

Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2018  
The New Covenant – the promise of God.

Even a casual observer of the Bible would soon discover that it has a lot to say about faith. Someone once defined faith as the substance that all of us say that we do not have enough of! Faith is a strange concept unless we fill it out in a more descriptive way to see what it is and what it is not. We need to learn what faith is and to act on it. We also need to know when it is just the vain imaginings of our distempered brains that are active, and not true faith!

For the past two Sundays, I have been speaking about the importance of looking to, and of seeing Jesus, of fixing our eyes on Jesus as the way we are called to live. I will not go over it all again, but I would encourage us to do so. Seeing Jesus, fixing our eyes on Him is another way of explaining faith. It is a way which does not make faith seem strange or so other worldly that it seems beyond us. . We probably do not do people any favours when we tell them just to have faith, without explaining what it is and what its focus is. If they are not Christians, they do not have faith, at least, not the sort that matters, when it comes to living a godly life. They may be moral and upstanding people, they may even excel Christians in their charity and kindness, but there is a morality which has nothing to do with faith in God.

Faith is not some woolly concept. It is not wishful thinking or hoping that it will be all right on the night. It is most certainly not an insistence that we will have the things which we desire and crave. All that is not faith as the Bible uses the word. Faith is looking at Jesus, fixing our eyes on Him as the only fountain of grace and good in this life and for eternity. It is agreeing with what He says and does and requires, no matter what others say, no matter what the trend of the world's wisdom says, or the demands of our flesh say.

For example, no matter how we strain to have faith, and repeat to ourselves that in the morning we will have lost all our excess weight, have turned blond, or will suddenly remember all we should have learned for an exam, no matter how we say we believe this will happen, it won't! So much that is passed off in Church circles as faith is wishful thinking. This is because without exception, faith, true faith, is centered on divine fact. Faith looks to Jesus, who He is in Himself, that is, His nature, it looks to what He has done, that is the Cross, and it looks to what He has promised. These we discover in the Scriptures, and there alone. Prophecy, words, and impressions, dreams and visions, all must all be brought to Scripture to be tested or else we are building on sinking sand.

You may have had friends who have told you after the break-up of a marriage due to infidelity that they know the Bible says it is wrong, but they have faith that for them it is all right. That is not faith, it is presumption! There are many other things people claim that God has told them to be all right for them, but if it had been brought to the searching light of Scripture, it would have been seen to be wrong. Often these folk think that the easy way, or the comfortable way must be God's way. Try presenting that idea to the Martyrs and persecuted, the missionaries and the Christian parent!

If you are a student of Christian history, and we would all benefit from some awareness of our history, it would show us how many people and movements, even whole denominations, have slipped into error, heresy, and ultimately collapse and decay by failing to test things by Scripture. We don't have far to see this in our day. Much of this is because either the Scriptures have been departed from as the rule of faith, or it has been looked at in purely academic and analytical ways. The Word and the Holy Spirit must always go together. When this happens, the Spirit turns the word meditated upon into grace in our hearts. Let me quote John Owen on this.

‘The whole renovation of our nature, the whole principle of holiness before described, is nothing but the word changed into grace in our hearts; for we are born again by the incorruptible seed of the word of God.’

Works. Banner Vol.3 p 470.

This is what gave rise to David crying out, ‘O how I love you're Law!’ and describing it as sweet, indeed, sweeter than honey. Read Psalm 119. This Psalm is all about how we approach and interact with the word. There is hardly a discovery of its delight and truth which is not followed by prayer, thanks and desire for truth to impact his heart!

Faith is the first grace we receive when we become Christians. It is given as the grace which receives every other grace which God gives. It is this faith we act upon when we fix our eyes on Christ, the eye of faith.

What we mean by this is that faith will look upon who Christ is. This is His character, His nature. We see that what we read about in the Bible is actually what He is like. He is gentle, pure and kind, loving and merciful and is not backwards about spending time and getting close to the sorts of people whom the world regards as trash! By the way, we are all polluted since the fall.

