

Covenant

Deuteronomy 4:41 - 5:6

In each of my first two semesters at seminary, I had a course that covered the history of the Old Testament. Not book by book, but much more chronological, from the beginning to the end in terms of time. But it wasn't simply a history course. It was a theology course. And that theology was also studied chronologically. In other words, we didn't study specific doctrines by topic, like you do when you read the Westminster Confession. Instead, we studied the theology of how God acted in the life of his people, and how that relationship between God and his people was revealed and developed through the history of those years between the creation of world and the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

There is a single word to define all of that theology, a single word that is still used today, a word you are all familiar with, the word covenant. But what is a covenant? If I then answer rightly that it is a relationship that God has established between himself and his people, then the question becomes, "What is the nature of that relationship?" What is that covenant relationship between God and his people, and how is it defined? That's my focus this morning, as we study through this great book of Deuteronomy.

There are any number of helpful ways to answer that question, but from our text this morning, I've chosen four answers. Four words that well define that covenant relationship between God and his people. And though we will be studying all of that this morning in the context of the Old Covenant, or Old Testament, these definitions don't change when Jesus came to inaugurate the new covenant. Outwardly, the relationship between God and his people changes, most obviously with the reality that we no longer kill animals on an altar when we gather to worship God.

But the basic definition of his covenant relationship with his people doesn't change.

So as we prepare to study the specific ten commandments in the weeks to come, as the people of Israel are about to receive those ten commandments from God a second time, just before they are enabled to enter and conquer the promised land, let's define more specifically God's covenant relationship with his people. First,

I. GOD'S COVENANT WITH HIS PEOPLE IS GENERATIONAL.

What I mean by that is that is that the terms of the covenant, the details of that covenant relationship, are made with God's people from one generation to another. In other words,

5:2-3

Horeb is Mt. Sinai. That's where God first gave the people of Israel the 10 commandments. It's in Exodus 20. If you remember and are able to put these books into the proper place in history, Exodus records the history of God's people as they left Egypt after 400 years of slavery and bondage. The event of the exodus was that departure, when Pharaoh finally let the people go after enduring the ten plagues which God inflicted upon Egypt. The final plague was the killing of the firstborn son, and because the Israelites were protected from that plague of death, Pharaoh finally let them go, and they fled across the Red Sea on dry ground. At that point, God gave them the law, the ten commandments.

But then as they wandered in the wilderness for the next 40 years, the whole generation of Israel died because of their disobedience. They grumbled and complained, and they refused to enter the promised land because they were afraid of the people

living there. But now, with a new generation waiting on the plains of Moab just east of the Jordan River, ready to cross over to their promised inheritance, God gives them his law again, a second time.

So notice again the words that are used.

v.2 “The Lord our God made a covenant with **us** in Horeb.”

With us! That’s not an obvious point. In fact, it would appear to be incorrect. None of these people were alive 40 years earlier at Horeb, at Mt. Sinai. They were not yet born. And those who were alive then are now dead, all of them except those two faithful spies Joshua and Caleb. So, actually, God didn’t made a covenant with **us** at Horeb. He made a covenant with our fathers, because we weren’t yet born. That’s actually the situation, more accurately defined. But that’s not what Moses said, according to verse 2.

Then look at,

v.3

Moses is making his point very clearly, isn’t he? The covenant that God made with his people when they came out of Egypt is still in effect, 40 years later. And that covenant was not simply the definition of the relationship between God and his people then. The definition of that relationship is timeless. The covenant is the relationship between God and his people, and that covenant is valid from generation to generation. So the succeeding generation is actually a party to the covenant, not because they were there when it was established, but because they are the people of God now, and therefore they participate in the same promise. The covenant is not bound by the restraints of time and the physical presence of specific people. Rather, as I am putting it, the covenant is generational.

