

The Covenant of Grace

by Watchman Nee

The Covenant of Grace is a gracious call from God, not based on human desire, but on God's desire, and it is a sign of God's power and almighty nature.

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-14, Romans 4:19-22, Romans 8:8, Philippians 3:3, Colossians 2:11

Topics: "Faith and Trust in God", "Covenant of Grace"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the significance of God's covenant of grace with Abraham, illustrating how God's silence during Abraham's self-reliance led to a deeper understanding of faith. He explains that true progress begins with God's call, not our efforts, and that the covenant, marked by circumcision, signifies a complete reliance on God rather than on the flesh. As Abraham's faith matured, he learned to trust in God's promises despite his own limitations, ultimately becoming a friend of God. The sermon highlights the importance of recognizing our helplessness and the necessity of grace in our relationship with God.

Transcript

One striking feature marks the thirteen years that followed Ishmael's birth. Throughout them all God did not speak to Abraham. His record is empty. What we have done on our own, God leaves us to get on with; He does not speak. But when Abraham was `dead'-dry and old, and could no longer have a son if he wanted one - then, God spoke to him.

The starting-point of all our progress is in God's gracious call; not in our desires. Abraham had not repented. Rather, Ishmael was growing yearly more precious to him. He had not realized his wrong, nor sought after God. From our standpoint, measuring him by all we have said so far, there was not much hope for him. But his hope was not dependent on whether he wanted God but on the fact that God wanted him. God was still at work on him; He had not let him go. If God wants a man, that man cannot escape His hand. How we need to learn to commit ourselves to the hand of the Almighty God!

So, after these years, God spoke to Abraham again. `When Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be thou perfect' (Genesis 17: 1). For the first time He uses the title El Shaddai, `God Almighty'. Abraham knew God had power and was almighty, but he did not know Him as all-mighty. God said, `Learn this, and be perfect,' that is to say, without mixture. The perfect are unmixed in everything; they are even perfectly weak, letting the Almighty do it all!

Now God made a covenant with Abraham. God wanted a people who should spring from Him, and He defines in the terms of the covenant where they must stand in order to be such a people. 'I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. Behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be the father of a multitude of nations. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee' (17: 2, 4, 7).

The sign of the covenant was circumcision. They were to be a people with no confidence in the flesh. They must not only be born, and called forth, by Him; they must bear in their flesh His sign. To be born, and to be bought with a price, is not enough. God has redeemed us, and begotten us again, but we are still not in the position of God's people, maintaining His witness in the earth, fulfilling His purpose, unless there is effective in us what is meant by circumcision. 'Ye shall be circumcised,' runs the command, 'and it shall be a token of a covenant betwixt me and you.' And it continues: 'The uncircumcised male . . . shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant' (17: 11, 14). Note carefully that those not circumcised were not therefore exterminated (like the people of Canaan). For this is not a question of salvation but of witness only. Their name was 'cut off'. In other words, we may be redeemed and possess new life, but if we do not recognize the Cross of Christ as dealing with the flesh in us, we have no name as His witnesses.

What, then, is circumcision? The apostle Paul tells us that in Christ 'ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ' (Colossians 2:11). Elsewhere he says, 'we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh' (Philippians 3. 3). And then he goes onto catalogue the various grounds he had previously felt himself to have for such confidence. They turn out to be things in no way sinful or wrong in themselves. His racial purity, his strict religious upbringing, his sincere zeal for God-these things were not sinful at all. They were simply grounds for natural pride. But 'they that are in the flesh cannot please God' (Romans 8. 8). The trouble today is that we do not recognize this. Romans chapter 7 is Paul's description of one who is doing his best to please God in the flesh, and it is one big 'cannot'.

Sin in a man is comparatively easy to deal with. But when it comes to having a part in God's work of recovery, the trouble arises with the flesh that wants to please God. It is here that the Cross of Christ comes to our aid. It undermines our self-confidence, so that, for example, we can no longer speak as dogmatically as we did, but it gives us a wonderful confidence in God.

It is as though God said to Abraham, 'What you need is faith and not works. You tried thirteen years ago; but I promised, not in order that you should bring it about but because I intended to bring it about.' Circumcision was the sign of that. It is to be a sign, for all generations of His children, that they know that in the flesh they are helpless.

