
THE COVENANT



In 1588, a young English woman (seven months pregnant) looked out over the sea, and what she saw—the Spanish Armada, with 130 heavily armed ships planning to invade the island—so frightened her that she went into premature labor, the midwife being *fear*.

Fear, in fact, was an apt image for her child, Thomas Hobbes, who became one of Europe's greatest political theorists. Living at a time when England had been wracked by civil war and endless religious violence, Hobbes wrote that people, without a strong, all-encompassing government, existed in a state of perpetual fear—fear of instability, fear of conquest, and, most of all, fear of death. People lived in what he called “the war of all against all,” and unless something radical was done, he warned that human life would be nothing but “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

What was the solution? Hobbes said that there was only one: the people must place themselves under a single power that would reduce all their wills to a single will and that would exercise complete authority over them. This power, this sovereign—be it a single man or an assembly of men—though wielding absolute hegemony over the nation, would end the terrible conditions that made their lives so fearful and unstable. In other words, in exchange for all their rights, the people would get peace and security instead. This transfer of power, from the people to the sovereign, is what Hobbes called the “covenant.”

The covenant idea, however, did not originate with Hobbes. On the contrary, God made a covenant thousands of years earlier with Israel—a covenant whose roots, in fact, went back even further in time. Unlike Hobbes's covenant, which was initiated and promulgated by the people, this covenant was initiated and promulgated by the true Sovereign, the Creator of heaven and earth. Also, though Hobbes's covenant was motivated solely by fear, God's

covenant is motivated by love—His love for the fallen race, a love that led Him to the cross.

Thus, because of what Christ has done for us, we love God back, and just as in the Hobbesian covenant, where the subjects had to surrender to the sovereign, we surrender, too—our sinful ways, our fears, our twisted notions of right and wrong. We do this not to gain something in return but because we already have been given the best that the Sovereign can give—Jesus Christ and the redemption found only in Him.

How does it all work? It is as simple as an exchange: Christ takes our sins and gives us His righteousness so that, through Him, we are accounted as righteous as God Himself. In this way, sin is no longer attributed to us; it no longer has to keep us separated from Him. Murderers, adulterers, bigots, liars, thieves, and even the incestuous can all be viewed as righteous as God Himself. And this wonderful gift, this accounting of righteousness, comes to them by faith, and faith alone. Hence the phrase, “righteousness by faith.”

But it does not end there, either. Through Jesus, murderers, adulterers, bigots, liars, thieves, and even the incestuous can enter into a relationship with God, because Jesus’ blood brings not only forgiveness but also cleansing, healing, and restoration. Through Christ, we are born again, and through this experience God writes His holy law upon the fleshy tables of our hearts. Thus murderers, adulterers, bigots, liars, thieves, and the incestuous no longer do the things they used to do. From and by this inward law, all of life is shaped for the believer. These people desire to work out what God puts within them, and that desire is matched with the promise of divine power. Here is the essence of what it means to live in covenant relationship with God.

This quarter, we look more closely at what God’s covenant is, what it offers, even what it demands. Though drawn from many sources, the lessons rely heavily on work of the late Gerhard Hasel, whose insights into the Word (where the covenant promises are revealed) will give encouragement, hope, and understanding in order that we can learn something that, perhaps, Hobbes never did: “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear” (1 John 4:18).

Gerhard F. Hasel (PhD, Vanderbilt University) was John Nevins Andrews professor of Old Testament and biblical theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. For 27 years he served as director of the ThD/PhD programs and from 1981 to 1988 as the dean of the seminary.

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