

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST COVENANT

“Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice, and keep My covenant, ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me.” Ex. 19. 5.

“He declared unto you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, even ten commandments. “ DEUT. 4. 13.

“ If ye keep these judgments, the Lord thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant, “ DEUT. 7. 12.

“I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers, which My covenant they brake.” JER. 31. 31, 32.

WE have seen how the reason for there being two Covenants is to be found in the need of giving the Divine and the human will, each their due place in the working out of man’s destiny. God ever takes the initiative. Man must then have the opportunity to do his part, and to prove either what he can do, or needs to have done for him. The Old Covenant was on the one hand indispensably necessary to waken man’s desires, to call forth his efforts, to deepen the sense of dependence on God, to convince of his sin and impotence, and so to prepare him to feel the need of the salvation of Christ. In the significant language of Paul, “The law was our schoolmaster unto Christ.” “We were kept

under the law, shut up unto the faith, which should afterwards be revealed.” To understand the Old Covenant aright we must ever remember its two great characteristics –the one, that it was of Divine appointment, fraught with much true blessing, and absolutely indispensable for the working out of God’s purposes; the other, that it was only provisional and preparatory to something higher, and therefore absolutely insufficient for giving that full salvation which man needs if his heart or the heart of God is to be satisfied.

Note now the terms of this first Covenant. “If ye will obey My voice and keep My covenant, ye shall be unto Me a holy nation.” Or, as it is expressed in Jeremiah (7. 23, 11. 4), “Obey My voice, and I will be your God.” Obedience everywhere, especially in the Book of Deuteronomy, appears as the condition of blessing. “A blessing if ye obey” (11. 27). Some may ask how God could make a covenant of which He knew that man could not keep it. The answer opens up to us the whole nature and object of the Covenant. All education, Divine or human, ever deals with its pupils on the principle—faithfulness in the less is essential to the attainment of the greater. In taking Israel into His training, God dealt with them as men in whom, with all the ruin sin had brought, there still was a conscience to judge of good and evil, a heart capable of being stirred to long after God, and a will to choose the good and to choose Himself. Before Christ and His salvation could be revealed and understood and truly appreciated, these faculties of man had to be stirred and wakened. The law took men into its training, and sought, if I may use the expression, to make the very best that could be made of them by external instruction. In the provision made in the law for a symbolical atonement and pardon, in all God’s revelation of Himself through priest and prophet and king, in His interposition in providence and grace, everything was done

that He could do, to touch and win the heart of His people and to give force to the appeal to their self-interest or their gratitude, their fear or their love.

Its work was not without fruit. Under the law, administered by the grace that ever accompanied it, there was trained up a number of men whose great mark was the fear of God, and a desire to walk blameless in all His commandments. And yet, as a whole, Scripture represents the Old Covenant as a failure. The law had promised life; but it could not give it (Deut. 4. 1 ; Gal. 3. 21). The real purpose for which God had given it was the very opposite: it was meant by Him as “a ministration of death.” He gave it that it might convince man of his sin, and might so waken the confession of his impotence, and of his need of a New Covenant and a true redemption. It is in this view that Scripture uses such strong expressions— “By the law is the knowledge of sin: that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may become guilty before God.” “The law worketh wrath.” “The law entered, that the offence might abound.” “That sin by the commandment might appear exceeding sinful.” “As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse.” “We were kept under the law, shut up to the faith, which should afterwards be revealed.” “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” The great work of the law was to discover what sin was: its hatefulness as accursed of God; its misery, working temporal and eternal ruin; its power, binding man down in hopeless slavery; and the need of a Divine interposition— as the only hope of deliverance.

In studying the Old Covenant we ought ever to keep in mind the twofold aspect under which we have seen that Scripture represents it. It was God’s grace that gave Israel the law, and wrought with

the law to make it work out its purpose in individual believers and in the people as a whole. The whole of the Old Covenant was a school of grace, an elementary school, to prepare for the fullness of grace and truth in Christ Jesus. A name is generally given to an object according to its chief feature. And so the Old Covenant is called a ministration of condemnation and death, not because there was no grace in it—it had its Own glory (2 Cor. 3. 10-12)—but because the law with its curse was the predominating element. The combination of the two aspects we find with especial clearness in Paul's epistles. So he speaks of all who are of the works of the law as under the curse (Gal. 3. 10). And then almost immediately after he speaks of the law as being our benefactor, a schoolmaster unto Christ, into whose charge, as to a tutor or governor, we had been given, till the time appointed of the Father. We are everywhere brought back to what we said above. The Old Covenant is absolutely indispensable for the preparation work it had to do; utterly insufficient to work for us a true or a full redemption.

The two great lessons God would teach us by it are very simple. The one is the lesson of SIN, the other the lesson of HOLINESS. The Old Covenant attains its object only as it brings men to a sense of their utter sinfulness and their hopeless impotence to deliver themselves. As long as they have not learnt this, no offer of the New Covenant life can lay hold of them. As long as an intense longing for deliverance from sinning has not been wrought, they will naturally fall back into the power of the law and the flesh. The holiness which the New Covenant offers will rather terrify than attract them; the life in the spirit of bondage appears to make more allowance for sin, because obedience is declared to be impossible.

The other is the lesson of Holiness. In the New Covenant the Triune

God engages to do all. He undertakes to give and keep the new heart, to give His own Spirit in it, to give the will and the power to obey and do His will. As the one demand of the first Covenant was the sense of sin, the one great demand of the New is faith that that need, created by the discipline of God's law, will be met in a Divine and supernatural way. The law cannot work out its purpose, except as it brings a man to lie guilty and helpless before the holiness of God. There the New finds him, and reveals that same God, in His grace accepting him and making him partaker of His holiness.

This book is written with a very practical purpose. Its object is to help believers to know that wonderful New Covenant of grace which God has made with them, and to lead them into the living and daily enjoyment of the blessed life it secures them. The practical lesson taught us by the fact that there was a first Covenant, that its one special work was to convince of sin, and that without it the New Covenant could not come, is just what many Christians need. At conversion they were convinced of sin by the Holy Spirit.

But this had chiefly reference to the guilt of sin and, in some degree, to its hatefulness. But a real knowledge of the power of sin, of their entire and utter impotence to cast it out, or to work in themselves what is good, is what they did not learn at once. And until they have learned this, they cannot possibly enter fully into the blessing of the New Covenant. It is when a man sees that, as little as he could raise himself from the dead, can he make or keep his own soul alive, that he becomes capable of appreciating the New Testament promise, and is made willing to wait on God to do all in him.

Do you, my reader, feel that you are not fully living in the New

Covenant, that there is still somewhat of the Old Covenant spirit of bondage in you? —do come, and let the Old Covenant finish its work in you. Accept its teaching, that all your efforts are failures. As, at conversion, you were content to fall down as a condemned, death-deserving sinner, be content now to sink down before God in the confession that, as His redeemed child, you still feel yourself utterly impotent to do and be what you see He asks of you. And begin to ask whether the New Covenant has not perhaps a provision you have never yet understood for meeting your impotence and giving you the strength to do what is well-pleasing to God. You will find the wonderful answer in the assurance that God, by His Holy Spirit, undertakes to work everything in you. The longing to be delivered from the life of daily sinning, and the extinction of all hope to secure this by our efforts as Christians, will prepare us for understanding and accepting God's new way of salvation—Himself working in us all that is pleasing in His sight.