

What is the New Covenant?

Romans 9:4e

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Have you ever made deals with God? I use to make them all the time. When I was coming up to an examination at school, or when a member of my family was sick I would make a deal with God. I would say, "Lord, if you would help me pass this test; or Lord, if you would make my dad well, I'll never raid the cookie jar for the rest of my life; or I'll read the Bible every day until I die." You remember the way we use to hope against hope that God would fill his part of the deal. And in fact we would fulfill ours for a whole three days sometimes, hoping to prove to him that we were really sincere about this. Yet the hope was weakened by a couple of facts.

Firstly, we weren't absolutely sure God knew about the deal. That is, there was no indication that he was even interested in this deal. And in a way, it wasn't even a deal because a deal was supposed to be between two people like an offer or a bribe to him to do something. Secondly, we were conscious all the time who are we; we're the lesser, we're the little fly; he's the greater. It isn't actually our right to initiate the deal. It's God's right only. We have no right to strike up a deal with God.

Yet it is interesting that we have enough of God's character and image left in us that our childhood intuitions were, in a sense, right. It is true that God is a covenant making, covenant keeping God. He is actually the kind of person who does make deals. He is the kind of person who does make agreements and covenants. And we were right too, in the feeling that it has to be God that initiates the covenant and that there ought to be clear indications to us that he has initiated it. The other two things that I think we all sensed were that an agreement entails promise by one party and a condition to be fulfilled by the other party.

So it is amazing how much we did understand about God even with our childish deals. Loved ones, that is true, our Creator is in fact a covenant making, covenant keeping God. He's that kind of person, He does make agreements with men and women and he does fulfill his part of the covenant if we fulfill our part. Of course that's the big difference between the covenants that are revealed in the Christian-Judaic revelation and the covenants that are supposedly revealed in other man-made religions and cults.

Other religions and cults always imitate the idea of God making a covenant but they always fall short in that there's great uncertainty about the indication that the god knows about the deal. There's always great vagueness about the see, hear, touch evidence that God has made the deal at all. There is always great uncertainty about the consistency of the God who is revealed because in non-Christian, man-made religions and cults the God always demands all kinds of bizarre conditions to be fulfilled. And they're often contradictory from year to year so that the gods of the Hindus and the god of the Muhammadans often demand all kinds of wild conditions to be fulfilled. They often contradict one another from year to year and from century to century. But the Creator, who is revealed in covenants in the Bible, is continually consistent. He keeps coming through as the same person all the time. And there's always clear evidence; see, touch, and hear evidence that he actually has initiated the covenant or deal.

That's of course, one of the great values of the Jewish nation. One of the great privileges that

they have had down through the centuries is that they have been the nation chosen by God, with whom he has completed great covenants; through whom God has touched humanity. Until God began to deal with the Israelites in this intelligible way, the face of our Creator was inscrutable. We didn't know what kind of person he was, but after he began making deals with the Jews through these covenants, we began to see what kind of God had made us.

That's what Paul says in Romans 9:4, "They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, and the covenants." To the Israelites belong the covenants. And as with the glory so with the covenants. They're accompanied by see, touch, hear evidence; scientific facts that can be observed by our outward senses. They're facts that assure us that God has made this covenant; that it is not the dream of some subjective visionary, that it is not the wishful thinking of some human being, that it is not the childish deals struck up by some primitive man; but, that it is a covenant that has been initiated by God.

In fact loved ones, in the case of the first covenant that was initiated, even the reason for it was accompanied by the see, touch, hear evidence. Wherever you go in this world, you can dig down and if you dig down far enough, you come to sedimentary rock or sedimentary strata. The very word sedimentary implies that it's been laid down by water. This is evidence that at some time there was a tremendous catastrophic flood throughout the world. Geological research in other parts of the world repeatedly turns up fossils of animals in postures of normal everyday activity that show that they were victims of a flash flood that came down and caught them in the midst of everyday life.

Now that flood was the reason for the first covenant that was ever made. You remember why the flood occurred. It was God's indication to us that he would not tolerate the violence and selfishness that we men and women introduced into the world when we rejected his friendship and the purpose for which he made us in the world. God declared to us, "I won't put up with the selfishness and violence that you are bringing in." You remember what happened to us then. We rejected his friendship, we rejected his purpose so suddenly we were displaced persons. We lost our sense of identity, we lost our reason for being alive, and we lost any security that we use to have in this world.

