

The Covenants

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

The sovereignty of God is a central theme in the covenants, and the failure of man is revealed in conditional covenants.

Scripture: Genesis 15:1, Isaiah 27:9, Isaiah 40:15, Jeremiah 31:31, John 5:24, John 6:44, John 10:28, Romans 6:14, Romans 11:26, Philippians 1:6

Topics: "Divine Sovereignty", "Covenant Theology"

Description

Lewis Sperry Chafer delves into the concept of God's covenants with humanity, highlighting the distinction between conditional and unconditional covenants. He emphasizes that unconditional covenants are declarations of God's promises without relying on human actions, while conditional covenants are dependent on human response. The sermon explores the significance of understanding these covenants, which shape the relationship between God and mankind throughout history, showcasing divine sovereignty and human choice in fulfilling God's predetermined purposes.

Transcript

The Bible discloses the fact that it has pleased God to enter into covenants with men. Eight of these covenants are recorded and they incorporate the most vital facts in man's relation to God throughout the history of the race. Each covenant represents a divine purpose and the majority of them constitute an absolute prediction as well as an unalterable promise as to the accomplishment of whatever God has designed. Reckoning from the time a covenant is made, it always anticipates the future and is intended to be a message of assurance to those to whom it is addressed.

The covenants of God are grouped into two classifications:

1. Those that are Conditional.

A conditional covenant is one in which God's action is made to be contingent upon some action on the part of those to whom the covenant is addressed. A conditional covenant guarantees that God "will do His part with absolute certainty when the human requirements are met; it also declares with equal certainty that He will not do according to the expectation of the covenant should the human responsibility fail.

2. Those that are Unconditional.

An unconditional covenant is simply a declaration on the part of God as to what He is going to do and is made without reference to human action, purpose, or merit. This form of covenant is illustrated in Gen 15:1-18. Believing fully in the promise of Jehovah concerning a seed (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:16-22), Abraham sought to have that promise ratified by an outward seal in action. Thus Jehovah directed in the preparation of the bodies of the animals to be used in this ratification, and though it was no doubt the custom that both parties thus entering into covenant should walk together between the pieces of the carcasses, God caused Abraham to become utterly inactive by a deep sleep while He passed through alone. Since this was an unconditional covenant in which Abraham had no responsibility, it was fitting that he should in no way appear in the ratification of the covenant. Jehovah had not said, So shall thy seed be, if; but He had said, "So shall thy seed be."

Since all human life is lived under some qualifying conditions belonging to the covenants of Jehovah, and since every passage of Scripture draws its color to some degree from the covenant under which it belongs, the importance to the Bible student of a clear understanding of these age-characterizing, world-transforming declarations of Jehovah cannot be estimated.

The eight major covenants are:

1. The Covenant with Man in Eden (Gen 1:26-31; Gen 2:16-17).

According to this record, God entered into a conditional covenant with Adam in which life and blessing or death and cursing were made to depend on the faithfulness of Adam. Human failure followed and the terms of the covenant were executed in righteousness.

2. The Covenant with Man after the Fall (Gen 3:16-19).

This is an unconditional covenant in which God declares to man what his lot in life will be because of his sin. There is no appeal allowed, nor is any human responsibility involved.

3. The Covenant with Noah and His Sons (Gen 9:1-18).

In declaring the far-reaching details concerning the course and destiny of the human family as represented in the sons of Noah, in faithfully promising that there would be no recurrence of the flood, and in establishing the authority of human government on the earth, God again entered into an unconditional covenant. However, this covenant anticipated the most minute control of all human life and destiny and could in no case be realized apart from the cooperative action of uncounted numbers of human wills; yet by the terms of this covenant God is committed to accomplish everything He has promised even to the molding and moving of the will of each individual who makes up the countless myriads of humanity who were to appear on the earth.

There is an insoluble mystery presented in every effort to reconcile the facts of divine sovereignty and human choice; but in an unconditional covenant, God is seen to be in absolute authority over all the forces of the world as well as over every thought and intent of the human heart. Yet in the outworking of the covenant no human being is conscious of divine coercion or of restraint upon his own freedom of choice. "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance" (Isa 40:15).

4. The Covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:1-4; Gen 13:14-17; Gen 15:1-7; Gen 17:1-8).

In like manner, this covenant reaches on through all time and into eternity and involves the blessedness of all the families of the earth. It is unconditional in the most absolute sense, being set forth in seven I wills of Jehovah, and is confirmed to Isaac (Gen 26:24) and to Jacob (Gen 35:12). This covenant anticipates the sovereign will of God in Abraham's personal blessing, in the everlasting mercy to Israel, and the coming of the Seed which is Christ.

