

For Our Learning...

In the last lesson, we looked at the various covenants that have been given by God to men. We saw, in that lesson, that covenants were applicable to the people to whom they were given. We also saw that God delivered a “new covenant” through His Son, the Messiah, and that this covenant was to be the last covenant for all men, for the remainder of time. This is an important principle, as it tells us what covenant we are responsible for. We are not held accountable to any of the previous covenants that God delivered to various peoples. We are only responsible for the covenant that was delivered for us and for our time.

Some have incorrectly concluded that because we are not accountable to the covenants that have come before, they are of no value to us. Such a supposition would make the revelation of those covenants delivered before pointless. Why would God record the information of those covenants if He did not intend for us to gain some benefit from them? Consider what Paul wrote:

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope (Romans 15:4).

This instruction tells us that there is value in studying the things that were revealed before the coming of Christ. There are things that we can learn from the covenants that came before, even though we are not under those covenants. There are principles that can be taken away from the things recorded in the Old Testament, and applications that can be made to our way of thinking toward the covenant that we live under. The challenge is figuring out the principles that we can learn and apply, while understanding that the tenants of the covenants themselves are not to be followed.

To help clarify this idea, we’ll consider a couple of the covenants given by God from this perspective.

God’s Covenant With Noah

As we saw in the previous lesson, God made a covenant with Noah that promised salvation from the coming destruction of the world if Noah would be obedient and build the ark as directed. The covenant was two parts: God’s part, and Noah’s part. When we look at the account of Noah and his work in Genesis 6-8, we observe Noah’s obedience. He was given specific instructions on how to build the boat, and his salvation was contingent on his following of those instructions.

When we examine this account, we do not think that we should start to build an ark to facilitate our salvation. We have not been given a message concerning the impending physical destruction of the earth. We have not been given instructions concerning the building of a great ark. Simply put, we have not received either the message of warning nor the instructions of salvation of that covenant. We are not obligated to the side of the covenant conferred upon Noah. It was for him, and for his family.

However, when we look at this account, there are many general principles that we can learn from it. We learn, for example that God expects complete obedience when He gives instructions. God was angry with mankind because they had rejected His instructions, and was to the point that He would

destroy all mankind (save for Noah and his family) from the face of the earth. Noah's salvation required that he be obedient to God's instructions.

We can also learn that salvation provided by God requires men to do work. That is what obedience was for Noah. He had to work diligently to fulfill the instructions that God gave, which included working on an ark that could have taken 100 years or more to build. Even though Noah did everything that God commanded of him (Genesis 6:22), he still did not earn his salvation. No matter how much work Noah did, his salvation would always be the direct result of God showering him with grace and mercy. This illustrates the conditional nature of God's grace and mercy. He has promised to extend these characteristics to men, but only when they are obedient.

We do learn much about the grace and mercy of God through this account. Many focus on the destruction of the world, and claim that God is vengeful and angry. However, His grace and mercy are evident by the fact that He made provision for those who were righteous to have a way of escape from the impending doom. It should also be noted that God's grace and mercy are displayed in the fact that He delayed the destruction of the earth for some 100 years while Noah and his sons were building the ark. During that period of time, Noah continued to preach a message of repentance to the people around him (2 Peter 2:4-5), giving them every opportunity to join with him in salvation. Every person who heard the message proclaimed by Noah had the opportunity to repent. They had God's grace and mercy offered to them, and chose (through their own free will) to reject it.

Another lesson we can learn from the account of Noah is that God fulfills His promises. When God makes a promise, we can trust that He will fulfill those promises. If we were not provided the accounts of fulfilled promises in the Old Testament, we would not know if we could trust God to do what He said He would do or not! We have confidence that God will fulfill the promises that He has made to us because we can read about His untarnished faithfulness in those things that were written before! The Hebrew writer based part of his argument on this idea:

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you." And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:13-20).

One of the "immutable things" that the argument is based upon is God's incapability to lie. When He made a promise, that promise would come to pass. This argument is not made simply by conveying the words, but rather on historical confirmation. He was making an appeal to the accounts that had been recorded before (which the Hebrews accepted as true) to show that God made promises, and God fulfilled promises. There were no examples that could be pointed to that showed that God had made a promise and then failed to keep it! We, therefore, learn about the immutable characteristic of God that He cannot lie.

The use of the word "immutable" in this context helps us to see that we can learn about the nature and characteristics of God from these Old Testament passages. The point of using the term "immutable" is that it identifies this characteristic of God as being "unchanging" or "unchangeable." The characteristic that God possessed in the time of Abraham (or even before that, Noah) is the same characteristic that He possesses today.

