

Sabbath School Lesson #9 – Trials, Tribulations, and Lists – 23-29 November 2019

Christ would have us avoid the implications of the oath taken by Israel in the days of Nehemiah. The importance of this leads us to focus on the memory text. It is clear in Scripture that we cannot in ourselves walk in God's law, yet, as seen in the days of Nehemiah, ancient Israel continued to make promises to walk in God's law. Thus we read: "They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes" (Nehemiah 10:29). This is not the first time the children of Israel made promises to obey the law of God. In the days of Moses, the children of Israel had entered into a covenant with God to keep His law. But the promises of that covenant at Sinai were never realised, and for the very reason that they were faulty. The promises of that covenant all depended upon the people. They said, "All that the Lord hath spoken, we will do" (Exodus 19:8; 24:7). They promised to keep His commandments, although they had already demonstrated their inability to do anything themselves. Their promises to keep the law, like the law itself, were "weak through the flesh" (Romans 8:3). The strength of that covenant was therefore only the strength of the law, and that is death. Yet, in the days of Nehemiah, the descendants of those who had made a covenant at Sinai, presumed to enter "into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law"!

In days of Nehemiah, when the people entered into an oath to walk in God's law, as was in the days of Moses at Sinai when their fathers entered into a covenant, the Lord allowed it. Yet the Lord knew the people were making vain promises. Why, then, was that oath and the covenant made? – For the very same reason that the law was spoken from Sinai; "because of transgression" (Galatians 3:19). The Lord says it was "because they continued not in My covenant" (Hebrews 8:9). They had lightly esteemed the "everlasting covenant" which God had made with Abraham, and therefore He made the Sinai covenant with them, allowed the descendants to enter into an oath, all as a witness against them. That "everlasting covenant" with Abraham was a covenant of faith. It was everlasting, and therefore the giving of the law could not disannul it. It was confirmed by the oath of God, and therefore the law could not add anything to it. Because the law added nothing to that covenant, and yet was not against its promises, it follows that the law was contained in its promises. The covenant of God with Abraham assured to him and his seed the righteousness of the law by faith. Not by works.

The covenant with Abraham was so ample in its scope that it embraced all nations, even "all the families of the earth." It is that covenant, backed by the oath of God, by which we now have confidence and hope in coming to Jesus, in whom it was confirmed. It is by virtue of that covenant, and that alone, that any man receives the blessing of God, for the cross of Christ simply brings the blessing of Abraham upon us. That covenant was wholly of faith, and that is why it assures salvation, since "by grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The history of Abraham makes very emphatic the fact that salvation is wholly of God, and not by the power of man. Said the psalmist, "Power belongeth unto God" (Psalms 62:11); And the Gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Romans 1:16). In the case of Abraham, as well as that of Isaac and of Jacob, we are made to know that only God Himself can fulfil the promises of God. They got nothing by their own wisdom or skill or power; everything was a gift from God. He led them, and He protected them.

This is the truth that had been made most prominent in the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt. God introduced Himself to them as "The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:15); and He charged Moses to let them know that He was about to deliver them in fulfillment of His covenant with Abraham. God spake unto Moses: "I am JEHOVAH; and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob as God Almighty, but by My name Jehovah I was not known to them. And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings, wherein they sojourned. And moreover I have heard the groanings of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am Jehovah, and I

will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments; and I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God; and ye shall know that I am Jehovah your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning which I lifted up My hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage; I am Jehovah" (Exodus 6:2-8).

Read now again the words of God just before the making of the covenant at Sinai: "Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagle's wings, and brought you unto Myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine; and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Exodus 19:4-6). Note how God dwelt upon the fact that He Himself had done all that had been done for them. He had delivered them from the Egyptians, and He had brought them to Himself. That was the thing which they were continually forgetting, as indicated by their murmurings. They had even gone so far as to question whether the Lord was among them or not; and their murmurings always indicated the thought that they themselves could manage things better than God could. God had brought them by the mountain pass to the Red Sea, and into the desert where there was no food nor drink, and had miraculously supplied their wants in every instance, to make them understand that they could live only by His word (Deuteronomy 8:3). The covenant which God made with Abraham was founded on faith and trust. Paul says "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto Him for righteousness" (Romans 4:3). So when God, in fulfilment of that covenant, was delivering Israel from bondage, all His dealing with them was calculated to teach them trust in Him, so that they might in truth be the children of the covenant.

In the days of Nehemiah, as was in the days of Moses, the response of Israel was self-confidence. Read the record of their distrust in God in Psalm 106. He had proved them at the Red Sea, in the giving of the manna, and at the waters of Meribah. In every place they had failed to trust Him perfectly. At Sinai He came to prove them once more, in the giving of the law. The generation in the days of Nehemiah had, per Psalm 106, again forgotten how the Lord had led Israel in the past. As Scriptures reveal, God never intended that men should try to get righteousness by the law, or that they should think such a thing possible. In the giving of the law Sinai, as shown by all the attendant circumstances, He designed that the children of Israel, and we also, should learn that the law is infinitely above the reach of all human effort, and to make it plain that, since the keeping of the commandments is essential to the salvation which He has promised, He Himself will fulfill the law in us. These are the words of God: "Hear, O My people, and I will testify unto thee; O Israel, if thou wilt hearken unto Me, there shall no strange God be in thee, neither shalt thou worship any strange god" (Psalm 81:8-9). "Incline your ear, and come unto Me; hear, and your soul shall live" (Isaiah 55:3). As His word brought forth Lazarus from the tomb, His word transforms the soul from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. But men distrust His word, they enter into an oath, adding on the word of God their own word, as if their word or promise is better.

A careful reading of Exodus 19:1-6 reveal that God did not ask them to enter into another covenant with Him, but only to accept His covenant of peace, which he had long before given to the fathers. This everlasting covenant is what the latter generation in the days of Nehemiah ought to have remembered and accepted. Instead, they make an oath to keep the law of God. The proper response of the people therefore would have been, 'Amen, even so, O Lord, let it be done unto us according to Thy will.' On the contrary, Israel in the days of Moses said "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do" and they repeated their promise, with additional emphasis, even after they had heard the law spoken. Years later, the lesson was never learnt, and Israel in the days of Nehemiah "entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law." It was the same self-confidence that led their descendants to say to Christ, "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" (John 6:28). Think of mortal men presuming to be able to do God's work! Christ answered, "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent." Even so it was in the days of Moses when the law was given at Sinai, and yet again in the days of Nehemiah when the law was read.