

Interpreting the Bible

Lesson 2: Reading the Bible in Light of Covenants

Table Questions:

1. God’s people in the Old Testament went to war for God. Why should the church not take up arms and spread the gospel by military force?

2. Deuteronomy 29:9 says, “keep the words of this covenant and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do.” Can we expect the righteous to prosper in material and physical ways (health and wealth)? Why or why not?

*Also, can we claim God’s promises for the land (2 Chronicles 7:14) for America? If America humbles itself and prays, and seeks God’s face and turn from wicked ways, then God will forgive and heal the land.” Will he punish us if we don’t?

3. Is the political nation of Israel still God’s chosen people? Should we politically support this nation’s safety and prosperity based on this (not taking into account other political motivations for supporting Israel)?

Major Differences between Old and New Testament

Those who teach and believe that the Old and New Testaments fit together have to wrestle with some fundamental differences.

Old Testament	New Testament
God’s people were a political nation (Theocracy)	God’s people (the church) are not a nation or political body (Rom. 9:6-8)
Religious authorities were Civil authorities (King, Priest, Prophet): they could punish sin with physical punishments	Spiritual authority is distinguished from civil authority (John 18:36)
Physical Promise Land represented God’s place of blessing	Heaven is our ultimate hope, not Promise Land (Heb. 12:22-24)
Circumcision marked God’s people	Baptism replaces circumcision; Christ circumcises hearts (Col. 2:11f, Rom. 2:29)
Israel (God’s Theocracy) went to war with other Theocracies to conquer and defend the Promise Land	Physical Holy Warfare is replaced by Spiritual Warfare (Eph. 6:10f.), and the gospel goes to all nations (Matt. 28:19f)
Temple and ongoing sacrificial system designed to deal with sin NT	Christ’s once for all sacrifice dealt fully with sins (Heb. 10:1-10)

Does this indicate two different religions? Are there different plans of salvation?

- How can the Old Testament be relevant to us today if the differences are so great?
- If so, what does this say about God? Is his plan arbitrary or inconsistent? Could his plan change again?

Major Similarities

New Testament claims continuity One God.

- Ephesians 4:4 “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call”

Jesus affirms that his ministry is in line with the OT:

- Matthew 5:17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.
- Luke 24:27 “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”

The Bible presents itself as one story with many chapters.

Problem with exaggerating the continuity

Jesus and early Christians had some problem with those who clung to the Law

- Was the problem just legalism? Is legalism just a perversion of the good OT law?
- If legalism were the only problem, does that make Jesus just a reformer? In other words, if he got them to treat the Law biblically (not legalistically) like Elijah or Isaiah would the problem be solved?
- Are we still under the obligation to perform the Law?
- Do the blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience apply today?

We will not be able to navigate through this issue without understanding covenants. Knowing how the covenants function throughout Israel’s history is the key to interpreting much of the Old Testament and valuable in understanding Christ’s work of redemption.

Biblical Covenants

What is a Covenant?

A covenant is a relationship God establishes with us and guarantees by his word.

Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) 7.1: *“The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.”*

Covenant of Works: The first covenant God made with man promised life to Adam and his children on the condition of perfect obedience. (WCF 7.2)

Covenant of Grace (Promise): After Adam’s failure, he and his children were incapable of fulfilling the covenant of works. God made a second covenant, called the covenant of grace. God freely offers sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring faith in Christ by the Spirit. (WCF 7.3-4)

Does this mean God scrapped the first covenant and the second is Plan B? Does God now ignore the requirement of obedience and switch to grace?

The Covenant of Works is not abandoned but the second covenant is added in order to complete or satisfy the first. The Covenant of Grace allows the Covenant of Works to be fulfilled. In light of this, we should ask, “Are you save by works or grace?”

Romans 5:18–19 *“Therefore, as [Adam’s] one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so [Christ’s] one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. [19] For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”*

We are saved by works, Christ’s works. We receive Christ’s work on our behalf by grace through faith. It is based on God’s covenant promise to us.

