

# Covenantal Renewal

Joshua 5:10–12

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## Introduction

It's been a while since we've taken up Joshua, but we've attempted to balance here in the beginning of this study the typology of the land being a sort of spiritual rest typifying the New Heavens and New Earth after Christ returns, and the spiritual dominion of the Church in this age and the transformative power of the Gospel. Theologians of all stripes generally focus their attention in this book to the question of the conquest of the land and its spiritual significance, while secular liberals misunderstand this point by imposing a political and social interpretation on top of the text.

But what I would like to suggest today is that the conquest is really secondary to another, much more important and often overlooked issue, and that is, covenant with God and the covenantal and sacramental union between Christ the promised Redeemer and His Church. Historically, the book chronicles the covenantal relationship between the people of Israel and God, but it also speaks to us today in that it speaks to the covenantal relationship which all of the elect of God ultimately share in Christ. So, I'd like to suggest to you that the context of Joshua is the occupation of the land, but that the theme of the book is covenant renewal of right worship after the apostasy of the wilderness wandering. This entire book and especially the first five chapters set out a covenantal renewal of God's instituted worship which was to continue in the land of rest for the people of God until Christ came. We are in this passage of Scripture in the middle of a covenant renewal worship service, which for the Israelites has lasted days. The entire context of this passage is worship, and through it, God's reconsecrating his people on the borders of the land to receive their portion in Him in their inheritance.

A. God is the actor here. He establishes covenant with His people; that He should be a God to them and they should be His peculiar people (Ex. 6:7; 19:5; Deut. 14:2; 26:18). He renews His covenant in the context of worship; He speaks and the people hear and respond. He condescends to, first, meet with his people, second, renew the terms of the covenant and its blessings in Him, and, third, to purify His people for communion with him by instituting several sacraments.

These sacraments acted as signs and seals of grace, which when received by faith, the faith of Abraham in the promise of the Redeemer, ministered grace, communion, and blessings to its recipients. To those inside the visible community of faith who had not faith individually, it served, as all sacraments do, to the condemnation and judgment of the receivers.

1. God institutes covenantal renewal.
2. Temporal sacramental provisions cease.
3. God consummates the covenantal renewal by re-instituting the Passover.
4. There is an order to the institution of right worship sealed in sacraments.

## **I. God institutes a renewal of His covenant.**

A. Now, we ought not to conflate common grace with special grace, as the Roman Catholics do, and dream up a “sacramental” significance to every mundane aspect of life. What sets the Reformed faith apart from the doctrines of Rome, is that we recognize that Scripture sets sacraments inside worship, and worship inside God’s covenant; Rome sets worship inside the sacraments found in the reign of the saints over nature. This leads inevitably to the veneration of saints, rather than submission to God as the Creator and Redeemer, who speaks to His people exclusively inside Covenant. Special grace is monergistic, not synergistic and natural, and the sacraments are not part of some “natural law.” They are exclusively reserved for worship inside Covenant and are specifically instituted by Christ in the New Covenant, being “fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory” (WCF, VII, 6). So we ought not to confuse common grace with special grace. But this was a unique period in redemptive history in which God provided here for the people’s physical needs inside His covenant through His sacramental nourishment. Everything here was to remind them of their future Messiah and to sign and seal grace to them in faith of Christ to come.

A. The people are God’s people and they live in His grace. He shows them grace by renewing His covenant inside worship.

1. His covenant both provides for them and requires faithful walking with Him.

It demands of the people:

- a. regenerating faith
- b. repentance unto life
- c. and sanctifying obedience.

2. The old unfaithful generation perished, giving place to new: “For forty years

I was grieved with that generation,

And said, ‘It is a people who go astray in their hearts,

And they do not know My ways.’

So I swore in My wrath,

‘They shall not enter My rest.’” – Ps. 95:11 (also Heb. 3:11).

