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Lesson 17
God's Covenant Love
Nehemiah 9:5b-21

As a Christian, have you ever had the experience of feeling as though God had abandoned you? Because your life seemed futile, sterile, or empty, you wondered whether the God who saved you had forsaken you because you did not sense His presence with you. Perhaps these times came when you were extremely tired, or when you had neglected personal Bible devotions and prayer, or when you found yourself in an emotional pit after being on a spiritual high, or when you were in depression, or when you had grievously sinned against your God.

Yes, there are times when our emotions may tell us that God has cast us off, and this was the experience of the Psalmist

“Do not forsake me O LORD; O my God, do not be far from me!” (Psalm 38:21)

“I will say to my rock, ‘Why hast Thou forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?’ As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, while they say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’ Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance, and my God.” (Psalm 42:9-11)

However, does God cast off his people? Does He forsake them? Does He abandon them? The answer is an emphatic, “No,” for He is faithful to His people because He is true to the covenant He has made with them. ***“For the Lord loves justice, and does not forsake His godly ones; they are preserved forever; but the descendants of the wicked will be cut off.”*** (Psalm 37:28). Our emotions often play tricks on us because we are humans, but God has made a commitment to save His people and this is true no matter how our emotions might be acting up.

Nowhere do we see more clearly God's faithfulness to His people and His commitment to His covenant than in the children of Israel who wandered in the desert for forty years in unbelief, waiting to get into the Promised Land. God entered into covenant with Israel and promised to take them into the Promised Land in spite of their unbelief, disobedience, and discontentment. God was true to His covenant with Israel because He must be true to His own word. God cannot lie, and He cannot go back on any promise He makes.

FACT OF A COVENANT

Nehemiah 9:5b-21 is the opening text to this message. In the Book of Nehemiah, the Jews were returning to the land of Israel after being out of the land because of disobedience for seventy years. This event occurred almost one thousand years after the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. The Jews were returning to restore the walls of the city of Jerusalem. The people and the Levites gathered together to confess their sins and to read from the Old Testament. At that time some of the Levites began to pray, and in their prayer they recounted God's faithfulness to Israel in the past in spite of unbelief and disobedience, and they pleaded for God to deal with them in compassion and lovingkindness, based on His covenant to restore Israel once again to the land God had given them. ***“Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who dost keep covenant and lovingkindness...”*** (Neh. 9:32).

God made a promise to Abraham, the father or progenitor of the Jewish race, to give the land of Canaan to the Jews.

“Thou art the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees, and gave him the name Abraham. And Thou didst find his heart faithful before Thee, and didst make a covenant with him to give him the land of the Canaanite, of the Hittite and the Amorite, of the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashit—to give it to his descendants. And Thou has fulfilled Thy promise, for Thou art righteous.” (Neh. 9:7-9)

God entered into covenant with Abraham and all Israel to give them the land. A covenant is a bond or agreement whereby God promises to do certain things for His people unconditionally, and the people agree to exercise faith and obedience to receive the blessings of this covenant. In covenant, God unreservedly gives Himself to His people and they in turn give themselves to Him and belong to Him. All through the Old Testament we see the words, ***“I will be their God and they shall be my people.”*** ***“And you will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.”*** (Ezk. 36:28). God’s covenant with His people is based on His unchanging and eternal love.

“And he said, ‘O LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like Thee in heaven above or on earth beneath, who art keeping covenant and showing lovingkindness to Thy servants who walk before Thee with all their heart.’ (1 Kings 8:23)

God promised in solemn covenant to bring the sons of Israel out of Egyptian slavery to the freedom of the promised land of Canaan.

“And I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they sojourned. And furthermore I have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel, because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage; and I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.’” (Exodus 6:4-8)

When God promises to do something, He cannot and will not lie or go back on His word. His covenant promises are true, sure and reliable.