A sign is a peculiarity. We see it, and by it we recognize a person. What is the distinctive mark of our Christian life before men? Is it wisdom, or honesty? Is it love, or eloquence in the Word of God? No; the feature that distinguishes the people of God is their lack of an overweening self-confidence. Alas, it is a feature hard to find. As young Christians we know everything: salvation, the fullness of the Spirit, the will of God! We are quite sure we know God's plan for us. But where is the fear and the trembling? Where is the uncertainty that knows it may well be mistaken, and that leans-yes leans-on God?

In chapter 15 we read of Abraham that he believed. Now, in chapter 17, the fulfilment of the promise is near; yet it seems that Abraham's faith has dwindled. We are told that he fell on his face and laughed (17: 17). It was probably the only position in which he dare laugh! For him and Sarah to have a son now was ridiculous. After all he was a man of a hundred. He had heard nothing like it. His early faith had been true faith, but even that had had an element of self-confidence in it, and now even his faith was dead! He had not back-slidden. This was part of God's work in him. The Father of the faithful had to lose his faith! For it had been a mixed faith-in God and in Abraham.

God was bringing about in Abraham a new quality of faith. That laugh was not a laugh at God, but a laugh at himself. `Without being weakened in faith he considered his own body now as good as dead (he being about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb: yea, looking unto the promise of God, he wavered not through unbelief, but waxed strong through faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. Wherefore also it was reckoned unto him for righteousness' (Romans 4: 19-22). This is true faith. When we are defeated and God does not speak, He is leading us to the end of, ourselves and to a complete confidence in Him. There is no substitute for that. We try to help God out, and inflate our faith, and make long prayers, but nothing happens. There is prayer which shows no self-confidence, which cries out in the midst of doubt and fear: `I don't know whether it is any use or not to do so, but I believe!' God can use faith that is exercised in the midst of extreme doubt, faith as small as a grain of mustard seed.

With the matter of circumcision settled we move into chapter 18 and find Abraham in the most privileged position of a friend of God. This is quite the most remarkable chapter in the Old Testament. Abraham is still in Mamre, the place of fullness. Three men come to him, and one of them is God in human form. This occurs in no other place in the Old Testament. God appeared, not as before in glory, but walking, bringing two angels. Abraham recognized Him and addressed Him as `my Lord'. He received the three of them as guests, inviting them to rest and wash and eat. This was fellowship and intercourse with God of a new order. As the latter part of the chapter shows, Abraham was taken into the divine counsels to have a part in them. He was God's friend.

They talked of Abraham's son, yet to be given. Now it was Sarah that broke into laughter. With Abraham the question was already settled. It was this that had qualified him to be God's friend. The story of Sodom works itself out, and after that a strange thing happens. Abraham is subjected to his second test with regard to his son. This takes place at Gerar in the land of the Philistines. Here Abraham comes to dwell, and as he did before in Egypt, he tells a lie to Abimelech king of Gerar. After chapter 18 and Abraham's fellowship with God, this is difficult to understand.

But there is a difference here from the incident in chapter 12. For when Abimelech rebukes him, Abraham explains why he did it. It was a thing they had planned together back in Mesopotamia. `We thought God wanted us to move about in this land. We thought you were idolaters, and we were afraid, so we made this plan.' The thing had not originated in Egypt: it only came to the surface there. It had its roots in Mesopotamia, and now here in Gerar it crops up again. Abraham is put to shame. He has to learn that Sarah cannot be separated from him. In Mesopotamia he had thought she could.

Abraham represents faith; Sarah represents grace. It is impossible to separate them. If the one is gone the other is useless. Here was one more treacherous thing that had to be rooted out before Isaac could be given. Faith that does not rest on God's grace is valueless. You cannot sacrifice Sarah.

For Sarah's sake the whole of Abimelech's house was punished (20: 17). Abraham was required to pray for them. It cannot possibly have been an easy thing to do. The women of Gerar were barren. How could he pray for them when his own wife had the same trouble? For other things, yes; but how for this?

But he did not ask that question. Now he had completely overcome the fears and questions and doubts that had had their root in Mesopotamia. 'My wife is God's affair, and so are theirs. I have no confidence except in God.' The lurking fear had been dragged out into the light of day, and slain. He was free to pray for others. He did not pray for Sarah, for now he had no need to. Immediately after this Isaac was conceived. 'The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken. And Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac' (Genesis 21. 1-3).

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