So a promise made to God’s people is a promise equally and personally valid to any one of God’s people in any generation. The promise spoken then, in the past, applies equally to us now, in the present. So these people who were not yet born when the law was given at Mt. Sinai, are still the recipients of God’s promise in their own day. Verse 3 is as clear as it can possibly be.

v.3

Now, a few practical applications of that. First, most broadly, our relationship with God, as his people, is not simply a personal or individualistic experience. Being a Christian is not simply defined as having a personal relationship with God. Certainly it induces that, but there is so much more. As God’s people, we are a body. We are a temple. We are all parts of the whole, and it is not healthy nor appropriate to define ourselves simply in terms of our own individual experience or identity. More accurately, we are members of the body of Christ. We are members of the household of God, a building, according to Ephesians 2, whose cornerstone is Jesus Christ,

Eph. 2:21 “...in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

So the covenant is a relationship God establishes with his people as a body, not simply an individual relationship. And in that context, the body is not composed simply of those who are alive today, but all those who belong to God from every generation. So the covenant relationship established between God and his people did, in fact, have reference to the people who were alive 40 years later. And that covenant relationship hasn’t changed to this day. We who are alive today are still identified as the covenant people of God, so that we, too, can say,

v.3

A second application, related to that, is that covenant promises of God, essentially his promise to be our God and to receive us as his children, is a promise that is valid from generation to generation. Specifically, through the family. For God's household includes the children, and his temple now actually includes even those children not yet born.

You see the promise of God in the gospel is a promise for you and for your children.

Let me quote the conclusion of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost,

Acts 2:36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

The people responded appropriately,

Acts 2:37 "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" 38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

The promise is to you and to your children. That's what I mean, "God's covenant with his people is generational." It is to you and to your children. In fact, your grandchildren, too. And great-grandchildren. "To all who are afar off." That's all generations who are afar off! This promise of God to be our God is a promise to be the God of our children, too. And to be the God of those generations who are still "afar off."

God's covenant with his people is generational. That is precisely the reason why we baptize our children, the children of believers. Because baptism is a sign of that covenant, replacing the Old Testament sign of circumcision. Contrary to much popular believe, baptism isn't a sign of a person's faith, it is a sign of God's promise, God's covenant promise, a promise to be our God and the God of our children.

Which is why our children, the children of believers, are set apart. In the context of Paul's instructions to the church at Corinth, that a believer who is married to an unbeliever is not free to divorce on those grounds, the point is made that,

1 Cor. 7:14 "...the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband."

Not "saved." Not regenerated. But still set apart, set apart as holy, because of that family relationship. And so are the children.

1 Cor. 7:14 "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy."

Children aren't saved because their parents are Christians. You won't get to heaven because your father or mother is a believer. But you are set apart to be among God's people, set apart as holy. You are identified as belonging to the people of God, because the covenant promise of God is generational.

In the Old Testament, therefore, the children of the covenant were given the sign of that covenant, and they were ALWAYS included in the number of God's people. So it is in the New Testament. The children of the covenant are set apart, and they rightly receive the sign of that generational, covenant promise, the sign of baptism. And the reason is because God's covenant with his people is generational.

Second definition of the covenant.

II. GOD'S COVENANT WITH HIS PEOPLE IS PERSONAL.

Again, that might be obvious, but let me emphasize the obvious for your encouragement. And actually, this idea of the personal nature of God's covenant relationship with his people sets Christianity apart from the other religions of the world, most especially Islam. The false god of Allah is not personal at all, not like the one true God. He is distant, separated from his people—not merely transcendent in terms of being exalted about them, but distant in terms of communication, in terms of fellowship.

Not so the God of the Bible. Look at the words of, 5:4

Face to face. Mouth to mouth, even. This was as deeply personal an interaction as it could possibly be. Personal in communication, above all else. God speaks to his people, directly, through the prophets. Their words were actually God's words, for he put his own words into their mouths. And that's why this emphasis on God's covenant being personal is so important. That's such a significant part of our Christian faith, this idea that God himself speaks to us, that the creator of the universe humbles himself to communicate personally with his creatures.

Let me say quickly, that the greatest demonstration of this personal nature of God's covenant with his people is that his word, the word he spoke to his people, that word actually became flesh and lived among us as a man. So this personal relationship that God has established by way of covenant is a ultimately accomplished in the most personal way possible or even imaginable—God actually becomes a man. He never lost his deity, he never stopped being God. But he became a human being, in the person of Jesus Christ.

