

I

THE OBJECTIVE ASPECTS OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE

A. THE COVENANT IN HISTORY

I. *The will of God to save fallen mankind*

It would have been possible for God to have inflicted eternal punishment upon man immediately after the fall as a just consequence of his disobedience. But in His mercy God decided not to cause judgment to intervene immediately. In His fatherly good will He wished to produce good from the evil that men do and to make use of Adam's fall and of sin as a means whereby a new and fuller revelation of His Divinity might be displayed. He resolved, therefore, to turn to the fallen world with all the splendour of His redemptive love and His saving grace. In doing this, God was concerned for His own glory as much as for the good of His creatures—*His own glory* : for He had created the world in order to make known to it the splendour of His Divinity, which, prior to the fall, had not been manifested in all its perfection—*the good of His creatures* : for, instead of leaving them to suffer death, the consequence and wages of sin, God took His fallen creatures in order to bestow upon them the revelation of His grace and the free gift of life.

God decided to substitute His patience and His grace for the demands of His justice. This is the eternal "covenant" of the Father. Holy Scripture reveals to us the conditions on which this grace would be and has been promised, realized, and acquired. An immediate destruction of sin was just as impossible as an arbitrary pardon which the offended majesty of God had not authorized. On the one hand, the sin was in man, and God's justice must finally have its course ; on the other hand, the majesty of God must be announced in its fulness to sinful man. Moreover,

God wished to pardon sin. While the sinner finds himself quite unable to expiate his sin for himself, God decides that it will be expiated by a Mediator who will acquire the justice which man has need of, and that man shall receive this justice as a free gift. God Himself, in the person of His Son, offers Himself so that this mediation may be effectively brought to fulfilment. The Son will be the Mediator, the expiatory Victim, the Ransom, the Saviour. The Father and the Son *together* resolve to cause the unique glory of God and the free salvation of His fallen creatures to shine forth at one and the same time. In theology this resolution is called "the pact of salvation" or "the covenant of redemption."¹ "God has from all eternity determined and predestined the salvation of the world by Christ, and He has proclaimed this eternal predestination and counsel of His to the world by the Gospel; whence it is quite plain that the religion and doctrine of the Gospel is the most ancient of all the religions and doctrines which have been, are, and shall be."²

As revealed in time and in the course of history, this will of God to save man from ruin and to give him justification and life is given the name of the "covenant of grace." It is first disclosed in Genesis iii. 15. From the very beginning grace is implicitly offered to all, to Adam and to his posterity, to Noah and to his posterity, according to rules and conditions of which we are largely ignorant.³ Up till the time of Abraham Holy Scripture tells us nothing of a formal establishment of the covenant of grace in the sense which it assumed from that time on.

2. *The formation of the covenant*

With the appearance of Abraham, we enter into a most important period of the dispensation of grace, that of the covenant of grace. Let us turn to Genesis xvii. Having already made Abraham a participant in His promises (Gen. xii. 1-3, 7), *God makes a covenant with him* (Gen. xv. 1-18) of a most solemn nature: "*Abraham believed the Lord, who imputed it to him for righteousness*" (xv. 6). A little later,

¹ Cf. Ps. lxxxix. 2-5. We make a mere reference to this notion, without being able to develop it here.

² 2nd. Helv. Conf., xiii.

³ Westm. Conf., vii. 3.

God renews this covenant with His elect in a still more precise and definite form. "The Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him: I am the Almighty God; walk before Me and be upright. I will make a covenant with you, and I will multiply you exceedingly. . . . This is My covenant which I make with you: you will be the father of a multitude of nations. . . . Kings shall descend from you. I will establish My covenant with you and with your posterity after you, from generation to generation; it will be an everlasting covenant, whereby I shall be your God and the God of your posterity after you. To you will I give the land where you sojourn as a stranger, and to your posterity after you . . . , and I will be their God. . . . See that you keep My covenant, you and your posterity after you, from generation to generation. This is the covenant which you must keep, the covenant established between Me and you and your descendants after you: every manchild among you shall be circumcized. You shall circumcize your flesh and it will be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. At the age of eight days, every male among you shall be circumcized, from generation to generation, whether he is born in the house, or has been bought for money from a stranger and is not of your race. He who is born in the house and he who is bought for money must be circumcized; and My covenant shall be in your flesh the sign of an everlasting covenant. The uncircumcized male shall be cut off from his people, because he has violated My covenant" (Gen. xvii. 1-14). And God adds (xvii. 19): "I will establish My covenant with Isaac, and it will be an everlasting covenant with his posterity after him."

Again, God says (xviii. 18, 19): "Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. I have chosen him in order that he may command his children and his house after him to follow the way of the Lord in doing that which is just and right, so that the Lord may accomplish for Abraham the promises which he has made to him. . . . I have sworn by Myself" (cf. xxii. 15-18).

