

Covenant Life
Deuteronomy 25:5-19

Today marks a very significant event in the life of our church, our covenant community. It was mid-March when our session decided to alter our weekly schedule due to COVID-19. We would meet together just once, suspending for the time our other activities on the Lord's Day—Sunday School, our fellowship lunch, and our afternoon worship service. Our time together as a covenant community was reduced to just that one hour at 11 am. For several weeks, we met only in groups of ten or less, providing a Zoom connection for those who chose to stay home. Then, we began meeting together again, but still only once each Sunday, and we began to observe what is now so familiar in our vocabulary—social distancing. As the virus became more prevalent over the summer, more and more use of facial coverings and masks was encouraged. Slowly, at the same time, several people who had exercised the care and concern to remain at home began coming back to church in person. But still not everyone. Last month we decided to begin meeting a second time to worship, but at 5 pm, since we didn't yet think we should begin eating together. And today, we return to the fuller schedule, the fuller commitment of time together, including the lunch and worship services morning and afternoon.

I say all of that to emphasize that we have our own covenant life, outwardly defined by that schedule. And at the center of that covenant life which we share together is our worship. It really was different to when we began to meet together only for an hour, and even that with many people choosing to be cautious and remain at home. It really was difficult those weeks we were limited to 10 people. Many churches stopped meeting in person altogether. And all of that should make us think about how good it is when we are able to meet together! That is our identity. Our

calling. We are God's special people, his treasured nation, the church.

I want you to think in those terms as we approach our text in Deuteronomy 25 this morning, because this is a text about covenant life as well, covenant life in the Old Testament. The church in that age was actually the whole nation of Israel. And so their national events, their national laws, their national customs were all religious in nature. Everything they did as a nation was deeply connected with their identity as the covenant people of God. And the priorities which God had for them, in the Old Testament, are obvious. In terms of outward principles, those priorities really are the same as today. But the external form is very, very different. So let's look at that external form of the covenant life of Old Testament Israel, all with a goal of being able to recognize just how it all should apply to us today.

The specific law, the civil laws have changed. I've been emphasizing that for several weeks. And here this morning is the so-called law of Levirate marriage.

v.5-6

What's the point of this law which no longer applies to us as it did then? What's the point? I believe I can answer that question plainly. The point is,

I. COVENANT SUCCESSION.

That is to say, God's covenant promise is made to you and to your children! It is a generational promise.

This custom seems strange to us. It seems, perhaps, unfair to women, to a widow, imposing upon her a husband against her will. But that isn't the point at all. The point is to provide a blessing to her, and to her husband who died, to the whole of his family.

The actual practice belongs to the Old Testament nation of Israel and is no longer binding upon us today, but it is worth considering the purpose of it then, in order to realize the abiding reality of that same purpose. Just now in different forms.

If a young husband dies, with no children, his brother, if living with him, presumably then single, is to marry his brother's wife. And the firstborn son would stand in line to receive all the blessing of the firstborn son of the man who had died.

The firstborn had a particular place and emphasis in Hebrew culture. There was to be a double inheritance to the firstborn son, but that wasn't so much a privilege as it was responsibility. Responsibility to care for the family in case of the death of the father. Responsibility to provide for the family in an ongoing way, and thus established with extra provision from the inheritance. And that included the responsibility to continue the family line.

Now, again, what is the principle? I'm not interested in continuing the actual practice, as if the firstborn today in any particular family might gain advantages of being judged to be the favorite. This practice is done away with in all the sense of equality that is emphasize in the New Testament. But the principle abides. And that principle, so clearly demonstrated by this law of the Levirate marriage, is simple and straightforward,

A. The focus of God's covenant promise is covenant succession.

I can put that in much simpler terms. When God makes a promise to his covenant people, the promise is for you and your children. That was very clear in the Old Covenant.

Gen. 12:7 "Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land."

Gen. 13:14 "And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: "Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; 15 for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. 16 And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered. 17 Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you."

