

GOD'S ETERNAL COVENANT OF GRACE

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Introduction:

It is a testament to the thoroughness of the framers of the Savoy Declaration of Faith, that having affirmed God's gracious provision for the redemption of sinners in His covenant of grace¹, they immediately proceeded to confess²,

Although this covenant has been differently and variously administered in respect of ordinances and institutions in the time of the law, and since the coming of Christ in the flesh; yet for the substance and efficacy of it, to all its spiritual and saving ends, it is one and the same; upon the account of which various dispensations, it is called the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The importance of the inclusion of this paragraph in the Confession cannot be over emphasized in that the denial of it has led to serious error not only in doctrinal understanding, but also in the experiential practice of many professing Christians. In particular, there are many who adhere to the doctrinal position, well known as "Dispensationalism"³, who view God's Covenant of Grace as provision for New Testament saints only. They claim New Testaments saints only are referred to as "the church", and for them grace only applies with no responsibility to the moral law. Excerpts from the writings of leading proponents of this view include, "Dispensational ecclesiology defines the church as a distinct body of saints in the present age having its own divine purpose and destiny and differing from the saints of the past or future ages"⁴, and "The law was never given to Gentiles and is expressly done away with for the Christian"⁵. Fragments of Scripture, taken out of context, such as, "you are not under law but under grace"⁶, only underscore for dispensationalists their definitive distinction between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament "church".

The dangers of this position, however, are not immediately apparent to many uninformed and in some cases naive Christians, but this forced dividing of God's people into two distinct groups, Old Testament and New Testament, is such that "In addition to an unbiblical doctrine of the church, dispensationalism has adopted a doctrine of

¹ Chapter VII., Of God's Covenant with Man, paragraphs 3 & 4

² Ibid, paragraph V.

³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to present the details of this position other than to state that it is chiefly characterized by its attempt to divide God's people into two distinct groups, Old Testament Israel and, the New Testament "church"

⁴ John Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom, Zondervan, 1959, page 224, this writer is indebted to Keith Mathison for compiling this and subsequent quotes from dispensational writers in his book, "Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?"

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, Balancing the Christian Life, Moody Press, 1969, page 88

⁶ Romans 6:14, NKJV used unless otherwise noted

salvation that violates Scripture by weakening the Bible's pronouncing concerning human sin. When sin is taken seriously, God's work in salvation is taken seriously, forcing us to fall on our knees in grateful realization that we had no part in saving ourselves. But when people do not take sin seriously, enormous problems arise. A weakened doctrine of sin has produced within dispensationalism a diluted understanding of election, a doctrine of possible atonement, and the lordship-salvation controversy"⁷. Suddenly for dispensationalists, the truth of salvation by grace is commingled with the dreadful lie of the Christian having no ultimate responsibility to God's moral law.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate from Scripture that indeed God's Covenant of Grace has always been the basis of salvation for sinners. The Apostle Peter reminded his Christian readers that they "were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. *He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was revealed in these times for you*"⁸. And this was addressed to no less than Jewish converts of the Dispersion. Indeed, God has administered this over-riding principle of grace in different ways at different times, but there is no other way for guilty sinners to be reconciled to God than by God's extension of grace and mercy through His Son Jesus Christ, who in response to a covenant with His Father, "being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of a cross"⁹.

The Covenant of Grace As the Basis For All Of God's Dealing With His People:

In God's Word, we have a remarkable record of God's progressive revelation of what has always been His plan of salvation for His people both before, and after the cross. As such, Charles Hodge presents four criteria for proving the truth of God's eternal plan for sinners of all ages, and they include, "the *same promise of deliverance* from the evils of apostasy, the *same Redeemer*, the *same condition* required for participation in the blessings of redemption, the *same complete salvation* for all who embrace the offers of divine mercy"¹⁰.