This covenant was confirmed to Isaac, to Jacob, to Joseph, and to their posterity. In every age believers have trusted in this covenant of grace and its promises; its sound echoes

through all Scriptures, and God also makes constant reference to it as He progressively brings it to its full development.

3. *Unity and immutability of the covenant throughout the Old Testament*

The covenant concluded with Abraham was not annulled by the covenant made with Moses at Sinai ; on the contrary, it persists in all its force (Gal. iii. 17 f.). God Himself reminds his people of the promise made to Abraham and his posterity (Ex. vi. 3-8 ; Dt. i. 8). It is for the sake of the covenant that He will deliver His people (Ex. ii. 24), that He will be gracious to them (Lev. xxvi. 42), and that He will remain faithful (Dt. iv. 31, vii. 9, 12, xxix. 12 f.). The law of Horeb could only cause the grace of the covenant made with Abraham to shine more brightly (Gal. iii. 19-25). The intercession of Moses is based on his faith in the God of the covenant who remains faithful (Ex. xxxii. 13 f.). Moses recalls to mind the promises and the requirements of the covenant of grace concluded with Abraham and the patriarchs (Dt. vii. 12, viii. 18). A careful study, such as would exceed the plan and object of this résumé, would show that the covenant of grace with Abraham and his posterity and the Sinaitic covenant are *essentially* the same, the latter differing from the former only by reason of a new dispensation and different and temporary modes of application (Ps. cv. 8 ff.).

Through the succeeding centuries the people all too frequently attempted to break this covenant.¹ When it might seem that the unfaithfulness of men had cancelled out the faithfulness of God, God recalls in solemn terms the immutability of His decision, of His grace, and of the benefits of the covenant² ; and men, constantly being reminded that God

¹ Cf. Gen. xvii. 14 ; Lev. xxvi. 25 ; Dt. xvii. 2, xxix. 25, xxxi. 16-18, 20 ; Josh. vii. 11, 15, xxiii. 14-16 ; Jud. ii. 20 ; 1 Ki. xi. 11, xix. 10 ; 2 Ki. xvii. 15, xviii. 12 ; Pss. xlii. 18, l. 16, lxxviii. 10, 37 ; Prov. ii. 17 ; Is. xxiv. 5, xxviii. 18 ; Jer. xi. 2, 3, 10, xxii. 9, xxxi. 32, xxxiv. 18 ; Ez. xvi. 59, xvii. 15 f., 18 f., xlv. 7 ; Dan. xi. 28, 30, 32 ; Hos. vi. 7, viii. 1 ; Zech. xi. 10 ; Mal. ii. 8, 10.

² Cf. Lev. xxvi. 9, 42-45 ; 2 Ki. xvii. 38 ; 1 Chr. xvi. 14-18 ; Neh. ix. 7, 8 ff. ; Ps. xxv. 10, lxxxix. 31-38, ciii. 18, cv. 8-10, cvi. 45, cxi. 5, 9, cxxxii. 11 f. ; Is. l. 1, liv. 10, lv. 3, lix. 21, lxi. 8 ; Jer. xxxi. 32-34, xxxii. 38-41, xxxiii. 20 f., 25 ; Ez. xvi. 8, 60, 62, xx. 37, xxxiv. 23, 25, 30 f., xxxvi. 25-28, xxxvii. 26 f. ; Hos. ii. 18-20 ; Hag. ii. 5 ; Mal. ii. 5 ; 2 Cor. vi. 16-18 ; Heb. viii. 8-13.

is faithful, are exhorted to renew the terms of the covenant and to claim and enjoy once more the benefits of its blessings.¹

The revelation of the covenant is so important that the words of God are called "the words of the covenant" (2 Ki. xxiii. 3 ; 2 Chr. xxxiv. 31), and the Scriptures are referred to as "the book of the covenant." Moreover, the offerings, the observation of the sabbath, and so on, are instituted as signs of the perpetual covenant (Num. xviii. 19 ; Ex. xxxi. 16 f.). The blood of the sacrifices is the blood of the covenant (Ex. xxiv. 8 ; Heb. ix. 18-20). The tables are the tables of the covenant (Dt. ix. 9, etc.), and the ark is "the ark of the covenant of the Lord" (Num. x. 33, etc.). But we should never finish if we wished to cite all the texts ; and the passages which refer to this covenant and promise without using the word itself in the text are still more numerous.

The efficacy and validity of the covenant of grace and its promises are apparent at every important stage of God's revelation. In the time of the Judges the theme of the covenant is present (Jud. ii. 1, 20, etc.). During the course of his life and in his last song David sings of the covenant with emotion (1 Chr. xvi. 14 ff. ; 2 Sam. xxiii. 3-5), and with him God renews His covenant (2 Chr. xiii. 5, etc.). Solomon celebrates the faithfulness of the God of the covenant (1 Ki. viii. 23 ff.). It is in virtue of the covenant that, during the reign of Jehohaz, God is gracious to the Israelites (2 Ki. xiii. 22, 23). In recalling the covenant and its promises, God—through the mouth of Isaiah—exhorts His people to "look to the rock whence they were hewn and to the hole of the pit whence they were digged," and to receive the blessings of the covenant (Is. li. 1, ff.). The intercessions both of Jeremiah and of Daniel are based on the covenant (Jer. xiv. 20 f. ; Dan. ix. 4 ff.).