Gen. 15:17 "And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. 18 On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates."

Gen. 17:1 "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. 2 And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." 3 Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: 4 "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. 8 Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

There was, of course, an outward sign associated with that covenant promise,

Gen. 17:9. “And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. 10 This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; 11 and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. 12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. 13 He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. 14 And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

Deut. 34:1 “Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is across from Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land of Gilead as far as Dan, 2 all Naphtali and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, 3 the South, and the plain of the Valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. 4 Then the LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have caused you to see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.”

Psalms 105:7 “He is the LORD our God; His judgments are in all the earth. 8 He remembers His covenant forever, The word which He commanded, for a thousand generations, 9 The covenant which He made with Abraham, And His oath to Isaac, 10 And confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, To Israel as an

everlasting covenant, 11 Saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan As the allotment of your inheritance,” 12 When they were few in number, Indeed very few, and strangers in it.”

What does this mean, covenant succession? It means that God’s covenant promise is extended from one generation to the next, for ever, to the thousandth generation. It means that the children born to God’s people are citizens of the covenant community. The children born to Israel were citizens of that nation. And they had the sign of the covenant promise to demonstrate that reality.

Now let’s move into the New Testament with that same principle in mind, the covenant promise of God which is made from one generation to the next, the promise of God which is for you and for your children. Let’s go to the day of Pentecost, when God so marvelously added three thousand to the church of those who were being saved. The conclusion of Peter’s sermon is this...

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.”

Then the response.

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.”

But there is one more verse.

Acts 2:39 “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.”

What does that mean? Same as it meant in the Old Testament. The children of believers receive the right to God's covenant promise. The promise of salvation is for you and for your children.

Let me demonstrate how that works. I won't ask you to raise your hands, but how many of you are here today, worshiping God, because of the influence of your parents and family in your life? Certainly you younger children, and you families who come together are showing the faithfulness of God to this promise. And parents, that is your hope and purpose in bringing your children to church and teaching them day in and day out about the faith. From infancy. And that is what you do, isn't it? Or should be doing.

And you adults, many of you, maybe most of you, came to know the Lord, came to know what it means to be a Christian, because of the influence of your parents. Not all of you, praise the Lord. God does rescue and redeem those whom we might call first generation Christians. And our evangelism should produce such fruit. But often, you who claim to be a Christian by your own profession of faith are the recipients of a promise claimed by your parents, a promise God makes to you and to your children. It would be interesting to see whom among you can go back the most generations! The promise is for a thousand generations, to all who are far off. The promise is for you and your children.

So if a widow has no children, her husband's brother bears the responsibility to see the blessing of God's covenant promise fulfilled in the next generation.

I'm not going to spend much time on it this morning, but let me emphasize clearly at this point that this is the reason we baptize

our infant children. We see that baptism as a sign of God's covenant promise, a promise that embodies the children of the covenant in its focus. The Old Testament believers certainly understand that. Their children were set apart as children of Israel. And our children today are set apart as the children of the covenant as well, the children of the church. They are our children. They are numbered among the visible community of God's people. And they have the privilege of the covenant sign of baptism, a sign of God's covenant promise.

There are certainly many Christians today who believe that only those who profess their faith should be baptized, upon that profession. But that misses the whole point of the covenant promise so clearly expressed in the Old and New Testaments, a promise for you and for your children.

Let me bring in one other emphasis here, with obvious Old Testament emphasis, regarding the substance of that promise.

B. The substance of God's covenant promise is descendants and land.

That's why the firstborn son's position was so prominent in the Old Testament. He inherited the family land. Thus, v.6

Remember, of course, that when God gave this covenant promise to Abraham, he had no children and he had no land. He accepted and received the promise only by faith, and that faith becomes the model by which we are to live our lives as well.

Heb. 11:8 "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10

for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

And that chapter goes to explain the meaning plainly to us.

