

23. LIVING IN THE COVENANT

In this final chapter, I want to make some remarks about life with the Lord in the covenant of love. It is clear that belonging to God's people is a great privilege. It is not something that we could ever earn, or secure by our efforts. The important thing for us to acknowledge in this life is that we are what we are only by God's grace. He has sovereignly come into our lives with his grace, and claimed us as his children in Christ. It should never cease to amaze us that we have been given such a place.

Since this place in the covenant cannot be earned, it must simply be accepted by faith. This means that we must begin where God begins. If we are born of God-fearing parents, we may believe that he has claimed us as his children from the time of conception and birth. This is not because of the faith of our parents, for our salvation is not based on a human act; it is because God has determined to make his covenant with believers and their seed. This is how the Lord has always worked and still works today.

If we have not been born of believing parents, but have later through God's providential care come to faith in Christ, we may believe that the moment we come to faith, we are included in the covenant of love, and this pertains also to our children, if we have them (Acts 2:38, 39; Rom 4:16). Our great joy is then to profess publicly the love of God in Christ, to be baptized, and to take our place as mature members of Christ's church.

The certainty of the covenant

God has made a covenant with us and given us visible signs and seals of this covenant in order that we may be sure of his love towards us. He has entered with us into a relationship that is determined by perfect love from his side. He has clearly demonstrated this love. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). We bring to mind that we did not love God first, but that the covenant is his initiative and work. "This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and

sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

We live in a world that is filled with many uncertainties and in which hatred and selfishness are manifest everywhere. But God has opened his heart to us in Christ and asks that we love one another. Being in God’s covenant gives us great assurance concerning his love. He looks at us not as we are in ourselves; he looks at us through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. In Christ we are enabled to accept fellow-believers as brothers and sisters. The same love motivates us to speak through evangelism and mission about God’s covenant of love also to those who do not yet know Jesus Christ (Col 4:6).

The heart of this covenant is that we consciously accept God’s love in Christ and so affirm from our side the covenant of love. We have to know our sins, confess them, fight against our sinful nature, and seek our surety in the cross of Golgotha. Not once shall we base any certainty on what we have done or not done. For Jesus is the Christ, the anointed Saviour, and he alone. Regeneration is a matter of receiving and accepting him in faith. “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 5:1). Nothing more is required for justification, and nothing less.

This faith is based solely on the promises of God revealed in the Gospel. It accepts as truth all that God has revealed in his Word. It is also a quiet confidence that these promises are true for oneself. Faith is not merely saying: “I believe that the Bible is true”, but faith is saying: “I believe that the Bible is true *for me*.” Faith is not saying “I believe that Jesus is the Saviour,” but “I believe that Jesus is *my* Saviour.”

This means that there is between God and us in the covenant a close and personal bond. In our baptism he called us by our name. Nothing in life is more personal and far-reaching than baptism. We must be careful that it does not become a forgotten sacrament. Since the covenant is a relationship of love, it is by that very fact a living, personal, and deep experience. Like the saints of old, we are to *walk with God*. This means that we open our entire life to him, keep no secrets before him, and always seek and find his hand in everything.

Loving one another means living together. Loving God means living with him. Our focus must be daily on the Lord, and in everything we do, we are to reckon consciously with his promises and his precepts. This must become a part of our life. “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet 1:8, 9).

Can there ever be doubt about our relationship with God? Will he always love me, no matter what happens in this life, even if I have terribly disappointed him time and again? Listen to him, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8, 9). The covenant is not rooted in our obedience –although our obedience is required – but

it is rooted in his love in Christ. It was said at our baptism: “And if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins, we must not despair of God’s mercy, nor continue in sin, for baptism is a seal and trustworthy testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God” (Form for the Baptism of Infants, *Book of Praise*, page 585).

Whatever I may come to doubt and question in life, not God’s love in Christ, not his covenant of grace. I may plead on that covenant every day, and I may know that he will never forsake me or desert me (Deut 31:6; Heb 13:5). Jesus Christ was forsaken on the cross, so that God would always be with me.

Commitment in the covenant

A covenant between people means that we are committed to one another. The covenant with God means that we are committed to God. We are living in a world that lacks commitment. Promises are not kept, vows not met, agreements not honoured. There is no confidence even in those who hold a public office by solemn oath. Respect for truth and faithfulness is lacking everywhere in this world.

But God is committed to those who love him. God’s commitment is his loving faithfulness and loyalty. He does not change but is from age to age the same, in the sense that he is eternally true to himself and always keeps his word to us. He has committed himself to one thing: to glorify himself in the salvation and perfection of his people through Jesus Christ, and his purpose shall come to pass, despite all human and diabolical opposition. No unholy alliance can break his covenant of love.

As God is committed to us, so we shall be committed to him. This commitment is not to be seen as some vague and superficial bond, but consists in doing specific and concrete things. The commitment that God asks of his people has through the ages never changed. Love is recognizing God’s sovereignty and obeying his commandments. No one really needs to ask what God’s wants. “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). These words summarize what God asks of us in his covenant of love.

When it comes to our commitment in the covenant of love, I am always impressed by the manner in which the Heidelberg Catechism defines our thankfulness to God for our salvation. It deals with the law of God (the Ten Commandments) and prayer (The Lord’s Prayer). The catechism makes clear that prayer is the most important part of this thankfulness.

