

Words of the Covenant

Deuteronomy 29:1-28

Words mean something, they have meaning. Words define things. Words express truth, and reality. They express commitment, and define obligation. They describe our reactions, our understanding, our response, and connection. And they are objective. Which is to say, they exist outside of us, expressing much more than our own subjective or existential feelings or experiences. And yet, we live in an age when words increasingly seem to have lost so much of their importance.

Words are now often seen to be boring, not representative of reality. They seem inadequate. “I don’t want words, but action,” we often say. The reason for that, in many cases, is that words are separated from our actions, and our lives are characterized by hypocrisy. But most of all words have increasingly lost their ability to define. Words take on whatever meaning is most convenient to their speaker, they come to be defined in whatever way is most advantageous to the one who utters them. And losing all connection with objective truth, they become just another subjective expression of our own ever-changing existential existence.

So nowadays we can’t rely upon others to keep their word! We can’t rely upon others to fulfill their promises or their obligations. We can’t even depend on the meaning of words to remain constant and faithful. Words themselves seem to change in meaning, often used to define the exact opposite of what they really mean. But not so with God. Not so with God’s word. His word is true. His word is truth. And unchangeable. Incapable of error and the very opposite of falsehood. And I want that sense of the priority of words to be prominent in my sermon this morning, a sermon focused upon the words of the covenant.

A covenant is a contract. An agreement. A bond, established by blood in the Old Testament context, a life and death commitment. And in that covenant are stipulations, duties and obligations. Typically then, there are blessings and curses prescribed by the covenant, depending on your faithfulness in keeping the terms of the covenant. All of those things are part of the words of the covenant, the contract which is defined by those words. That is our focus this morning, though when we come to study the covenant, the words of the covenant, which God made with mankind, we have to add another emphasis. Actually, a starting point. Namely, the understanding that this covenant between God and his people is a covenant of grace. That is to say, God initiated it. God determined to come down to our level as creatures, as it were, he condescended to us in order to establish this covenant. It was an act of his grace. And though he determined the stipulations of the covenant himself, with sovereign authority rather than by negotiation, still the foundation of grace was always evident. God chose his people, to be in covenant relationship with them, because of his grace, not because of anything in his people. He determined to be our God, by an act of his own grace. He determined that we would be his people, on the basis of his own lovingkindness. Not based on anything that we earned or deserved. That’s grace. And that is our starting point in studying this covenant he established with us.

I. GOD’S GRACE IS THE FOUNDATION OF OUR COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.

That is emphasized here in Deuteronomy 29.

v.1-2

The point is, that God did this. God not only chose Israel to be his people, he delivered them out of the land of Egypt. That’s grace. “You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt.”

Remember the preface to the ten commandments, the context for the giving of the law itself,

Ex. 20:2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

I am the Lord your God who saved you! I delivered you out of bondage. I redeemed you. That’s the very definition of grace. In the language of the New Testament, the words come out this way,

Tit. 3:3 “For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

That’s grace. He saved us! We didn’t save ourselves. We didn’t earn it or deserve it at all. He saved us. “When the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared... He saved us.”

Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Look at how that grace is evident here in Deuteronomy, grace made clear by the context of the sinfulness of God’s people. Still God kept his promises to them.

v.2-8

The emphasis there is,

A. The encouragement of God’s promise in the trials of life.

The people grumbled. They didn’t believe. At times, they outright rebelled. Yet God saw them through it all. God led them and provided for them through it all. Even in the desert, in the wilderness for 40 years, “Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn out on your feet.”

That’s grace. God’s grace. And with that encouragement comes,

B. The clarity of God’s promise to his covenant people.

The covenant of grace is founded upon one single, overarching promise. “I will be your God and you will be my people.” And here in Deuteronomy that promise is made as clear as can possibly be.

v.10-13

This is some sort of covenant renewal ceremony, something by comparison with our worship services today. The people were gathered together, standing before the Lord, to renew their commitment to the Lord. As they did so, God renewed his commitment to them. He speaks of the people entering “into covenant with the LORD your God, and into His oath, which the LORD your God makes with you today.” And by God’s own promise, by his own oath of faithfulness to the people, we read in verse 13, “that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you.”

