redemption was done once for all, but the work of redemption was not an end in itself. Although it was an essential part of the working of God, the whole work of Christ was for the purpose of making it possible for men to partake of the life of God.

Consider these scriptures: *"The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly"* (John 10:10). *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"* (John 14:6). *"These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name"* (John 10:31). *"When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life'"* (Acts 11:18). *"These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God"* (I John 5:13).

What we are saying is that man could not partake of life without what Christ did, and that the believing that God is looking for from us is a believing that takes us on into the life of God. Anything less than this stops short of God's purpose. Jesus said the first thing that men must do is believe in Him (John 6:29). A person must believe that Jesus is the Christ before he can come in faith. If we do not believe that He is who He says He is, why would we listen to Him? But if we believe that He is Christ and Lord, then we will listen to Him and obey. The first thing that He will tell us is to repent (turn from the way we are going) and come to Him for cleansing. He is the only one who can forgive us of our sin, and He does this on the basis of repentance and what He did on the cross. However, the cleansing is for the purpose of filling with the life of God. True believing will not stop short of receiving the life of God.

Sonship

We said earlier that the purpose of God may be expressed as bringing many sons to glory (Hebrews 2:10). In the Old Covenant, however, we find almost no mention of sonship, and what is mentioned is a very distant relationship. Israel is spoken of as God's son (Exodus 4:22), but the thought of a nation being a son is very far from the intimate sonship we find in the New Covenant. This close relationship was not possible before Calvary, but now that the matter of sin has been dealt with, the purpose that God had in His heart all along can be fulfilled.

What Christ did opened the way for us to be true sons. Most of us were outside of Israel, so we were not even in the Old Covenant. We had no hope, and no basis even to approach God. In speaking to the Galatians, Paul likens what Christ did to adoption (Galatians 3). Adoption is a legal process by which an outsider is included in the family. Until the legal process is completed, there is no basis for a relationship. Christ completed the legal transaction necessary for us to be sons, but to make the sonship

real, He sends the "Spirit of adoption" into our lives whereby we can say "Abba, Father." (Romans 8:15) (The word "Abba" is a close term of endearment, like "Daddy.") In other words, the Holy Spirit comes and makes the relationship by bringing us into life (God's life) so that we can have fellowship with the Father and with the Son. No man can call God "Father" or Jesus Christ "Lord" except by the Spirit (I Corinthians 12:3). Sonship is by birth. When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus in John 3, He said that the beginning is to be born again, and that it is a spiritual birth. Apart from this birth, we cannot even see the kingdom of God, let alone enter into that kingdom and have fellowship with God. To be a son of God, we must be born of His life. This is what brings us into union with God. Those saints in the Old Covenant could not enter into sonship because the provision was not yet there. Now that the provision has been made, God is dealing with sons (Hebrews 12).

Jesus is spoken of as *"the firstborn among many brethren"* (Romans 8:29). Although Christ was in the form of God (Philippians 2:6), He laid aside His glory and became fully identified with man. In so doing, He was perfected as Savior and qualified before God to save mankind and to *"bring many sons to glory"* (Hebrews 2:10). Worship and praise to the One who is worthy shall fill our hearts and mouths for all eternity! It is doubtful that we shall ever plumb the depths of God's love and comprehend the riches of His mercy for including us in such a way, but the scriptures are plain as to these things, and the Spirit within says, "Amen." We need to continue to ponder these things before God, that He may reveal more of this great salvation to us. For now, let us see very clearly that sonship is a unique privilege of the New Covenant.

The privileges unique to sons are endless. A son has the full benefit of the father's house. The father provides all of his needs. He is given full access to the father--directly. He does not need an invitation, but can come into "Daddy's" presence anytime with his needs. The fellowship between the son and the father is established just because he is the son--nothing more is required. Everything the father has is the son's, according to the son's maturity and ability to handle it. He has full access to all the father has and knows. As the maturity allows, he is able to draw upon the father's resources.

Sonship speaks not only of privileges, but of responsibilities. A son is permanently identified with his father, representing the father at all times whether he wants to or not. Every lack in a son brings discredit on the father, and every success reflects favorably upon the father. As long as the son is in the father's house, he must answer to the father for his conduct. He must submit to his father's training, not being allowed to establish his own will, but being responsible to carry out the will of the father.

As the son abides in the father's house, he increasingly bears the image of the father. *"Beloved, now we are the children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is"* (I John 3:2). There is only one way this can possibly be true in reality, and that is that we have His life. A person cannot copy or mimic the life of God. The only thing we can do is let the life manifest through us. We bear the image of our father. If Adam is our father, we will bear his image. If God is our father, we will bear His image.

God does not work in the realm of our "trying to be like Jesus." God brings the reality of His life within by new birth. The Holy Spirit comes to abide within us to make us sons in reality. *"For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out 'Abba, Father'"* (Romans 8:15). The central thought in sonship is closeness of relationship by the Spirit that we may bear His name. What a glory, and yet what a responsibility! No wonder those in the Old Covenant could not bear this responsibility. It simply is not possible without His life. Has the glory of the New Covenant yet broken upon our hearts? May God open our eyes that we may see.

Salvation

There is a term we need to consider again, and that is "salvation." What do we mean by "salvation"? What do we mean when we ask, "Are you saved?" Let us consider these phrases, asking God to give us fresh understanding.

The thought in the word "saved" is that we have been delivered from some place of danger into a place of safety. What was the danger? The danger was that we were dead in sin, and the only thing we could expect was the wrath and judgment of God. What is the place of safety? The only safe place is "in Christ," for everything that God is doing is in Him. All of the promises are to those who are "in Christ." The thought of somehow being delivered from the wrath and judgment of God but not being in a place of living union with Christ is not to be found any place in the New Testament.

