

What Is a Lawful National Covenant?

Ezra 10:1-5; 2 Kings 23:3

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Why spend time preaching and teaching on the subject of National Covenanting? What is the relevance of this to us and to our children? Simply stated, God does not forget covenants made with Him even if they were made hundreds of years ago. Consider Israel's National Covenant with God and how when the posterity hundreds of years later grossly sinned against that covenant, God specifically declares that He would bring His judgment upon them for breaking the covenant of their fathers (Jeremiah 11:9-11). We, too, should carefully consider whether we as a Church or Nation have violated sacred and solemn covenants of our forefathers lest God's holy judgment fall upon us (as it fell upon Israel, 2 Samuel 21:1-2).

Consider further the judgment God brought upon the great Gentile city-state of Tyre when Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, laid it waste after a 13 year siege. Why? First, Tyre delivered to Edom refugees from Israel who were fleeing from Syrian captivity (Amos 1:9-10). This was the same cruelty committed by Gaza (a city of the Philistines) against the Israelites (Amos 1:6-8). But there is second sin that aggravates the cruelty committed by Tyre against the Israelites. What is it? Tyre obstinately broke "the brotherly covenant" that was made nearly two hundred years earlier between King Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 5:12; 1 Kings 9:13). Here we see God's judgment brought upon succeeding generations of Tyre for failing to keep a national treaty with Israel—a treaty of peace which bound not only the king and the generation that made the covenant of peace with Solomon and Israel, but which bound generations, even hundreds of years later. If a National Covenant of peace between two nations is so binding that God's judgment falls upon the heathen nation breaking that covenant, how much more will God's judgment fall upon the posterity of nations that break covenants made directly with God and not simply with one another (as was the Solemn League and Covenant)?

Yes, dear ones, we see in Scripture (time and time again) that God does not forget national covenants. He judges those nations that treat them with contempt. However, in order for those national covenants to be binding, they must be lawful in their content.

I. National Covenants Must Be Agreeable to God's Law (Ezra 10:1-5).

A. No covenant, oath, or vow is binding upon anyone if the specific content of it is not morally agreeable to God's Law; for we cannot bind ourselves or others to sin against God. The truth to that which is sworn is essential to the binding nature of a covenant even as we see was the case in the covenant instituted by Ezra between God and Israel.

B. Why was this covenant instituted? It was instituted because of the pollution of Israel with the religions of the nations around them through intermarriage with them (Ezra 9:1-2). This was strictly forbidden by God's Law (Deuteronomy 7:2-4). This you will recall was the sad consequence that befell King Solomon, the wisest mere man that ever lived (1 Kings 11:1-8). If Solomon was led into such gross sin and violation of God's commandments by giving in to his lusts and pleasures, it can happen to you and to me. Let us learn from these examples to avoid these sins, lest we reap the pain and agony that Solomon and Israel reaped.

C. Note carefully that the covenant established by Ezra was made according to God's Law ("and let it be done according to the law" Ezra 10:3). Covenants that are contrary to the Law of God are not lawful

covenants and do not bind the moral person (whether it be one individual moral person or a nation of individuals that form one moral person) as we see in the case of Herod's sinful oath (Mark 6:26) and in the case of the sinful oath of those Jews that bound themselves to kill Paul (Acts 23:12-14). In these cases, both Herod and the Jews should have repented of having made a sinful covenant which they were not obligated to keep. However, when a covenant is morally agreeable to God's Law, it engages the person (or persons) and their posterity (if they are included in it) to fulfill it as long as there is a posterity. Note as well the emphasis upon swearing in the name of the God of "truth" in Isaiah 65:15-16 and in Jeremiah 4:1-2. Lawful national covenants are always covenants that are morally agreeable to God's Word. It will be my task in a future sermon to demonstrate that the Solemn League and Covenant is such a National Covenant.

II. Lawful National Covenants Have an Intrinsic Obligation (2 Kings 23:3).

A. Note in 2 Kings 23:3 that King Josiah bound the people by way of a national covenant to that to which they were already bound by God's Law, namely to obey God's Law. You see, there is a distinction made here between the obligation to obey God's Law and further binding oneself to obey God's Law by way of a solemn covenant. Covenants are lawful because they are agreeable to God's Moral Law as we have seen under the first main point. However, lawful national covenants bind and obligate the original covenanters and their posterity to obedience not only because of the moral content of the Covenant, but also because a lawful covenant is binding in itself—there is an added obligation in a lawful covenant. Let me explain.

