

CHAPTER V.

THE TWO COVENANTS IN CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

“These women are two covenants: one from Mount Sinai, bearing children unto bondage, which is Hagar. Now this Hagar answereth to Jerusalem that now is, for she is in bondage with her children. But the Jerusalem which is above is free, which is our mother. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free. With freedom did Christ set us free. Stand fast, therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage.” GAL. 4. 24-31; 5. 1.

THE house of Abraham was the Church of God of that age. The division in his house, one son, his own son, but born after the flesh, the other after the promise, was a divinely-ordained manifestation of the division there would be in all ages between the children of the bondwoman, those who served God in the spirit of bondage, and those who were children of the free, and served Him in the Spirit of His Son. The passage teaches us what the whole Epistle confirms: that the Galatians had become entangled with a yoke of bondage, and were not standing fast in the freedom with which Christ makes free indeed. Instead of living in the New Covenant, in the Jerusalem which is from above, in the liberty which the Holy Spirit gives, their whole walk proved that,

though Christians, they were of the Old Covenant, which bringeth forth children unto bondage. The passage teaches us the great truth, which it is of the utmost consequence for us to apprehend thoroughly, that a man, with a measure of the knowledge and experience of the grace of God, may prove, by a legal spirit, that he is yet practically, to a large extent, under the Old Covenant. And it will show us, with wonderful clearness; what the proofs are of the absence of the true New Covenant life.

A careful study of the Epistle shows us that the difference between the two Covenants is seen in three things. The law and its works is contrasted with the hearing of faith, the flesh and its religion with the flesh crucified, the impotence to good with a walk in the liberty and the power of the Spirit. May the Holy Spirit reveal to us this twofold life.

The first antithesis we find in Paul's words, "Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or the hearing of faith?" These Galatians had indeed been born into the New Covenant; they had received the Holy Spirit. But they had been led away by Jewish teachers, and, though they had been justified by faith, they were seeking to be sanctified by works; they were looking for the maintenance and the growth of their Christian life to the observance of the law. They had not understood that, equally with the beginning, the progress of the Divine life is alone by faith, day by day receiving its strength from Christ alone; that in Jesus Christ nothing avails but faith working by love.

Almost every believer makes the same mistake as the Galatian Christians. Very few learn at conversion at once that it is only by faith that we stand, and walk, and live. They have no conception of the meaning of Paul's teaching about being dead to the law,

freed from the law— about the freedom with which Christ makes us free. “As many as are led by the Spirit are not under the law.” Regarding the law as a Divine ordinance for our direction, they consider themselves prepared and fitted by conversion to take up the fulfillment of the law as a natural duty. They know not that, in the New Covenant, the law written in the heart needs an unceasing faith in a Divine power, to enable us by a Divine power to keep it. They cannot understand that it is not to the law, but to a Living Person, that we are now bound, and that our obedience and holiness are only possible by the unceasing faith in His power ever working in us. It is only when this is seen, that we are prepared truly to live in the New Covenant.

The second word, that reveals the Old Covenant spirit, is the word “flesh”. Its contrast is, the flesh crucified. Paul asks: “Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye made perfect in the flesh?” Flesh means our sinful human nature. At his conversion the Christian has generally no conception of the terrible evil of his nature, and the subtlety with which it offers itself to take part in the service of God. It may be most willing and diligent in God’s service for a time; it may devise numberless observances for making His worship pleasing and attractive; and yet this may be all only what Paul calls “making a fair show in the flesh,” “glorying in the flesh,” in man’s will and man’s efforts. This power of the religious flesh is one of the great marks of the Old Covenant religion; it misses the deep humility and spirituality of the true worship of God—a heart and life entirely dependent upon Him.

The proof that our religion is very much that of the religious flesh, is that the sinful flesh will be found to flourish along with it. It was thus with the Galatians. While they were making a fair show in the flesh, and glorying in it, their daily life was full of bitter-

ness and envy and hatred, and other sins. They were biting and devouring one another. Religious flesh and sinful flesh are one: no wonder that, with a great deal of religion, temper and selfishness and worldliness are so often found side by side. The religion of the flesh cannot conquer sin.

