

Baptism and the Covenant of Grace

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Scripture Reading: Galatians 3:1–18, Hebrews 8:6–13

Texts: Galatians 3:17–18, Hebrews 8:10–12

Why are we having baptism today? Is it because a believer has come to faith in Christ? No, not today. Is it because the infants to be baptized are saved? We don't know that for sure. Is it because baptism will somehow *save* these children? No. Why then? Why baptism *today* with these parents and their babies? It is because the living God is *our* God and the God of our children. These parents will confess that before God and the congregation, solemnly pledging, with God's help, to bring up these children as *His* children, to rear them in the fear and admonition of the Lord. We are having baptism today, not primarily to focus on baptism, but because *baptism* has us focus on God and on His covenant with us and our seed.

Baptism is about *covenant*. Scripture is about covenant. Salvation is about covenant. God's dealings with mankind are about covenant. So this will be that upon which we will focus at this time. May the Lord bring added clarity to a subject that has sorely divided His church for a long time. May our focus indeed be upon the Lord and His dealings with us so that, at the end of the day, we may bless the Lord our God from the heart.

We have two texts for this occasion Galatians 3:17–18 and Hebrews 8:10–12: “And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect. For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave it to Abraham by promise” and “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: and they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.”

We will consider baptism and the covenant of grace with the help of these texts under three main headings: the covenant patterns, the covenant parameters, and the covenant pleading ground for believers and their seed. As we begin, let us first look at patterns in Scripture with respect to the doctrine of God’s covenant dealings with His people.

1. Covenant Patterns Concerning Believers and Their Seed

All of us confess that God’s revelation is *progressive*. In other words, He unfolded truth to mankind over time, not giving everything at once, at the beginning, but instead revealing some truths at the beginning and then elaborating on them over time. Other truths are not revealed at the first but over time they are brought into view in their proper place.

But covenant is a reality that is brought to the foreground early and repeatedly in Scripture. One revelation

of covenant builds upon another so that our understanding of covenant grows as we consider each subsequent revelation of it. So there are aspects of covenant that change over time. Other aspects remain the same. It is important to keep this in mind when considering covenant.

Covenant Patterns Concerning Adam and Noah and Their Seed

Though explicit mention of covenant does not appear in the first chapters of Genesis when describing God's relationship with man before the fall, it is clear from Romans 5 that the apostle viewed Christ as head over all who are saved, and Adam as the head of all who sin. Jesus Christ, then, already shines through this history, albeit in shadow form. Paul goes back and forth between Adam and Christ, comparing and contrasting them. And as we shall shortly see, this kind of relationship, where God has dealings with the one and the many who are associated with the one, is standard covenantal language that God repeatedly uses. Let's see if we can trace patterns regarding covenant in both testaments.

We have already seen that God's prohibition to Adam and Eve not to eat of the forbidden tree affected not only Adam, but all who would proceed from him. We are all involved in his fall (Rom. 5:12). Was there a sign of that covenant? In a way there was. Negatively, there was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Positively, there was the tree of life. Was Adam a believer after all? God does not explicitly say. However, after God's promise of a deliverer, we don't see in Adam anything of the sinful, rebellious spirit that characterized Cain, his son. Adam appears to have worn, without murmuring, the covering of animal skin that God gave to him and Eve. He named his wife "Eve," meaning the mother of all living, after he fell into sin, seemingly to indicate that there was life to

be had even after sin. Eve, for her part, when receiving their firstborn, said, “I have gotten a man from the Lord.” It also seems apparent that they taught their children, Cain and Abel, to sacrifice, indicating some understanding of the significance of that mode of worship. So it would appear that this first covenant was made with what appears to be a believing couple and their seed.

Later, just prior to the Flood, we hear God speaking to a believing Noah, “But with thee will I establish my covenant” (Gen. 6:18). It would seem, just from these words, that God’s first explicit mention of covenant was to Noah alone. But as is the nature of progressive revelation, we read three chapters later, “And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you and with your seed after you” (Gen. 9:9). A few verses after that, “covenant” is expanded even further: “This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you” and then later still, “between me and the earth.” As to a sign of that covenant, God chose the rainbow as He explicitly states in Genesis 9:13. So this covenant was made with believing Noah and his seed, both with the godly Shem and the ungodly Ham as well as many, many others, even all the offspring of believing Noah. In the Gospels, Jesus would show that children too are included in His kingdom (Matt. 19:14).

