

The Real Deal

In the name of him who came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many, dear friends in Christ: “Have I got a deal for you.” How often do you hear that these days? From the cable company that wants to give you six months of premium channels for free; to the wealthy Nigerian widow who picked you, a random stranger, to assist her in transferring her vast fortune to the safety of a US bank in exchange for half of it; to the caller who so persistently offers to extend your car’s warrantee – we’re constantly bombarded with deals made to sound as if they’re too good to be true (in most cases because they are). Even legitimate businesses engage in it. Ever shopped at Kohl’s department store? When you check out, they don’t tell you how much you paid. No, they tell you how much you *saved* by shopping here today. Why, the way they tell it, they’d have you think if you keep on shopping there, you’ll be rich! Yeah, maybe not so much. The point is we’ve learned to be wary when someone comes along and offers a really good deal.

And yet, in today’s reading from Jeremiah, the Lord God is doing exactly that. He’s describing the new covenant that he will make with the houses of Israel and Judah in the future. He explains that it won’t be like the first covenant that he made with them when he led them out of Egypt and delivered it to them on tablets of stone by the hands of Moses. No, this will be a vastly improved covenant, he tells them – a *really* good deal. And considering the absolute truthfulness and integrity of who it is that’s establishing this covenant, we can be certain that it’s the *real* deal. Inasmuch as we live in the days and under the provisions of this new covenant, it will be good for us to understand exactly what the real deal is, and how it differs from the old covenant that it supersedes.

So, let’s talk about that old covenant, the one that’s no longer in effect. What was the deal there? First, it needs to be said that it was a very good covenant; nothing at all wrong with it. It relied entirely on God’s grace and mercy. It started with Abraham. He was an idol worshipping pagan who did not know the Lord. Then one day the Lord came along and smiled on him. He said, you. I’ve chosen you, Abraham. Here’s the deal. I’m going to bless you. I’m going to make of you a great nation; give your descendants a land of their own, a rich land, overflowing with milk and honey. I’m going to make your name great. And through your Seed I’m going to bless all peoples on earth. Abe’s like, okay, sounds good to me. What do I do? The Lord told him to head west. Keep going. I’ll tell you when you get there.

Abraham pulled up stakes and headed out. When he arrived in the land of Canaan, the Lord told him here’s the place. To you and your offspring I will give this land. Abe found it to be a very good land; everything the Lord said it would be. Trouble is, Abraham didn’t have any offspring, not a one. It took some time, but eventually the Lord blessed him with a son through whom he would later give him many descendants. And Abraham lived a truly blessed life in the Promised Land where he lived as a sojourner. Though he didn’t see in his lifetime all of the other promises fulfilled (it takes time to grow a nation from one man), he saw enough to know they would be fulfilled. The Lord always keeps his word.

Fast forward some 500 years. By that time the Lord had made good on his promise to make a nation of Abraham – actually, at that point, several nations; but we’re primarily interested in the one that came through Abraham’s grandson known as Israel. Israel now had a population of some two to three million people. The Lord decided that the time had come to

fulfill his promise to give them a permanent home in the Promised Land. The only glitch was the nation of Israel was enslaved in Egypt. No problem, said the Lord. I can fix that in a jiffy. He rolled up his sleeves and went to work. Mighty, outstretched arms and ten terrible plagues later, Israel marched out of Egypt loaded down with treasures as if they had conquered the place – but they didn't. The Lord did it for them.

He had Moses lead the people to Mount Sinai. There the Lord laid out the specifics of his covenant with Israel. It cut two ways. He told them I will be your God, that is, I will take care of you, defend you from your enemies, bless you abundantly, and always be with you. I will place my holy presence in your midst and dwell with you on earth, for the time being in a tent called the Tabernacle, and later, when you get around to building it, in a temple in the Promised Land. All this I will do for you.

And here's your part: you will be my people. As my people, I expect you to live as my people, reflecting my own character: upright, noble, honorable, trustworthy, keeping the good and moral commandments I've given you. Mostly, I want you to trust me. Look to me alone to fulfill all your needs. Don't go turning to other gods who are no gods at all and can do nothing for you. You be *my* people.

