

- The New Covenant

Resurrection Sunday March 31, 2024 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa
Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 6:44-45

- Introduction: Citizenship, Marriage, Congregational

Covenant important in Congregational Churches cf. the Mayflower Compact.

A few years ago I visited several government websites to see, on a lark, how easy it would be to immigrate to and become a citizen of another country. Canada did not want me, though if I learned a trade they might change their minds. Switzerland was open to the idea, but it would be expensive. Lithuania was a possibility, but I needed to get a job there, live and work there for ten years and then take an oral and written exam in Lithuanian before becoming a citizen of the nation. No country made it easy, and I can see the point to that. Citizenship is a serious commitment that involves responsibilities on both parts. It is, I think, a form of a covenant, which is like a contract but has an emotional component to it. Family, if the family is functioning well, is a covenant. Marriage is definitely a covenant. The word "covenant" is very special to Congregational Churches, with the Mayflower Compact often used to guide church covenants to this day. So on Resurrection Sunday, I'd like to consider the idea of a covenant with God through Jesus Christ, particularly what Jeremiah had in mind when he spoke of a "new covenant" centuries before the Lord Jesus.

- Set the Stage: Jeremiah, the unhappy prophet

Jeremiah is, arguably, the most frustrated of all the major prophets. Starting when he was young (maybe 15), Jeremiah spent a lifetime speaking as a prophet of God knowing that people would not listen to him and that he would see the covenant between Israel and God broken and the nation plundered with the people carried away. He would live to see the nation cease to exist and the covenant of citizenship come to nothing. It would have been especially poignant for him to speak of a new covenant, a new "marriage between God and His people, a new citizenship of heaven (cf. Philippians 3) that is fulfilled in Christ.

- Jeremiah 31:31-34 Covenant vs. Contract

"In modern times we define a host of relations by contracts. These are usually for goods or services and for hard cash. The contract, formal or informal, helps to specify failure in these relationships.

The Lord did not establish a contract with Israel or with the church. He created a covenant. There is a difference. Contracts are broken when one of the parties fails to keep his promise. If, let us say, a patient fails to keep an appointment with a doctor, the doctor is not obligated to call the house and inquire, "Where were you? Why didn't you show up for your appointment?" He simply goes on to his next patient and has his appointment secretary take note of the patient who failed to keep the appointment. The patient may find it harder the next time to see the doctor. He broke an informal contract.

According to the Bible, however, the Lord asks: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"

(Isa. 49:15) The Bible indicates the covenant is more like the ties of a parent to her child than it is a doctor's appointment. If a child fails to show up for dinner, the parent's obligation, unlike the doctor's, isn't canceled. The parent finds out where the child is and makes sure he's cared for. One member's failure does not destroy the relationship. A covenant puts no conditions on faithfulness. It is the unconditional commitment to love and serve". - Bruce Shelley*

- The meaning of the word, "covenant"

At this point I'd like to take a look at the word for covenant. It looks like this-בְּרִית- and it is pronounced "ber-it." Its basic meaning is to select, or to cut, as in someone cutting away what is unwanted. Notable in the examples of covenants in the Old Testament is the episode (Genesis 15:7) in which God makes a covenant with Abram. Abram sacrifices several animals and cuts their remains in to and God passes through to declared that if He keeps not His promises, may what happened to the animals happen to Him.

Thus a covenant is literally as well as figuratively cut. One of the distinctives of the new covenant in Christ is that the covenant is made between Christ, representing humanity, and the Father, and thus will never be broken. Another distinctive is the application. The Old Covenant was written on tablets. The New Covenant is written on the hearts of people. Take a look at verse 33.

- God writing the covenant on peoples' hearts

2 Corinthians 3:3 "...clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart."

People in ancient times would sacrifice animals to a god and then have the priest interpret what he discerns on the interior organs of the dead animal as a message from that god. Here the Apostle Paul uses a similar image to describe the covenant written on our hearts and revealed by how we live. The Gospel, under the New Covenant, is written in books but also imprinted on the hearts and minds of people all around the world. It is internally driven.