- a. The rebellion was a time of spiritual hardening.

b. God renews His covenant to set this generation apart from the last and to prepare a purified church for the land. Now, God’s purification is a time of refreshing:

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:19–21).

c. The Prophets always spoke to the heart, calling all the congregation to true faith in the promise of the future Messiah. Repentance looking forward or backward to the Cross is the same; God’s salvation always saved the heart, and the Israelites experienced many times of refreshing in direct proportion to the gift of faith—even though they had to wait for the coming of Jesus and the eventual restoration of all things in Him.

d. Purity in the Church is proportionate to the number and influence of true believers growing in their faith and holiness inside the visible congregation living under the oracles of God. If that gap between the visible and invisible church is shortened, and we have more mature believers, the Church becomes more pure, because obedience proceeds only from faith—being “a Jew inwardly” (Rom. 2:29). We’re even called spiritual “Jews” in the New Covenant, if there is any doubt! Our faith is the faith of Abraham—it’s the same faith. That’s why we’re called “Jews inwardly.” What is true of the individual is true also of the Church: “Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matt. 7:17). Jeremiah 31 promises to narrow the gap between believers and non-believers in the Church and instill purity to the Christian Church by inscribing the Law on our hearts, so that both Jews and Gentiles are united in the same faith in the Gospel age. The new wine of the Gospel has burst out of the old wineskins of Israel, and Jeremiah 31 speaks to the spiritual impact of that on the visible church. But the essential faith required of the Congregation of Israel is the essential faith required of the Christian Church and to insist on a difference in faith between the Old Covenant and New, or to argue that believers in Israel were saved by covenantal reservation in the New Covenant, is to wrongly divide the Word, nullify the Covenant spoken of here in rooting God’s people in their inheritance, and to strike at the root of Romans 2:29, Peter’s sermon to the Jews in Acts 3, and the command to the Church in both Ps. 95 and Heb. 3 to not harden its heart.

B. God promises to provide for all of their needs inside the Land which He is giving them as their inheritance. The Land is first to be reserved as a place to commune with and worship their God. Physical provision happens then to the covenant community inside the spiritual blessings which they are promised. The very presence of God accompanies their provision, setting them apart as God’s holy people in every provision.

## II. Temporal sacramental provisions cease.

The manna was a temporary physical mainstay with sacramental significance. Calvin calls it a “paternal providence.” God was being a father to them in their provision of manna; feeding them with soft and tender food for soft and tender consciences. It came with the assurance that God would provide for them until He rooted them into the land, after which, it ceased. It was soon to be replaced by the very corn of the land of their inheritance. It ceased on the very day that they entered! But the sacramental significance, that it’s being a sign and a seal of better things yet to come in Christ, is shown in Jesus’s allusion to the manna in John 6:32–35:

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ Then they said to Him, ‘Lord, give us this bread always.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.’”

A. Jesus is the real manna which fell down from heaven and feeds us with His own flesh and blood, pleading His atonement before the Throne of grace. And the believing Israelites, while awaiting the day for the Messiah to come, fed on Him under the terms of the Old Covenant: “all 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” (I Cor. 10:3–4).

B. The manna would be replaced by Christ, but in its shadowy outline of Christ to come, the Old Covenant ministered a sacramental participation in the spiritual blessings of God if it was received in faith! The people communed with God as they ate, putting all their trust in God to provide for them, both spiritually and physically. But if not enjoyed in faith, it became only a dead sign, and indeed the herald of a stricter judgement for them in participating in the sacrament but without faith: “But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the Lord was aroused against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague” (Num. 11:33). The people were exposed in their sin by virtue of their rejecting the sacrament commanded of them. And by the way, the manna was not like the Lord’s Supper which asks us to examine ourselves, lest we partake unworthily. A more Biblical comparison to the Lord’s Supper is the voluntary offerings—“First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:24). That commandment from Jesus now applies to those who partake the Lord’s Supper. But the permanent sacraments of the Old Testament (feasts, ritualistic cleansing, and dietary laws) were commanded to be kept universally, and in faith, because theirs was a church under-age and in need of visible signs for every promise of God: “For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek

after wisdom” (I Cor. 1:22). When the sacraments were not kept in faith from the heart, the people were held to a stricter judgment. There was no “opting out.” Many want to “opt out” of infant baptism. They want to spare their children from the stricter judgement of those inside the covenant who do not believe. They find it difficult for God to hold the congregation to standards which condemn the unbelievers in the congregation to stricter sacramental judgement. But you see the principle that people must come to God in faith before a sacrament can be a sacrament is not found in Scripture to be the prerequisite under covenant. God visibly covenants Himself to the congregation in prescribing worship with clear sacraments, extending the covenant with blessings for faithfulness and curses for disobedience, softening whom He will and hardening whom He hardens, irrespective of human choice. And that’s why the Jews got a stricter judgment! And so will you if you do not believe!

### **III. God consummates the covenantal renewal by re-instituting the Passover.**

After the consecration of all their congregation, the people made ready to keep the Passover. They were sacramentally brought into the congregation first through circumcision, then equipped to celebrate their atonement from sin and deliverance from Egypt in the Passover. There are obvious parallels between baptism and the Lord’s Supper here. Only after we are brought into the visible church through the sacrament of baptism, are we able to sit at the Lord’s Table. Calvin argues that we ought not to think that they had stopped keeping the Passover, but rather that this was to remind them of their duties. Very possibly true. But that meant that they were also derelict in not bringing their children and men into the visible community first, and this threatened the sacramental integrity of their keeping the Passover in the wilderness—a problem compounded by their congregational rebellion. They entered visibly into the congregation through circumcision, then kept the Passover inside that congregation, as one people renewed before the Lord on the entrance of the land of inheritance. In like manner, so Christian families ought to do.

A. However, we ought not to directly equate sacraments across the Old Testament and the New. Those of the paedocommunion persuasion argue that since infants shared in the Passover, they ought to share in the Lord’s Supper. What we do unto one side (baptism), we must do unto the other (Communion). But the Passover both looked ahead to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and behind to an actual redemptive moment in Israel’s history, which included THE ENTIRE congregation—men, women, and children being delivered from the slavery of Egypt. There was a literal sense which required the children’s presence and engagement. It was with reference to looking back to the historical moment which set the nation of Israel free as a historical people to serve God that the children

were included. We see this in the question which God sets before the children to ask in the sacrament (a ritual which in no wise is included in the Lord's Supper, by the way): "And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? that ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses" (Ex. 12:26–27). The children were there to ask the historical question which applied to the houses of the Israelites, not to partake of spiritual benefits indiscriminate of belief. And besides, the Passover is not equivalent with the Lord's Supper because it looked not only forward, but backward to a historical moment of relevance to the old visible church. We get an entirely different command regarding the Lord's Supper, which applies only to the invisible church: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (I Cor. 11:28–29). There is individual discernment required. The injunction to "remember" is spiritual and personal; not historical and general. There is no such stated spiritual prerequisite for either circumcision or baptism, where entrance into the covenant body is neither tied to a specific historical moment, nor to spiritual "remembering." Indeed, with circumcision it was impossible to "remember"—and circumcision and baptism are equivalent to each other and different from the Lord's Supper in this—that the recipient is entirely passive. Not so with the active "remembrance" involved in the Passover and the Lord's Supper.

B. And so, the people of Israel kept the feast and went into the land to possess it.

#### **IV. There is an order to the institution of right worship sealed in sacraments.**

There is an order to the institution of right worship sealed in sacraments which renewed the terms of the covenant to the people of God and held them to its blessings and cursings.

First, we see the Ark of the Covenant passing over the people in chapter 3 and a crossing over the river, or a second Passover, in which the children are to ask what the memorial stones mean for the national redemption of Israel.