Indeed, our commitment is seen in prayer, trust, piety, and obedience. Personal devotion and family worship come first. These flow from a living membership of the church. Remember further that the Sabbath is called in the Bible a sign of the covenant. It holds true in this sense today that we gather diligently with God’s people every week on the day of worship. As we read in Hebrews, a book that tells us so much about God’s covenant of love, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing...” (10:25). We need to worship God together with the saints, and to hear his word proclaimed. It is only through communal worship

that our daily devotions will be sustained.

Living membership of God's church does not just mean attending church. It means being in every way a functioning part of the body of Christ. Paul writes, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body...and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor 12:13). Our baptism places us in the community of the baptized, within the one covenant people of God, where everyone has his place and function. Together we must use our gifts and talents for the benefit of the whole and to the glory of God's name. It is a bad sign when a member of the church does not participate in the affairs of the church of Christ.

Covenant and prayer

I want to stress that this living membership must then become evident in daily worship. One of the most important things in our life will be prayer. "Come near to God, and he will come near to you" (James 4:8). It is the heart of the covenant experience. Through prayer we may speak with our God and Father, may open our hearts and pour out our soul. This prayer is to be done regularly, but also spontaneously. From wherever we are, we may freely call upon God in the name of Jesus Christ. This, truly, is walking with God, as we have read about it already in Genesis.

Prayer has been called "the thermometer of faith." It certainly sets the standard for life within the covenant. Prayer is the communion and communication that stands at the heart of our relationship. Can we love someone and not speak with him, confide in him, tell him all things, and feel completely at ease doing so? The Psalms show us the way to speak freely and reverently with our God, without fear. "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear..." (1 John 4:18).

When we pray, we receive answers. Through prayer we receive grace, also the grace to obey. In all our deeds we shall seek to keep God's commandments. We shall not be selective, but obey all God's commandments, regardless of our specific leanings. Of great importance here is a conscious and determined dealing with our weaknesses and sins. We shall not tolerate these, but identify them, and battle them.

We are called in this covenant of love constantly to break with sin. We must follow God's command, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you"(James 4:7). Covenant children sometimes too quickly and easily think that the devil is irresistible and that a certain sin cannot be overcome. In our own strength we indeed cannot be victorious, but through Christ and His Spirit we can. The history of God's covenant people shows that we can be triumphant through Christ, by faith. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who all testify to the amazing fact that God's strength is manifest in our weakness.

We must, then, break with sin. The history of the covenant shows us that God is extremely displeased with the sins of his people. All the Israelites who left Egypt perished in the wilderness and could not enter the promised land through their unbelief, except for Caleb and Joshua. While the power of faith is great, unbelief

paralyzes the resolve of God's children. And we are told that what happened to Israel is an example to us, so that we do not test the Lord. The warning must be heeded, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (1 Cor 10:12). Sin is no trifling matter.

This is especially true in the *new* covenant. The rule is that the more one has received, the more one also owes. Since we have more riches in Christ, and our knowledge is greater than that of the people of old, we must show forth all the more obedience. Deliberate sin was always a serious matter; now it has become inexcusable. We are warned that if we live in sin now, while knowing better, there is only the severe sanction of the covenant. "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Heb 10:26, 27). The old covenant knew of capital punishment; the new covenant warns of eternal death.

Our Lord Jesus Christ committed himself totally in life and death; we cannot do anything less than committing ourselves fully and completely.

The comfort in the covenant

Living in the covenant of love will mean, in different measures, the hatred of the world. The Lord Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18, 19). This is strong covenantal language! Christ continued, "Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also" (John 15:20).

The enmity and antithesis that God placed from the beginning of time will continue and intensify to the end, when the world gathers all its strength to attack the beloved city (Rev 20:9). Being a covenant child and bearing the mark of Christ will become increasingly difficult. Christians are not always prepared or willing to accept these consequences.

There is much suffering in the world. People sometimes by their own deeds bring ruin to themselves and their loved ones. This should not be the case with covenant people: "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler" (1 Pet 4:15). We must be careful not to break the laws of the land. But Peter adds, "However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (verse 16).

The Bible tells us in various places that it is an honour to suffer for Christ. When we "participate in the sufferings of Christ," we will also share in his glory (Heb 12:7; James 5:10; 1 Peter 4:13). The only accusation that shall stand against us is that we belong to God's covenant in Christ our Lord.

Serving Christ under adverse circumstances is a reminder that we do not have

here a lasting city. We come into this world with nothing, and we must leave everything behind. We are aliens and strangers on the earth. “People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Heb 11:14-16).

While we must face the destruction of our earthly tent, we know that we “have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (2 Cor 5:1).

And so we are comforted. We may look forward with all the saints to the new heaven and earth, where we may see God face to face and walk with the saints. Being in the covenant of God’s love, living in it every day, we know ourselves to be on our way out of this world of sin and death to the land of eternal rest.

In the covenant of God’s love, hope springs eternal.

That hope must soften all our sorrow.
Come, fellow-pilgrims, heads then high;
For those who bide salvation’s morrow
The hills are level, seas are dry.
O blessedness above all measure,
O joy when once all grief is banned.
There is our heart, there is our treasure,
When we are in the promised land.

(Hymn 53:2, *Book of Praise*).