We saw the same thing two weeks ago in,

Deut. 28:9 “The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways.”

That’s the expression of God’s grace. This was a covenant founded on God’s own promise, a promise going all the way back

to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was, most of all, a promise to Abraham of many descendants and a great land.

Gen. 17:7 “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.”

That covenant promise is still valid today, it remains the expression of God’s promise and oath to us as his people today. “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

There is one more aspect of this covenant of grace that is worthy to be emphasized, namely,

C. The generational continuity of God’s covenant relationship with his people.

You see, the covenant promise of God is always “for you and your children.” The children of God’s people have always been members of the covenant community of God’s people. They are not the children of the world, but they are set apart as the children of God’s people. That is the theological foundation of why we baptize our infants, not that the water of baptism has any magical power in and of itself, not that our children from infancy are automatically saved or regenerated, but simply that God’s covenant promise is generational. There is a continuing from generation to generation. And so we read,

v.14-15

He’s referring to generations! Generations to come. Even generations afar off. And that emphasis on generational continuity is emphasized again with reference to “the coming generation of your children” in verse 22.

The covenant is not just made with those who stood there that day, but the promise was extended to the generations that would follow, generations still afar off.

Do you remember the preaching of the gospel from Peter on the day of Pentecost? His sermon concluded with the words, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” The book of Acts records such a marvelous 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. 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.”

That’s the covenant promise. A promise for you and your children. And to all generations who are afar off. Even to the thousandth generation. So this great and gracious covenant promise is expressed as clearly as can be,

Deut. 7:6 “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. 7 The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; 8 but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 “Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His

commandments.”

However,

II. GOD’S JUDGMENT ABIDES UPON THOSE WHO REJECT AND REBEL AGAINST HIS COVENANT.

There is a warning. A curse, upon covenant breakers, as we studied last week from chapter 28. But the curse, when inflicted, is always well deserved. It is God’s response to those who break the covenant, whose sin is nothing less than rebellion against God. And the point here is that such,

A. Rebellion is a matter of the heart.

Sin is a matter of the heart. Rejection of God is a matter of the heart. And so we read,
v.16-18

The people sinned outwardly, they fashioned idols and abominations with their own hands and worshipped those idols rather than God. But Moses’ description of them is noteworthy. They are those “whose heart turns away today from the LORD our God.”

And so this curse of the covenant, this judgment of God, demonstrates to us so clearly that,

B. God is jealous to preserve his covenant people in their faithfulness.

Jealous. That means eager, zealous, to protect and to preserve that which is rightfully his. And in that context, God is a jealous God. He requires us as his people to be faithful to him. That’s how we live out our identity as his covenant people. With faithfulness. Just as a husband and wife live out their marriage vows, with the demonstration of their faithfulness to each other. And that is necessary! Crucial. Vital. Unfaithfulness is itself a violation of the covenant, a breach. And God is jealous to protect that marriage relationship which he has with his people. So we

read a warning to those who become unfaithful, those who determine to follow the dictates of their own heart rather than the word of God.

v.19-20

That is a terrible judgment, to be sure. A solemn warning. Not that a true believe can lose his or her salvation, but that someone whose heart is rebelling against God, someone whose life is in rebellion to God and who demonstrates a rejection of God’s covenant promise, such a person is in danger of the curse of that same covenant.

v.21-22

Even that, however, remains as a warning for the next generation. That they might see a picture of the judgment of God and make desire to avoid it. God continues in his zeal to preserve his covenant people. That patience, however, and forbearance, will not last forever. And the warning of the judgment of his wrath is not an empty threat. Ultimately,

C. God’s justice is pronounced upon those who forsake his covenant.

That is quite plain to see.

v.23

Fire and brimstone. And it would get the attention of everyone who sees it.

v.24

The answer is plain. The meaning is clear.

v.25-26

So it is in our day. Such a warning of judgment needs to be proclaimed today as well. Until Jesus returns. It is a warning of

judgment, that would call those who have forsaken God to repent. To turn back to him, to serve him and love him with all their hearts.

