

I want to open this morning by thinking a bit about covenants. A covenant is a solemn agreement between two or more parties, particularly concerning what each party agrees to do and not do. At Grand Avenue, our church covenant outlines our relationship with one another. The first commitment expressed is (and this is our main point and application!): **“We endeavor to remember and to remind one another of Jesus Christ, crucified for our sins and risen from the dead.”** Earlier, we remembered Jesus in the Lord’s Supper. Luke recounts how Jesus instituted the meal:

He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to them, and said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he also took the cup after supper and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus clarifies that this is a covenant meal, eaten in "remembrance" of him and the covenant in his blood. In giving it to us, Jesus ensures that we will regularly remember the new covenant.

Our passage ends with a covenant remembrance ceremony. The covenant remembered is what we call the "Old Covenant," the Sinai Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, or the Law of Moses. It outlined how Israel was to behave as God's people and how the Lord would respond to their behavior. In Deuteronomy, Moses prepared Israel to enter the land by reminding them of their covenant with Yahweh and the necessity of obeying the Law. Moses instructed them to hold a covenant ceremony when they entered the land:

Look, today I set before you a blessing and a curse: there will be a blessing, if you obey the commands of the LORD your God I am giving you today, and a curse, if you do not obey the commands of the LORD your God...When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess, you are to proclaim the blessing at Mount Gerizim and the curse at Mount Ebal. ... For you are about to cross the Jordan to enter and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you. When you possess it and settle in it, be careful to follow all the statutes and ordinances I set before you today.<sup>2</sup>

This ceremony is detailed in Deuteronomy 27. Six of the tribes of Israel would stand on Mount Gerizim. The other six would stand on Mount Ebal. The tribes on Ebal would declare the curse. The tribes on Gerizim would announce the blessing. This is what we find in Joshua 8:30-35.

At Mount Ebal, Joshua built an altar on which he wrote the words of the Law of Moses. This reminded Israel of what the Lord required, along with the curse given for disobedience. They offered sacrifices, remembering that only death could appease God’s wrath.

Then they divided between the mountains and proclaimed the blessing and curse. Joshua "read all the words of the Law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them."<sup>3</sup>

The author emphasizes the reading of every word of the Law to every Israelite because—as we saw last week—their blessing depended on the entire nation's entire obedience. As Moses said: **“there will be a blessing, if you obey the commands of the Lord your God I am giving you today, and a curse, if you do not obey the commands of the Lord your God...”**

The Old Covenant is what we call a “covenant of works.” Blessing depended on the obedience of the people. That is why it is essential they remember the Law as they enter the land—their possession of it will always depend on their obedience. They will be blessed if they obey, cursed if they disobey. We see this illustrated in our passage.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 22:19-20

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 11

<sup>3</sup> Joshua 8:34-35.

**Principle 1 — Complete obedience brings complete blessing.** In our passage, the Lord gives Joshua instructions for a second attack on Ai. Joshua then gives his army instructions according to the Lord's word. Then Joshua and Israel obey the Lord's instruction resulting in complete victory over Ai. This account is written to emphasize Israel's complete obedience to God's word (unlike the previous chapter). It culminates in every word of the Law being read to every person of Israel. **Only complete obedience to the Law brings complete blessing.**

**Principle 2 — Complete disobedience brings complete destruction.** We see this in the desolation of Ai. Listen to the author's emphasis on the completeness in verses 22-26:

Israel struck them down, until **there was left none that survived or escaped**. ... When Israel had finished killing **all** the inhabitants of Ai...and **all of them to the very last** had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai and struck it down with the edge of the sword. ...Joshua did not draw back his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had devoted **all the inhabitants of Ai to destruction**.

We see the extent of their desolation in their king. Joshua had his body "hung on a tree" until evening. The Law of Moses stipulated that an executed criminal was to be hung on a tree until evening and then buried. Such a criminal, hanged on a tree, was cursed by God. The king represented his city; Ai was utterly cursed. Its destruction was, in a word, *complete*.

Such complete destruction is disturbing to some modern readers. It's important to remember these were not cities full of good people, living respectful lives, who just happened to be in the land God gave to Israel—and so they were all put to death. We must read these stories with Genesis 15 in mind. The Lord told Abram that his offspring would be afflicted in Egypt for 400 years. After which, "they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."<sup>4</sup> There would be a 400-year intermission ***because "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."***

"Amorites" is shorthand for all the peoples dwelling in the land. The Lord would not give their land to Israel in an unjust way. They were wicked people, living in disobedience to God, storing up wrath for themselves. God was waiting until their sin was "complete." When complete, God would bring the Israelites to the land to give the nations what they deserve.

**So, how do we apply these two principles?** One option is to try really hard to obey everything that the Lord has commanded so that you can receive God's blessing and escape his curse. You might even opt for doing something similar to the end of this chapter. You'll devote yourself to remembering all of God's commands. You'll recite them everywhere you go. You'll even hang the words of Law on the walls and doors of your house so that you see them every day. After all, that's what the Lord commanded Israel to do, right? (You know that didn't work, right?)

After Joshua comes Judges and a spiral of wickedness as Israel inhabited the land. In the end, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes."<sup>5</sup> Judges is a microcosm of Israel's history. Even after a king and a temple, Israel carried into exile. No matter how many institutions, offices, festivals, and sacrifices—they simply cannot stop sinning. So, they cannot be blessed. The curse is their ultimate end.