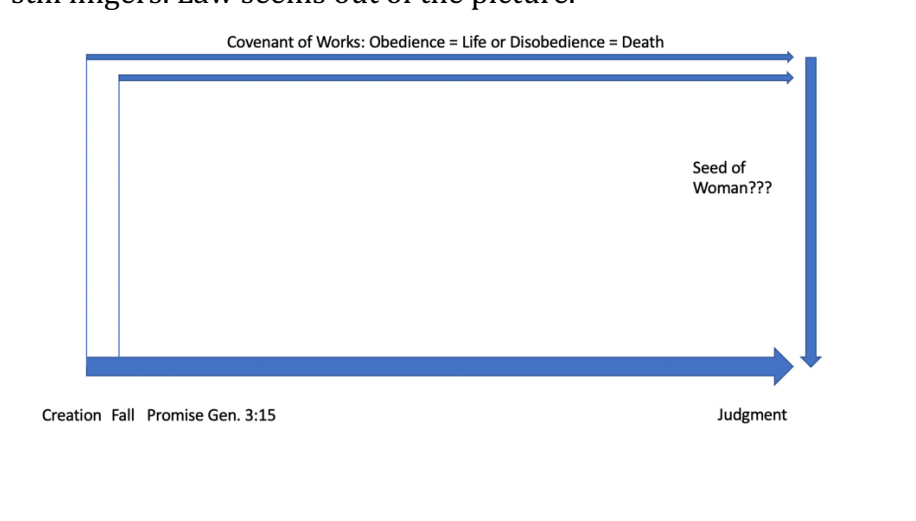
- The Covenant of Works stretches from Adam until the end of time. The Covenant of Grace begins after the Fall and continues through time.
- Covenant of Grace (Promise) starts out vague but increases in clarity as story of the Bible unfolds.
 1. Genesis 3:15 God offers hope to Adam and his descendants with the promise of life by His gracious act.
 2. Promise of grace is made to Abraham and all nations.

Genesis 12:1–3

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. [2] And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [3] I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, **and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**”

3. Genesis 15 God makes an oath that he will guarantee (upon threat of self-destruction)

The picture of God’s redemption is getting clearer. But the question of how God will do this still lingers. Law seems out of the picture.



Law Returns? Nation of Israel at Sinai

Enter Israel as a nation formed on Mt. Sinai after the Exodus. God makes a covenant with them that appears to operate on a works principle.

Exodus 24:7

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."

But!!! this did not cancel out the previous covenant of grace made to Adam and confirmed to Abraham.

Galatians 3:16–18

[16] Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. [17] This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. [18] For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

Habakkuk demonstrates eternal salvation was by faith. Habakkuk 2:4

[4] "Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.

Israel, from Moses to Christ, functions on Two Levels:

1. Redemptive community saved by grace: our forefathers in the faith/OT Church
2. A law-based community that received temporal blessings and curses based on their obedience to the law.

- People of God defined by ethnicity
- Obedience or disobedience would determine Israel's status in the Promise Land (Dt. 27-28)
- Three Types of Laws given to Israel
 - Civil: marked God's people as a theocracy, prefigured Christ as King
 - Ceremonial: set Israel apart from other nations and Temple sacrifices to deal with sins, prefigured Christ's sacrifice
 - Moral: summarized in the Ten Commandments, prefigured Christ's perfect obedience.

What's the relationship between obedience and well-being in this life?

1. There is a "natural" relation: There are natural consequences to sin, totally apart from God's miraculous intervention.

Examples:

- Slothful people don't achieve as much as hard-working people
- A soft answer turns away wrath

- People who are untrustworthy find that others won't confined in them

2. The Sinai relation (covenant with Moses): God created a special relationship where prosperity in the Promise Land was contingent on obedience.

Examples:

- "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you."
- "And if you will obey my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be full. Take heed lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, and the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and he shut up the heavens, so that there be no rain, and the land yield no fruit, and you perish quickly off the good land which the Lord gives you....Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day" (Dt. 11:13-17, 26-28).
- Deuteronomy 28
[Note that there is no "natural" relation between rain and obedience, or draught and disobedience. God pledges here to intervene supernaturally, miraculously, if you will, in Israel's history in Canaan. He pledges to withdraw rain if Israel is disobedient, and to bless with rain if she is obedient.]