Covenant Patterns Concerning Abraham and His Seed

Moving ahead to Genesis 15:18 we read, “In the same day the LORD...made a covenant with Abram.” Once again, God expands this covenant in Genesis 17:7, “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee.” As in the covenant with Noah, there is a sign associated with this covenant as well. “And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your

foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.” This covenant sign was to be administered, ordinarily, to infant boys by the explicit command of God. “He that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you” (Gen. 17:12). Abram was circumcised, as were his sons, Ishmael and Isaac, as well as Isaac’s sons, Esau and Jacob. This covenant was begun with believing Abram and extended to his seed. But there was an additional feature of the covenant made with Abraham. In Genesis 17:12–13 we are told, “Every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed must needs be circumcised.” Here the pattern is expanded from the believer and his seed to the believer and his *household*, i.e. all who lived under his headship. But it did not apply to those who had been allied with Abraham, like Aner, Eschol and Mamre who had helped him in battle. So already at this early date God was indicating that believers have a sanctifying influence on their household and therefore the covenant sign would be applied to them too.

We find the same pattern with respect to Isaac: “I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant and with his seed after him” (Gen. 17:19). God mentioned these covenant relationships when He looked upon the afflictions of His people Israel in Egypt (Ex. 2:24). Jesus once again appears “through the lattice” as it were, since in the New Testament we learn that, because of what Jesus did, we too may be adopted into the household of God (Gal. 4:4–5).

Covenant Patterns Concerning Moses and Israel

Later in Exodus, God would establish another covenant, this time with the entire people of Israel, a covenant quite distinct from that made with Abraham, as is made clear in passages like Deuteronomy 5:2–3 and the New Testament

book of Hebrews. The pattern, however, held. In Exodus 19:3–6 we read, “Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel; Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.” Here, God covenants with the whole church, the church in the wilderness, as Stephen would later call it (Acts 7:38). They would be a peculiar treasure to the Lord, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. He would be their God, and they His people. And as we have seen previously, this covenant would be made with believers in Israel as well as those who would die in unbelief in the wilderness. They all were a sanctified people, a people set apart by God, set apart for Himself, His care over them exemplified by the laws He gave, His presence with them, and the gospel couched in the ceremonies.

In addition to the sign of circumcision, the Lord gave Moses a second sign of this covenant. In Exodus 24:8 we read, “And Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD hath made with you.” Circumcision would set them apart by teaching them they were His, but the blood pointed to that which they needed in order to be in a saving relationship with Him, pointing of course to the coming Messiah. So circumcision marked His claims upon them, while the blood pointed to that which alone could bring them into a saving relationship with Him.

To make the covenant picture complete between God and Israel, God would also mention the Sabbath as a perpetual covenant throughout their generations (Ex. 24:8), teaching them and us that holiness, i.e. the keeping of God’s commands, is a vital aspect of being in a covenantal

relationship with Him. “Without holiness, no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

Jesus can be seen in this aspect of covenant expansion, for through His atoning work, we who believe are accounted “a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9).

In Leviticus 26, God warned Israel about breaking His covenant made on Mount Sinai, telling them the many and grievous judgments He would send on account of it, even to the point of captivity. But even then, when completely broken as a nation and scattered among their enemies, cities wasted, faint of heart, pining away in their iniquity, we nevertheless read these remarkable words, “Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember.... And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them: for I am the LORD their God.” Here was a durable covenant over against one which they broke. The durable remained while the other made on Sinai would fade away, a covenant Israel broke by their iniquities against Him. Even though many Israelites sinned against God, even though so many remained unbelievers till their death, and even after receiving the covenant sign of circumcision, God did not disannul His covenant with believing Abram and his seed. Paul repeated the same point in Galatians 3:17, “And this I say, that the covenant that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect.” Jesus’s redemptive work assures us that all of God’s promises are, in Him, Amen (2 Cor. 1:20).

Covenant Patterns Concerning David

David, in his day, wrote that God made with him an everlasting covenant—ordered in all things and sure. And whereas David mentions covenant but once in the historical books of Scripture, his references to it in the Psalms are many: “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant” (Ps. 25:14); “I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant, Thy seed will I establish forever, and build up thy throne to all generations. Selah” (Ps. 89:3–4); “He hath remembered his covenant forever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations. Which covenant he made with Abraham” (Ps. 105:8–9). So the pattern remained, God covenanting with believers and their households.

