

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 19 September

Children's Talk: Agreements

Does anyone know what an agreement is? An agreement is when someone asks you to do something, and you say, or agree, that you will do it. When your mom says, "clean up your toys," and you say, "ok," you have made an agreement. What are some other agreements that people make?

But not all agreements are the same. There are lots of different ways of saying you agree to do something. If your mom says, "Clean up your toys," you can decide how strong your agreement is:

- Sure
- Ok
- Yes
- Yes absolutely!
- Yes, I promise!
- Yes, I pinkie swear promise absolutely!

Now if you agree by saying sure, and then decide, you know what, I'm not actually going to do what I said I would, that doesn't seem that bad. But if you say, "Yes, I pinkie swear promise absolutely!" that feels a lot worse, right?

So sometimes we even use this as an excuse. When we agree to do something, like clean up our toys, and then decide not to, we can defend ourselves by saying, "well, I didn't *promise* I would."

But that's not really how the Lord wants us to think of agreements. He doesn't want us to think that some agreements we can just forget about and ignore because we feel like it. He wants us to treat agreements as if they matter, even the little ones.

Back in the old days, people would make promises with an oath: they would say, "I promise, by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, and my own head that I will do what I said I would do!" That was basically their way of pinkie swearing.

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No." For whatever is more than these is from the evil one. (Matthew 5:33-37)

So Jesus was teaching them that instead of making big, grand promises, and thinking that they could break all the other promises, they needed to start just saying yes, and meaning it, or no, and meaning it.

When your mom asks you to clean up, and you say sure, that doesn't mean you can decide not to do it just because you didn't *promise* to do it. Whether you say, "sure," or, "Yes, I pinkie swear promise absolutely!" both agreements are just as important as each other. So the next time you agree to do something, think carefully about whether you actually mean to do it. And if you do, simply say "yes!" and then do it; or if you don't really mean to do it, just say, "no" and don't do it. But either way, when you make an agreement, make sure to do everything you can to keep it. Then people will trust what you say, and your agreements will be strong.

Strands Through Scripture, Part 3: Covenants

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

19 September, 2021

Every word or concept in Scripture has a deeper spiritual meaning. This spiritual meaning is what ties the Word together from beginning to end. By looking at individual concepts as they appear throughout the Word we can begin to glimpse connections and strands of meaning running through what on the surface appear to be disparate and even contradictory stories. Today we are going to look at the idea of the Covenant, specifically the Covenant that exists between God and mankind. Along the way we will explore how we can better uphold our side of the Covenant and gain appreciation for how the Lord upholds His side.

Before we jump in though I simply want to define “covenant.” Through the years this word has become a technical term for the pact that God made with the people of Israel. But in the original language the word for covenant simply means “agreement.” It could range in scope from a pact between two individuals, to an alliance between nations, all the way up to God’s relationship with humanity.

As with any agreement, there are levels of meaning or significance, from the mundane to the sublime. I thought I would use one of the more common agreements, or covenants, that we still encounter today. I have here a marriage certificate. This is the official recognition from the government that two individuals have entered into a marriage covenant. How that covenant is held can vary greatly between couples, or even vary greatly within one couple, depending on the context. I’ll go to two extremes, illustrated by two more documents. Here is a prenup, or ante nuptial, agreement. I’ll read a little bit of it and you tell me if you think this adequately sums up the agreements that exist between a husband and wife. Now I’m not saying prenups are bad, there are very valid reasons to get them. But they are not the whole picture. Now here is another document, very different in nature from the previous one. At the top it reads, “her vows.” I’ll read a few lines. I think we can all agree for all that the marriage certificate and prenup do represent some aspect of the agreements that exist between a husband and wife, these vows are a much truer, deeper, and more meaningful form of that agreement. When a husband and wife resort to the legal docs, that’s probably a sign that the marriage has gone sour. When they’re entire focus is on their heartfelt promises to each other, freely given and received, that is a sign that the marriage is healthy.

So why did we start here, rather than the Word? It’s because like in a marriage, we can easily end up viewing God’s covenant with us as a mere legal contract, one that we didn’t even have a choice as to whether or not we would sign up for it. Yet as we go through how the Word presents the idea of this covenant we will start to see that ideally, we reach a stage at which we see our relationship with God not as a mere contract, but as a heartfelt promise, freely and joyfully entered into on our part.

As with any agreement, there need to be two parties to it. In our case, they are the Lord and us. Both sides have something to offer the other. But interestingly, the for first covenant that is mentioned by name in the Word, part of that is missing. This is the covenant that the Lord made with Noah, his descendants, and all living things on the Earth after the flood had subsided:

Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: “And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you,

and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. ¹¹ Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

And God said: “This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: ¹³ I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.” (Genesis 9:8-13)

This is a powerful statement from the Lord, especially considering that in the story He had only recently wiped out most of the life on Earth. I mentioned though that something was missing from this covenant, or agreement. What’s missing? A condition on the part of mankind. God did not promise, “if you obey me, I will never destroy life again.” He flat out promised that it would never happen, regardless of the behaviour that people might engage in.

