

Doctrine & Covenants Lesson 4 Notes: Covenants

*Blessed are they who have kept the covenant
and observed the commandment, for they shall obtain mercy.*

D&C 54:6

THE PURPOSES OF GOD ARE FULFILLED THROUGH COVENANTS

Life is meant to be a school and as we saw in our last lesson, the first lesson in that school is **Obedience to God**. If we cannot learn that, we will be greatly handicapped in learning any other lessons of life, and will waste the days of our probation. In order to teach men obedience, God binds them in agreements with himself. God is also bound by covenants. (D&C 82:10) He will faithfully bring to pass all that he has said, both the blessings and the cursings that go with his laws. If that were not true, there would be no power within covenants to lift men and women to higher and higher levels of spiritual development. They would be suggestions or good counsel. But when we are in covenants with God, we are held to them; i.e., we have accountability to God. If we break the covenant by disobeying commandments, then we bring upon ourselves the various "curses" or bad consequences of a broken covenant. So we will learn from making covenants, either in a positive or negative way.

Another way of looking at this is to think of the covenants we make as rungs on a ladder, steps upward in our progress. By binding ourselves to obey we bring into our life God's help to live the covenants we have made. In the same way a parent is helping a small child grow and develop in character, God is committed to our growth and development. His purpose is to raise us up to a point where we have the same character as he does. He wants us to be like him. "Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am." (3 Nephi 27:27)

There is an unspoken covenant between parent and child (good parents anyway) that goes like this: "I love you and will provide for you and sacrifice for you and do every necessary thing for you. You are to be obedient to me in return and that way you will learn best how to grow up and be a successful, law-abiding, responsible and happy adult. When you aren't obedient I will punish you in age appropriate ways and when you are obedient I will reward you with my approval and blessing. In these ways I will guide you toward the maturity I want you to have and know you have the potential to achieve."

God, as a perfect parent, has hopes for us, his children, also. In order to fulfill those hopes he makes covenants with us. They are not vague and informal, but formal, binding and specific. These covenants are made through ordinances that are the same for all mankind, so that God can be a fair and impartial God (and parent). He knows that through certain covenants the power of the atonement is accessed. That is why Satan is always seeking to influence mankind to change or break or ignore the covenants of God. The history of Christianity in the 2000 years since Christ's resurrection is largely the shameful history of how the historical church changed and abandoned God's true covenants. The Doctrine & Covenants proclaims God's anger at those who "have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant." The restoration of the gospel came in our day "that mine everlasting covenant might be established." (D&C 1:15,22)

Like the Good Parent that he is, God also shows us mercy as we grow and learn to measure up. All children make mistakes as they grow. There is a difference between being "faithful" to our covenants, and never making a mistake. That difference is the Trying Principle, as in D&C 46:9. "For verily I say unto you, [spiritual gifts] are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments, and **him that seeketh so to do**; that all may be benefited that seek or that ask of me, that ask and not for a sign that they may consume it upon their lusts." God is not angry with those who are trying. He is angry with the unrepentant and rebellious. He is patient with the weak who are "seeking" greater strength. The unforgiving will not find mercy. Those who seek after signs to "consume upon their lusts," will not find them. But to the man who says, "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief," Christ shows abundant grace. (see Mark 9:24)

In that light, let's go back to the ladder. That metaphor comes from Genesis 28, the story of Jacob on the run from his brother Esau, who has threatened his life for tricking him out of his father Isaac's birthright blessing. Jacob's mother, Rebecca, has arranged for Jacob to leave for her brother's home in Haran, where Jacob can seek a wife and avoid his brother's murderous rage at the same time. All alone on the open road, Jacob lies down for the night with a stone for a pillow. He dreams of a ladder or stairway to heaven upon which he sees angels ascending and descending. At the top is God, who identifies himself as "Jehovah Eloheim" (God Almighty) (Gen 28:13). God then makes a covenant with Jacob (later named Israel). This covenant is basically a re-issue of the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob, through whom it now will come. (Abraham was Jacob's grandfather.) There are four parts: 1) He will have numberless children ("as the dust of the earth" in number), 2) He will have the land (Canaan) upon which he lies as an inheritance for him and his seed, 3) Jacob's descendants will be a blessing to all the families of the earth and 4) God, Jehovah, will be with him forever and not leave him.