B. The Moral Law of God always binds the moral person of an individual or of a nation regardless of time or circumstances. For example, no person or no nation is ever exempt from the First Commandment ("Thou shalt have no other gods before me" Exodus 20:3). This commandment always prohibits following other gods in our life by making anyone or anything more important to us than God Himself, by serving anyone or anything before God Himself, by loving anyone or anything more than God Himself, by acknowledging the authority of anyone over the authority of God, and by worshipping anyone or anything other than God Himself. The Federal Constitution of the United States engages this nation in national idolatry when it states that the supreme law of the land is the Constitution itself (a law of man's mere authority) rather than the Bible (a law of God's supreme authority) and when it protects the alleged "right" to practice whatever religion one wants to practice (a moral wrong cannot be a civil right). If then all nations are already bound to worship the Triune God of the Bible alone, and to love and to serve God supremely by the First Commandment, why should a nation also bind itself by way of a national covenant to do what it is already bound to do in the First Commandment? It is because there is an added obligation (or what is called "an intrinsic obligation") in the act of covenanting, whereby we voluntarily engage ourselves to do what God's Law already requires us to do. In a lawful National Covenant we acknowledge that God's Law binds us to be God's people in trusting, loving, and obeying Christ and His Word in accordance with Psalm 2, in which the nations through their national leaders and representatives are commanded to "kiss the Son" (that is, in their official capacities to honor, worship, and reverence Him as the mediatorial King established by God). God's Law requires and binds each nation that has the Word of God to "kiss the Son". A nation acknowledges and owns this obligation when it engages itself by way of entering into a National Covenant with God.

C. For example, there is always a binding obligation upon all men to tell the truth according to the Ninth Commandment ("Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor"). So why does not a judicial court simply remind a person that he/she is bound to tell the truth before testimony is given? Why an oath? It is because there is an added obligation in an oath or covenant that further binds the moral person to do what he/she is already bound to do by God's Law. So that if one voluntarily binds oneself to tell the truth by way of a lawful oath, if that person should lie, he has not only lied and broken the Ninth Commandment, but he has

also perjured himself by breaking a lawful covenant and has taken the name of the Lord God in vain (thus breaking the Third Commandment as well). Thus, one who might say that he owns the Solemn League and Covenant simply because he believes the content of the Solemn League and Covenant to be morally agreeable to the Word of God has missed the whole point of the added (or intrinsic obligation) of that National Covenant. It is not only owning the moral content of that National Covenant to be right and good, but also owning the National Covenant itself as binding oneself and all posterity to endeavor to walk in all faithfulness to the moral truths contained in it. To own the moral content without owning the covenant itself (when one is bound as posterity) is to perjure oneself.

D. Do you think it was important not only to be reminded of your lawful obligations to one another at your wedding, but also to bind yourself by way of a covenant promise to those same lawful obligations? Why? It was important because in solemn and sacred circumstances, it is needful to demonstrate that what we are doing is serious business and that we shall endeavor (by God's grace) to fulfill those promises.

E. Let me close by sharing with you the story of a covenant-breaker. His name was Manasseh and we read of him in 2 Chronicles 33. There was not a more profound covenant-breaker among all of Judah's kings. He was the son of one of the most faithful kings of Judah, Hezekiah. And yet Manasseh introduced the most heinous and gross abominations into the Kingdom of Judah. In fact, the inspired Word of God compares the abominations of Manasseh not to other ungodly kings (whether in Judah or Israel), but rather to the abominations of the Canaanites that occupied Palestine when Israel entered the Promise Land under Moses and Joshua (2 Chronicles 33:2). The specific abominations he promoted are listed in 2 Chronicles 33:3-9. The Lord judged Manasseh and Judah by sending him into Assyrian captivity. However, while he was imprisoned and in great affliction, Manasseh turned to his covenant-keeping God, trusting in the Lord and repenting of his grievous sins. The God of grace forgave Manasseh and restored him back to his throne in Judah, whereupon he instituted a glorious reformation of the true religion. Dear ones, we are all covenant-breakers—we are all like Manasseh (to various degrees). That is the very reason that Christ came as the second Adam. Whereas the first Adam broke covenant with God (and all of us sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression), so the Lord Jesus kept covenant with God for all His elect in obeying God perfectly and in suffering perfectly the just penalty for the sin of His people. We can never perfectly keep covenant with God in this life and that is why we must cast ourselves upon Christ by faith alone trusting in His covenant-keeping alone as our righteousness before the throne of God. Dear ones, the true account of Manasseh is an encouragement to us all that we should never give up on our covenant-breaking nation. It is no more difficult for God to bring a wicked nation unto Himself than it is to bring a wicked king unto Himself. Just as Jesus Christ alone is the hope of every individual, so Jesus Christ alone is the hope of every nation. And Christ will one day (in the future) draw His ancient people Israel unto Himself and the nations of the world as well (according to Romans 11:11-29) through His own perfect covenant-keeping for unworthy covenant-breakers.

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