Then we determined to get our own sense of identity by forcing everybody else to pay attention to us. And we decided to give ourselves meaning in life by just concentrating on staying alive and getting our own food, shelter, and clothing. And in order to do that, of course; we had to dominate each other. In those early centuries that's all men and women did, they dominated each other, they determined to get as much satisfaction from each other that they possibly could. They determined to get everybody to pay attention to them so that they'd have a sense of identity. They determined to get all the food, shelter, and clothing they needed regardless of what it did to anyone else.

The world was filled with violence and selfishness so God determined, "I will not allow this to extend throughout my universe," and he flooded the whole place with a tremendous world-wide flood that destroyed everyone except Noah. Then after the flood, he saw that the only thing left to do was to somehow deal with the interned, self-abusing, world-abusing, people-using, carnal personality that we had developed. And that's what, in fact, he did. He took it and put it into his Son and he destroyed it there in a great cosmic crucifixion, in the timeless, spaceless time of eternity.

Then, because he had provided the only antidote for sin that was effective (because that's what a self-gratifying, self-directing, self-glorifying, independent life is--it's just sin!) He was free to make this first covenant with Noah. That was the reason for the first covenant. Now let's just look at the conclusion of that first covenant; it's Genesis 9:8-11, "Then God said to Noah and to

his sons with him, 'Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.'

So God said He'd never again destroy the earth. All of us live under that covenant. We all should have been destroyed because of the selfishness and violence that is actually in us, even at this moment. We should never have had our seventy years to live on this earth and the opportunity that that gives us to get to know our God. We should never have had it. So all of us whether we're Muhammadans or Hindus, Christians or Jews we all live under that covenant and under the benefit of that covenant. We all experience the common grace that flows from that covenant. That common grace is stated in Genesis 8:22, "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." Now there have been years when we have wondered if the summer had ceased, that maybe winter had taken over; but it is true that those things have never ceased. That is plain see, touch, hear evidence that God has certainly kept his part of the promise. Now if that were the only evidence, we still might question it but the whole world and the whole nation and history of the Jews were other evidences. So loved ones, that was a specific promise that God gave us.

Then, as he committed himself to holding his hand back from destroying the earth, he then had to make some conditions that we were to fulfill so that our sin would not destroy the earth. You get that in Genesis 9:6, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image." Every society that wants to avoid extinction comes to the point when it has to go back to that law. The ordering of civil life was the condition that God laid down for us to fulfill, so that he could keep his part of the bargain. There will come a time, you know, when lawlessness will break out; and we will actually be ready to destroy ourselves and destroy the world completely. And it's at that time that Jesus will have to come and bring order into the chaos. But, before that, an anti-Christ will come and impose a human order on it. That's the condition that human beings have to fulfill; that death penalty that was initiated in Genesis 9: 6.

Now the signs of the covenant are plain for all of us to see. The first sign, the sign that God had initiated this, was there in Genesis 8:20, "Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar." First of all, there was a sacrifice; not to persuade the angry God to have mercy, God had already shown mercy. That's not the purpose of sacrifice at all in the Old Testament. That sacrifice stood for the sacrifice of Jesus in the eternal heart of God when Jesus allowed our selfish, carnal personalities to be destroyed in himself. Every sacrifice that you see in the Old Testament stands for the sacrifice of Jesus which enabled God to extend any mercy to us at all. That was the first sign of the covenant.

The second sign is the one that you and I can see in the sky after a rain shower; Genesis 9:12-17. "And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen over the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between me and all flesh upon the earth.'" And it's a "see" piece

of evidence. You know we can sit here and sceptically say, "What's the proof that that's the meaning of the rainbow?" Well, is there a better meaning that is known by all people throughout all the world? It's interesting, nobody else has thought of a better meaning and there is no other great meaning that is talked about. Of course I'd be with you completely in the idea that someone saw the rainbow and just thought that he'd build a whole story around it; except that he'd have to build up a whole series of stories. He'd have to build up a whole national history to bluff thousands of people if that were true. Loved ones, it's reasonable! Look at the rainbow every time you see it and realize there was not a rainbow before the flood. God initiated the rainbow at the time as a actual sign that God will not destroy the world again.