By way of review then, in each Old Testament instance, God took the initiative to establish His covenant with believers. He included in His covenantal dealings believers’ children. He expanded His covenantal dealings to include their households. He expanded His covenantal dealings to include a nation, and even after that nation came into dire straits, He maintained the covenant He established with Abraham before Israel ever existed. It is with these truths in view that we approach the covenant mentioned in Jeremiah 31, the so-called “new covenant,” a reference repeated in various places in the New Testament.

Covenant Patterns in the New Covenant

It is sometimes explained, particularly by Baptists, that this covenant is unique compared to all others, distinct in that it only pertains to believers and not necessarily their seed. It is distinct, they say, from the covenant made with Abraham and his seed. But if these things are so, we face the challenge as to what to do with the covenant

made with Abraham. What became of it? If it was merely a national covenant or a Jewish covenant, how do we explain Paul's teaching in Galatians 3 where he writes that God "preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed"? Or what about his teaching that the blessing of Abraham would come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ? Or that the covenant made with Abraham "was confirmed before, of God, in Christ so that the law which came four hundred and thirty years later could not make the promise to Abraham of no effect" (Gal. 3:17)? Recall also how the apostle refers to circumcision as the sign and seal of the righteousness of the faith which Abraham had. So then, we ask ourselves, is the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 *brand* new? The word "new" in the biblical languages doesn't always mean entirely new; it can also mean *renewed*. Was the Jeremiah 31 covenant brand new if it was established, as the passage clearly states, with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah? According to the book of Hebrews, the old covenant that was decaying and fading away was that which was made with Israel on Sinai, *not* that which God established with Abraham and his seed. So when Hebrews 12:24 tells us that New Testament believers are come to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant and to the blood of sprinkling, are we to believe that somehow Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, David, and other Old Testament saints came to God in another way? Not by way of faith in Christ, the covenant of grace? Our Lord told the Jewish leaders that Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus' day and he saw it and was glad (John 8:56).

In the New Testament, then, we find a continuation of the pattern we've already seen. God's covenant continues to be with believers and their seed. God's covenant continues to be with His church. The signs of the covenant continued to be administered to the children of His people and to those brought into the church from without. Let us

see if we can trace these affirmations in the New Testament text.

As to the link between the covenant of Abraham and the New Testament church, we read that John the Baptist's father, Zacharias, prophesied that with the birth of Jesus, "God raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; as he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began... to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; the oath which he swore to our father Abraham." By God's Spirit, Zacharias prophesied that the covenant made with Abraham is linked to the salvation promised in Jesus the Messiah. It was this understanding that emboldened Peter, speaking by the Spirit on Pentecost, to say to the multitude of assembled Jews and proselytes, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ," adding, "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" (Acts 2:39). The prophets had foretold of the expansion of God's covenant mercies to the Gentile nations, and hence Peter reflected this by saying that the promise will now be to as many as the Lord our God shall call. Peter pleads God's covenantal relationship with the seed of believers in his next recorded sermon, saying, "Ye are the children of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities" (Acts 3:25–26). Later on, Paul would write these memorable words concerning the Jews, "For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins. As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your

sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes" (Rom. 11:27–29).

Continued also is the Old Testament pattern of household circumcisions. When Lydia came to faith she was baptized, as was her household. When the jailor came to faith, he was baptized, as was his household. So too did Paul baptize the household of Stephanus.

That the children of believers should continue to receive the sign of their covenant relationship with God was clearly understood by the apostles. In Acts 21:20–24, Paul and James both affirm publicly that children of believing Jews ought not to be denied circumcision, which all Jews recognized as God's sign of covenantal inclusion. What about the children of believing Gentiles? James explicitly mentions *they* were strictly forbidden circumcision. Was there no sign to reflect their children's covenant relationship to God? Of course there was, that of baptism, the sign applied to the households of Gentile converts to Christianity. This would explain why Paul in Colossians 2 wrote of circumcision and baptism as if they were one and the same sign:

And ye are complete in him (i.e. Christ), which is the head of all principality and power: In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; blotting out (i.e. with His blood) the handwriting of ordinances (laws) that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.

So we find it has pleased God to establish His covenant with His people, a people sovereignly separated from

others to be His own. He declares to them that He would be their God and they His people. It has also pleased God to extend His covenant to the children of His people so that, as Psalm 78 tells us, we fathers would make God known to our children “that the generation to come might know him, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare it to their children: that they might set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.”