When Jacob arises in the morning after this experience, he says, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, "How dreadful is this place! This is none other but *the house of God*, and this is the gate of heaven. And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of that place Beth-el. (House of God)" (Genesis 28:16-19)

Now let's put these elements together and see what we get. In a place where Jacob has a dream of the steps to heaven, he sees God and has the Abrahamic covenant bestowed on him. He calls the place "the house of God." Where do we have the blessings of Abraham bestowed on us? In the House of God—the temple. That is also where we make our own covenants that represent a series of steps upward toward God, a progression of ever-higher commitments to and understanding of God. Every time I attend the temple I think of Jacob's ladder and how the Lord leads me step by step up the covenant ladder towards him. Thinking about the covenants and ordinances we have made in the temple is one way these covenants help us become what God wants us to be.

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

To make binding agreements, whether in business or spiritual life, we must have complete confidence in the other party. Business contracts are enforced through law. When making covenants with God, our faith rests in the character of God. We trust that he will do what he says he will do. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: "It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God" (*Teachings*, p. 345). The name for the quality of the trustworthiness of God is *faithfulness*. In fact, "*Faithful and True*" is one of God's names. (see Rev.19:11)

The scriptures are important for in them we learn how God dealt with mankind in history, and we learn to expect that he will also deal faithfully with us. Those who are scripturally ignorant will have a more difficult time trusting and covenanting with God. How important are the bedtime scripture stories we tell to our little children! They are teaching those children to trust God. The Old Testament is also filled with scriptures that extol God's faithfulness.¹ "Thy faithfulness is unto all generations: thou hast established the earth, and it abideth." (Psalm 119:90)

ABRAHAM BLESSING THE WORLD

There are four different parts to the blessing that God made with Abraham and that was passed down to Issac, then Jacob, and onto Jacob's twelve sons who became the House of Israel (including Judah and Ephraim). There isn't time to study every one of them but let's focus on one that includes obligations for all of us. That is the promise made to the patriarchs that "all the families of the earth would be blessed" through Abraham and his descendents. (Gen. 18:18; Gen 28:14) There is more than one way that all the families of the earth are blessed by Abraham's seed and the priesthood they hold:

- Christ, our "Great High Priest" will come through Abraham's line and bless all people with the blessings of salvation through his atonement. Christ is THE Seed of Abraham.
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¹ See the Vignette called "Great is thy Faithfulness."

- The Jews (that's what we call them now, but really it started with the *whole* House of Israel) are descendants of Abraham and through them have come the laws of Moses upon which so much of the Western world's culture and legal system depends.
- The priesthood, and its power to seal, comes through Abraham's descendants. This makes possible the sealing of all the families of the earth into eternal families and the making of personal temple covenants in the House of God.
- The mission of the church to bring the New and Everlasting Covenant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world comes through missionaries and members acting through and under the direction of the priesthood, which is a heritage of the Abrahamic covenant.
- All of Abraham's descendants who have the blessings of the gospel in their own lives are called to be the "salt of the earth and the savor of men." (D&C 101:39-40) We are to be a *good influence* in every family, neighborhood, city and culture in which we find ourselves. We are to reflect the light of Christ into the lives of others, not to keep the blessings for ourselves as if we were admiring a special prize we had received, or licking the Chosen People lollipop. We are *blessed in order to bless* the rest of mankind. "Israel is my servant," Jehovah said. (Isaiah 44:21; 41:8; Jer.46:27) If we *fail* to bless the rest of mankind, we are "thenceforth good for nothing only to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men." (D&C 101:40)

So.... if we only see the Abrahamic covenant as *our special birthright*, meant to bless ourselves and our family, we will have gotten it all wrong. Both the Father and the Son's motivation towards mankind is love. The Doctrine & Covenants contains an echo of John 3:16 ("God so loved the world, that he gave his only son," etc). It explains that the Savior had this same motivation. "The Lord God, ...even Jesus Christ your Redeemer; *who so loved the world that he gave his own life*, that as many as would believe might become the sons of God." (D&C 34:3) *They so love us!* And so should we love our fellow man. And give ourselves for them. That's what the Abrahamic covenant is all about.