An often-used scripture is Romans 10:9-10, which says: *"If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes to righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made to salvation."* Notice the words: *"If you confess...the Lord Jesus..."* How can we confess Jesus as Lord except by the Spirit? (I Corinthians 12:3) To say, "Yes, I know Jesus Christ is Lord" if He is not truly Lord has no meaning. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. The saints in the Old Covenant believed in God, but that did not make God Lord in their lives. Paul expressed this in Romans 7. This was Paul's experience under the Law, and he did not find deliverance apart from Christ and the provisions of the New Covenant (Romans 8:1-4). The only way we can be "in Christ Jesus" is to be in the Spirit, in His life, for *"if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His."* (Romans 8:9)

The Philippian jailer said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." What was this believing? Was it an intellectual belief in a historical Christ, or was it a living belief in the heart, which leads one on into the life of God? The cheap "believism" that is so prevalent today says, "Yes, I believe," but does not see the life changed and a person brought into union with God by the Spirit. It is spoken of by James as *"faith without works"*--dead, and useless (James 2:14-26).

Paul says it like this: *"For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life"* (Romans 5:10). Think carefully about what he is saying. The reconciliation was what Christ did on the cross, apart from us. Christ removed the veil that separated man from God. That was God's doing, whether we responded or not. But we were in the place of danger: death. The only thing that could bring us out of danger was life, and Paul says we will be "saved by His life." Our only salvation is to be made alive to God and to be led by His Spirit. *"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God"* (Romans 8:14). That is the only way we can be delivered from being sinners.

We were sinners because we were dead to God. When we were separate from God, living independently from Him, manifesting our own righteousness, and trying to be good, all that we did was sin. It was all filthy rags in God's sight. God says that to be righteous, we must partake of His righteousness. This is accomplished as we partake of His life by the Spirit. This is salvation.

The New and Living Way

In Hebrews 10:20 we are told that this New Covenant is *"a new and living way."* The truth in those words needs to ring in our hearts, expand our revelation, and direct our walk. Everything in this New Covenant is new. In Christ Jesus, we are a new creation (II Corinthians 5:17). None of the old creation was brought over. The promises of the New are better than the Old (Hebrews 8:6). The promises on which the New Covenant is based are the Savior and the Holy Spirit. Both are God himself, and both have been given. This makes the foundation as sure as God Himself. This covenant cannot fail because it is a covenant in the life of God. *"It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure"* (Philippians 2:13). No wonder Paul could say, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"* (Philippians 4:13).

The Old Covenant depended on what man could do. It failed because man apart from God lacks the ability to meet the standards of a Holy God. The New Covenant will not fail because it depends alone on what God can do. Man does have a part, but it is not to help God. It is not a "50-50" relationship. It is a "100-100" relationship. Man submits to God in faith without reservation, and the full power of God is manifested without limit in vessels of clay. Glory! Even the changing that takes place in these earthen vessels is not from defeat to victory, but *"from glory to glory"* (II Corinthians 3:18). *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us"* (II Corinthians 4:7)

One of the promises in this New Covenant is that God will put His laws in our minds and write them on our hearts (Hebrews 8:10). The commandments of the old Law were written on tablets of stone. Men memorized them, and tried to obey. They taught their children saying, "Know the Lord." Now the old has passed away! We do not know God in that way any longer. He has given us His life that we may know Him in reality. *"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent"* (John 17:3). *"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in Spirit and truth"* (John 4:23,24).

We do not know God in an intellectual way with our minds. We still have minds, and we need to set our minds on eternal things, but the mind is only a faculty of our being for certain purposes. Knowing God is a matter of the Spirit. Fellowship is in the Spirit, in the life of God, not in the mind. The mind is used to reason about many things. The mind may reason about food, but reasoning about food does not satisfy hunger or nourish the body. So it is with God. We may reason about the things of God, but nourishment only takes place as we experience God in the Spirit and eat of the living bread. *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God"* (Matt. 4:4).

The living word is what the Holy Spirit writes on our hearts and minds. Our focus is on our relationship with God by the Spirit. This is an entirely new working in the New Covenant that the saints in the Old knew nothing of, and it takes everything out of the dead letter and into life. Search the New Testament from cover to cover and see how God has lifted His entire working out of the dead letter, from commandments written in stone--to life, with His word being written in our hearts and minds by the Spirit.

Faith

Everything in the New Covenant is made ours by faith. We begin in faith, continue in faith, and end in faith. This is where the Galatians went wrong. Listen to what Paul told them. *"This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain? Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith?"* (Galatians 3:2-5) *"So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham"* (Galatians 3:9). *"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:27).

Faith is a continual living connection with a living God. Faith is authored in our hearts by God through His living Word (Romans 10:17). Faith is not trying to believe. It originates with God. Our part is to hear God, submit to His Word, and obey. This brings God and His grace into our lives every time. There is no other way. Apart from faith we cannot please God. Faith lives in the living Word of God. This new and living way is a life of faith. The saints in the Old Covenant knew about acts of faith, but this life of faith is something that was not open to them. As Christians, our lives are lives of faith that draw continually upon God and allow His life to be lived out through us.

Brethren, these few words have not even scratched the surface of the riches that have been made ours in Christ Jesus in the New Covenant. May the Lord stir our hearts deeply to search these things out, so that we may enter in and walk in the life of God. The door is open. Have we entered in? May we allow the Lord to lead us on into His presence this day, that we may dwell there forever for His glory!