1. The Promise

One need only go as far as chapter three of Genesis to discover God's great promise of the deliverance of man from his sinful, fallen, and ruined condition by the "Seed" of the

⁷ Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?*, P&R Publishing, 1995, pages 133-134

⁸ 1 Peter 1:18-20, *italics mine*

⁹ Philippians 2:8

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995, Volume II, p. 367, *italics mine*

woman, who would bruise, or crush the head of the serpent¹¹. The serpent of course is, “that serpent of old, called the devil and Satan”¹², who having deceived himself into thinking he could exalt his “throne above the stars of God”¹³, proceeded to bring sin and death upon all mankind through his successful temptation of Eve, and ultimately Adam. And the “Seed” is further identified in God’s dealings with Abraham. In particular, when Abraham obeyed God regarding his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, God proclaimed again His gracious, undeserved blessing upon Abraham and his posterity by stating, “blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice”¹⁴. Now some argue that this seed was the nation of Israel, but the Apostle Paul clearly refutes that view with, “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds’, as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed’, who is Christ”¹⁵.

Thus, God’s dealings with His people, and all of mankind for that matter, center chiefly on the undoing of this destructive work of the devil with man, and all of creation. This is made crystal clear in the New Testament, where we read, “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil”¹⁶. As such, the rest of God’s revelation in Scripture after the fall becomes in effect what Francis Schaeffer called “the book of fallen men”¹⁷, with God’s great promise for the recovery of some for Himself such that it will one day come to be that, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God”¹⁸. This promise of recovery would include, “the forgiveness of their sins, restoration to his favour, the renewing of their hearts, and the gift of His Spirit”¹⁹.

But it is also clear that God’s revealing of His gracious intentions was such that it was not given all at once, but was proclaimed by degrees with “ever increasing clearness”²⁰. This was the meaning of the writer to the Hebrews when he introduced his letter with, “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son”²¹. The message has always been the good news of God’s grace to His people, but in the time of the Old Testament, it was presented as anticipatory, like one viewing and moving towards a distant mountain range, which could be seen and was indeed real, but was not yet close enough to where specific details could be clearly distinguished. This is brought out where Peter wrote to

¹¹ verse 15

¹² Revelation 12:9

¹³ Isaiah 14:13

¹⁴ Genesis 22:17-18

¹⁵ Galatians 3:16

¹⁶ 1 John 3:8

¹⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis In Space and Time*, Regal Books, G/L Publications & InterVarsity Press, 1972, p. 43

¹⁸ Revelation 21:3

¹⁹ C. Hodge, II:369

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Hebrews 1:1-2

New Testament saints, "Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things which angels desire to look into"²².

John Calvin contrasted the administration of the Covenant of Grace during the time of both Testaments when he wrote, "After Malachi has bidden the Jews heed the law of Moses, and continue in it earnestly because after his death there was to be an interruption of the prophetic office, he immediately afterwards declares: "The sun of righteousness shall rise" [Mal. 4:2]. By these words he teaches that while the law serves to hold the godly in expectation of Christ's coming, at His advent they should hope for far more light... for today the grace of which they bore witness is put before our very eyes. They had but a slight taste of it; we can more richly enjoy it"²³.

We read of the Old Testament saints that, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth"²⁴. And yet, it was always the same gospel promise presented to New Testament saints, which was also given to the Old Testament saints. In speaking of the Old Testament generation of Israel, which did not enter the rest of Canaan, we read, "For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them"²⁵. Paul made this abundantly apparent when he wrote, "the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed'. So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham"²⁶. David contemplated the blessing of God's gracious promise by writing, "Blessed is he whose transgression is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity"²⁷. This praise is a statement of the blessing of God's gracious removal of sin from the sinner's account, which is at the core of the believer's hope, whether living before, or after the cross.

An example of this "progressive revelation" of God's Covenant of Grace is encompassed in His promise to David that, "When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever"²⁸. Certainly there are elements of this Davidic covenant that were fulfilled in David's son Solomon, but the eternal nature of this promised kingdom goes far beyond Solomon, and points to the "Seed" who would not only bruise the serpent, but also be a King with a kingdom. Jesus Himself would confirm His

²² 1 Peter 1:10-12

²³ John Calvin, Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1, Book Two, Chapter IX, page 423

²⁴ Ibid, 11:13

²⁵ Hebrews 4:2

²⁶ Galatians 3:8-9

²⁷ Psalm 32:1-2

²⁸ 2 Samuel 7:12-13

fulfilling of this promise when Pilate asked, "Are you a king then?", to which Jesus responded, "You rightly say that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world"²⁹.