Loved ones, that's the first covenant. What I'd like to share is this: I think some of you mistake that covenant as a covenant of salvation. There's a naive, heretical, unhealthy mindedness that goes around and says, "Here we are in a beautiful world. The Lord is good, he loves us all, he's keeping the world going, he's providing for us, so he must love us. I don't need to do anything more but believe that God is good and kind and I'll be right with him." Do you see that all God was doing there was in the light of the only antidote for sin by what he provided for our destruction in Christ Jesus? He enabled the world to go on in our individual lives for another 70-80 years so that we would have an opportunity to make use of this antidote in Jesus for our sins.

But this covenant is only a covenant of reprieve. It isn't a covenant of salvation. Our preacher hood is not the same as sonship. Do you see that? There are a lot of us, particularly in America, that think, "I am a creature of God, I'm a child of God. I'm experiencing all the rain and the sunshine that the children of God experience so I must be right with God." No, loved ones! This dear word says that God will rain his rain on the just and on the unjust until the end of this earth. And so all of us, whether we're Muhammadans or Hindus, whether we're Jews or Christians, whether we're children of God or enemies of God we all experience the benefits of his common grace that God has agreed to give to us all. That is he agreed, "I won't destroy you even though you deserve destruction, I'll allow you to live for another 70 years to enter into the destruction that I wrought upon your selfish personality in My Son Jesus. But if you don't enter into that, you cannot receive My spirit, you cannot be My child." So it's good to see that covenant in its right place.

Now the second covenant is one that God made maybe 6,000 years later though the Bible doesn't clearly indicate how much later. Certainly thousands of years later he made another covenant with Abraham and it's there in Genesis 15:18, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.'" God established a nation, among whom his Son could be born, so that his Son could reveal to us forever the great, miraculous destruction that had taken place in him before the foundation of the world. That's the meaning of the phrase, "the Lamb was slain before the foundation of the world." [Revelation 13:8] The great cosmic crucifixion of us took place in Jesus before the world was ever created, although it was not revealed until Jesus came in the first century of our era.

Now, God took a further step of promising to Abraham that He would be the father of this nation among whom his Son would be born. He made the provisions in Genesis 15:3, "And Abram said, 'Behold, thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir.' And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir.' And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'" Which, of course, was the most

incredible thing possible because Abraham was 100 years old, and Sarah his wife was about 90 years old? So it was seemingly impossible that a son was to be born to her. And the first condition that Abraham had to fulfill was the one mentioned in verse 6, "And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." The father of the Jews was actually accepted by God because of his faith. That was the condition that he had to fulfill. He had to believe that God was good, that he was his dear friend and that he would provide all for him that he needed. And that faith enabled God to accept Abraham as his child.

Then again the sign was a sacrifice; Genesis 15:9, "He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.' And he brought him all these, cut them in two..." Abram didn't do this in order to provide an angry God with some satisfaction, but to stand for that dear heart of God that was cut in two when his own Son was destroyed and we were destroyed with him. Then the sign again was; Genesis 17:9, "And God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you should be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money, shall be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.'"

Well, it's certainly a see, touch, hear piece of evidence, isn't it? Every male Jew is circumcised. And if you ponder about it, thinking of the Jews and of the kind of people they are and of the number of times they had disobeyed their God; yet down through the centuries they have kept this inconvenient and painful ritual alive in their societies. Loved ones, it makes you think that they must have been very convinced that God had actually revealed himself to Abraham in this way, in order to preserve such a uncomfortable and painful ritual through the centuries. Yet that ritual is being done, probably this very day, to some Jewish child and it's a clear sign that something incredible happened back then. Many perhaps don't even believe there's a God, yet they believed something miraculous happened back then.

When do you think Abraham was accepted by God? After he was circumcised? You know that isn't true. It was several chapters before that, that God was making the promise to Abram that he was to have a son and Abram believed God and his faith was counted for righteousness. So the first Jew was saved by his faith in God's love and mercy. He wasn't saved because he did something to his body. But he was saved because of his attitude to God. It's what Paul points out in Galatians 3:6, 7; "Thus Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of righteousness. It isn't the Jew who comes forward and says I have a sign on my body that I'm a child of God and that's what matters. It isn't the Lutheran who says, "I was confirmed and I have the sign of confirmation." And it isn't the Baptist who says, "I was baptized by immersion, I have the sign that I am a child of God. So I'm right with God." And it isn't the Methodist who has received the right hand of fellowship into the membership of that church and says, "I have the sign that I am a child of God." Loved ones, it's not the sign that brings you under the new covenant. Churches can't make you a child of God. It doesn't matter what sign you have, if you haven't the faith that God counts as righteousness, you cannot enter into the new covenant.

