

Last week we spent our time talking about the role of the pastor in the church. I ended by putting it back to you, from Hebrews 13:

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

I want to go back to this, because I want to make sure that the, WHAT YOU SHOULD DO, does not become detached from WHO YOU ARE. What I mean is, after laying out the role of pastor from the standpoint of the household of God, it is important that you understand what role in the family each and every one of you plays AS WELL AS WHY THIS IDENTITY MATTERS. We all have identity issues that we bring into the church, and when we compound our identity issues with those of our neighbor, we create a dangerous little gathering of self-centered glory hogs coming to church for our own benefit.

What we are going to do today is look at Scripture through a narrative perspective. That means we are going to look at the whole Bible as one story so that we may find an answer to the question: HOW DO WE FIT INTO THE PLAN OF GOD?

The story of the Bible is one of relationship: the relationship between God and His people.

This relationship is described by God through the language of covenant.

In general: The covenant is the means by which man has communion with God. It is a living contract between God and man, most commonly described by God as:

*I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people (Leviticus 26.12).*

God has chosen to reveal the mystery of His eternal plan to us in stages (**Ephesians 3.9**). This does not mean that God's plans have changed or varied, but God has established one, eternal covenant, under different administrations. The overarching covenant which covers every event from the beginning of time to the end is known as the **Covenant of Redemption**.

The covenant of redemption is the eternal agreement within the Trinity in which the Father appointed the Son Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit to redeem His people from the guilt and power of their self-inflicted sin (**John 17**). God appointed Christ to live a life of perfect obedience to the law and to die a sacrificial death as the representative for all who trust in Him (**1 Peter 2.22-24**).

This covenant has been disclosed through the **Covenant of Works** and fulfilled in the **Covenant of Grace**.

The covenant of works is a conditional covenant that requires a set standard of performance. With obedience to these works, there are promises, and the breaking of these conditions brings punishment.

The **Covenant of Grace** is an unconditional promise that where God will save His people regardless of their failing works. These two covenants stand side by side in the Bible and need to be seen as two parts of the coin that reveal to us the covenant of redemption. We see this covenantal relationship playing itself out through the entire Bible. Starting in Genesis:

The first covenant we see made in the Bible is the Adamic covenant. It was made in the Garden of Eden between God and Adam who represented all mankind as a federal head (**Romans 5.12-21**) It promised continued life in the presence of God for obedience and separation from God for disobedience. Adam, and all mankind in Adam, broke this covenant, thus standing condemned by original sin. Additionally, every person who has lived since Adam has chosen to sin freely (**Romans 3.9-18**).

In **Genesis 3.15**, in the wake of the Fall, God gives Adam and Eve a promise of salvation, the proto-evangelium, the first proclamation of the gospel:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.*

This is the foreshadowing of the covenant of grace. God says here, even though you have chosen to turn your back on me, I will not turn my back on you. I have a plan. That plan is that from the offspring of woman will come one who will crush the head of Satan once and for all. And He does this not just to victoriously destroy the enemy, but to open up the possibility for their to once and forever be a relationship established between God and His people.

God continues to define His relationship to His people in covenant. In **Genesis 9**, we see God establish a covenant with Noah: a promise that He will never again punish the sin of the earth through flood. In the flood, we get a clear picture of God's holiness and justice: sin must be punished. In the rescuing of Noah's family and the following covenant with them, we get a picture of God's mercy: though human beings are fully sinful and deserving of death, God promises to withhold their destruction. In this, God shows us the results of our failure to fulfill our part in the covenant of works, while also displaying for us His grace in allowing us to live. This points to the dual nature of our God: just and gracious.

Moving on in Genesis we see God establish a covenant with Abraham in **Genesis 12**. God promises 4 things to Abraham in this covenant:

1. I will multiply you greatly; a great nation
2. I will make you a blessing; from your offspring will the nations of the earth be blessed
3. I will be your God, you will be my people
4. I will give you a promised land.

When God makes this promise to Abraham it has both Physical and Spiritual applications. God did multiply the nation of Israel and made it great, God did make them a blessing in their witness of Him, God did lead them as His people, they received Canaan as a land of inheritance.

**Romans 4** and **Galatians 3** show us that these promises were not then, or ever, meant to be understood solely as promises to the bloodline descendants of Abraham. These were mere shadows of the things to come. These promises were to point forward, to the one offspring who would be a blessing, and open the floodgates to the salvation of many nations. We are Abraham's offspring and heirs to the promise, because we share Abraham's faith. We are the people of God.

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. Galatians 3.28-29*

The Covenant with Abraham is a restating of the Covenant of Grace, with further revelation. Now we know it will not only be from the Seed of Woman that produces the savior, but that it will come from the line of Abraham. We also have stipulations, responses required from Abraham, that had not been there before. To be clear, Abraham was chosen because of God, not because of anything that He did, but the promises that he received from God demanded action: *walk before me, and be blameless*.