Wilhelmus à Brakel made a further observation regarding the promise of life as being the same in both testaments. He wrote concerning Genesis 3:15, "this promise was not addressed to Adam and Eve, but only within their hearing. From this it follows that the covenant of grace was not established with Adam and Eve, and in them with all their descendants as was true for the covenant of works. Rather, Adam and Eve, hearing this promise, had to receive the promised Savior for themselves in order to be comforted, as every believer has done subsequent to the giving of the promise"³⁰.

2. The Redeemer

In spite of the Old Testament saint's distant and thus dimmer view of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, we see in Scripture that this promise of forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ was at the forefront of their hope. With Moses we read, "By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter... esteeming the reproach of Christ, greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward"³¹. What can this mean, but that Moses' hope in the promise of forgiveness, and everlasting life was grounded in Jesus Christ whom he knew and loved by faith.

One of the most compelling texts regarding Christ as the Redeemer for both Old and New Testament saints is found in Romans where we read, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed"³². These verses proclaim that the means of the removal of sins for saints of all ages is the propitiation provided by Christ, which the sinner receives by faith. The only differentiator is time relative to the Incarnation of Christ, in that there were sins committed before the cross, and there are sins that have been committed after the cross.

We are helped in this understanding of the above text by examining the meaning of the war in heaven between Michael and his angels, and the devil and his demons as related in Revelation³³. The devil was accusing the saints in heaven of being unjust, and therefore unfit to be before God. This, of course, was to accuse God Himself of being unjust in His dealings with sinners, by allowing sinners to be in His presence with no basis for their justification. As such, Paul in the Romans text described this period of

²⁹ John 18:37

³⁰ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, Volume 1, Chapter 16, *The Covenant of Grace*, pages 451-452

³¹ Hebrews 11:24,26

³² Romans 3:23-25

³³ Revelation 12:7-12

time before Christ's Incarnation in space and time as one where in His forbearance, God "passed over" the sins committed before Christ's atonement. But this passing over was not one of letting those sins go unpunished, but of waiting on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ to be revealed and accomplished in the course of space and time. And so, upon the triumphal entry of the risen Christ into heaven³⁴, the supposed basis for the devil's argument was demolished, and the accuser of the saints lost his place in heaven, and was cast down. And therefore, "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us"³⁵. This work of Christ as Redeemer for believing sinners of all ages is brought out further with, "He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance"³⁶.

The very last of the Old Testament saints themselves bear witness of their anticipation of God fulfilling His promise of grace through the Christ. As such, they, as Hodge points out, had a degree of knowledge of God's provision of salvation that exceeds what we might conclude from a casual glance at Scripture. Clearly, figures like Simeon who was, "waiting for the Consolation of Israel", to whom, "it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ", Anna who, "gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem"³⁷, Zacharias who praised God for having, "raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David"³⁸, and John the Baptist who leaped for joy in his mother's womb upon coming into the presence of pregnant Mary, all bear testimony to the fact that much had been revealed to God's people by the Holy Spirit regarding God's intentions of grace. Additionally, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus answered Jesus' inquiry as to what things they were discussing with, "The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people... But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel"³⁹. In Antioch, Paul spoke in the synagogue, "And we declare to you glad tidings – that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He was raised up Jesus"⁴⁰. And again, in defending himself before Agrippa, Paul pointed out that he was being judged, "for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers"⁴¹, thus demonstrating that his preaching Christ and Him crucified and risen was consistent with what had always been the promise of a Redeemer for Israel.

Our Lord and Savior Himself testifies as to His being the Redeemer for God's people of all ages by telling the Jews, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to

³⁴ Revelation 5:1-14

³⁵ Romans 8:33-34

³⁶ Hebrews 9:15

³⁷ Luke 2:25-26, 38

³⁸ Ibid, 1:69

³⁹ Ibid, 24:19,21

⁴⁰ Acts 13:32-33

⁴¹ Ibid, 26:6

Me that you may have life"⁴². Similarly to the two Emmaus bound disciples, "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Thus, He taught them the significance of the priestly system, sacrifices, the temple, etc. as pointing to His fulfillment as the great High Priest who, "has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself". Likewise, He must also have taught them that He was the greater than Moses Prophet⁴³ who would be the Word Himself made flesh, and the Son of David who would rule everlastingly over a kingdom without end.