God's Covenant With Israel

Much like the covenant with Noah, we can look at some of the aspects of the covenant that God made with the people of Israel and see that there are lessons that we can learn, even if we are not living under that covenant. By looking at the instructions that God gave to His people under that covenant, and seeing how He responded to obedience and disobedience under it, we can gain an understanding of God, and His relationship with His people. What we notice is that God has changed the specific actions that He requires under the covenant, but not the expectations for obedience.

There are, for example, many practices that God established as being sinful for the people of Israel. Some, He was clear, were wrong because of their innate sinfulness. That is, they were sinful for the people of Israel, and they were sinful for all other people as well. Some practices God condemned for the people of Israel because they made a specific point for His people. These instructions were not for any other people under any other covenant.

Let's start with an example of the latter first. God gave instructions to the people of Israel that they were not to wear clothes that were made of two different types of fabric together (Deuteronomy 19:19). This instruction was intertwined with instructions to not allow livestock to interbreed, and to not plant more than one kind of seed in a field. There is nothing innately wrong with wearing a shirt made of more than one kind of material; this was an instruction just for the children of Israel. These instructions served a deeper purpose. The intent of these laws was to teach the children of Israel about purity. God had an expectation that they would keep themselves pure, not mingling with the Gentile nations. There was a need for this purity, as the Messiah was to descend through these people, and the lineage was to remain pure. Once the Messiah came, there was no need for the purity of lineage, and all records of such were destroyed with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

While we do not have the same instructions concerning these types of separation in the New Testament covenant, we can still learn from what was revealed to Israel. We still need to learn the lesson of moral, and spiritual purity. God has not required that we have this type of physical reminder in our daily lives, but He has certainly provided the principle for us:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:14–18).

While the children of Israel were given these overt reminders of keeping themselves physically separate from those around them, we have instructions to stay separate from worldly people around us. It is not that we are to be removed from the world, but we must learn how to keep ourselves pure from the world around us:

Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world (James 1:27).

I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth (John 17:14–17).

Nowhere in the writings of the New Covenant are there instructions for us to refrain from mixing fabrics, or to refrain from planting two types of seed within the same field. The concepts of remaining pure, however, are prevalent in the New Covenant. The principle remains, even though the specifics of obedience have changed substantially. We learn how seriously God takes the principle from the Old Testament covenant, and we learn what He expects of us under the New Testament covenant.

Now, let's consider an example of God's instructions for the Israelites that was true for all people. God condemned the practice of homosexuality for His people under the Old Covenant:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination (Leviticus 18:22).

If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them (Leviticus 20:13).

Some have proposed that these instructions were only true for the Israelites, and that, like instructions for not mixing fabrics, they do not apply to us today. There are a couple of ideas that need our consideration. First, we need to understand that we are not under the instructions of the Old Testament covenant, and therefore are not bound to obey the instructions because they are found there. We are under the New Testament covenant, which repeats the condemnation of this sinful practice:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:22–32).

We see throughout scripture that God dealt with the sin of homosexuality harshly. In fact, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah were the direct result of the sin of homosexuality (Genesis 19:1-11). God has condemned this sinful behavior throughout time. We do not reject homosexuality because it is condemned in the Old Testament, but rather because it is condemned in our covenant. We can learn, however, how seriously God took this sin. He called it an abomination. He dealt with it by condemning the guilty to death. We are not given those instructions in the New Covenant, so we do not implement such a penalty. But, that does not change the fact that we can learn how seriously God has viewed such sins in times past. We clearly learn that God intends for His people to avoid sins that He identifies, and learn how He deals with those who refuse to comply!

Learning from the past...

It does not take long when studying the scriptures to see that God revealed and recorded the events of the past for a reason: so that we might be able to learn from the actions and experiences of those that came before us. Throughout the New Testament, the writers refer back to events in the Old Testament to illustrate some point of value. Perhaps, the passage this is most evident is found in Hebrews chapter 11. There, we have a running history of faithful characters from the Old Testament, which reveal some characteristic that we should apply to our own lives. Notice, as we consider this passage, that we are not instructed to be obedient to the specific acts that these men and women of faith were given, but we are supposed to emulate their faith.

The examples of faith set out for us in Hebrews 11 are introduced by an important verse at the end of chapter 10:

But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. (Hebrews 10:39)

The English Standard Version of the Bible translates this verse a little differently:

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls (Hebrews 10:39).