God continues to reveal His plan in His covenant with Moses at Sinai. We usually think of this as the giving of the Ten Commandments. God has rescued Israel from Egypt. He parted the sea. He has led them across the desert: fed them, given the water, led them by fire and smoke, and now they come to the base of a great mountain and God settles on the top of it in a great storm.

It is here that He lays out His Law and describes how they ought to relate to Him. In the same way that God commanded Abraham to: *walk before me, and be blameless*, He is now directing the Israelites on what that walk looks like.

*The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Exodus 19.3-6*

God sets out a conditional, evangelistic covenant. Conditional meaning that both parties had a role to fulfill. The covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai was not a promise of blessing like the covenants to Noah and Abraham, in which God promised AND fulfilled the promises. Instead, it was God revealing His Law, which would act as the divider between those who were His people and those who were not. In the OT time, the civil aspects of the law would regulate the life of the Israelites so that they would be sustained and be a light to the surrounding nations; this is its evangelistic character.

The final God initiated covenant is found in **2 Samuel 7**. God has fulfilled His promise of the Promised land to the Israelites, they have settled down and made quite a kingdom for themselves. After a bad run with Saul as king, David becomes king. David, the man after God's own heart, ushers in a time of great prosperity for the nation of Israel. In the midst of this, God offers a covenant promise to David:

*When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 2 Samuel 7.12-13*

God further specifies the path of the Messiah, no longer just human, or just of Abraham, but from the line of David. But we also see for the first time the idea of kingship. Not only would the people of God be a nation, or a group of people, but they would most definitely have a king.

The final God-initiated covenant is the Messianic covenant. We find this in **Jeremiah 31**, it says:

*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Jeremiah 31.31-33*

Here God makes a huge revelation as to the nature of the existing covenants. He talks of a new covenant, but this new covenant is not at the expense of the old. THE PREVIOUS COVENANTS ARE NOT NULL AND VOID. NOR ARE THEY ENTIRELY SEPARATE FROM THIS ONE. The Messianic covenant is new because of the manner by which the law is given to them. It is no longer written on stone tablets and handed to them in a covenant ceremony. Instead, it is written on their hearts through the work of the Spirit; given freely by the grace of God.

**The Adamic covenant** is still valid. People are still held responsible for their sin.

**The Noahic covenant** is still valid. We recognize each breath as a gift of God's mercy.

**The Abrahamic covenant** is still valid. The people of God are chosen by God, built up by God, and expected to live life for God.

**The Mosaic covenant** is still valid. The perfect keeping of the law is still necessary for salvation. The difference is, it isn't our ability to keep it, but Jesus Christ, who came and lived a perfect life on our behalf. The law for us NOW is a guide to how we should live AS one of God's people.

**The Davidic covenant** is still valid. WE HAVE A KING. Jesus was not just a savior who came, did His thing, and now lives entirely separate and detached from us. He rules over the world, but specifically for believers, He rules our life. But not as some dictator, but he has allowed us to have a loving relationship with Him.

**The Messianic covenant** is still valid. We, just like Israel, break the written Law. We need a mediator of the covenant. We need to be made new; have the Law written on our hearts. We need the grace of God to bypass our depraved hearts and do the work that we could not do. We need Jesus.

This forms the foundation for us of Covenant theology; what it does for us is Open up your Bibles to 1 Peter 2, after that brief introduction, we are now going to jump in on what this has to do with a group of people sitting in a theater in 2012. Starting at verse 9, it says this:

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession*

This is the same language included in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants: nation, priesthood, possession. What this does is place all of God's family into a much greater and more important family. THIS IS OUR IDENTITY. I started off by saying we all have identity issues that we bring into the church: GOD CURES THIS. We may be a lot of things in this life, but first and foremost we are the PEOPLE OF GOD. That is not just some clever phrase to make us feel nifty as we go back to doing what we have always done. This should cause a fundamental change in how you live your life. How does it change us?

*that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

We have been brought from darkness to life. The covenants of God show us our blindness, our inability to live in accordance with the holiness of God, but they also show us that God does not leave us there. The great overarching story of the Bible is of God pursuing His people. Redeeming them. Showing them the marvelous light. A light that

was promised to Israel, spoken of by the prophets, but not truly seen until Jesus Christ entered into human existence. THIS SHOULD CHANGE US. My fear is that most of us have found a way to morph this identity into the many other aspects of our lives, rather than allowing the marvelous light to transform us. We have manipulated God's Word to create a Christianity that does not reflect the covenant maker. And I believe that the main deficiency is found in this verse:

*that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

Because when we read that, when we hear proclaim, we are always thinking about the people who are not Christians, who need to hear the truth...and I am not saying they don't. But we fail to believe that we need it. we tend to think that once we have received salvation, that we are done; that it is time to move on to deeper and more challenging things. BUT THERE IS NOTHING DEEPER THAN THE GOSPEL. There is nothing more life changing than the recognition of what our God has done to bring us to Him. We desperately need to be reminded of God's: love, wrath, justice, mercy, faithfulness. Because we forget. And when we forget we get caught up in the things of the world. So Peter warns us:

*Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.*

We do not belong to this world. We belong to a heavenly realm. We are sojourners/exiles, people awaiting the day when we can be in our real home. UNTIL THAT TIME, we are at war. Our hearts are the possession of God, and thus they are an enemy of this world. We must, then, be diligent to not simply hand our most precious gift over to the enemy, but we must fight for holiness. We fight by remembering. We fight by putting ourselves and God in proper relationship. When we forget; that is when we fall.