Plainly, all that had gone on before prior to Christ appearing at Bethlehem, instead of being entirely detached and separate from the Covenant of grace, were preparatory shadows and types for which He is the substance and reality. As such, it was also an administration of anticipation with John the Baptist as the last Old Testament herald, using Old Testament language, proclaiming as he decreased, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"⁴⁴.

3. *The Condition*

In a previously cited passage, Paul very unmistakably identified the gospel with the promise made to Abraham when he wrote, "Scripture... preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed'", and then added, "so then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham"⁴⁵. As such, the condition for the apprehension of the blessings in the gospel of reconciliation, forgiveness and moral renewal, is faith and always has been. It's interesting to observe that at least three New Testament letters, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, contain expositions⁴⁶ of what is in fact a doctrine found in the Old Testament, which is, "The just shall live by his faith"⁴⁷.

Paul's teaching on this issue finds great expression in Romans where he wrote, "For the promise that he would be heir of the world was not to Abraham or his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith... Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace... He (*Abraham*) did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness." *Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us.* It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised for our justification"⁴⁸. Thus, Abraham exercised faith towards a specific promise

⁴² John 5:39-40

⁴³ Deuteronomy 18:15,18

⁴⁴ John 1:29

⁴⁵ Galatians 3:8-9

⁴⁶ Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38

⁴⁷ Habakkuk 2:4

⁴⁸ Romans 4:13, 16, 20-25, italics and italicized insert mine

of release from the guilt and the power of sin through Christ. Indeed, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad"⁴⁹.

In his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul refutes those who would add the keeping of the Mosaic law as an additional requirement for salvation. In the process, he highlights the point that the promise, and Abraham's apprehension of it by faith, was made 430 years before the giving of the Mosaic law. He was careful to include that, "the law... cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect"⁵⁰. He further points out that the giving of the Mosaic law before the coming of Christ served a specific purpose in that, "it was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made"⁵¹.

John Calvin wrote concerning this verse, "The law came and roused the sleepers, for this is the true preparation for Christ. 'By the law is the knowledge of sin.' (Romans 3:20.) Why? 'That Sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.' (Romans 8:13.) Thus, 'the law was added because of transgressions,' in order to reveal their true character, or, as he tells the Romans, that it might make them to abound. (Romans 5:20.)"⁵² And what is that true preparation for Christ, but to knowingly come to a state of being helplessly condemned by the law and under the judgment of God, and then to seek and obtain the blessings of Christ's work of redemption by faith. This faith is a specific faith in God's promise as expressed in His Covenant of Grace.

Again, the time before the coming of Christ was preparatory in nature and was intended to build expectation for the redemptive work of Jesus Christ in space and time. Hodge wrote, "It was not mere faith or trust in God, or simply piety, which was required, but faith in the promised Redeemer, or faith in the promise of redemption through the Messiah"⁵³. Paul clarifies this difference in the administration of the covenant before and after the coming of Christ by comparing the church of the Old Testament as being in a state of adolescence such that, "before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor"⁵⁴. It should be pointed out in this verse that, "*Faith* denotes the full revelation of those things which, during the darkness of the shadows of the law, were dimly seen; for he does not intend to say that the fathers, who lived under the law, did not possess faith... as faith was not then clearly manifested, so the time of *faith* is an appellation here given, not in an absolute, but in a comparative sense, to the time of the New Testament"⁵⁵

⁴⁹ John 8:56

⁵⁰ Galatians 3:17

⁵¹ verse 19

⁵² John Calvin, John Calvin Collection CD, Ages Digital Library, Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, page 86

⁵³ C. Hodge, II:372

⁵⁴ Galatians 3:23-25

⁵⁵ John Calvin, John Calvin Collection CD, Ages Digital Library, Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, page 92

Further, in Revelation 13:8 we find John writing, "The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world"⁵⁶. Without a doubt he intended to proclaim the efficaciousness of the sacrifice of Christ from the very foundation of the world. à Brakel wrote, "Christ was not slain in actuality from the foundation of the world, but rather as far as the efficacy of His sacrifice was concerned. From that moment believers believed in Him through the sacrifices, wherein they beheld the death of the Savior to come, and received Him by faith unto justification. This was true of Abel and Enoch, for we read, 'By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, for before his (*Enoch's*) translation he had this testimony that he pleased God' (Heb. 11:4-5). Abel sacrificed in faith, Abel pleased God, and Abel was righteous. This expresses irrefutably that Abel saw Christ represented in his sacrifice"⁵⁷.