As I said last week, in a full sermon regarding those curses, that warning is appropriate for us as Christians, too. Not that the certainty of our salvation is removed, not that any sense of assurance of salvation is eliminated, but the severity of the warning is still useful. And motivational. Rebellion against God is a serious matter. Covenant breaking is a serious matter. Forsaking God is a serious matter. And our hearts ought to be softened, and our consciences pricked. We should keep short accounts with God, that is to say, regularly, frequently, come before him with our own repentance for the sins which remain in us.

And when we do so, in faith, there is the hope and promise of the gospel, that we will be forgiven. But to those whose hearts remain hard, to those whose rebellion against God is the definition of their life, nothing remains except the justice of God's judgment.

v.27-28

That isn't just an Old Testament message, either. Consider the similar warning of,

Heb. 10:26 "For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

30 For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people." 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

So the call to repentance is not simply the evangelistic call of the gospel for unbelievers, it is an appropriate call for all of God's covenant people. And with that call, comes the great promise of his forgiveness and fellowship. Remember these words written to the church at Laodicea in,

Rev. 3:19 "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. 20 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. 21 To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Let's come back, then to my opening thought. And the title of this whole sermon.

III. WORDS OF THE COVENANT.

As I said in my introduction, words mean something. They mean something very specific. In fact,

A. Words define our covenant relationship with God.

It is a relationship, to be sure. And that's an important point. The exercise of our faith is not a merely intellectually or academic exercise. It is a relationship, a personal relationship. For God is a person, a being. But that relationship is defined. Defined by words.

Sometimes it's hard to define our human relationships. Never is that more obvious than in the whole process between two

people knowing one another as friends and two people getting married. There isn't much in the Bible to define that transition, at least up to the point of betrothal, or engagement. And so that makes it hard for us today to define the different stages of that relationship. There isn't a clear, black and white biblical definition of all the stages of friendship that would progress into any sort of courtship or dating relationship. So you have to define those relationships very carefully, defining the expectations and commitments that would go along that relationship. I've those sorts of conversations with a number of you over the past several years, emphasizing the need for a clearly understood and articulated definition. A definition of words.

With our covenant relationship with God, we are not left without a definition. The words are plain and clear. Notice even how this chapter begins.

v.1

These are the words of the covenant. These words define the covenant. These words are the covenant. So we aren't left in an attempt to seek to establish a relationship with God without direction. We aren't left to our own wisdom or our own ways. And while that should every encouraging to us, and very helpful, it is also a warning. We ought not to define our relationship with God on our own terms. This covenant is not even negotiated, as you might negotiate a mortgage contract, two parties negotiating all the terms in order to arrive at a satisfactory compromise. With God, in our covenant relationship with God, there is no such negotiation. No such compromise. God defines the terms.

Those terms are gracious, to say the least. They are kind and merciful. But they are sovereignly administered. They are determined by God himself. God defines our relationship with him, with his word. With his words. The words of the covenant.

And those words also define our obligations as God's covenant people.

B. Words define our covenant obligation before God.

v.9

They aren't just words of definition. They are words of duty. Words to be kept, to be observed. Words to be practiced. Words to live by, as well as words to believe.

Very, very early on in my study of Greek, I gained a tremendous insight into this idea of God's words defining our covenant obligation before God. It came from a simple sentence in 1 John, and if you know anything about John's writing, his use of Greek is very simple and easy to understand. So it is the first book any new student of Greek should learn to translate.

1 John 1:6 "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."

Literally, it simply reads, "we do not do the truth." You see, truth is something you do! Not just believe. God's words, God's word, is something you do. Something you practice. Something that you live, not just something you believe.

v.9 "Therefore [people of God] keep the words of this covenant, and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do."

For God by his grace, has called you to be his covenant people.

v.12 "...that you may enter into covenant with the LORD your God, and into His oath, which the LORD your God makes with you today, 13 that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."