

COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

Part VII

by Thomas Ice

Previously I overviewed most of the biblical covenants and examined each one to see if they are still in force today and if they are, how they relate to the church age believer. I have already surveyed all of the biblical covenants except the final one—the New Covenant, which I will seek to do at this time.

THE NEW COVENANT

The New Covenant (Deut. 29:4; 30:6; Isa. 59:20–21; 61:8–9; Jer. 31:31–40; 32:37–40; 50:4–5; Ezek. 11:19–20; 16:60–63; 34:25–26; 36:24–32; 37:21–28; Zech. 9:11; 12:10–14; Heb. 8:1–13; 10:15–18) provides for the yet future spiritual regeneration of Israel in preparation for the millennial kingdom. This is an unconditional covenant and is made between the Lord and the nation of Israel and has not yet been enacted for the nation of Israel. The New Covenant is predictive of Israel's new spiritual condition that begins at the end of the tribulation and continues into and throughout the Millennial Kingdom. Arnold Fruchtenbaum tells us the following about the New Covenant for Israel:

The announcement of the New Covenant begins with a declaration that it will be a Jewish covenant, for it will be made with both houses of Israel (v. 31). It will be in sharp contradistinction with the older Mosaic Covenant (v. 32). Of the five Jewish covenants, the Mosaic was the only conditional one. Although God had been faithful in keeping His terms of the covenant, Israel had not been so faithful, resulting in the Mosaic Covenant's being broken. For while the Mosaic Covenant showed the standard of righteousness which the Law demanded, it could never impart to the Jew the power to keep it. But that problem will be rectified in the New Covenant (v. 33) through regeneration, which will provide the internal power necessary to meet and to keep the righteous standards of God. The result of the New Covenant will be a total national regeneration of Israel (v. 34). Jewish missions and Jewish evangelism will not be needed in the Messianic Kingdom because every Jew will know the Lord, from the least to the greatest. The sins of Israel will be forgiven and forgotten. While there will be Gentile unbelievers in the Kingdom, there will not be Jewish unbelievers in the Kingdom. To a man, all the Jews will believe. There will be no need to tell a Jew to "know the Lord" because they will all know Him.¹

THE NEW COVENANT AND THE CHURCH

We have seen how the New Covenant will be fulfilled for Israel, but an often ask question is does this covenant relate in any way to the church? A New Covenant is mentioned a number of times in reference to the church in the New Testament (Matt. 26:27–28; Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 3:6). It appears to be the basis for the forgiveness of sins and a spiritual dynamic that is not just reserved for the nation of Israel. I believe that there is one New Covenant, which will be fulfilled in the future with Israel but is participated in relation to the doctrine of salvation by the church today. The Bible clearly teaches that God promised a New Covenant to His people Israel (Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:26–38) and that Jesus established the New Covenant through His death on the cross (1 Cor 11:25–26). "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it,

in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor. 11:25). The inclusion of the Gentiles is substantiated by Jesus' statement in Matthew 26 enlarging the scope of the New Covenant when He says, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). Luke records a similar statement when Jesus says, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20).

Paul contrasted two covenants in 2 Corinthians 3:6–18. The first was the old Mosaic Covenant, while the second is the New Covenant. Under the old there are the tablets of stone, the letter, a ministry of death, and fading glory. Under the new there are tablets of flesh (human hearts), the Spirit, a ministry of life, and surpassing glory. The first has passed away. The second is now reigning. Paul is a minister of this New Covenant, as the passage says, "who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6). So it appears that in some way the New Covenant applies to the current church age, even though none of the specific prophecies relating to Israel appear to have been fulfilled under the New Testament application of the New Covenant to the church age. We see in Scripture that the Church has not replaced literal Israel in its relationship to the New Covenant, and the New Covenant is not being fulfilled totally in the Church today.

HOW THE NEW COVENANT APPLIES TO THE CHURCH

A key to understanding what Scripture teaches on this matter is to recognize that the Old Testament promise of the New Covenant contained both spiritual and material benefits. The church indeed is enjoying the spiritual benefits (e.g., regeneration and the indwelling Holy Spirit), but the church is not experiencing the material benefits, which remain unfulfilled and will remain unfulfilled until literal national Israel appropriates the New Covenant to experience both its spiritual and physical benefits at the end of the Tribulation and throughout the millennium. Paul says in Romans, "For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things" (Rom. 15:27). Rodney J. Decker has the following explanation of how the New Covenant applies to the church today:

The New Covenant, prophesied in the Old Testament to be made with Israel, was ratified at the Cross and implemented as a replacement of the Mosaic Covenant. It is presently the basis on which anyone relates to God and it governs the life of all believers. The church, though not a formal partner of the New Covenant, participates in the covenant both as a subject of its rule of life and as a recipient of promised Abrahamic Covenant blessings for Gentiles that have come through the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

This explanation does not demand that the church "fulfill" the covenant; that remains for national Israel in the future millennium. It does acknowledge that there is more involved in the New Covenant than could have been known simply from the Old Testament. This in no way changes the meaning of those passages, but does allow for God's doing more than He promised (though it will be no less than promised). The term "partial fulfillment" is not necessary. If fulfillment is used to describe the relationship of the covenant partners, then fulfillment in any respect should be viewed as future. "Participation" is a better term to describe the present aspects as it both avoids replacement concepts (the church replacing Israel in fulfilling the covenant) and also explains the partial nature of the obedience evident in the experience of the church. Even though the ministry of the Holy Spirit has

changed dramatically, based on the ratification and implementation of the New Covenant, the full ramifications of that ministry will not be experienced until the covenant enters the fulfillment stage in the future messianic kingdom. . . . The Old Testament does not say that only Israel will participate in the New Covenant. The Old Testament does say that the New Covenant is made with Israel. That is different, however, from saying that the New Covenant is *only* for Israel. The New Testament does not violate Old Testament statements when it includes more than was revealed in the Old Testament.²

CONCLUSION

If one attempts to say that the New Covenant is being fulfilled today, during the current church age, through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, then it would mean that we should not evangelize any more, that every Jew would be saved, and that we would have the Law of God written on our hearts (compare Jer. 31:31–34). This is not the case within the church today. Therefore, it means that we are not currently experiencing the full impact of the New Covenant as described in the Old Testament. Postmillennialists, Amillennialists, Covenant Theologians, and preterists all believe that all aspects of the New Covenant are being fulfilled today. If such were the case then why do we have evangelism and have to teach people the Law? Jeremiah speaking the word of the Lord says, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:33b–34). Believers today simply do not fit this description. Further, the Lord is speaking about what He will do with Israel. Notice to whom the passage is directed: “‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the LORD” (Jer. 31:33a). This is certainly not yet a description of the Jewish nation as it exists today.

The Bible is clear that Israel will one day receive the benefits of the New Covenant. What a wonderful day that will be when she enters into a right relationship with the Lord after all of those years. At the same time, the church is a partaker in the spiritual blessings that flow from the New Covenant, not “a taker over” of Israel’s promises, as some are inclined to say. God’s plan is on course and will be fully implemented in the course of His timing. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003, [1982]), pp. 410–11.

² Rodney J. Decker, “The Church’s Relationship to the New Covenant,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Vol. 162, Num. 608; Oct, 1995), pp. 455–56.