4. *The Complete Salvation*

In his hymn "Rock of Ages", Augustus Toplady gave expression to some excellent doctrine with,

*Let the water and the blood,
from thy riven side which flowed,
be of the sin the double cure,
cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r.*⁵⁸

Indeed, this "double cure" is the basis upon which one is pardoned from their sins and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, thus reconciled to God and admitted into eternal life with all the saints. This is the complete salvation resulting from God's eternal Covenant of Grace to saints before and after the cross.

The Old Testament saint David bore witness to this full salvation in the Psalms. As regards forgiveness, he wrote, "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity... I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin"⁵⁹. David was still a sinner, but from a legal standpoint God no longer considered him to be guilty. This is the justification by faith for sinners of all ages because, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"⁶⁰. David's iniquity was no longer credited to his account, but was credited to Christ's account, and thereby he was pardoned, and reconciled to God. He testified, therefore, of his peace of conscience when he wrote, "You have put gladness in my heart"⁶¹

Concerning sanctification, David provided beautiful evidence of his new heart by writing, "With all my heart I have sought you", "Oh how I love Your law! It is my

⁵⁶ Revelation 13:8

⁵⁷ à Brakel, 1:454, *italicized insert mine*

⁵⁸ Augustus M. Toplady, "Rock of Ages", Trinity Hymnal, Great Commission Publications, 1990, #499, verse 1

⁵⁹ Psalm 32:2,5

⁶⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:21

⁶¹ Psalm 4:7

meditation all the day", and, "It is good for me to draw near to God"⁶². This is a man who is no longer enslaved to the power of sin, but like believing sinners of all ages have become "slaves of righteousness", "who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit"⁶³. He doesn't speak of God as distant and foreign to himself, but as, "my shepherd", "my Lord", and "my God"⁶⁴. Clearly, David is a recipient of the blessings of the New Covenant, the Covenant of Grace, whereby God says, "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people"⁶⁵.

Further, David's hope of entering into the fullness of the life to come is articulated in, "As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness", "In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore", and, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever"⁶⁶. He thus echoed what was the hope of all the Old Testament believers who came to, "desire a better, that is a heavenly country"⁶⁷.

Indeed it can be said, as evidenced by the example of David that Old Testament believers partake of all the fullness of salvation in the Covenant of Grace. In this life they "ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that Spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ"⁶⁸. And in the life to come, Jesus confirmed this identical blessing to both Old and New Testament saints when He said, "Many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven"⁶⁹.

An Objection From Jeremiah:

Some object to the eternal nature of God's Covenant of Grace, by pointing to the prophet Jeremiah, where we read, "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I

⁶² 119:10, 97; 73:28

⁶³ Romans 6:18; 8:1

⁶⁴ Psalm 23:1; 110:1; 31:14

⁶⁵ Jeremiah 31:33

⁶⁶ Psalm 17:15; 16:11; 23:6

⁶⁷ Hebrews 11:16

⁶⁸ 1 Corinthians 10:3-4

⁶⁹ Matthew 8:11

will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more"⁷⁰. Further, they add to their argument from Hebrews, where it is written, "For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second", and "He has made the first covenant obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away"⁷¹. From this passage they conclude that God made a change in His plans because of the failure of the first covenant. As such, the Covenant of Grace is a kind of "plan b".

The Jeremiah passage, however, is the very passage quoted by the author of Hebrews as part of his appeal to Jewish converts that they not be seduced into slipping back into the demands of the old covenant. His intention is to show that God never intended the old covenant to be unending, and he does this by referring to the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. "What he is saying here is that the very fact that the Old Testament promises a 'new' covenant means that the Old Testament itself foresaw the temporary nature of the 'old' covenant. There would never be any need for a 'new' covenant if God had always intended the old covenant to be permanent... In other words, it was always part of God's plan from the beginning to inaugurate both covenants. God did not make a mistake or have to resort to 'plan b'"⁷².

The Apostle Paul underscored this understanding when he referred to the old covenant as a, "ministry of death", and "passing away"⁷³. The "guardian", or "tutor" of the law was a constant reminder to the church in it's childhood, the time of the Old Testament, that although God was indeed dwelling with them in the holy of holies, a way of access had not yet been revealed to them to come into His presence. We read, "Into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for people's sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing"⁷⁴. As such, the old covenant could never provide life and reconciliation because, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God", and, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them"⁷⁵.