FAILURE OF ISRAEL

God entered into covenant agreement with Israel and was always faithful to His covenant. However, Israel was not faithful in holding up her end of the covenant to be true and obedient to the God who redeemed her out of slavery. The people did not keep their covenant with God. ***“They did not keep the covenant of God, and refused to walk in His law. . .”*** (Psalm 78:10). They would not believe God even though He did miracle after miracle for them while in the wilderness. ***“. . . Because they did not believe in God, and did not trust in His salvation”*** (Psalm 78:22). They were stubborn and rebellious and would not soften their hearts before God. ***“. . . And be not like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart, and whose spirit was not faithful to God”*** (Psalm 78:8). They continued to sin against God and to test God to His limits. ***“Yet they still continued to sin against Him, to rebel against the Most High in the desert. And in their heart they put God to the test by asking food according to their desire”*** (Psalm 78:17-18). God brought severe discipline to Israel, but they still refused to obey God and they continued in the sin of unbelief, which brought futility into their lives.

“The anger of God rose against them, and killed some of their stoutest ones, and subdued the choice men of Israel. In spite of all this they still sinned, and did not believe in His wonderful works. So He brought their days to an end in futility, and their years in sudden

terror.” (Psalm 78:31-33)

What was their problem? They were not faithful to God’s covenant. God had entered into a covenant with Israel and committed Himself unto them unconditionally, but they would not commit themselves unreservedly to God. They wanted no covenant with God. **“For their heart was not steadfast toward Him, nor were they faithful in His covenant.”** (Psalm 78:37)

The sins of Israel grieved the holy God who had entered into a covenant with His people. Their transgressions “pained” the sovereign God of the universe. **“How often they rebelled against Him in the wilderness, and grieved Him in the desert! And again and again they tempted God, and pained the Holy One of Israel.”** (Psalm 78:40-41). God was grieved and pained with much emotion for He had said, **“I will be their God and they shall be My people.”** Yet His people were living as though there was no covenant, as though there was no God at all. The unbelief of His people pierced right into the inner being of God so as to deeply wound His holy nature.

God hates the unsaved man when he sins, but when a true believer sins, God is grieved and pained because He loves His people and longs for them to enter into a deeper commitment of rest and holiness for Him.

FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

The whole history of Israel in the wilderness was that of unbelief. Only occasionally were there a few glimmers of faith, but that always occurred after God had done a miracle and supernatural phenomena was noticeable to all. Ten times Israel was tested by God in the wilderness, and ten times Israel failed in unbelief, but God was always there in covenant faithfulness to see His promise through to the bitter end. When Israel failed to believe God in the crossing of the Red Sea, when it appeared that there was no human escape from certain death at the hands of Pharaoh and his armies, Israel in unbelief said, **“For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”** Yet God was faithful and opened up the Red Sea and the children of Israel went across on dry land. When Israel was at Rephidim and there was no water to drink, the people in unbelief began to grumble and quarrel against Moses and God. Yet God in faithfulness gave them water to drink in abundance through a miraculous intervention. When there was no food to eat and Israel in unbelief wanted to go back to the flesh pots of Egypt, the people began to grumble and complain, but God was faithful and supernaturally provided heavenly manna and quail. Sometimes God became so disgusted with Israel that He was ready to destroy the whole bunch of them and start a whole new nation with Moses, but Moses pleaded God’s covenant faithfulness to Israel. He reasoned with God in prayer that God must be faithful to His own covenant promise to His people. When Israel came to the border of Canaan, the Promised Land, in unbelief they said, **“We cannot take it.”** They began to grumble, and God in faithfulness to His covenant told that whole adult generation that they would never enter into the land because of their unbelief. The adults would die in the desert during thirty-eight years of wandering, and only the children would get into the land. God took severe steps of judgment against Israel, but He was true to His covenant, and the children of Israel did get into the Promised Land ultimately.

Israel was a stubborn and rebellious people but God was gracious and compassionate, full of lovingkindness, and was ready to forgive His people based on His covenant relationship with them.

“But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly; they became stubborn and would not listen to Thy commandments. And they refused to listen, and did not remember Thy wondrous deeds which Thou hadst performed among them. So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But Thou art a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness; and Thou didst not forsake them.” (Neh. 9:16-17)

Notice carefully the words, ***“And Thou didst not forsake them.”*** God was absolutely true to His covenant even though Israel lived much of their forty years in the wilderness in unbelief.