That was the deal. It was a perfectly good deal. But wait, someone may say; that part about the people having to keep the moral commandments of God, how's that possible? People are sinners. We're born that way. How can we uphold our end of the deal?

The answer is it's not like the Lord didn't think of that. He knew who and what he was dealing with. This is why he built into the deal the means whereby the sins of his people would be taken away. That's what the whole priesthood and sacrificial system was about. Through it the Lord was saying, no, I don't want you to sin; but when you do (because I know you will), here's how you deal with it. Repent of your sins, turn back to me, offer the prescribed sacrifices, and we're good to go. In this way, despite your sins which are many, I will continue to be your God and you will be my people. The point to be emphasized is that it was entirely within the capacity of the people to uphold their end of the deal.

The problem is that they didn't. Time and time again they turned from the Lord to other gods. They sank into all kinds of moral depravity. And when they did, they stubbornly refused to repent and return to the Lord. They shut their ears to his pleading with them to hear reason. And when they wouldn't listen, he'd resort to physical means. You don't want me to be your God? You don't want to be my people? Okay, let me give you a taste of that; see how you like it. They didn't like it. They didn't like it when he withheld his protection from their enemies. They didn't like it when he withheld his hand of blessing. Eventually, after a lot of needless pain and deprivation, they'd wise up and come crawling back like the prodigal son. And like the Father of the prodigal, the Lord would welcome them with open arms. So glad you're back. Let's try this again.

And again, and again; it's the sad history of the nation of Israel. By the time we get to Jeremiah's day, they'd been through too many cycles to count of this turning away and restoration. Though it was completely within their means, Israel never did uphold its end of the deal. This is why, through Jeremiah, the Lord is proposing a new deal, the real deal.

What's different about the new deal? The Lord explains, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." The first covenant worked on the outside. It was external. The law was written on stone – over there. God's gracious presence was with his people more

like a neighbor in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. A great and mighty neighbor, to be sure; but still next door, so to speak. There was some distance there. There had to be. Sinners cannot stand in the presence of the holy God and live.

In the real deal the Lord is describing through Jeremiah, the Lord declares that he will come much closer. He'll work from the inside of each of his people. He will unite himself to their bodies. His word will be part of them. The voice of conscience they hear in their heads will be his own. His gracious presence will be personal – and at the same time collective because he'll be in all of his people uniting them into one body.

Through Jeremiah the Lord describes the real deal. Unfortunately for the prophet, he could talk about it, he could long for it (I'm sure he did); but he couldn't experience it. We can. And we do. This is the New Testament covenant under which we live and operate. And what made it possible is the perfect life, sacrificial death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the fulfillment of the old covenant. His death for our sin cleansed the temple of our bodies, making it possible for the Lord to dwell directly in us and direct us from within – which he does by his Word and Spirit, which he does by Baptism, which he does by confession and absolution, which he does in the Holy Supper whereby Christ Jesus himself not just spiritually but also in his body and his blood becomes part of us. Through these means the Lord continues to cleanse his temple in us through the ongoing forgiveness of our sins.

The old covenant was good; nothing wrong with it. And by it even in Israel's worst days there always remained a small number of faithful people. Israel as a whole failed; but scattered individuals and families held fast. The new covenant, the real deal we live by, is better. By it God's faithful people are not confined to a tiny percentage of a single, small, obscure, politically insignificant nation in the Middle East, but it has expanded – or better to say the Lord has expanded it – into a kingdom that embraces billions of people from every nation on earth.

Because we are blessed to live in these days of the real deal that Jeremiah could only dream of, let us make the most of it. Let us resolve to allow the Lord to continue to write his word upon our hearts that he may dwell in us richly, guide us by his Spirit, cleanse us of all sin, make us pure and holy, and cause us to walk in his ways as his people and with him as our God. To whom be all praise, honor, and glory now and forever, through our Savior Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!