

Sabbath School Lesson #2 – God’s Covenants With Us – 7-13 January 2023

Christ would have us understand that God’s covenant with us is simply God’s promise to us. The Lesson writer’s use of ‘bilateral’ or ‘unilateral’ contract terms to explain God’s covenant with us is unnecessary and unfortunate. God’s covenant requires a faith response and cannot justly be presented as ‘bilateral’ or ‘unilateral.’ In spiritual sphere, there are two covenants: God’s covenant, and people’s covenant. A covenant is a promise. So, there are two promises – God’s promise, and the people’s promise. There are two types of works, God’s works, and people’s works. Nothing of the people’s covenant/promise, or works, can save any person. Salvation is only through God’s covenant/promise and works.

The common meaning of “covenant” is a compact between two parties involving mutual agreement. But such is not the basis of God’s covenant with us. In the call of Abraham, we find this promise: “In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). After Abraham’s great test of faith, the promise is repeated with a slight change of wording, and is confirmed with an oath: “By Myself have I sworn, in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:16-18). This promise to Abraham is interpreted by Peter to be a covenant which God made with the fathers: “Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (Acts 3:25). There is no indication of any mutual agreement here, but simply an undertaking on the part of God to bless the world through the seed of Abraham. Let our response be Amen! The same should be our response to God’s law. No man can keep the law of God. If God’s law is kept, it must be kept perfectly, no half keeping is accepted by God. No man can keep the law perfectly to be accepted by God. Only Christ can keep God’s law perfectly. Any man in whom God’s law is kept perfectly, that work can only be the work of Christ in that man, and it is not the work of the man himself.

“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Romans 10:4). Those who go about to establish their own righteousness will ever fall far short of attaining to the righteousness of God. We can be complete only in Christ. Our best efforts are far below perfection; but when we in faith submit to Christ, then our faith submission efforts are said to have: “quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens” (Hebrews 11:34). The whole duty of man is to keep God’s commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13), yet no man can keep the commandments except “the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5), and it is not merely by the help of Christ, rather, it is Christ who does the keeping of the law in us.

The enemy of souls takes advantage of the natural cry of the soul that is anxious for eternal life, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30) to turn man’s attention to his own works. The enemy turns men from Christ, who alone can cleanse from sin and make men righteous. Eternal life cannot be earned, it is too valuable. No man can give an equivalent for it. It cannot be obtained without good works, yet no amount of good works will buy it. “The gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord” (Romans 6:23). After we have done all, we are still unprofitable servants, and whatever we receive must be as the gift of God.

All Bible examples such as Malachi 3:10-11 suggesting man making ‘bilateral covenant’ with God are but examples of God’s compassion upon us in our fallen condition wherein in His mercy He reaches out to us, but “it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). People in ignorance and sincerity enter covenants with God, but God’s mercy in dealing with us should not be interpreted as God’s own ‘bilateral covenant.’ God’s covenant and God’s promise are one and the same thing, as clearly seen from Galatians 3:17, where it shows that to disannul the covenant would be to make void the promise. Genesis 17:7-8 says that God gave land to Abraham by a covenant; but Galatians 3:18 says that God gave it to him by promise. God’s covenant with us is not ‘bilateral,’ but one-sided promise to us, for “Who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things” (Romans 11:35-36).

When God’s law says, “Thou shalt not,” we may take it as God’s assurance that if we but trust Him He will preserve us from the sin against which He warns us. God’s law is fulfilled in you through Christ who is “able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before

the presence of His glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 1:24). It is not you who are to do that, which the Lord pleases, but the word of God, “it shall accomplish that which I please” (Isaiah 55:11). You are not to read the word of God and say, ‘I will do that,’ but open your heart to “the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13) and “let the word of Christ dwell in you” (Colossians 3:16) that it may accomplish God’s will in you; what He commands, He enables. Neither promise to do what only God can do nor interpose between yourself and God to prevent Christ working God’s righteousness in you.

God made promises to Abraham, but never asked him to make any promise in return (Genesis 12:1-3). God repeated them later, still exacted no promise from him (Genesis 13:14-17; 15:4, 5). Genesis 15:9-17 shows that God’s covenant is a one-sided promise. God never asks us to make promises to Him, but to believe His promises (Genesis 15:6).

In God’s one-sided covenant, we respond with “the good fight of faith” (2 Timothy 6:12), faith in “God, which giveth us the victory through Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57). In a ‘bilateral’ covenant, we ourselves do the fighting. If we fight the “fight of faith”, Christ fights for us, and “in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us” (Romans 8:37).

It is so rare for men to do anything without expecting an equivalent, that theologians have taken it for granted that it is the same with God. Thus, the Lesson writer prays we “uphold our end of the bargain.” But God does not make bargains with men, because He knows that they could not fulfil their part. “Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6). Knowing that man is “wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17), God counsels him to buy of Him everything that is needed, but to buy “without money, and without price” (Isaiah 55:1). The trouble is, even when men are willing to recognise the Lord, they want to make bargains with Him. They want it to be a ‘bilateral’ covenant in which they will be considered as on a par with God. But whoever deals with God must deal with Him on His own terms, that is, on a basis of fact — that “verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity” (Psalm 39:5), and “that power belongeth unto God” (Psalm 62:11) – that we have nothing and are nothing, and He has everything and is everything, and gives everything. God gives us His goodness. But for us to ask God for good things and promise to serve Him in return is to deform His goodness.

In judgment, only “the works of God” wrought in us, are acceptable to God. The question is, “What shall we do that we may work the works of God?” the answer is, “This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent” (John 6:28-29). God Himself does the good works which, when exhibited in the lives of men, render them pleasing to Him in judgment. Our Saviour said: “But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God” (John 3:21). The psalmist said: “O how great is Thy goodness which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee; which Thou hast wrought for them that trust in Thee before the sons of men!” (Psalm 31:19). God Himself has wrought the good works with which we are to appear before His throne in judgment.

Did Paul live a ‘bilateral nature of the salvation covenant’ and did he say he ‘had upheld his end of the bargain,’ as the Lesson writer says? No! When Paul said, “I have fought a good fight . . . I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7), he meant that he had kept in his heart that faith which enabled him to fight “the good fight of faith” (1 Timothy 6:12). If Paul was in a ‘bilateral’ covenant, he would have relied on his own power to fulfil his ‘end of the bargain.’ Paul lived in God’s covenant of grace believing “the just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). Like John, Paul had “victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4), he did not uphold his ‘end of the bargain,’ but he “kept the faith.”

Paul testifying of the work of God, said: “But by the grace of God I am what I am; and His grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all,” and he added, “yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10); Paul’s desired was “not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Philippians 3:9). Paul says, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Says David, “Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory, for Thy mercy, and for Thy truth’s sake” (Psalm 115:1).