Heb. 11:13 “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”

Back in Deuteronomy 25, we see that,

C. The importance of God’s covenant promise is made evident.

v.7-10

That’s really the same emphasis in verses 11-12, where punishment is inflicted upon a woman who intentionally causes harm to the ability of a man to produce children, and I believe the emphasis is upon the intentionality of that harm.

v.11-12

The point being, God’s promise is for you and for your children.

Now, sometimes, sadly, children grow up to reject that promise. And though the covenant promise remains a source of hope and an encouragement to pray, the rejection is often an obvious reality. And the one who rejects the promise and rejects the privileges of that promise incurs much responsibility and guilt

for such rebellion. But the exceptions don’t disprove the basic principle. God’s covenant promise is for you and for your children. So, to use the language of Deuteronomy 6 and apply it today,

Deut. 6:6 “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Going on in our chapter this morning, we see examples of what I simply call,

II. COVENANT JUSTICE.

Beginning with equity. Fairness and honesty in all personal transactions.

v.13-14

A. God is a God of equity.

The measures were the weights on a scale, so a dishonest tradesman would use a light weight to measure out goods to be sold. Maybe a 14 ounce weight, only to claim that he was selling a full pound of 16 ounces. Such treachery, such dishonest is strictly prohibited. And notice how directly that integrity in public and social transactions is related to their identity as God’s covenant people,

v.15

God is, therefore also a God of mercy.

B. God is a God of mercy.

The reward of long life is not a reward that is earned by the

performance of good works. Rather, it is a blessing bestowed by God upon those who demonstrate their faithfulness and integrity in their lives. Having “a perfect and just weight” is but the duty. Yet God rewards their faithfulness richly. Such is his mercy, “that your days may be lengthened in the land which the LORD your God is giving you.”

You might recognize that same blessing of mercy shown to those who honor their father and mother according to the fifth commandment,

Ex. 20:12 “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you.”

Paul doesn’t miss that point of emphasis upon God’s mercy when he refers to that commandment in,

Eph. 6:1 “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 “Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with promise: 3 “that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”

All of God’s blessings given to his covenant people are the rewards of God’s mercy, inciting our praise and devotion to him in response. With a warning here in our text as well.

v.16

C. God is a God of righteousness.

A God of justice, perfect justice, such that those who rebel will suffer the consequences of their rebellion.

We see that in the ten commandments as well, with reference to the second commandment,

Ex. 20:4 “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth

beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; 5 you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

Mercy and justice are not contradictory. Rather, they both display the character of God’s perfections. He is merciful. And he will bring justice. Such is the nature of his covenant promise.

Finally, in chapter 25, please consider the final verses.
v.17-19

Let’s go back to the original account in history,

Ex. 17:8 “Now Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim. 9 And Moses said to Joshua, “Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.” 10 So Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. 11 And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. 12 But Moses’ hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. 13 So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. 14 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this for a memorial in the book and recount it in the hearing of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” 15 And Moses built an altar and called its name, The-LORD-Is-My-Banner; 16 for he said, “Because the LORD has sworn: the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.”

Our text this morning actually adds detail to that narrative, and clearly the treachery of Amalekites is made obvious. Again in terms of general principle, that point is still valid. It all has to do with the purity of the covenant people of God as a whole, as a nation in the Old Testament.

III. COVENANT PURITY.

A. The treachery of the wicked is exposed.

As we read of Amelek in verse 18, “he met you on the way and attacked your rear ranks, all the stragglers at your rear, when you were tired and weary; and he did not fear God.” He did not fear God. Therefore he harmed God’s people. And God exposes that treachery for all to see. And then condemns it.

B. The treachery of the wicked is condemned.

v.19

Sounds harsh. Actually, it was. Justifiably so. The Amalekites got what they deserves, as does anyone and everyone who will fact the judgment of God’s condemnation.

Heb. 9:27 “And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.”

All of that is embraced in this covenant relationship which God has established. You will be my people, you and your children. And I will be your God, and the God of your children. Thus, as that verse in Hebrews 9 continues,

Heb. 9:28 “...so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.”