We also look at what Christ has done. This is the Cross. There is a world of things which Christ accomplished and completed on the Cross. It is one thing to know the story, but it is another thing to believe it and know it to be true, and for it to have an effect on us. It is faith and the Holy Spirit that makes the knowledge we have of the Cross into something that affects our hearts. The Holy Spirit acting on the Word turns it into grace in our hearts. I like that phrase of Owen!

We also look at what God promises. Second Peter chapter one speaks of the promises of God as ‘exceedingly great and precious’ and as the means by which we are kept from going the way of the world and being carried by its flow. Not only does it protect us, it gets our sails up to make headway on our journey to heaven.

Apart from these, God's character, works and promise, there are no grounds for faith. If we say that we have faith, and it does not rest on these three things alone, or does not focus on the truth revealed in the Scriptures, that is not faith as described by the Bible. Such faith is human, fleshly, sinful, and consists of our wishful thinking, or worse the fruit of our emotions

Perhaps many of us have come across sad stories of people and movements who claimed a special revelation which was not revealed as they claim, in the Scriptures. There was the sad story of Munster in the Reformation days. A leader claimed that this was the city of God, the center of the Kingdom. It all went wrong! There have been people who were so convinced that they knew the day of Christ's second coming that they camped out on the Mount of Olives to meet Him. This, despite the fact that Jesus said that no one knew the day or time of His coming except the Father, and the warning that we are to be found ready at all times because He would come when it was not expected!

I heard of a lady who believed that her husband would be raised up from terminal illness at the last. She was convinced that if she 'seeded' faith by confessing her desire as a conviction, and praising God, that it would come about. While she was at home preparing a great party for his return, he was in hospital and died alone. Devastation followed, as I am sure you can imagine. So much hope, but not grounded in anything but wishful thinking and error. So sad.

A sad but funny one was a day a number of people believed that if they only had faith, their eye sight would be healed. As an 'act of faith', some of them threw away their glasses. One chap threw away his very strong contact lenses and they were run over by a car. He then had to explain to Mum and Dad what had happened to these very expensive lenses. This was faith in faith, not faith in God! There is a difference.

Were they wrong in believing that God could heal? No, they were not, but they were presuming a lot and in a sense were trying to put God on the spot, forcing His hand. Many strange and wonderful things are recorded in the Bible and in Christian History, but they are different in that they did not happen by trying to put God on the spot. There was intense prayer in some accounts, and sovereign grace in others. Faith in the person, Cross and promise of Christ is the way God directs us. Not every difficulty or sadness we face is to be resisted and to be delivered from. Often we waste our sorrows because we think that we should find a way out. Trouble is God's way of showing us the corruption of our hearts so that He can sanctify us. It takes heat to smelt gold. It takes a lot of heat to so smelt gold and purify it until the smelter can see his reflection in the molten gold so proving its purity. Don't seek only to get off the heat. Look for Gods smelting and purifying! We are to seek the work of God until His image is perfected in us

How then do we grow in faith and understand where to look and what to do, to grow up in every way into Christ?

The principle is looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, Heb. 12v 2 and see what Heb. 2v9 says. Look and see Jesus! Who He is, what He has done and what He has promised.

Let's turn to Ezekiel Chapter 36. There is in this passage an implicit promise of a New Covenant that God will make with His people. This passage relates both to the Nation of Israel, the Jews, and the spiritual people of Israel, Christians.

The Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

The Old Covenant consists in what we read about in the Old Testament. It relates to the way that a Holy God chose to relate to a sinful unholy people. In it we read about sacrifices where blood is shed and blood is sprinkled. Blood is shed to make atonement for sins committed, to cover the guilt of sin. Sin gives rise to guilt, and guilt to fear, and the blood of the animals was given to deal day by day and year by year with the sins the people committed. The purpose was to remove fear which kept the people from approaching and living to God.

There was another aspect to these sacrifice. The blood was also sprinkled on things and people to set them apart and to make them holy. This sprinkling acted day by day and year by year to cover and cleanse the pollution caused by original sin, the fruit of the fall, our corrupt and defiled natures. Indwelling sin, the principle of sin in our hearts, makes us unclean. The sprinkling of the blood cleansed the uncleanness of sin. This uncleanness gives rise to shame, and shame keeps us from approaching God with confidence and boldness. You may remember the result of Adams sin was shame and fear, and it is no different with us.