From this unusual agreement, which is really more a promise than an agreement at all, we learn just how committed the Lord is to keeping His covenant with us. As we will see, later covenants have clauses that people can keep or break; but at a fundamental level the Lord’s side of the covenant is enduring and unshaken, regardless of how much we sin. You could reject the Lord at every turn; break every commandment, violate every rule; despise Him and treat your neighbour with cruelty; and so on and so forth with every sin and evil imaginable; and still the Lord would not fail to uphold His promise of love and preservation. He would still seek to bless you, to forgive you, and lead you to eternal happiness in heaven. Even if someone rejects the Lord even to the end of life, and so chooses for himself an eternity in hell, even there the Lord would continue to uphold his promise of love and preservation. The Lord’s side of the agreements is more of a promise and a certainty; it is us who can freely choose to uphold (or not) our end. As the Lord says in the Word,

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. (Revelation 3:20)

Whether or not we open to the Lord, He will continue to press to be received by us in our hearts and minds.

That’s not to say that the agreement holds no matter what: we do have our part to play, and this too is reflected in the Old Testament covenant. We see this particularly in the Covenant as it existed between Jehovah and the Children of Israel. This covenant was sealed at Mt. Sinai, when Jehovah gave the many laws and regulations that the Children of Israel were to follow. Most important of all were the Ten Commandments. That these commandments were the foundation of the Covenant can be seen from the fact that they were kept in the Ark of the Covenant: as I tell my Grade 5 students, this is just a fancy way of saying the box of the agreement. This agreement box was the heart and soul of the Israelites’ faith. Their success was entirely contingent on how well they kept their side of the agreement: blessings if it was followed, curses if it was broken. They were told,

Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of Jehovah your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today,

that Jehovah your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of Jehovah your God.

But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of Jehovah your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.

(Deuteronomy 28:1-2, 15)

The blessings and curses then listed consist almost entirely of material wealth and safety, or material poverty and disaster.

On the one hand, it should be obvious that these exact blessings and/or curses no longer apply to us: those who keep the Covenant outlined in the Ten Commandments do not become fabulously wealthy, nor are those who disobey struck down with calamity. Even so we can still draw an important lesson from this concept. We do indeed suffer when we fail to keep the Lord's commandments. Not that He punishes us or that we fail in a material sense; but evil carries its own reward. The further we stray from the Lord's covenant with us, the less able He is to bless us with spiritual joy and happiness. The more we return to Him and keep His commandments, the better we can receive the spiritual joy and happiness that He was trying to grant us all along. Even if evil is not always punished, it always has a consequence; in the same vein, even if good is not always rewarded, there is always a blessing in doing it. The Lord's promises to bless those who keep His commandments is an agreement that He will never break.

But there is something more to our agreement with the Lord than just a contractual exchange of obedience and blessing. In fact, that is one of the more superficial ways of viewing that agreement. Just like if a marriage spends all its time referring back to the prenup, it's a sign of dysfunction, if in our relationship with the Lord we are constantly butting up against the limits of the commandments we may have a dysfunctional relationship with the Lord. A marriage is not about the terms and conditions, and nor is a relationship with the Lord. If we look for loopholes and technicalities in the Word that let us get away with as much as possible while suffering the fewest consequences, then we have not really fulfilled the spirit of the Lord's law. The commandments are a crucial underpinning of that relationship; but the ideal is to be so fully within them that we don't even notice they are there. The goal is to have them written on our hearts. The Lord does not want to push us around with rules, He wants to have a relationship with us.

We see the Lord pushing to get us to that level especially in the New Testament. When He established the practice of Holy Supper on the night His arrest He referred to His own blood as the blood of the Covenant:

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26:27-29)

At first glance this may not seem much different from the ancient Jewish sacrifices that established the Old Covenant of law and punishment. But then the blood of the covenant was that of an animal sacrificed to God. Here, Jesus offers His own lifeblood as a sign of the covenant. In it we see the possibility of taking in something

from the Lord Himself, and having it become a part of us. It is the symbolic establishment of a personal relationship between us and the God of the universe, rooted in love and charity.

The Lord pushes us to enter into a relationship with Him that is not forced, but that is free and joyful. He wants to have a relationship that is less like the legal haggling of a divorce court and more like the personal vows promised in marriage. This is the ultimate goal of all real covenants or agreements. The Teachings of the New Church explain it this way:

The purpose of any covenant is conjunction, that is to say, its purpose is that people may live together in friendship or in love. This also is why marriage is called a covenant. The Lord's conjunction with man does not exist except in love and charity, for the Lord is love itself and mercy. He wills to save everyone and by His mighty power to draw them towards heaven, that is, towards Himself. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1038)

The Lord's many, many commandments all come down to the simple desire to live together in friendship and love with us mere mortals. If we are able to keep the commandments, and not just keep them as a technicality, but as an act of love, we are elevated from the status of servants to that of friends:

No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. (John 15:15)

Blindly following the rules is a good start. But when we fully realize their purpose is a loving relationship, or covenant, they are no longer a chore but the simple acts of true friendship.

In the Word we see a full range of the Covenant, from a contract of blessing and cursing to a pact of friendship. But at heart, it is all the same covenant: a promise from the Lord that He will never cease to support us and uphold us; a plea from the Lord to remain in His care so that He can bless us; and an opportunity from the Lord to enter into an eternal friendship of charity and love. As He teaches us in the prophet Ezekial:

Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Ezekiel 37:26-27)