What a contrast to the religion of the New Covenant! What is the place the flesh has there? “They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh, with its desires and affections.” Scripture speaks of the will of the flesh, the mind of the flesh, the lust of the flesh; all this the true believer has seen to be condemned and crucified in Christ: he has given it over to the death. He not only accepts the Cross, with its bearing of the curse, and its redemption from it, as his entrance into life; he glories in it as his only power day by day to overcome the flesh and the world. “I am crucified with Christ.” “God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ, by which I am crucified to the world.” Even as nothing less than the death of Christ was needed to inaugurate the New Covenant, and the resurrection life that animates it, there is no entrance into the true New Covenant life other than by a partaking of that death.

“Fallen from grace.” This is a third word that describes the condition of these Galatians in that bondage in which they were really impotent to all true good. Paul is not speaking of a final falling away here, for he still addresses them as Christians, but of their having wandered from that walk in the way of enabling and sanctifying grace, in which a Christian can get the victory over sin. As long as grace is principally connected with pardon and the entrance to the Christian life, the flesh is the only power in which to serve and work. But when we know what exceeding abundance of grace has been provided, and how God “makes all

grace abound, that we may abound to all good works,” we know that, as it is by faith, so too it is by grace alone that we stand a single moment or take a single step.

The contrast to this life of impotence and failure is found in the one word, “the Spirit.” “If ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law,” with its demand on your own strength. “Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not”—a definite, certain promise—“ye shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh.” The Spirit gives liberty from the law, from the flesh, from sin. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, peace, joy.” Of the New Covenant promise, “I will put My Spirit within you, and I will cause you to walk in My statutes, and ye shall keep My judgments,” the Spirit is the center and the sum. He is the power of the supernatural life of true obedience and holiness.

And what would have been the course that the Galatians would have taken if they had accepted this teaching of St. Paul? As they hear his question, “Now that ye have come to know God, how turn ye back again into the weak and beggarly rudiments, whereunto ye desire to be in bondage again?” They would have felt that there was but one course. Nothing else could help them but at once to turn back again to the path they had left. At the point where they had left it, they could enter again. With any one of them who wished to do so, this turning away from the Old Covenant legal spirit, and the renewed surrender to the Mediator of the New Covenant, could be the act of a moment—one single step. As the light of the New Covenant promise dawned upon him, and he saw how Christ was to be all, and faith all, and the Holy Spirit in the heart all, and the faithfulness of a Covenant-keeping God all in all, he would feel that he had but one thing to do—in utter impotence to yield himself to God, and in simple faith to count upon Him to perform what He had spoken. In Christian experience there may be still the

Old Covenant life of bondage and failure. In Christian experience there may be a life that gives way entirely to the New Covenant grace and spirit. In Christian experience, when the true vision has been received of what the New Covenant means, a faith that rests fully on the Mediator of the New Covenant can enter at once into the life which the Covenant secures.

I cannot too earnestly beg all believers who long to know to the utmost what the grace of God can work in them, to study carefully the question as to whether the acknowledgment that our being in the bondage of the Old Covenant is the reason of our failure, and whether a clear insight into the possibility of an entire change in our relation to God, is not what is needed to give us the help we seek. We may be seeking for our growth in a more diligent use of the means of grace, and a more earnest striving to live in accordance with God's will, and yet entirely fail. The reason is, that there is a secret root of evil which must be removed. That root is the spirit of bondage, the legal spirit of self-effort, which hinders that humble faith that knows that God will work all, and yields to Him to do it. That spirit may be found amidst very great zeal for God's service, and very earnest prayer for His grace; it does not enjoy the rest of faith, and cannot overcome sin, because it does not stand in the liberty with which Christ has made us free, and does not know that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. There the soul can say: "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." When once we admit heartily, not only that there are failings in our life, but that there is something radically wrong that can be changed, we shall turn with a new interest, with a deeper confession of ignorance and impotence, with a hope that looks to God alone for teaching and strength, to find that in the New Covenant there is an actual provision for every need.