1. we forget God is holy, and so we minimize our sin
2. we forget our savior, so we look for another one
3. we forget His sacrifice, so we allow grace to become cheap and meaningless
4. we forget our own fragility, so we think we can handle things we can't
5. we forget who the center of the story is, and we recast ourselves

What is the solution to this? We are the people of God, pursued by Him from before the world was created, joined together with saints through time and space, called to be a people who fight against our own flesh and for the glory of God. HOW?

The answer is the local church. You might be thinking, 'give me a break.' There are no statues of a local church anywhere. God works through individuals. He does. But even the greatest of individuals needs the support of the church. They need guidance because they are a sinner. They need encouragement because they doubt. They need reminding because they forget. The way that God sustains and empowers His church is by not only binding people to Himself, but also in binding them to one another in covenant.

We see this at the end of Joshua, Joshua chapter 24, the nation of Israel making a covenant. In this covenant, they are not setting down new rules to be followed, instead this covenant exists:

1. To be a reminder of the covenant between themselves and God that already exists.
2. To make clear what it means to be God's people (and in turn teach who God is).
3. To create a human level of accountability to the promises made.

It is important for the people of God to not only be bound to God, as His possession, but also to be formally joined to the church. As a church, we practice these person-to-person covenants as a way to officially relate to one another, with rights and stipulations connecting promises made to a level of accountability. We practice these covenants on three levels.

**1. The first is marriage.** This covenant is built out of the description of marriage from **Genesis 2.24**, expounded in the words of Jesus and Paul. Marriage is a covenant between two people and God in the presence of witnesses. The promises between the two people are the vows, God does the one flesh unifying (creating a bond which should not be broken), and the witnesses provide the couple with a level of support/protection.

**2. The second is the parent covenant.** This is derived from Deuteronomy 6. It includes the promises of blessing on covenant children from God, as well as the responsibilities of parents to uphold their role as the leaders and teachers of the family. Once again, an official covenant is made that binds the role of parent (already present) to the church family to help support/protect.

**3. The third covenant we practice is the membership covenant,** and we will spend a few minutes here, because there is a bit more of a struggle with this than there is with marriage or parenting.

Church membership exists as a way for you to commit to this family, and for this family to commit to you. In many ways, we are connected to all Christians, by nature of our shared identity. But in another way, our presence here ties our physical self to a specific people.

If we are truly waging war, then a wartime analogy might explain it best. The church universal, the whole of God's people are all united and on the same team, but you fight with your platoon. Opportunities may come up for you to interact with other soldiers... great, but you are dependant on the people to your right and to your left. And they

depend on you. We will always be living life as a church half committed, until we can be convinced that we need the people around us AND they can trust your dedication. Church membership is not just club membership. It is a serious commitment to real people and a living God. I pray that everyone covenants to this family, but also that you actually commit your life to the building up of the local expression of God's church.

In the back of our books it lists out 7 benefits of membership at the church:

- 1. You have the benefit of accountability to spiritual leaders.**
- 2. You shamelessly identify with Christ or his people.**
- 3. You encourage other believers to commit to the local body versus consume.**
- 4. You stop being an independent Christian**
- 5. You participate in a stronger more unified effort of God's people.**
- 6. You may have opportunity lead church ministries or serve as a church leader.**
- 7. You have greater opportunities to use your spiritual gifts**

Two weeks from today we will start a membership class after service on Sunday. This will be a time to learn what we believe, an opportunity to ask any questions you have about the church, and to give us an opportunity to get to know you.

As we leave here I just want to leave you with a few questions as you try to decide how you feel about all of this.

1. Do you see that God is the divine storyteller and you are just a character?
2. Do you understand that in every conditional covenant God made you have failed to meet His demands?
3. Do you recognize that even though that is the case, He has pursued you and given you a way back to Himself?
4. DO YOU REALIZE THAT THE ONLY WAY TO GOD IS THROUGH HIS SON JESUS CHRIST WHO CAME TO THIS EARTH TO DIE TO MAKE THE COVENANT OF GRACE POSSIBLE?

If you acknowledge that you are a Christian. If you are a Christian, Do you acknowledge that with this gift comes the responsibility to love Him and obey His commandments? Not just to skate by, but to dig in and work to live a life worthy of the life that you have been called to. If you believe that, Why would you not covenant with the church to fight with us toward this mission? Stop being a lone wolf Christian who thinks that somehow you can do without the support of other Christians.



We will come forward now to remember the covenant of redemption in the practice that Jesus gave us: Communion. If you are a believer, this meal is for you to renew the unconditional covenant that God has made with us, a promise that we will be His people, and He our God, because of His goodness and love, not ours.