That's the point of the Old Covenant. These words that Israel needed to listen to carefully, written on tablets at Sinai and the alter at Mount Ebal—what are they for? What do they do? Paul tells the Corinthians that they are a "ministry of death," a "ministry of condemnation."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 15:16

<sup>5</sup> Judges 21:25

<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:6-7

Be careful. If you read this chapter and respond, "I need to obey the Law of Moses," then you commit the heresy of the Galatians. The essence of the Law is works—"the one who does them shall live by them." Paul argues, "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'"<sup>7</sup>

**Do you feel that weight this morning?** Do you sense your complete and total inability to obey God's requirements? Do you perceive how everything you do is laced with sin? Can you look back on this week (or this morning) and recall how—despite your desires and best efforts—you fell short of God's glory? Can you look back and see restart after restart, resolution after resolution, discipline after discipline—all of which have failed to produce perfect conformity to the will of God?

We do not need a renewed commitment to the Old Covenant. We need an entirely *new covenant*, a covenant with power to give life and transform us. That is what we have in Jesus.

The **New Covenant** that we remembered this morning is not a covenant of works.<sup>8</sup> It is a **covenant of grace**. In it, God promises to save his people: to redeem them from the curse of the Law; to release them from the deception of Satan; to forgive their sins and give them a glorious and eternal resurrection in a world free from sin and death. He provides this salvation entirely by grace through faith.

How does God enact this new covenant? He does not cut it in the flesh of beasts and birds but in the flesh of his Son. In his life, Jesus fulfilled the Law by being everything it called Israel to be. In his death on the cross, he fulfilled the Law's demand for death. On the third day, God raised him from the dead, declaring Jesus righteous, undeserving of the curse. He did not die for his own sins; he had none.

That is what we proclaim in the Lord's Supper. "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."<sup>9</sup> Eating, we proclaim that Jesus' life and death was "*for us*." Jesus also says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." When we were dead in sins, God made a covenant in Christ. Our covenant relationship with God is neither established nor continued by our obedience. It is by grace alone.

Jesus does not call us to Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal to remember a blessing and a curse according to our works. No, he calls the church to his table to remember that he was cursed for us and that we are now blessed in him with every spiritual blessing. "Do this in remembrance of me."

The New Covenant does not consist of works but "of faith." Through faith, by the power of the Spirit, we are united with Jesus. So, Paul can write, "because of [God] you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption." Christ—and Christ alone, received by faith alone—is our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption.

Where is our righteousness? In Christ crucified! Where is our sanctification? In Christ crucified! Where is our redemption? In Christ crucified! That is why Paul told the Corinthians, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."<sup>10</sup> He knew nothing but Christ because everything we need is in Christ crucified!

That is why Jesus said, "Do *this* in remembrance of me!" Our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption are *not* found in remembering the Law. No, our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption are found only in remembering the end of the Law—Jesus Christ crucified.

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<sup>7</sup> Galatians 3:10-12

<sup>8</sup> See Ephesians 2

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:24-25

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:2

Do you want to be holy, transformed into the image of Jesus? Don't look at the Law! Look at the death and resurrection of Jesus. For the New Covenant "gives life" as a "ministry of righteousness."

In the New Covenant, we not like Moses on Sinai, unable to see God's glory and live. Paul tells the Corinthians, "we all...beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."<sup>11</sup> When we hear the good news of Christ crucified and risen, we look full-on at the glory of God and live. That sight transforms us into the image of his glory.

Do you want to be a person of virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love? What did we learn in 2 Peter? "...whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins."<sup>12</sup> We lack these things because we have "forgotten" that we were cleansed from our former sins.

So how do we gain and keep these things? Reverse-engineer Peter's assessment. If these qualities are lost through forgetting our forgiveness, it stands to reason that they are found in remembering it. Peter will write of having "escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."<sup>13</sup> We escape sinful behaviors by knowing Christ, for God has granted us "all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him."<sup>14</sup>

**How do we apply this?** Remember the Gospel! Use God's prescribed means for remembering the gospel—taking the Lord's Supper, teaching each other the word of Christ through song, hearing God's word preached. Assemble with the church as we remind ourselves of the Lord's death for us. Read the word, pray, preach the gospel, fellowship with saints, persevere through suffering. The aim of spiritual disciplines is to remember Christ crucified because the gospel is God's power for salvation.<sup>15</sup>

That brings us to our final application: **Do not fear.** That's the first command in our passage: **"And the LORD said to Joshua, 'Do not fear and do not be dismayed.'"** You can't blame them for being afraid to return to Ai. They had just suffered defeat. But now, God had removed the cause of their failure, the sin that brought a curse. If your wickedness is removed, then God is for you. If God is for you, there is nothing left to fear. So, the Lord says to Joshua, "Do not fear."

"Do not fear" is the most frequent command in Scripture. "Do not be afraid" is the most frequent command of Jesus. Why? Because fear is our constant companion. It infests every area of our lives and every decision we make.

We're sinners, and we know that at the core of our being. That makes us afraid—especially of God. We doubt that God is for us, cares for us, loves us. When we doubt God's love, we turn to other things for justification, approval, and safety. We sin and give ourselves to idols. So, God reminds us often—"You do not need to be afraid."

This week, write down your biggest fears in life and your most pressing fears for the week ahead. Be as ruthlessly honest as you can be. Then spend time asking this question of each fear: If God loves me, forgives me, and counts me righteous in Christ—if God is really for me—then why do I have this fear? How should the person and work of Jesus help me to live without this fear?

Remember this: **Through our faith in Jesus Christ, we are loved, forgiven, righteous, holy, and redeemed—God is entirely for us. And if God is for us, we have no reason to be afraid.**

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18

<sup>12</sup> 2 Peter 1:9

<sup>13</sup> 2 Peter 2:20

<sup>14</sup> 2 Peter 1:3

<sup>15</sup> Romans 1:16