The elaborate sacrificial system in the Old Testament serves to show us the need we have of meticulous cleansing, but also serves as a shadow of what was to come in the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.

The purpose of the book of Hebrews is to show the superior and perfect nature of Christ's work, as contrasted with the sacrifice of animals. His sacrifice was once and for all. The imperfect nature of the Old Testament sacrifices is shown by their having to be offered again and again. Hebrews tells us that the New Covenant in Christ's blood is a better sacrifice, offered by a better priest, in a better temple. Furthermore, it proves this by saying that the priests in the Old Testament stood, Hebrews 1v3, whereas Christ sat down, Hebrews 10v11. This signifies that God has accepted the sacrifice of Christ once and for ever as acceptable to Him, and that the sacrifice offered by Christ is perfect and complete, hence He sits as there are no more sacrifices to be made.

Hosea 6 verses 1-4 are a promise of this New Covenant and the language invites us to see it in terms of Christ in the tomb until the third day.

Turn back to Ezekiel 36 verses 22-38.

## **V22-24**

The introduction to the terms of the new covenant are very important. God declares in Verses 22-24 that what He will do is not because there is any goodness or merit in the people. On the contrary, they had been called to live in a way that brought God glory, but rather than this, they had behaved in such a way to bring discredit and shame upon the Name of God. Apart from being a sad testimony of their wickedness and ingratitude, it tells us that we have nothing to offer God, even on a good day, to be worthy of His salvation. It also excludes any possibility that there is anything we have or are that God needs. He does not like us or need us, but it is out of His own nature that He loves us, the creatures which He had made in His own image. It is entirely because of His being gracious that He will act to save a people who do not know they need to be saved, and who in actual fact, are doing everything to provoke God to anger!

If we think that we will go to heaven because we are nice, moral or have never done anyone any harm, then we are trying to save ourselves. It will not work, it has never worked. When we close our eyes in death and come into God's presence, if He asks us why He should let us into His heaven, the only answer that will open the gates is because we have trusted in the work of Christ alone. He will not open the gates because we think God owes us something for being nice or being a minister or a member of a Church. We sing the song, 'In Christ alone,' and 'On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sane,' and it is!

## **V 25-29**

These verses tell us the terms of the New Covenant. This is the promise of what God says He will do, and has done for us in Christ, and all this, despite us! This is what we are to look on by fixing our eyes on Jesus. This is what Jesus did for us. We are to look at what He says the Cross has done, this is the meaning of the Cross. This is what we are to look at by faith, act faith on, and focus on, no matter what else is going on about us. Fix our eyes on Jesus – this is it.

Let us look at the broad sweep of what we are told God will do for us and in us.

1. V25 God will sprinkle clean water on us, and we will be clean. This is an initial cleansing, the forgiveness of sins that we receive when we believe. It does not mean that we will not sin again, indeed, it does not mean that we will not sin terribly again, but while that is not inevitable, it does happen.

This sprinkling deals with the sin issue, the sins we have done. It deals with the guilt such sin brings us under, and the fear that results from it. Many people are full of fear about death. Now, while all of us hope our end will happen peacefully at home in our own beds when we are asleep it is not always this way. Most of us hope it will be without pain, loss of faculties, or lingering, but that is beyond our control. There can be a fear as to the manner of our death, and that is understandable, but it is not to be out of proportion. This fear is not pleasant, but can be dealt with.

However there is another fear, and that is the fear of the actual event of our death, what is there after this, will we go to heaven or hell? That fear is the result of guilt which keeps us from intimacy and faith in God. Sin is poison to faith, and faith is poison to sin, so nurture faith!

2. V26 God will give us a new heart and put a new spirit within us. This deals with the sin within our nature problem. It deals with the fact that from birth until new birth, there is a principle, a heart within us that has a bias to sin, and enjoys sin, and wants to sin. No educator has ever had to teach a child how to disobey or be bad, it all comes naturally because we have stony hearts.

Now, God will act to give us a new heart and a new spirit, or principle within us. This will change our desires and outlook and it is now a bias which is towards God, and which begins to desire to know and obey God where before it did not care about God nor His Laws. In this way, God brings to birth within us a principle of life. The complication is that there are still the remnants of our corrupt nature within, which stays with us until we leave these old bodies. This is what gives rise to the war within us that Paul speaks of in Galatians 5 v 16-18.