Again, it should be observed that in the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant God is committed to marvelous accomplishments which extend over the whole history of the race and into eternity. To guarantee this, which is infinitely more than merely foreseeing what man would do, man must be moved by a sovereign hand even to the controlling of every thought and purpose which has any part in the fulfillment of this covenant. Yet in its outworking, not one of the whole human family will be conscious of doing other than his own free choice may prompt him to do. The sufficiency of God to perform even as He has determined is not now a question of abstract speculation. Thousands of years of human history have witnessed a perfect fulfillment to the present hour; yet in the midst of this stupendous divine achievement man has not ceased to disbelieve in the sovereignty of God nor to belittle God in all his thoughts. The sphere of man's thought is limited to the circle in which his own will seems to him to be supreme.

5. The Covenant with Moses (Exo 20:1 to 31:18).

In transmitting the three-fold law (the commandments, Exo 20:1-17; the judgments, Exo 21:1 to 24:11; and the ordinances, Exo 24:12 to 31:18) to Israel through Moses, Jehovah entered into a conditional covenant with that nation. The terms of the law may be stated in the phrase -- If ye will I will, and if ye will not I will not. In Deu 28:1-62, as in various portions of the Old Testament, these stipulations which condition the covenant of the law are expanded in greater detail as to their application. Though the covenant was made to depend on the faithfulness of Israel, Jehovah foretold their failure and the suffering that would follow (Deu 28:63-68). History has only confirmed the divine prediction as to their failure. It should be noted that no child of God under grace is subject to this hopeless conditional covenant of law works (Rom 6:14).

6. The Covenant with Israel concerning Their Land (Deu 30:1-10).

This unconditional covenant looks on to Israel's final possession of the land. Nothing will hinder this blessing. Even Israel herself will be willing in the day of His power, regardless of what the modern Jew or the foe of Zionism may be saying today. Coming up out of Egypt, that nation came to Kadesh-barnea where Jehovah made it a matter of their own choice as to whether they would at that time enter the promised land. By so much He then put them upon a basis similar to that of a conditional covenant. They rebelled and were turned back into the wilderness for thirty-eight more years of wilderness wandering. Later, and without the slightest reference to any choice on the part of Israel, Jehovah took them into their land with a high hand. He did not take them in against their wills, but He so controlled their wills that they went in with songs of rejoicing. The time is coming when that nation, though scattered over all the earth, will be regathered into their own land to possess it forever. At that time Israel will not limit Jehovah by her own choice in the matter. God will regather them with sovereign power. Nor are their wills to be coerced; for it is written that they shall enter with songs of praise, and "everlasting joy" shall be on their heads (Isa 35:10; Isa 51:11; Isa 55:12; Isa 61:3, Isa 61:7). The heart-attitude of Israel toward Jehovah in the kingdom is also anticipated in this covenant, which attitude is fully stated under the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-33). The final yet future placing of Israel in her own land is thus assured by an unconditional covenant of Jehovah which can never be changed or broken (Jer 23:8; Eze 37:21-28).

7. The Covenant with David (2Sa 7:4-16).

This covenant, likewise, is unconditional. By its terms David is promised an unending royal lineage, a throne, and a kingdom, all of which are to endure for ever. In the declaration of this covenant, Jehovah reserves the right to interrupt the actual reign of David's sons if chastisement is required (2Sa 7:14-15; Psa 89:20-37); but the perpetuity of the covenant cannot be broken. As the Abrahamic covenant guaranteed to Israel an everlasting entity as a nation (Jer 31:36) and an everlasting possession of the land (Gen 13:15; 1Ch 16:15-18; Psa 105:9-11), so the Davidic covenant guarantees to them an everlasting throne (2Sa 7:16; Psa 89:36), an everlasting King (Jer 33:21), and an everlasting kingdom (Dan 7:14). From the day that the covenant was made and confirmed by Jehovah's oath (Act 2:30) to the birth of Christ, David did not lack for a son to sit on his throne (Jer 33:21), and Christ the Eternal Son of God and Son of David, being the rightful heir to that throne and the One who will yet sit on that throne (Luk 1:31-33), completes the fulfillment of this promise to David that a son would sit on his throne forever.

8. The New Covenant Made in His Blood (Mar 14:24; Luk 22:20; Jer 31:31-33; Eze 37:26; Heb 8:6, Heb 8:10-13; Heb 10:16).

This, again, is an unconditional covenant and it is most important for every child of God to recognize this fact since this covenant forms the very basis of his own relation to God. What may be proposed for Israel or the nations may be of interest to the believer, but it does not directly apply to him; but the covenant of divine grace is of infinite import to all who are saved.