"We affirm that the ancient Fathers had two sorts of promises, as we also have to this day. The one sort concerned present or terrestrial things, such as the promises respecting the land of Canaan and victories, and such we still have today respecting our daily bread. The other sort concerned

¹ Cf. 2 Ki. xi. 17, xxiii. 3 ; 1 Chr. xvi. 14-18 ; 2 Chr. xxix. 10, xxxiv. 31 ; Ezra x. 3 ; Neh. ix. 38 ; Pss. l. 5, lxxiv. 20, lxxvii. 8-10 ; Jer. xiv. 20 f., l. 4, 5 ; Dan. ix. 4.

then, as is also the case now, heavenly and eternal things, namely, the divine grace, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life, through faith in Jesus Christ. The ancient Fathers had not only external or terrestrial promises, but also spiritual and heavenly ones in Christ.”¹ We shall soon return to this important question.

4. *The Covenant of grace in the New Testament*

The Virgin Mary sees in the birth of her Son a mark of the faithfulness of God in connection with His promises and rejoices in the fulfilment of the covenant made with Abraham (Lk. i. 50-55). Zacharias, after the birth of Christ, sings of the accomplishment of the covenant, ever present and efficacious (Lk. i. 72-75). And rightly so! For Christ had been announced beforehand as the one who would fulfil the covenant with the people (Is. xlii. 6 f.); He is the promised Mediator of the covenant (Is. xlix. 8 f.); He is “the messenger of the covenant” who was expected in faith (Mal. iii. 1). The promise having been fulfilled, He is the Mediator of the covenant and is confessed as such (Heb. viii. 6, ix. 15, xii. 24); He is the Guarantor of the covenant (Heb. vii. 22); He introduces His own into the covenant (Rom. v. 2). Christ Himself described His blood shed for the remission of sins as “the blood of the covenant” (Mt. xxvi. 28; Mk. xiv. 24; Lk. xxii. 20; 1 Cor. xi. 25).² It is by the blood of the everlasting covenant that Christ has become “the great Shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. xiii. 20); and His resurrection from the dead took place in virtue of the promise of the covenant (Acts xiii. 32 f.).

The exegesis of these texts shows that Christ’s work is twofold. On the one hand, He endures the just punishment inflicted on the sinner by God, He intercedes for those whom the Father has given Him, and He causes their persons and their service to be actually acceptable to God. On the other hand, He reveals to man the truth concerning God and his relationship to Him, and also the conditions of acceptable service; Christ persuades men to receive the truth, and

¹ 2nd Helv. Conf., xiii.

² We explain below in what sense the adjective “new” in the two last texts cited should be understood.

renders them capable of doing so ; and He directs and sustains them in all circumstances, in order that their salvation may be brought to perfection.

The theology of the covenant of grace is constantly presented to us in the thought of the Apostles and disciples. It forms the central theme of Peter's first sermon after Pentecost : it is the promises of the covenant and their fulfilment which are expounded (Acts ii. 14-41, iii. 12-26). From beginning to end these sermons are an exposition of the theology of the covenant. It is the theme of the covenant again which serves as the starting-point for Stephen's address (Acts vii. 2-8), and for Paul's defence before Agrippa (Acts xxvi. 6 f.).

Paul affirms the permanence of the covenant and the real vitality of its promises (Gal. iii. 17). Christians are the children born according to the promise (Gal. iv. 21, 23, 28) ; they are the children of Abraham (Gal. iii. 7, 26, 29) ; those who believe to-day are blessed together with faithful Abraham (Gal. iii. 9). The believer is justified by faith, like Abraham, and he enters into the same covenant and receives the same promises (Rom. iv.). The adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, the service of God, and the promises belong to Paul's fellow-countrymen and kinsfolk according to the flesh, because of the covenant, even though they continue in unbelief (Rom. ix. 3 f.). They continue to be loved by God for the sake of their fathers (Rom. xi. 28) ; although they have rebelled, the people have not been rejected, because of the covenant (Rom. xi. 1 f.). The Gentiles, on the contrary, being strangers to the covenants of promise, are without God and without hope in the world (Eph. ii. 12). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the immutable covenant sworn by God, in which believers find their encouragement and refuge by appropriating the promises which it offers (Heb. vi. 13-20). Then, at the end of time, when the new Jerusalem descends from heaven, from the presence of God, and the tabernacle of God is established among men—then the promise of the covenant, " I will be your God and you shall be My people," is completely fulfilled. This last echo of the covenant is found in Rev. xxi. 3.