THEN THERE'S THE MOSAIC COVENANT

There is another covenant between God and man that is central to the scriptures and to man's history with God. That is the Mosaic covenant. It was made between God (Jehovah)—who spoke from the top of a Mt. Sinai covered with smoke, fire, lightening and thunder—and the Children of Israel who stood quaking at the foot of the mountain. The covenant consisted of a set of laws, called the Mosaic Law, which the people promised to obey. The people heard God himself speak the Ten Commandments; the rest of the laws were written down by Moses as God gave them to him. By agreeing to obey these laws they entered into a covenant with God.

Deuteronomy describes it thusly: "Ye stand this day all of you before the LORD your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives... That thou *shouldest enter into covenant with the LORD thy God*, and into his oath, which the LORD thy God maketh with thee this day; that *he may establish thee today for a people* unto himself, and that *he may be unto thee a God*, as he hath said unto thee." (Deuteronomy 29:10-13)

This agreement is found in shorthand many, many places in the Old Testament, expressed simply as "...and I will by your God, and ye shall be my people." The unspoken "if-clause" here is: *if you will obey me!* The condition is *always* obedience. And if the people obey the commands, then that obedience becomes their "righteousness." "And it shall be our righteousness, *if we observe to do all these commandments* before the LORD our God, as he hath commanded us." (Deut. 6:25)

What do the people get for their covenant to have Jehovah as their God? It is a darn good deal with the conditions found most succinctly expressed in Leviticus 26. God will:

1. Give them rain in due season and good crop yield.
2. Give an abundance of food and they will eat it in peace.
3. Assure peace in the land, and "none shall make you afraid."
4. Rid evil beasts out of the land.
5. Assure you will chase your enemies and they will fall before you.
6. Make you fruitful, and multiply you.
7. Establish his tabernacle (temple) among them.
8. Walk among them and be their God.
9. Take them to himself. "You will be my people."

There is a second half of the Leviticus chapter. It tells what will happen to them if they do *not* obey. It is not pretty, and as you might expect, it is in large part a reversal of the above blessings.

1. God will appoint to them terror, consumption and the burning ague.
2. You will have sorrow of heart.
3. You will sow your seed in vain for enemies shall eat it.
4. You will be slain before your enemies.
5. They that hate you will reign over you.
6. Your strength will be spent in vain.
7. Your land will not yield her increase.
8. Your children and cattle will be slain by wild beasts.
9. Your highways will be desolate.
10. If after all this you still do not hearken, I will scatter you among your enemies.
11. And bring your land into desolation.

You get the idea. "I set before thee this day a blessing and a curse; A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day: And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the Lord your god, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known." (Deut. 11:26) An even more complete listing of the blessings and cursings inherent in the Mosaic covenant is found in Deuteronomy 28 and 29. A lot more time is spent on the cursings than the blessings, and they read like a prophetic picture of just what was going to happen to the Children of Israel. God knew. Of course He knew. Have you ever said to a stubborn child, "Well, you're just going to have to learn the hard way."

It is easy to say to ourselves that we would never be that stubborn or stupid. But the Doctrine and Covenants has many statements that the early Saints failed to keep the commandments they were given and were being chastised by the Lord during the hard times in Missouri. Sometimes you will hear people say that the days of the Old Testament are over. They say God doesn't curse people for disobedience in our day. Those who have been to the temple can judge for themselves if there are any negative consequences promised there to those who do not live up to their covenants.

The Mosaic Covenant, which was basically a set of laws that the people promised to live, and a set of promises from God to those who agreed to keep the laws, is called in the Doctrine & Covenants, "a preparatory gospel." (D&C 84:27) The Lord also tells the Saints that they cannot enter into the "strait gate" by the Law of Moses. (D&C 22:2) The Mosaic covenant is a beginning rung on Jacob's covenant ladder that leads to heaven. You have to step on it to reach the higher rungs. You can't skip it. But it can't take you high enough on its own.