John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

God has spoken to us. In his written word, he continues to speak to us, face to face, mouth to mouth. We have the very word of God and we are able to read it ourselves. That is as personal as it gets! In his first epistle, John puts it this way,

1 John 1:1 “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— 2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us— 3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

Thirdly, then,

III. GOD'S COVENANT WITH HIS PEOPLE IS PRACTICAL.

What I mean by that is simple. The word God speaks to us has direct and immediate applications to our lives. As James puts it so well, we are to be doers of God's word.

James 1:22 “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.”

And to emphasize the practical nature of God's covenant relationship with his people, James is very specific,

James 1:26 "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

Here's true faith, not answering all the questions of the Westminster Shorter Catechism or defending all the doctrinal statements found in the Westminster Confession. No, here's true faith. Here's true Christianity. Here's true orthodoxy. Here's pure religion. "Visit orphans and widows in their trouble."

Then again,

James 2:4 "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

Indeed, that is the only way to show forth your faith, by the evidence of your life. And you demonstrate your faith by obeying his word.

4:44-45

5:1

So what were the people of God supposed to do when their covenant God spoke to them personally, as he did at Mt. Sinai? What are the people of God supposed to do today when our covenant God speaks to us personally, through his law? That's easy...do what he says! You must be careful to observe the

statutes and judgments God gives us. That was our particular focus last Sunday, especially from,

Deut. 4:15 "Take careful heed to yourselves, for you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, 16 lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure."

Deut. 4:19 "And take heed, lest you lift your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, you feel driven to worship them and serve them."

Deut. 4:23 "Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the Lord your God has forbidden you. 24 For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."

Take careful heed to yourselves. In other words, we must give careful and diligent attention to obedience. We must be doers of the word. Truth is something you do, not simply something you believe.

There is a specific example given to us in our text, that I'll mention only somewhat briefly at this point, since we will cover the cities of refuge in more detail in chapter 19. But I want you to look at the verses, commenting in general this morning on their practical nature. God speaks to his people personally, and very, very practically.

v.41-43

This is so very practical, so very applicable to daily life. In the Old Testament, the civil law and the temple law were really one and the same, so we find here an example of something we would apply to the civil government, but my point today is simply

that God's covenant with his people is practical. Those who kill, by accident as it were, by manslaughter, ought to have a place where they can go and be protected from the harshness of the punishment that should be inflicted upon those guilty of murder.

Finally, a fourth description of God's covenant with his people. And if you have listened carefully to me these ten sermons now from Deuteronomy, if you have noted my emphasis from week to week, you should be expecting this definition of the covenant without even looking at the outline.

IV. GOD'S COVENANT WITH HIS PEOPLE IS GRACIOUS.

In other words, this covenant is a covenant of grace. Let me show you that from the text.

4:46-49

Do you remember the emphasis on the defeat of Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan? God gave them that victory. God, in his grace, enabled them to obtain that victory. God, by his grace, gave them that land to be their own. He gave them success, he gave them safety. So that they could continue and complete the conquest of the promised land. God's covenant with his people is gracious.

And let me make that graciousness known even more plainly and clearly.

5:5

The people were right to be afraid. They were right to fear God, and honor the revelation of his glory.

Ex. 19:16 "Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. 17

And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. 19 And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice. 20 Then the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up."

And where's the grace? In the provision that God gave for the people to hear and receive his word, namely the intercession of Moses. We see the great glory of God, and yet, with all that glory, he still speaks to his people. That's grace!

The people of God saw their God, and they didn't die! They saw the fire and the smoke, and they were able to endure it. That's grace.

And the words were full of grace as well, the words we call the preface to the ten commandments.

5:6

Beloved, that's grace. God has redeemed his people out of Egypt. That's grace. God has saved his people from slavery. That's grace. God has delivered his people out of their slavery. That's grace. And he did it all because he is a God of grace.

So it is that this covenant relationship between God and his people continues today, this covenant of grace. It is the covenant by which we are saved, and the covenant by which we, too, are personally and practically engaged to our Father in heaven. God's covenant with his people is generational. It is personal. It is practical. And it is gracious.