The New Covenant guarantees all that God proposes to do for men on the ground of the blood of His Son. This may be seen in two aspects:

(a) That He will save, preserve, and present in Heaven conformed to His Son, all who have believed on Christ. The fact that it is necessary to believe on Christ in order to be saved does not form a condition in this covenant. Believing is not a part of the covenant, but rather is the ground of admission into its eternal blessings. The covenant is not related to the unsaved, but it is made with those who believe, and it promises the faithfulness of God in their behalf. "He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phi 1:6), and every other promise concerning the saving and keeping power of God is a part of this covenant in grace. There is no salvation contemplated for man in this age that does not guarantee perfect preservation here, and a final presentation of the saved one in glory. There may be an issue between the Father and His child as to the daily life, and, as in the case of David's sons, the Christian's sin may call for the chastening hand of God; but those questions which enter into the daily life of the believer are never made to condition the promise of God concerning the eternal salvation of those whom He has received in grace.

There are those who emphasize the importance and power of the human will and who contend that both salvation and safe-keeping must be made conditional on the cooperation of the human will. This may seem reasonable to the human mind; but it is not according to the revelation given in the Scriptures. In every case God has declared unconditionally what He will do for all those who put their trust in Him (Joh 5:24; Joh 6:37; Joh 10:28). This is a very great undertaking which must of necessity involve the absolute control of the very thoughts and intents of the heart; but it is no more unreasonable than that God should declare to Noah that his seed would follow the absolute channels which He had decreed, or that He should declare to Abraham that He would make of him a great nation and that of his seed Christ should be born. In every case it is the manifestation of sovereign authority and power. It is evident that God has

given latitude for the exercise of the human will. He appeals to the wills of men, and men who are saved are conscious that both their salvation and their service are according to their own deepest choice.

We are told that God controls the will of man (Joh 6:44; Phi 2:13) and at the same time appeals to and conditions His blessing on the will of man (Joh 5:40; Joh 7:17; Rom 12:1; 1Jo 1:9).

The Scriptures give unquestionable emphasis to the sovereignty of God. God has perfectly determined what will be, and His determined purpose will be realized; for it is impossible that God should ever be either surprised or disappointed. So, also, there is equal emphasis in the Scriptures upon the fact that lying between these two undiminished aspects of His sovereignty -- His eternal purpose and its perfect realization -- He has permitted sufficient latitude for some exercise of the human will. In so doing, His determined ends are in no way jeopardized. One aspect of this truth without the other will lead, in the one case, to fatalism, wherein there is no place for petition in prayer, no motive for the wooing of God's love, no ground for condemnation, no occasion for evangelistic appeal, and no meaning to very much Scripture; in the other case it will lead to the dethroning of God. It is reasonable to believe that the human will may be under the control of God; but most unreasonable to believe that the sovereignty of God is under the control of the human will.

Those who believe are saved and safe forever because it is according to the unconditional covenant of God.

(b) The future salvation of Israel is promised under the unconditional New Covenant (Isa 27:9; Eze 37:23; Rom 11:26-27). This salvation will be accomplished only on the ground of the shed blood of Christ. Through the sacrifice of Christ, God is as free to save a nation as He is free to save an individual. Israel is represented by Christ as a treasure hid in the field. The field is the world. It was Christ, we believe, who sold all that He had that He might purchase the field, and in order that He might possess the treasure (Mat 13:44).

Conclusion.

In contemplating the eight covenants, too much emphasis cannot be placed on the fact of the sovereignty of God as it is related to those covenants which are unconditional, and the absolute failure of man as it is revealed in the outworking of those covenants which are conditional. Whatever God undertakes unconditionally will be completed in all the perfection of His own infinite Being.

QUESTIONS

1. Into how many major covenants has God entered with man?
2. Define a conditional covenant.
3. Define an unconditional covenant.
4. State how Gen 15:1-18 illustrates an unconditional covenant.
5. What importance may be attached to the study of the covenants?
6. Name and describe those covenants which are conditional.
7. Name the covenants, giving Scripture references, which are unconditional.

8. a. What did the covenant with Noah promise?
- b. What does it reveal as to divine sovereignty?
9. a. What did the covenant with Abraham promise?
- b. What does it teach as to divine sovereignty?
10. a. What did the covenant with David promise?
- b. What does it teach as to divine sovereignty?
11. What truth is illustrated by Israel's experience at Kadesh-barnea?
12. a. Name two objectives in the New Covenant.
- b. Is that covenant conditional?
- c. What relation does believing on Christ sustain to the New Covenant?
13. Distinguish between divine sovereignty and human choice.
14. On what basis will God be free to save the nation Israel as promised under the New Covenant?

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