How is it "preparatory" for living the higher law? It provides practice in submitting to God's authority. It gives experience. You learn about how life works and about consequences. It is the childhood stage of learning the ropes and showing God that you can be entrusted with more.

THE NEW AND EVERLASTING COVENANT

But we aren't still living under the Mosaic Law are we? Well, yes and no. There are many laws still in force that were part of the covenants of the Old Testament. Tithing, for example, and keeping the Sabbath day holy. The 'thou-shalt-nots' are still in force against adultery, murder, theft, dishonoring parents, etc. But as per the D&C 22:2 scripture, with Christ there came recognition that the old law was not sufficient. Jesus brought *new* law, which did away with *the system of religious worship* of the old covenant—the holy days, the animal sacrifice and circumcision. He did *not* do away with the Ten Commandments or other moral commandments. In fact, he raised the bar on those. Or, you might say, he invited us to step up a rung on the covenant ladder.

In the Old Testament itself there are prophecies of a new law and covenant to come. Moses, who all Israel recognized as the great lawgiver, prophesied that God would send another prophet like unto himself.² In Jeremiah 31:33 we read, "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people." These things look forward to the

² "For Moses truly said unto the fathers, "A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, *that* every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people." (Acts 3:22-23 quoting from Deut. 18:15)

time when Christ would come among them and give them the law of the gospel.

In the Sermon on the Mount the Lord explained that the people knew adultery was wrong, but they must not even think lustful thoughts. It was not enough to avoid murder. They must not even call a man a fool. He upped the ante on other commands as well, making charity, or the pure love of Christ, the “end” or goal of all commandments (1 Timothy 1:5). He taught that if a person didn't attain this charity, according to this *new* covenant, they were “nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:1-2; D&C 18:19; D&C 88:125) Such a law, with its emphasis on the inward condition of the heart, was much more difficult to live. In fact, it was impossible to live unaided, and required the “new heart” prophesied³.

The New and Everlasting Covenant, or the law of the Gospel, had to provide something more for mankind than new and harder laws to live. And it did, of course, because it provided the magnificent atonement of Jesus Christ, through which we could be born again and become “New Creatures in Christ.” (2 Cor. 5:17) We could have his spirit come live within us and provide the needed enabling power that the old law could not give. A law, by itself, provides no power to live it. That power comes by Christ through his spirit.

The New and Everlasting Covenant is the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (D&C 66:2) It is the combination of all those promises by God to man by which he is lifted up and given the power to attain eternal life. It is called the *everlasting* covenant because it was *always* part of the plan from before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8; 1 Peter 1:20; D&C 128:5). It was always God's plan to redeem his people by coming down to earth and becoming Emmanuel, “god with us.” Because Christ was mortal through his mother Mary, he could feel all the physical sensations of human mortality. (“He was in all points tempted like as we are...” Heb. 4:15) But because he also had what we *don't* have, a divine genetic component, he had perfect Godlike control over all these sensations and temptations (“yet without sin”). He was “an high priest able to be touched with the feelings of our infirmities.” And “in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.” (Heb. 2:18) Having God “with us” was something new and an important part of the gospel plan for man's salvation from sin.⁴

He literally suffered every effect of fallen humanity's sins in the garden of Gethsemane when Satan threw at him everything that man was subject to by virtue of their sins. So he, who was by right *free* from Satan's power, made himself voluntarily subject unto it, “becoming sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21) and suffering every curse, every punishment, every pain, every sickness, every heartache and torture possible, and suffering all these things in a pure soul, where his suffering would have been sore and exquisite. “How sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not. Behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink...Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.” (D&C 19:16-19) Never a day or minute goes by that we are not in debt to His great acts of love. The Atonement made possible a new kind of life for us. A life unlike that of the children of Israel, whose relationship was characterized by repeated failures to be faithful to their covenants. Through the New and Everlasting Covenant we have hope of a “new heart” in Christ, enabling a new spirit to be in us, so that we might keep faith with him and receive all the magnificent promises of our covenants.

*Know therefore that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God,
which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him
and keep his commandments
to a thousand generations.*

Deuteronomy 7:9

³ Jeremiah had said of the “old heart”: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” Jeremiah 17:9

⁴ See Christmas story “The Man and the Birds” in Vignettes