If one tells a child they are to brush their teeth, eat their dinner, and go to bed on time, or he will be disciplined, it is meant as a discipline and restraint placed upon him for his good. However, one does not tell an adult they will be disciplined for the same reason. It is hoped and anticipated that the adult will apply the same discipline to himself if necessary, having been trained in childhood. So too this is true in the adulthood of the church, the New Testament era, where the law is the *same law* taught during adolescence. Thus, we see the continuity of the Old and New Testament administrations of the Covenant of Grace, where the old covenant had a temporary, anticipatory, and restraining purpose.

⁷⁰ Jeremiah 31:31-34

⁷¹ Hebrews 8:7,13

⁷² Keith Mathison, "The New Covenant", Tabletalk Magazine, Ligonier Ministries, January 2004, pages 9-10

⁷³ 2 Corinthians 3:7,11

⁷⁴ Hebrews 9:7-8

⁷⁵ Romans 3:23; Galatians 3:10

Some Implications of Rejecting the Eternal Nature of the Covenant of Grace:

As already indicated, there are those, who using texts like the New Covenant Jeremiah passage, etc., see a complete disconnect between Old Testament Israel under the Old Covenant, and the New Covenant of Grace, which they view as exclusive to the time of the New Testament. A leading advocate of this “dispensational” view wrote, “The entire system, including the [Ten] commandments as a rule of life, ceased with the death of Christ”⁷⁶. This statement exemplifies the sharp distinction made by them between the Old Testament period of the law, and the New Testament time of grace. As such, they place God’s people into two separate categories with only those of the Old under any obligation to God’s moral standard as expressed in the Ten Commandments.

As such, there are professing Christians today who claim belief in the gospel, and yet excuse themselves from any responsibility to God’s moral law. After all they say, “a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ... for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified”⁷⁷. Thus, the result is a low view of the sinfulness of sin, and antinomianism often characterizes their Christian experience. Indeed, how many have been deceived into thinking their entrance into the kingdom rests only on a decision, or profession made at one point in time with no corresponding change in their lives. It seems that the enemy may have subtly added to this confusion with the emergence of the so-called “new perspective” on Paul’s writings. That is, it may happen if one presses God’s people to be keepers of God’s moral law, they might be charged with promoting the “new perspective”. Some preachers, fearful of this possible accusation, might ease up in their calling of God’s people to a life of holiness.

But the distinction between the Old and New dispensations is not the law for one and not for the other for, “God shall write His will on the fleshly tablets of the heart, in contrast with the older engraving of His law on stone tablets. But it will be essentially the same law of God that will be the substance of this engraving”⁷⁸. And again, “Under the new covenant administration, the law is written on believers’ hearts and the indwelling Holy Spirit empowers them toward a more mature obedience than their old covenant forebears. But that obedience continues to be measured by the same rule of life – the moral law of God”⁷⁹. And this obedience is not in any way to merit salvation, but is the fruit of a new God-given nature. And this new nature is manifested by a glad and loving obedience to God’s law. As such, true believers in this life are in measure returned to that state enjoyed for a time by Adam and Eve, where their obedience under the Covenant of Works⁸⁰ was because of love for God, heart, soul, mind, and strength. True Christians have been released from the slavery and bondage of sin, and the condemnation of the law. They are now, “called to liberty”⁸¹, obeying out of the freedom that comes from the love of God. John wrote, “For this is the love of God, that we keep

⁷⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Dallas Seminary Press, 1947, 7:225

⁷⁷ Galatians 2:16

⁷⁸ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980, pages 281-282

⁷⁹ Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?*, P&R Publishing, 1995, pages 89-90

⁸⁰ As expressed in Genesis 2:16-17

⁸¹ Galatians 5:13

His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome⁸². And they're not burdensome for the true Christian because he now has a way to give expression to that new knowledge in the head, and that love in the heart for His Creator who has restored him in some measure in this life to that rightful place for which he was created. And that place was, and is to find in God all of his fulfillment, blessing, and supreme satisfaction, and thereby enjoy Him forever.