Even when Israel made an image of God in the golden calf, and accepted the words of Aaron which were, ***“This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt,”*** God was faithful. These Jews had degenerated into practicing forms of paganism. They became drunk, involved themselves in a sexual orgy, and bowed to a golden calf that they said was Jehovah. Yet, even in this gross incident, God was true to His covenant and did not forsake His people. He continued to love His people and to make provision for them in spite of their wayward behavior.

“Even when they made for themselves a calf of molten metal and said, ‘This is your god who brought you up from Egypt,’ and committed great blasphemies, Thou, in Thy great compassion, didst not forsake them in the wilderness.” (Neh. 9:18-19a)

Oh the longsuffering and patience of a sovereign God who is bound in a covenant relationship with His people! God is faithful because He is true to His covenant. He does not overlook the sins of His people, for He disciplines all Christians for their sins, but because He is tied to them in covenant love, God will be faithful to His own, right to the end.

The New Testament also confirms this truth.

“Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” (1 Thess. 5:24)

“For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 1:6)

FAVOR OF THE CHURCH

God bound Himself in covenant love to Israel, and He also has bound Himself to the Church in covenant love. In the New Covenant, through the death of Christ, God has bound Himself to true Christians. In unconditional love, God has agreed to be our God and we have agreed to be His people through the New Covenant.

When Christ was in the Upper Room, His last night on earth, He took the cup of wine and said, ***“This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.”*** (Luke 22:20b) In the Book of Hebrews, the author quotes the Old Testament reference in Jeremiah 31 that applies to the church saying, ***“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws upon their heart, and upon their mind I will write them...”*** (Heb. 10:16). In 2 Cor. 3:6 Christians are said to be ***“servants of a new covenant.”***

Just as surely as God bound Himself to Israel in covenant love, so He has bound you and me as Christians to covenant love in the New Covenant. He is our God and we are His people. God has unconditionally bound Himself to us in sovereign love and we are to respond to Him in faith and obedience. Through the New Covenant, we have become the people of God.

“But you are a CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR GOD’S OWN POSSESSION, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.” (1 Pet. 2:9-10)

The God of heaven and earth dwells with us now and will dwell with us for all eternity.

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them...’” (Rev. 21:3)

In covenant love, God through Christ has guaranteed His people eternal life.

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” (John 10:27-29)

Christ unconditionally grants God’s people eternal life, but God’s people truly follow Christ because they too are bound to the New Covenant to walk in faith and obedience. In fact, it is this mighty, dynamic and unchangeable love of Jesus Christ in the New Covenant that gives us the new motivation to be obedient to Christ. The more we Christians understand that we are bound to God in covenant love, the more softened, pliable, teachable, dedicated, and committed we will become as God’s very own people. It is when we as God’s people become controlled by the love of Christ that we shall be effective for Christ. ***“For the love of Christ controls us...”*** (2 Cor. 5:14a) Understanding Christ’s ***“so great love”*** for us, gives us a new motivation to love Christ with our whole being and stirs within us new desires to be obedient to His holy, moral law.

Even when we Christians get rebellious, harden our hearts, grumble and complain, and even fall into grievous sin, God is there in covenantal love and faithfulness to us. He will not forsake us. He does not abandon us. He cannot leave us, for He is bound to us in covenant love. Surely God will discipline us when we sin because He loves us, and in His lovingkindness He seeks to bring us to repentance and humble confession. The moment we as sinning Christians are willing to keep our end of the covenant in repentance, faith, and obedience, God abundantly forgives. Oh, how wonderful is the God who possesses us! Oh, how faithful is the God who has bound Himself together with us in covenant love.

CONCLUSION

Who gets New Covenant blessings? Who becomes the recipient of God’s redemptive and covenantal love? Only those who by an act of the will receive Jesus Christ as their Savior for sin and bow to Him as Lord of their life, giving Him the right to rule.

Have you received Christ? Do you know anything of His overpowering love? You can know the covenantal love the moment you receive by faith the person of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. God loves with covenantal love those who love His Son Jesus Christ. God will love you if you will bow to Christ as Lord and receive Him as Savior. ***“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.”*** (John 3:16)