- Application: cf. Divine Conspiracy

Not stricter rules but examples of the actions of a Spirit-filled Person

Dallas Willard, in The Divine Conspiracy, points out that the moral standard of the Sermon on the Mount, a commentary on the 10 Commandments, is not a standard that we must somehow attain but examples of a person who is filled with the Holy Spirit. They would want to behave as Jesus commanded. That joy in right living is an indication of that "epistle" written on our hearts and lived in our lives.

- Application: Be a person of hope. Cf. Jeremiah 32 in which Jeremiah buys a field

In addition to knowing that strength of the New Covenant and the application of the New Covenant, Scripture instructs us to always be people of hope (consider Romans 8). Even in his grim circumstances, Jeremiah was instructed to have hope. In the very next chapter (chapter 32) Jeremiah goes and buys a field knowing that his nation will soon be conquered and all the lands given to other peoples. With God there is always hope and if the great prophet, in the midst of all this, can act with hope then the hope we have in the New Covenant with Christ cannot fail.

- Conclusion

Hundreds of years before the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the great prophet Jeremiah, surrounded by disaster and wreckage, the very end of his nation as he understood it, wrote of a new sacred country, a new covenant that will be written on the hearts of people and not on tablets of stone. Christians believe that the New Covenant is Jesus Christ, who binds people all over the world in a covenant with God that cannot be broken and will never fade away. The New Covenant is but one of the marvels of the Resurrection. We are a people of the Holy Spirit, and we are a people of hope.

*I.H. Marshall, *Jesus the Savior*, IVP, 1990, p. 275ff

<https://bible.org/illustration/covenant-not-contract>

- Children's Message

Hello, children of God! Who likes watching sporting events? What kinds of teams or sports do you enjoy watching? (*Take a few answers*) Well, I often like to watch sports games. But something that can be extra special to see is when there's a team that isn't "supposed" to win, but comes from behind to have an incredible upset success! Everyone loves to see an "underdog hero", when the winner is unexpected. For instance... *Describe a few stories of unexpected wins in sports over the years. Show pictures or perhaps sporting equipment that accompany each event. Specific descriptions may vary, but emphasize how the outcome surprises the viewers.* Sometimes a game might seem like it's certainly going to go one way, and it might seem bleak for team fans, only to surprisingly turn around and reverse directions!

This happens in history at times, as well... *(Optional extra) Use more pictures to discuss and describe two or three stories of famous historical battles that also had a theme of surprise reversal or “upset win.” A few to consider include the Battle of Chancellorsville, the Winter War, or the Battle of Agincourt.* These fights should not have had the outcome that they did, but unexpected results happened! It’s interesting to learn about these times and consider how the “underdog” could possibly pull through.

But do you know what the greatest “upset victory” in history really was? It didn’t involve sports or guns or cannons. The most incredible reversal took place at an empty tomb. When you think about it, the Resurrection was, to those observing, an unexpected triumph over the ultimate enemies, sin, death, and the devil. Jesus had been crucified and buried. It might have seemed like Satan won the day. The disciples felt distraught and hopeless. It looked like there was no way to make a comeback. But come back is exactly what Jesus did! On the third day, He rose again, forever defeating death! He fulfilled God’s promises and returned to life so that we can live forever. The devil did not have the last word, and never will!

Now, we know the whole story. When we talk about Good Friday, we might feel sad, but not quite destitute, since we understand Jesus will be alive come Easter. But there are other times in our lives that might feel full of sorrow and dismay. We might encounter periods that seem as though things will never look bright again. But that is the hope that we have in Easter. Because of Jesus, we know we have hope and joy. We celebrate the Resurrection and look forward to the final Resurrection, when we will be with Jesus. We rejoice that He has already taken care of our sins and loves us, and is always with us. Easter reminds us that Jesus turns our lives around. He is risen! Alleluia!