

22. CAN THE COVENANT BE BROKEN?

The question whether the covenant can be broken has already been answered, at least by implication, in the foregoing. The answer is an affirmative one. If covenant and election are not to be identified, and we should not speak of a covenant with the elect, then it follows that the covenant can indeed be broken.

Some try to escape this conclusion, as we saw, by speaking of two covenants, an “inner” and an “outer.” The inner covenant is the real covenant but the outer one has only the form of a covenant, not its substance. The outer one can be broken; the inner one cannot. This, however, is not the viewpoint of Scripture, which teaches us that there is only one covenant and which speaks of covenant breakers.

The Old Testament gives us many examples of such covenant breakers. Cain was a covenant child, and at his birth his mother confessed God’s gracious help. Cain knew of God’s covenant demands and even offered sacrifices to the LORD. Yet he ignored God’s specific warning, deliberately sinned, grew more rebellious, and finally killed his brother. The consequence was that God expelled Cain from before his face. God cannot tolerate despisers of the covenant.

The Bible itself uses the expression, “...he has broken my covenant” (Gen 17:14), for example in the case of one who does not maintain circumcision as the sign of God’s covenant. This biblical usage should clinch the issue. One must truly be part of a covenant before one can break it, and it is clear that the covenant as a relationship can indeed be broken beyond repair.

The example of Esau

Another clear example of covenant breaking is that of Esau, as described in Genesis 25-36. There is, of course, the prophetic utterance at the birth of Esau and Jacob, “...the older will serve the younger” (25:23), and so we learn that God’s sovereign will stands above all that happens. In connection with this point, Paul in Romans 9 refers to God’s “purpose in election” (verse 11). This does not, however,

do away with Esau's responsibility.

God is not unjust (Rom 9:14): Esau reaps what he himself has sown. In Galatians 6:7, 8 we read, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit will reap eternal life." This truth must always be clearly placed before covenant children.

As Esau and Jacob grow up, we notice that Esau, who is a skillful hunter, has a restless and roving spirit; he is "a man of the open country" (Gen 25:27). It is not that this preference is sinful in itself, but it does lead Esau ever farther away from the tents of his father, also from the responsibilities that he has as eldest son. Esau's place is more in the world than with God's people.

This is further indicated in the incident of the stew. As Esau comes home famished, and seeks an immediate stilling of his hunger, he sells his birthright to his brother with the statement, "What good is the birthright to me?" The Bible states, "So Esau despised his birthright" (Gen 25:32, 34). The birthright is not just the right to the earthly properties of his father, but is meant here also in a spiritual sense: the promise that comes to him in the covenant. Of what good is this covenant to Esau? He has little interest in the affairs of the LORD; his heart yearns for the pleasures of the world. His needs must be immediately satisfied.

We read in Genesis 26:34, 35, "When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah." There are two elements here which we should note. First, Esau marries Canaanite women with whom there was no bond. In doing so he enters into a covenant with the Canaanites and ignores the covenant with the LORD. Second, Esau does this in a worldly style by taking two wives. We are reminded of Lamech, son of Cain, who did the same (Gen 4:19).

These two women are mentioned by name and their father's names are included. This may indicate that they were from influential Hittite families. Thus Esau carves out his niche in the land. He makes a covenant with the Hittites, and in doing so, despises the covenant of the LORD.

Esau's parents, Isaac and Rebekah, suffered much grief because of their son's deeds. We may assume that these women moved into the tents of Isaac (i.e., into his camp), and carried on their false religion. So Isaac and Rebekah were daily confronted with their idolatry. This was for them a constant source of grief (Gen 26:35).

When Esau later learns that Jacob has gone to Paddan Aram to find a wife there, he commits another impulsive act. We read, "Esau then realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father Isaac; so he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath, the sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael..." (Gen 28:8, 9). If it is a matter of keeping things within the family, there's always Ishmael closer by; why go all the way to Paddan Aram? But again an alliance is made with a family whom God clearly did not recognize as his covenant children. Esau

experiences rage at Jacob's deception but not repentance over his own misdeeds.

In Genesis 36 we read the finale of Esau's life: he leaves Canaan and goes to the hill country of Seir. He becomes the father of the Edomites, a people that would become a fierce enemy of God's covenant nation. The greatest enemies of Christ's church are often those who were born into the church but despised their inheritance. The covenant is then broken.

Breaking the covenant

There are other examples in Scripture which give a similar picture. We must understand that the breaking of the covenant does not come overnight, but is the result of a process in which one becomes more and more estranged from God and his people. In the end a conscious choice is made for the world because the world allows a sinful lifestyle. Often this is done at key moments, when it comes to choosing a vocation or entering into marriage. Do we then fully bring into account that we are God's covenant children?

The warning against covenant breaking applies not only in the context of the old covenant. In the letter to the Hebrews, which speaks about the greater glory of the new covenant, Esau's despising of God's love is recalled as an example for New Testament believers. In Hebrews 12:16, 17 we find this warning, "See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears." The word "godless" means here "unholy," not dedicated to God but in love with this world.

Esau later did seek the material benefits which came along with the covenant. But he could bring about no change of mind. There was no repentance; the tears that were cried were crocodile tears. Outwardly Esau showed sorrow, but there was no real change of heart. Paul later warns the Corinthians precisely for sorrow that is not true repentance. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Cor 7:10).

Breaking the covenant is the result of a process of growing disobedience towards God and increasing estrangement from the church. Finally one joins the world, because that's where the heart is. And once that process is completed, it is, humanly speaking, almost impossible to return. Great is the grace of God when a lost covenant child returns to the service of the Lord. Great is the joy when a prodigal son comes home.

What about Jacob?

Someone may say: but Jacob was not really any better than his brother Esau. After all, he received his father's blessing through deception and lies. He took advantage of his brother's weaknesses, instead of encouraging him on the right path. Esau later bitterly complains, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has

deceived me these two times: he took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing" (Gen 27:36).

Indeed, Jacob's life also is filled with sin and weakness. God's covenant children are by no means perfect. This is no excuse, but it is a reality. The Bible is honest and candid about the sins of God's people. And make no mistake about it, Jacob had to suffer the consequences of his sins. See what happened in his own family, among his own sons, and how he was hurt by them. The deceiver became the deceived. Within the covenant we must always be on our guard against our own weaknesses, for by our sins we not only bring shame to God's name but also "deeply wound [our] consciences" (Canons of Dort, V, Article 5). The consequences of sin are serious and must sometimes be borne for an entire lifetime.

Yet in Jacob's life, faith had the final say. In Hebrews 11:21, we read, "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff." Undoubtedly the letter to the Hebrews refers to this fact of the blessing of Joseph's sons to show that Jacob accepted the order determined by God that the younger would be greater than the elder (Gen 48:17-20). Jacob had learned to bend under the *sovereign* grace of God and give all glory to God.

When we keep God's covenant, this is not a testimony to our own goodness or ability; it is a sign of God's love and grace. When we may say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7), this is no boast in ourselves but a recognition of God's care and guidance.

The history of Esau and Jacob shows us how great our responsibility is within the covenant of love. Let us learn to live in accordance with God's precepts and so strive to reap the blessing of his promises.