This latter translation shows the connection between the end of chapter 10 and the beginning of chapter 11 a little better. The author was encouraging his readers to have the same kind of faith that he was about to write about with Old Testament examples. The positive examples of chapter 11 stand in contrast to the negative example of the children of Israel who failed to enter into the promised land (Hebrews 3-4).

Reading Hebrews chapter 11 reveals to us what it means to truly have *faith*. This is an important lesson to learn, as we are bombarded by the idea in the religious world that we are “saved by faith only.” Those who propagate such doctrine do not understand the nature of faith! Declaring we are saved by “faith only” is an attempt to disregard actions (works). However, we can learn from these things that were written before, what God’s expectations are for us. This application is clearly made by the verse cited above (Hebrews 10:39).

Examples of faith...

Hebrews 11 is filled with examples of faith, all of which we should emulate. Let us consider a couple that are expressed by the Hebrew writer.

Abel. The Hebrew writer tells us that Abel, by faith, offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain. When we speak of something being done “by faith” we must realize that it was done according to the word of God:

So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17).

From this, we understand that God gave Abel instructions, and he was counted as faithful because he did what God told him to do. Cain, on the other hand, failed to make his offering according to the instructions of God. His offering was not made “by faith”.

We do not presume that we are to make the same offering as Abel because he is used as an example of faith. In fact, it would be impossible for us to do so, because we have not received the instructions that he was given; we do not know what his offering was exactly! However, we can learn from this instruction that God expects those who are faithful to do just what He commands.

Only those who are obedient can be counted as faithful! The contrast established by the examples of Cain and Abel make this point: The obedient are called faithful, while the disobedient are not. We learn, therefore, the importance of obedience from the example of Abel.

Enoch. In Hebrews 11:5-6, the Hebrew writer used the example of Enoch to illustrate faithfulness. It is interesting to note that he did not identify one specific thing in Enoch's life that illustrated faithfulness, but rather the example of his whole life. He was taken by God, rather than seeing death, because he had "...this testimony, that he pleased God."

Using the life of Enoch, the Hebrew writer was able to make the general application:

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

Through this application, the Hebrew writer illustrates the very point we are trying to make. We can learn a lesson from these examples of old, even if we are not instructed to do the same things that they were told to do. We don't know all that Enoch was commanded to do, so we cannot emulate his exact actions. What we can emulate is his faithfulness. He was identified as one who "pleased God" because he was obedient. He did what God told him to do. We learn what *faithfulness* means by the example of men like Enoch. We learn, but Paul's application to Enoch's example, that faithfulness is far more than just an intellectual acceptance of the existence of God (or Christ for that matter). It also requires diligently seeking after Him. We must seek out His instructions for our lives, and put them into practice. If we do not, then we are not learning anything from the example of Enoch!

Abraham. The first example of Abraham used by the Hebrew writer is that of God calling him from his homeland to go into another land (Hebrews 11:8-10). Abraham was called out, and he responded, even though he did not know where he was going. Clearly, our lesson from Abraham here is not that we should pack up and move toward Canaan. We have no call to do, and we could not possibly do so without "knowing where <we are> going."

What we can take from the example of Abraham is that God expects obedience, even when that obedience is hard. He expects us to follow His instructions, even when we may not fully understand His instructions. Abraham's choice to do just what God instructed is called *faith*.

Another lesson we learn from this account in Abraham's life is that we need to have the proper attitude. Abraham was able to pull up stakes and move to a new land because he had the proper attitude toward his life in this world. He was looking for something greater. Paul said that he was waiting "for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." He was not so enthralled by the personal possessions of this life that he could not leave them behind for the instruction of God. Sometimes we become so wrapped up in what we have that we are unwilling to let go. Jesus said:

"Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:28-30).

So, we can learn from Abraham that we need to look beyond this life, and realize that there is much more to come than what we can accrue here. In fact, Paul went on to describe the attitude of Abraham and his wife Sarah, and their descendants that followed them:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured

of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them (Hebrews 11:13–16).

From these Old Testament characters that lived as pilgrims in the land, we learn to live as spiritual pilgrims today. We look for the eternal land that has been promised to us, and strive to live in such a way as to attain it!

The Hebrew writer also cites the example of Abraham offering up his son, Isaac, as an offering (Hebrews 11:17-19). Clearly, God is not giving instructions that every parent is supposed take his son and offer him as a burnt offering on a far away mountain. We can learn, however, what it means to have true faith in God. All of the promises made to Abraham were contingent on his son of promise. But, God told him to take that son and offer him as a burnt offering. Abraham, understanding the promises, believed that God would resurrect Isaac if he were put to death. This is faith! There is no evidence that God told him that he would raise Isaac, nor is there any evidence that Abraham had seen such a miracle.