But now, what does this all mean to us today? What exactly does baptism signify for the children being baptized? Is baptism mere symbolism or is it weightier than that?

2. Covenant Parameters with Believers and Their Seed

With sadness we have seen that repeatedly in the Old Testament, the sign of circumcision, precious as it was, did not give grace to those who received it. Think of Ishmael, of Esau, or of so many Israelites. Yet it clearly was not meaningless to God, despite this reality. For an Israelite to deny one’s covenant relationship with God and covenant obligations was, to Him, a serious offence. God commanded all His people to obey His voice and did not make any allowances for those lacking true faith, demanding less of them. They were indeed a privileged people, set apart by God from all the rest. And He commanded them to reflect this distinctiveness in the way they interacted with the nations around them, with respect to marriage, making covenants with them, etc. They were to be a sanctified people, a people set apart for God.

This distinctiveness is also the same with respect to baptism and our children. Baptism does not automatically confer or give grace to the baptized child. Just as with circumcision, there are baptized children and adults who

sadly end up not exhibiting the fruits of a saving relationship with God. Think of Simon the sorcerer who, though baptized, and though he followed Philip for a while, was eventually told by Peter that his heart was not right in the sight of God and that Peter thought him to be in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity. But regardless of our children's spiritual condition, baptism says to us as parents that these children, just like Israel's children, are God's children. They are to be brought up in His ways, giving honor to Him as their God, and are commanded to live as His people. They are not to resemble the children of the world in their life. They shall be judged more strictly by God than others will. To whom much is given, much will be required, "and that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes" (Luke 12:47-48).

Is there any advantage to being a child of believing parents? Much in every way! Chiefly, because unto them were committed the oracles of God. Having God's Word, hearing God's promises, being surrounded by godly influences—these advantages are immense. The New Testament speaks plainly about the sanctifying effect of believers on others, namely a believing spouse on his/her spouse and a believing parent on the children of the household (1 Cor. 7:14).

In Hebrews 10:29, after quoting Jeremiah 31 concerning the new covenant, Paul writes, "Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" None of us believe that true Christians can lose their salvation. Yet Paul, on the heels of mentioning the "new covenant" text, writes of how dreadful it is to be

sanctified by the blood of the covenant and yet to tread underfoot the Son of God whose blood it was that was shed, and to insult the Spirit of grace, the Spirit who takes the things of Christ and shows them unto us. Sorer punishment indeed, and rightly so!

In baptism we see encouragement. He is our God. We are His people. We see privileges, the blessings of being among God's people and under the regular witness of God's Word. We also see responsibilities. We all must live as His people, regardless of whether we are born again or not, and will be judged accordingly.

3. Covenant as a Pleading Ground for Believers and Their Seed

Who can forget the poignant prayer of Abraham, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" (Gen. 17:18). Even though God would answer by affirming that His covenant would be with Isaac and his offspring, God did say to Abraham, "As for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation." How many times did Moses plead God's covenant relationship with Israel when he knew Israel deserved the wrath of God, saying, "Why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand?" (Ex. 32:11). Even when the Lord in His wrath would say to Moses that Israel was the people that he, Moses, led forth from Egypt, the man of God would invariably reply that it was God's people that He led to freedom: "They are thy people and thine inheritance, which thou broughtest out by thy mighty power and by thy stretched out arm" (Deut. 9:29). Hear the prophet Jeremiah plead in like manner: "Do not abhor us, for thy name's sake, do not disgrace the throne of thy glory:

remember, break not thy covenant with us” (Jer. 14:21). Even when God chided Israel for being covenant breakers, He did not therefore renounce His covenant with them: “For thus saith the Lord GOD; I will even deal with thee as thou hast done, which hast despised the oath in breaking the covenant. Nevertheless I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant” (Ezek. 16:59–60). This was Peter’s point in mentioning God’s covenant to the people right after Pentecost: “Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.” In other words, let us be encouraged and plead God’s covenant mercies, since we cannot plead anything about ourselves, being the betrayers and murderers of the Messiah Himself!

Baptism says much to us, also today, beloved. It speaks to the whole congregation, “I am the LORD thy God. It speaks to all believers, being a sign and seal of the righteousness of Christ which we have by faith. It speaks to parents: “These are God’s children. Rear them that way” It speaks to children: “This is your God. Love, honor, and obey Him.” And it also speaks of Jesus Christ, whose blood is our covenant pleading ground. Amen.