3. The New Covenant Relation:

- There is no longer a holy land or a holy people (at least not in the geo-political sense; the church is both international and intra-national),
- There are no special covenant blessings/cursings related to temporal prosperity in a given land.
- In fact, following the example of Christ and the apostles, there appears to be, if anything, an inverse relation between faithfulness and temporal prosperity. Saints in the New Covenant "fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ" (Col 1:24), they intend to know Christ, not only in the power of his resurrection, but also "in the fellowship of his suffering, becoming like him in his death" (Phil. 3:10).

Summary

- Israel's eternal salvation comes by grace through faith in the promised Christ
- Israel's temporary earthly situation (punishment and reward) by works of the Law

Moses is in heaven completely justified and forgiven for all his sins by faith (Heb. 11:23f), but while alive was punished and kept from entering the land through disobedience.

It is better to think of this on corporate terms, not individual. Punishments/blessings were more often given to the whole nation rather than individuals. Jeremiah sits weeping in Exile though he was obedient. David remained in the Land despite his sin.

Why did God add this law principle to Israel?

God gives Israel a law that it couldn't keep. Israel will continue to fail to obey the law until it seems they are completely rejected by God.

Israel dramatically portrays the Covenant of Works (even while being saved by grace)

1. It was a re-enactment of Adam's failure: Humanity in Adam + Law = Condemnation

- **The Law exposed sin.**

Romans 7:7f "What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin...sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and righteous and good."

- **The Law demonstrated humanity's helplessness**

Romans 8:3a...For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.

- **The Law proved that there needed to be another type of humanity, because in Adam we could not fulfill the Law**

There is a sort of drama that Israel puts on for the world to see. On a typological level it demonstrates God's judgment for sin.

2. It was a preview of Christ's success: Christ + Law = Vindication/Justification

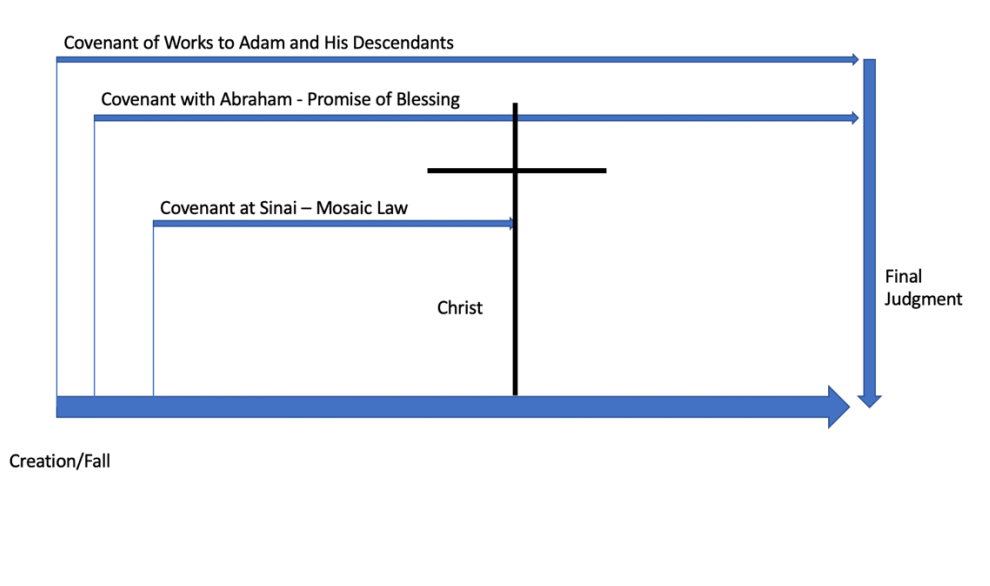
- **Christ did what Israel could not**

Romans 8:3b...by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us...

Matthew 5:17-18 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. [18] For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

Romans 10:4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

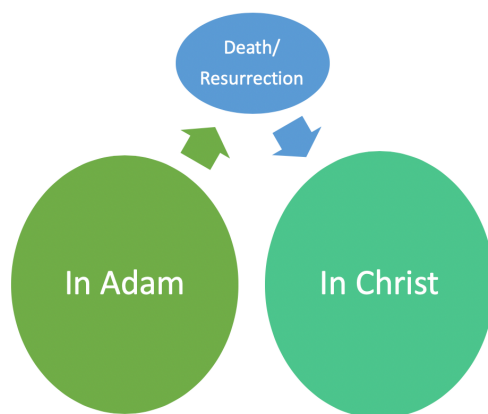
Galatians 4:4-7 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, [5] to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. [6] And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" [7] So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.