The sad truth is that so many of us do not realise what God has done for us, and do not understand the conflict that we encounter as the result of the life of God having been born in us. This can lead to us becoming discouraged and even thinking that we are getting worse rather than better. However, this feeling arises because we do not see how polluted we are and we get a shock when we see the colour of the water that comes out of us in the wash! It is actually a good sign when we are humbled by what God cleans out of us. All of us do not know the depths of darkness of our own hearts, and learning some of this is actually part of being made holy, sanctified.

3. V 27 God will put His Spirit within us. Not only does God say He will clean our external and internal sins, not only will He replace the root of our sin with a new root, but He will give us the Holy Spirit to be the power that drives an ongoing process of deeper and deeper cleansing. This is the means by which God takes forgiven sinners and makes them holy with a holiness derived from Him. This process called sanctification continues throughout our mortal life and is completed when we shed these earthly bodies and receive new bodies, which are without the taint of sin and are beyond its touch.

This is what God said He would do, has done through Christ's death on the Cross and His resurrection. This is a done deed, and is mediated to us by the Holy Spirit and received by faith.

It is faith in the word and the Holy Spirits acting on the word that causes the Word to become grace in our new hearts and which gives rise to our growth in Christlikeness and in faith. Faith acted on, faith used, gives rise to more and stronger faith. Faith not used or acted on will wither and atrophy just as our muscles do if not used due to injury or age or giving up exercising.

Therefore, when we sin, we look to the blood of Jesus to cleanse us and to forgive us. When we are tempted, we look to the new heart and spirit we have been given by Christ. When we become aware of our utter rottenness in the past, and our continuing ability to be vile, we mortify our flesh by the Spirit. We will see how polluted we have been and are, (verse 31 tells us this) and it is this way so that we will be humbled and meek before God.

All of this is what God will do as a sovereign act.

This is what we see as we look at Jesus and fix our eyes on Him. This is not a vague hope that all will be right on the night, nor is it wishful thinking. This is the only way to see our sins cleansed, our sinful natures changed and subdued, and the presence and working of the Holy Spirit to keep us on the journey to God when everything around us comes apart. Read some hymns, like 'Jesus lover of my soul.' There is no place to go to, nor is there anyone to turn to when friends and foes turn on us and the world shows it's unpleasant side and everything and everyone we hoped in proves to be false.

All the above, and more, is what God will do and has made full provision for. We are not utterly passive in response to this. Nothing we do can earn it, but having been given this, we are to respond and ensure we act to nurture it and let this new life grow.

If we were to get a great landscape gardener in to do a complete makeover of our garden, unless he covered it all in concrete, we would have to tend and keep it so that the new plants grow and not the weeds. No amount of watering and weeding makes the garden grow, but we are to apply ourselves to nurture what God makes grow. So it is with our souls. Nurture it, care for it, and God will give the growth.

We nurture this new life in a number of ways, but the principle means we are to employ prayer and meditation on Scripture. If we do this, we will become aware at some stage that the Spirit is indeed transforming us because we will notice two things. We will become aware that love and faith are growing in our souls. We will find that we love God more, and that love for our neighbours is also increasing whether they deserve it or not, and whether we like them or not. The Word will also become more and more a source of wonder as we see more and more how wonderful the grace of God is. This is evidence that faith is growing.

For those of you who think that Christianity is all about doing good things in the world, well a life which is growing in love and faith, will not long be without expressions of this love and faith towards the world. How sad to give our bodies to the flames as 1 Corinthians 13 says, but for it to be nothing because we do not have the love of God within us! How sad that Jesus said that there would be some who would say, 'Lord! Lord, did we not do this and that for you?' However they did not do it out of love and faith, and so Christ told them to depart from Him because He never knew them! These were dead works. Yes, they were works, but the works were dead. God accepts living

works which He sets us. They are acceptable because they are His works and are done out of faith and love.

In conclusion, let us see Jesus, fix our eyes on Jesus, because there is hope and life in no one else but in Him alone.