From Abraham's example, we can learn what it means to act in faith. He put all of his trust in God and His promises. He believed that God would do whatever was necessary for those promises to be fulfilled. If His promises were reliant upon the son of promise, then he believed that God would raise him from the dead. We learn the lesson that we must do whatever God requires, even if we don't know how God is going to use it to fulfill His promises. Even if we do not understand all the reasons that God gives a particular instruction, faith demands that we act in obedience. While we are not bound to follow the specific instructions given to Abraham, we can learn about what it means to be obedient in faith. We learn to do just what God commands us to do, without questioning His authority to give the commands!

Moses. The writer of Hebrews introduced Moses at his birth, praising the faith of his parents who hid him from Pharaoh and his wicked edict. Here, we are not to learn that we are to take our children and hide them in the river when they are born. We certainly have no threat that would incite such action. However, we can learn from this account that God views children as precious. When Pharaoh commanded that all the young boys be killed, people of faith knew that God expected more of them. We can also learn from this account that God expects faithful people to defy secular governments when they create laws that would cause one to violate His will. There are certainly applications that we can make to these principles today. We are instructed to submit ourselves to the governing bodies over us (Romans 13:1-7). However, when those governments give commands that contradict what God has given, we are to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:25-29).

By faith, Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter (Hebrews 11:24-26). He had the opportunity to live the life of comfort and luxury, perhaps even positioning himself for an office of power in the government. Instead, he chose to associate himself with the people of God. Paul said that Moses was,

...esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward (Hebrews 11:26).

We clearly are not in the position that Moses was in, and so we have not received any kind of instruction for dealing with these particular circumstances. However, as with all of the other examples we have seen, there are lessons that we can learn from the example of Moses. We learn that we have to be able to look past the immediate circumstances that we face to see the bigger picture,

the reward that lies ahead. It is interesting that Paul makes this very point later in this context concerning the motivation of Jesus Himself:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1–2).

This attitude on the part of Moses caused Him to respond in obedience to every instruction that was given to him by God. He forsook Egypt (Hebrews 11:27), he kept the Passover (vs. 28), and he led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Red Sea on dry land (vs. 29). If we learn to have the same attitude, it will lead us to be obedient to every instruction given to us by God. We will not be given the same instructions as Moses was given, but we can be obedient with the same vigor to the instructions that God has given to us!

Joshua and the walls of Jericho. Paul only gives one verse to Joshua's conquest of Jericho (Hebrews 11:30), but that one verse draws to mind the account. Joshua was given specific instructions concerning the conquest of this first city in Canaan (Joshua 6). They were to march around the city one time per day for 6 days, and then on the 7th day they were to march around it 7 times, and then blow the trumpets as directed by God. Because they did what they were told to do, the walls of the city fell down, and they were able to conquer Jericho.

We do not learn from this account that we are to gather an army and go to a city of the Middle East and march around it for seven days! We do learn, however, that God expects us to be obedient, even if the instructions don't make a lot of sense to us. There was no normal military strategy to God's instructions for Joshua, yet Joshua followed them just as they were given. We should learn that our responsibility is to be obedient in faith to whatever God has revealed, whether it makes sense to us or not. God told the Israelites that He gave them commands to see whether they would be obedient to Him or not. Perhaps some of His instructions were given simply to see who would obey and who would not!

“Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers. And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD (Deuteronomy 8:1–3).

Many more examples could be used, but hopefully these will suffice to illustrate our point: there is much to be learned from the accounts of the Old Testament, including the covenants that God made with mankind, even though we are not under those covenants. These things have been “written for our learning” (Romans 15:4). It is through these accounts that we can learn principles that God does expect His people to apply to their lives. If we dismiss the lessons or these accounts, we are missing out on a great deal of instruction that God wants us to have!

Questions...

1. If we are not bound under previous covenants, what value does their revelation serve?
2. What principles might we learn from the covenant that God made with Noah?
3. Are there any instructions that are found in God's covenant with Israel that we are obligated to keep today? Why or why not?
4. What role does Hebrews chapter 11 play in our lives under the New Testament covenant today? How are those examples cited beneficial to us today?
5. What principles can we draw from Abel's faithful sacrifice?
6. Give two lessons that we can learn and apply from the example of Abraham.
7. How did Moses show faith in the Christ by his actions? What applications can we take from his example?
8. Give one lesson that can be drawn from the example of Joshua at Jericho.