Key to Understanding Christ: Christ is the True Israel. Christ did what Israel could not do.

What if you clung onto the Law instead of the promise? What if you rejected Christ and sought to be saved by the Law?

- “...by works of the law no one will be justified.” Galatians 2:16
- “For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” Romans 3:20
- “For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.” Romans 4:15
- “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse” Galatians 3:10
- “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” Philippians 3:9



The Law and the Christian

- *The Civil Law is fulfilled in Christ: His Kingdom is not of this world* (John 18:36)
- *The Ceremonial Law is fulfilled in Christ: Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins* (Hebrews 10:12)
- *The Moral Law is fulfilled in Christ: Christ's act of obedience is for us* (Romans 5:18), yet the moral law still has value.

Richard Gaffin: *"the antithesis between the law and the gospel ends the moment someone becomes a Christian."*

Three Uses of the Law: Moral Law remains and functions in the ways.

1. A mirror reflecting the perfect righteousness of God. It exasperates us and shows us our need as sinners for a savior.
2. To restrain evil: It doesn't change our hearts, but it can inhibit lawlessness.
3. Moral guide for believers: It tells us what we are being made into.

[Why there is not still a special plan for Israel?]

Principles for Interpreting the Bible in Light of Covenants

1. We must interpret scripture in its unity as one story. This means we must take into account the whole story when interpreting a section of it.

2. We must understand every passage in light of its immediate covenantal context.

3. We need to translate Israel's typology into ways it foreshadows Christ's fulfillment:

- Understanding blessings/curses in light of Christ:
 - Temporal health and wealth for obedience translates to eternal redemption and restoration because of Christ's obedience.
 - Temporal suffering of curses for disobedience translates to the suffering Christ endured for our covenant curse.
- Key figures do not often correlate to us, but to Christ.
 - We are not to "be like David"
 - We are to see how David points to Christ
- Holy War where Israel destroys the Canaanites foreshadows God's final judgment. They suffered physical punishment that represents eternal judgment.
- Promise Land only foreshadows a "better country" expected in the new heavens and new earth (Heb. 11)

4. Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's purpose or True Israel, will help us understand the ways New Testament authors see fulfillment.

Example: Matthew 2:14-15

And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt [15] and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

- Many scholars scoff at Matthew's use (or abuse) of Hosea 11:1, claiming Matthew has ignored the context.
- In context of Hosea "son" is clearly Israel as a whole. It is not a prediction of the future but a reference back to the Exodus. Hosea uses it as an expression of God's love that persists through Israel's unfaithfulness.
- Matthew was not unaware of the original context. In fact, Matthew depends on you knowing the context for the full meaning.
- The effect of the quote teaches us the Jesus will fulfill what Israel needed. The outcome will be rescue like the Exodus.

Answering the Table Questions:

1. God's people in the Old Testament went to war for God. Why should the church not take up arms and spread the gospel by military force?

- Israel foreshadowed Christ's eternal kingdom.
- Their rendering of temporal judgment prefigured Christ's final judgment
- Christ's kingdom is now advanced through spiritual warfare

2. Deuteronomy 29:9 says, "keep the words of this covenant and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do." Can we expect the righteous to prosper in material and physical ways (health and wealth)? Why or why not?

*Also, can we claim God's promises for the land (2 Chronicles 7:14) for America? If America humbles itself and prays, and seeks God's face and turn from wicked ways, then God will forgive and heal the land." Will he punish us if we don't?

- Christ's obedience merits eternal health and wealth for his people
- Prior to the Final Judgment, God does not punish us for our sin.
 - There is no connection between our prosperity or suffering based on our obedience (aside from the "natural" relationship noted above)

3. Is political nation of Israel still God's chosen people? Should we politically support this nation's safety and prosperity based on this (not taking into account other political motivations)?

- Christ is the true fulfillment of Israel and its purpose
- Christians "in Christ" can see a direct correlation with Israel. They are the OT church.
- Israel apart from Christ is still in Adam and with humanity under the curse of the Law.