That faith is not the general faith of a Noah that says, "God has held back His hand from destroying

the earth and here I am alive, so God must love me." And even the general faith of Abraham that God is good and that he will make provisions for all that is needed in this life. Loved ones, it is the faith that the only reason God was ever able to make covenants with his people was because of a cosmic miracle of crucifixion that he wrought upon our turned inwards, selfish, people-pleasing, world-abusing personalities. Only when we believe that has happened and we are willing for those personalities to be destroyed and completely remade by God's Spirit, only when we are ready for that, are we ready to enter into the new covenant. So in a way, those old covenants have some of the new covenant in them and yet the new covenant is very different. The old covenants were only possible because of the central heart of the new covenant; the death of Jesus.

Next Sunday we'll talk more about the other covenant God made with Moses and compare it with the new covenant today. But would you just ask yourselves, if you by any chance are living with a false idea of what the new covenant is? Are you living with the idea that, "Here we are, God loves us, the sun's shining, everything's right with the world, all I have to do is carry on, have a good life and God will accept me in the end"? Are you living like that? Loved ones, the only way you can enter into the new covenant with God is to believe that that old self of yours -- that makes things so miserable for your loved ones at home -- was crucified with Jesus and you're willing to let it be destroyed in your life and willing for God to make you a completely new person. That's what the beautiful new covenant is.

If you want to enter into that, you can enter it this morning. So don't think it takes a long time. It takes faith; which is belief, plus obedience to God. It's believing that part of you that you cannot control has been destroyed in Jesus and being willing for your life to be controlled by the spirit of Jesus from this day on. You can make that commitment now, you can. I don't know how many of you know how to do it. But you can do it now. And anyone who thinks it has to be a gradual thing--loved ones, you don't gradually get rid of cancer; cancer is cut out. If you say that I'll gradually become like him, loved ones, you won't! You'll just get more and more subtle in your rebellion. The only way to enter into the new covenant is by striking a bargain today and moving into agreement with God at this moment by faith. And you will experience a completely new spirit in your life; just a miraculous new spirit that will give you a love for other people that you've never had. I'm not talking about all sorts of nice feelings, the nice feelings aren't important. Happy feelings aren't what's important because they come and go, depending on our circumstances. But the Holy Spirit of Jesus can give you a new love for your brothers and sisters, and a new love for the people at work, and a confidence about your relationship with God your Creator, but nothing else can. You must be willing to stop running your own life. So loved ones, maybe what I should do is to pray a prayer now, and if you feel that this is right, you can pray it with me. It's important to make a definite commitment. Get up tomorrow morning and begin to get to know your God through this dear Bible and begin to obey him. It can be the start of a new life. So I'll just pray now, and you can just pray quietly in your own heart.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, I would pray now on behalf of my brothers and sisters here and especially Lord, for those loved ones who have not known exactly how to make a commitment to You under the new covenant. So Lord, I would ask You to listen to their prayers now. We would just come before You and say to You that we know that we need to change and we know that we need to have a more real relationship with You than we have.

Lord, we believe all the things that we heard about You, but Father, we don't know You ourselves. We

know that this comes by faith but somehow we have tried to exercise this faith and we can't do it. Now, we see that faith is the gift of God. You give faith. You give an ability to know You as our own dear Father, to those of us who are willing to accept what You've done to us in Jesus. And so Father, we see that what we need to do now, is not try to work out faith or be all concerned because we haven't faith; but we have to examine whether we're ready to take part in that cosmic crucifixion of ourselves in Jesus that You've wrought even before the world was created.

So we ask You, by Your Holy Spirit, to show us what we need to let go. Show us where we're running our own lives, where we're using our friends to glorify ourselves. Lord, would You show us where we're always thinking of ourselves first, where we're always avoiding difficult situations because they're unpleasant, where we're always running from things because we want to protect ourselves? Will You show us how we're really just monsters that keep on trying to defend ourselves and make everybody serve our interests? Will You show us each place where we're resisting being crucified with Jesus, where we're resisting dying with Jesus? And then Lord, would You show us that the thing we have to do this morning is to be willing. We can't destroy these things inside us but we can be willing to have You destroy these things in us. We can be willing to do without them and face the consequences of not being able to lose our temper again -- to not criticize people again. Father, we commit our lives to Your hand and we trust You to be our only defender and to make the miracle of Your transforming life real to us. We ask this in Jesus' name and for Your glory. Amen.