Another, and more serious implication resulting from the rejecting the eternal nature of God's Covenant of Grace, is what is in effect the repudiation of God's immutable nature, and His eternal wisdom. The mere suggestion of God engaging in some form of "broken-field running", whereby He modifies or replaces His plan based on unfolding conditions, reduces God to a helpless and pathetic victim of circumstances, and robs Him of His glory. But we read, "I am the Lord, I do not change"⁸³, and Paul writes of, "the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?"⁸⁴.

We have already noted that Jesus was, "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world"⁸⁵. We learn from this passage that God, upon the fall, set into motion a great plan of recovery, which had been predetermined in eternity past within the counsel of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As such, even at the very dawn of human history, Adam expressed belief in God's promise of recovery. In the midst of his darkened knowledge of God, his polluted affections, his spiritual death, his dying body, the abnormality of creation, the dysfunction of his relationship to God, his wife, and even himself, he named his wife "Life"⁸⁶. In this way, he expressed belief in God's spoken word of a "Seed" who would come from the woman, and undo the works of "The Serpent", and be a giver of life. And he lived by faith in anticipation of that promise.

Jesus himself would declare, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven"⁸⁷. George Smeaton commented regarding this passage, "this saying of Christ implies that for this event the whole previous history of man waited, and the history of Israel was in fact a pledge or preparation for its appearance. He virtually declares that all the previous ages looked forward to this day, and that the whole divine economy was constituted and arranged only with a view to it. This saying emphatically shows that the event here referred to – the coming of the Son of God to fulfill the law – was the center-point of the world's

⁸² 1 John 5:3

⁸³ Malachi 3:6

⁸⁴ Romans 11:33-34

⁸⁵ Revelation 13:8

⁸⁶ The literal meaning of Eve, note from the New Geneva Study Bible, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995, page 14

⁸⁷ Matthew 5:17, 19

history, and therefore carrying with it retrospective as well as prospective consequences”⁸⁸.

Besides, if God’s Covenant of Grace was not eternal and comprehensive of all of redemptive history, both Old and New Testaments, then what was Paul writing about when he penned, “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh – who are called Uncircumcision by what is called Circumcision made in the flesh by hands – that at that time you who were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He himself is our peace, *who has made both one*, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, *so as to create in Himself one new man from the two*, thus making peace, and that He might *reconcile them both to God in one body* through the cross”⁸⁹.

Conclusion:

Scripture unmistakably teaches that God’s Covenant of Grace is eternal in its nature, and has always been, and will continue to be the basis upon which sinners are reconciled to God. Old Testament saints lived in anticipation of its fulfillment in Christ with the types and shadows of the tabernacle, priesthood, sacrifices, et al as helps to their anticipatory faith, and New Testament saints live in the light of its accomplishment.

Anything less than an eternal understanding of this Covenant for God’s people of all ages brings God’s sovereignty and wisdom into question. The implementation of this Covenant is God’s chief means of exhibiting His glory as evidenced when Moses requested of God, “Please, show me your glory”, to which God replied, “I will make My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion”⁹⁰. In effect, God is supremely glorified in that in spite of gross rebellion and disobedience, God is merciful to helpless and undeserving sinners in a way that upholds His law to the fullest, “to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one (*or in other words, a sinner*) who has faith in Jesus Christ”⁹¹

A denial of this truth inevitably leads to a low view of sin with its accompanying antinomian consequences. This is simply another form of justifying a life lived in continual rebellion to God’s laws. John wrote, “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God”⁹².

⁸⁸ George Smeaton, *Christ’s Doctrine of the Atonement*, The Banner of Truth Trust, page 225

⁸⁹ Galatians 2:11-16, *italics mine*

⁹⁰ Exodus 33:18-19

⁹¹ Romans 3:26, *italic insert mine*

⁹² 1 John 3:10

And finally, it is the eternal nature of this Covenant which lies at the root of the believer's assurance. To go to God by faith in confession and humility knowing that, "the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them", is a balm to a weary guilt-ridden sinner. He sees that outside of this Covenant there is nothing but misery and wrath, but inside the Covenant is the fullness of God's salvation in Christ.

Let us, "Praise the Lord, call upon His name; declare His deeds among the peoples, make mention that His name is exalted. Sing to the Lord, for He has done excellent things; this is known in all the earth. Cry out and shout, O inhabitant of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel in your midst"⁹³.

⁹³ Isaiah 12:4-6