Second, we see visible entrance into the covenant community signed and sealed through the circumcision of all the males by household—thus pulling families and not just individuals into the visible church.

a. A minor note here: just as the family is the fundamental institution in society, so also the covenant family is foundational to the social order and sanctification of the church. Thus Jesus says, let the little children come to me (Matt. 19:14)—they were to hear and receive the oracles inside the context of visible covenant. Most of the broader evangelical church in America today prefers to minister the oracles

outside of covenant; just hoping that children will come to faith in youth groups rather than in family worship and covenantal inclusion into the worship of the church. Our churches today decline in holiness in proportion to how many families keep back their children from the worship service. Times of discipline are needed, but nowhere in Scripture do we find the command to unilaterally keep infants back from worship. God uses the means of grace (Word, sacrament, and prayer) to bring children who are in their sins to Him. To withhold any of these means is to put God to the test with regards to bringing your children to faith. Your children's hearts are at stake! Thus, the Apostles Paul and John gives the churches (speaking to churches) instructions for households—covenant fathers, mothers, and children in holiness, sanctification, and discipleship (Eph. 5:22–6:4; Col. 3:18–24; I John 2:12–14). Thus baptisms are said to be given to households in the New Testament and not just to individuals, and greetings from the churches are sent from households (Acts 16:15; I Cor. 1:16; 16:15; Phil. 4:22; Col. 4:15; I Tim. 5:8; 2 Tim. 4:19, and so on). Actually, Jesus said baptize whole “nations,” but that’s a different story, and one which takes a church history class to unpack. But to deny this is to undermine the covenantal inclusion of the family into the church, since covenant begins with God’s instituting ordinances and sacraments. It is to put your children at spiritual risk. The baptist tradition, for all of its strengths is certainly more individualistic and autonomous in its view of the church government, Christian piety, and even the sacraments. Incidentally, this is why most baptists prefer to describe sanctification as “discipleship” instead of “growth in grace.” The pietistic tradition from whence they came saw holiness as a list of “spiritual disciplines” imparted directly by the Spirit rather than the ministration of the Spirit working through the “means of grace” offered inside the covenant family and church and buttressed by individual medication of the Word, prayers of confession, and mortification of sin.

Third, we see the people keep the sacrament of the Passover meal, which sets before the people their national redemption from the land of sin and slavery and their covenantal relationship within God’s family which binds them to all the other rituals, ordinances, laws, and sacraments of the Old Testament church as a church under-age before the New Covenant in Christ. Thus, because the Lord brought them out of the land of Egypt they are to remember that they are His peculiar people, and they are to keep the set feasts, sabbaths, ritualistic cleansing, dietary laws, and all other ordinances in the Law of Moses which all signed AND SEALED the work of Christ to come. In these sacraments, the people “inwardly by faith, really and indeed . . . but spiritually” fed on Christ their future Redeemer. The Old Covenant offered the grace of Christ to come really (definitely!) through faith as in the New. Any other interpretation necessarily leads you to a different dispensation of grace, not simply a different administration of the same grace in

Christ, wrongly dividing the Scriptures and also the Church of God. It is to be detested most severely; for the New Covenant only revealed the realities of the things of Christ signified in the Old, but now revealed to us in “more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the new testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations” (WCF, VII, 6). The London Baptist Confession subtracted this section and cut in half the chapter on God’s covenant with man from the Westminster Confession. Baptists of the 17th century understood that they disagreed with Reformed Presbyterians on the very basic doctrine and structure of the covenant, unlike most modern “reformed Baptists” who would prefer to say that they agree on the covenant but differ only in the administration of it. It was rare indeed to find Baptists and Presbyterians mixing at all in the 17th century, but our ancestors thought deeper about the issues and they mutually understood and admitted their theological differences rather than trying to tolerantly combine together as a broader “reformed community” like today. The American Reformed churches prefer tolerance and alliance rather than doctrinal integrity, and we are losing our doctrines as a result. We are besieged from without by the forces of secularization and cater to it inside the church by only insisting on agreement on practical or salvific matters. The 17th century was entirely a different place. And our ancestors had guts!

Fourth, we see the spiritual and physical gift of manna replaced with the very grain of the land of inheritance. The temporary sacramental institution of provision in the wilderness wandering was to give place to the permanent worship of God rooted in the land, and eventually, of course, the tabernacle would become eclipsed by the erection of the Temple, which served the Old Covenant people with a permanent center of the instituted sacramental worship of the entire congregation and its rituals, cleansings, offerings, and sacrifices, all which signified Christ to come.