

The most personal covenant we can make is in marriage. Even though there are some who call marriage nothing more than a piece of paper, marriage is the most intimate, the most binding, the most significant covenant we can ever make: *"I, in the presence of God and these witnesses, take you, to be my [spouse]. I promise to be faithful to you as long as we both shall live."* And since this is what we call a vow, we recognize that we're calling on God to witness what we say and to punish us if we break the covenant we are making.

It's only appropriate, then, that God uses marriage as a picture of his relationship to his people. God says that he was *"a husband to them."* God assumed the role of provider and protector in this relationship. God promised his people that he would be sensitive to their needs and would serve them and make sacrifices for them, all things that we husbands promise our wives but fall woefully short in doing for them. Through Jeremiah God says, *"I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant."*

This covenant is the first in Jeremiah's contrast. We often call it the Sinaitic Covenant, because God established it on Mt. Sinai, or the Mosaic Covenant, because God gave it through Moses. This two-sided covenant was based on behavior and couched in conditional clauses—always including or implying the word "if." At the foot of Mt. Sinai God said, *"If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession" (Ex 19:5).* If the people obeyed, then God promised that he would bless and reward them. Think, for example, of the Fourth Commandment: *"Honor your father and mother, that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."* God was the husband; the people were his bride and, as such, were to follow his lead, listen to him, and submit to his Law. It was this two-sided covenant that the people repeatedly and wretchedly broke. In short, God says that they had been unfaithful to him, their faithful husband. They had cheated on him by prostituting themselves to every kind of idolatry and sin.

And yet God loved them and in faithful love forgave them. That's what a husband does. The same covenant that exposed their sin also pointed them ahead to a divine Deliverer from their sin. Since their sins had separated them from God, they needed a divine Redeemer who would reunite them with him. The old covenant, with all of its bloody sacrifices, kept them looking ahead to the time when God would establish a new covenant with them, a one-sided covenant, one in which everything would depend on God.

That's why the old covenant, while good, wasn't as good as the new one. That it was good is without question, for David writes, *"The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes" (Ps 19:7, 8).* All these phrases refer to the promises God made under the old covenant, and it was a good covenant. But it was a temporary covenant, one that was outdated. Its purpose was to keep the Old Testament believer looking ahead to the coming of the new covenant, one that would be without the Law, one that would be sealed not with the blood of animals but with the blood of the very Lamb of God, one that we commemorate every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. That's why Paul writes, *"Before this faith,"* this new covenant in Christ, *"came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith,"* this new, one-sided covenant in Christ, *"has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (Ga 3:23-25).* The old covenant is no longer in effect; it's been replaced by the new.

While God certainly forgave sins under his Old Testament covenant, it was a covenant that was all wrapped up with the Law. It was a covenant that had run its course, one that would be reestablished in Christ. God's faithful love forgives, not only under the terms of the old covenant, but also and so much more under the terms of the new.

2. And so God through Jeremiah says: *"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

That last statement just blows me away. Sadly, forgetfulness is something we've all learned to live with and almost even to expect. We forget the things we should remember, and we remember the things we should forget. But for God to forget just doesn't sit well with us, does it? What would happen if God forgot the way we do? What if for just one season he forgot to cause the seed to sprout or to send rain from heaven to water and nourish it? What if for just one day he forgot to put the sun to bed at night and rouse it from sleep the next morning? What if for just one second he forgot to maintain this complex world he miraculously created in six days?

Or, to bring it a bit closer to home, what if God forgot about you? What if he forgot about me? What if he lost track of me, one petty peon in this world of eight billion people? What if he let my house number slip from his memory or deleted my cell number from his contact list? What if he forgot, or worse yet, didn't care about my blisters and my burns, my trials and my tears, my sin and my shame?

My friends, God does not and he will not forget. He says, *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine" (Is 43:1).* He assures us that not one hair will fall from our head nor will a sparrow drop from the sky without his knowledge and approval. There is nothing God forgets—nothing—except for our sin. *"I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

Do you hear that? Do you understand what it means? To you and me, whose every sin is equally serious and whose guilt and shame are equally burdensome, God's words about forgiving and forgetting are wondrously sweet: *"I will forgive [your] wickedness and will remember [your] sins no more."* David says, *"As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Ps 103:12).* Micah says, *"You will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea" (Mic 7:18).* Paul says, *"He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross" (Col 2:13, 14).* And John assures us, *"The blood of Jesus, [God's] Son, purifies us from every sin" (1 Jn 1:7).* My friends, God doesn't just cancel your sin; he blots it out as if it never happened. He doesn't just remove it from his sight; he casts it behind his back into the depths of the sea. He doesn't just forgive your sin; in faithful love he chooses to remember it no more.

Think about it. No more laws to be meticulously obeyed day after day, year after year, generation after generation. No more trying to work our way into God's grace and favor. No more animals being slaughtered on bloody altars. It's a once-sided covenant. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, perfectly obeyed all the requirements of God's holy Law in our place, and on the bloody altar of the cross he offered up the only sacrifice necessary to pay for our sins. All this he did—not to maintain some old, outdated covenant with one single nation, but to establish a new covenant with all nations forever.

In faithful love God forgives—fully and forever. Don't we want to love like that—so that we, like Jesus, can say of others: *"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing"?* Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 23:34—Love Forgives

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In my 8th grade confirmation classes, as we begin our study of the nature and characteristics of God, I ask the question: "What does the Bible tell us about God?" We learn that God is triune (three persons yet one God); eternal (without beginning and end); a spirit (without flesh and bones); and omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent (all-powerful, all-knowing, and present everywhere). These are God's primary characteristics, because they apply to him alone. Then we list the secondary characteristics of God—that he is holy, just, faithful, good, compassionate, gracious, loving, and forgiving. Upon compiling this list, I ask, "Which of these characteristics do you cherish the most?" The answers vary from student to student, but most of them cite God's love and forgiveness. For me God's faithfulness is most important, because to know that God is faithful means he cannot lie, and that I can trust him when he tells me he is loving and forgiving.

Today, as we continue our Lenten series on *Love*, we learn to appreciate how important it is that God is faithful and that:

In Love God Forgives

- 1. He forgave under the old covenant.**
- 2. He forgives under the new covenant.**

1. Through the Prophet Jeremiah, God compares his relationship to his people in terms of a covenant, and especially the covenant between a husband and his wife. God says, *"The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I led them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them."*

Jeremiah is contrasting two different covenants, which we'll get to in a moment, but, first, some thoughts about a covenant. We today don't really understand what a covenant is. We prefer talking about contracts and agreements and handshakes. A covenant is much stronger and a great deal more personal. A contract can be rather dry—like when we sign papers to pay off an automobile or appliance. An agreement or a handshake isn't nearly as strong a term either, for it doesn't have a bonding quality to it at all. What's interesting is that in the days of Abraham, when two men would form a covenant, they'd seal it by grabbing each other by the inner thigh. Now that's something that requires a great deal of trust, wouldn't you agree?