

HOW TO LIVE BY FAITH IN COVENANT

Genesis 9:1-17

November 14, 2021

This morning I am continuing to speak on the subject of faith – and I am continuing to use some of my material from Greg Boyd’s book *“Benefit of the Doubt, Breaking the Idol of Certainty”* which deals with how we as believers often misunderstand Biblical faith. **The good news from last week’s message** – was that it’s perfectly OK and it’s actually healthy to struggle and wrestle with God. In fact, God wants us to wrestle with our faith, especially during our trials and temptations, because that’s how we grow and mature and build godly character. God helps us develop our character and takes us to a higher level of faith often through the purifying and refining fires of trials to make us fit and ready to be His kingdom people called to reach out to this world with God’s love to those who are hurting in the same way we are hurting. In those times when God doesn’t answer our prayers the way we think they should be answered, we are to endure, persevere, and not lose hope. That’s what we are told by James, the half-brother of Jesus in **James 1:2-4**, *“Consider it pure joy by brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”* The testing of our faith gives us the power of endurance for this journey we are on as we’re heading towards our everlasting heavenly home where the promise is that there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain!

It’s unfortunate that for many believers today – their faith is the opposite of striving and wrestling with God. They wrongly believe that having the gift of faith is supposed to alleviate all their struggles and solve all of their problems, and that faith is supposed to answer all their difficult questions. So, they think of their faith in terms of a faith-o-meter, as a measurement or level they are to achieve. Constantly struggling with the question, *“How much faith is enough: 50%, 75%, 100%?”* Never knowing how much faith is adequate to fulfill God’s requirements to receive His favour and blessings. So, if their prayers aren’t being answered, they believe they didn’t have enough faith; if someone in their family dies from cancer or tragically, it’s because they didn’t have enough faith; if their marriage ended in divorce, they didn’t have enough faith; if they aren’t receiving their healing, it’s a faith problem, and on-and-on-it-goes. These kinds of Christians

constantly ask, “*Do I believe enough; Am I sure enough; Am I doing enough, and Do I know enough or know the right things?*” As a result, they live without peace, contentment and rest!

As a result, a faith that is supposed to be centered on Jesus becomes centered on themselves, on their works, on their striving for more faith, and on their righteous acts. Trying hard to please God, but never quite hitting the mark is not the way God calls us to live this life of faith. As I said last week, it is idolatry when a person’s life, worth, and identity come from themselves and not from God. One of the reasons this misunderstanding of faith is so prevalent in the church today is because most people see faith as a legal requirement before almighty God, seeing faith as following a set of rules, a long list of do’s-and-don’ts. They see God as judge and jury, and must do everything He says to stay on the judge’s good side or else suffer His wrath. They see their faith as a legal document or legal contract between themselves and God rather than as a relational covenant based on love!

This morning I want to help dispel this misunderstanding of Biblical faith – by speaking on the subject of covenant. I have titled this message, “*How to Live in Faith by Covenant.*” The first thing we need to understand is that our faith relationship with God is a covenant relationship, not a legal contract. God operates by way of making covenants with His people and the first covenant we find in the Bible takes place immediately after the devastating global flood that wiped out every living breathing creature on the earth except for those onboard the ark. This first covenant was between God and Noah, his sons, and with every living creature that was on the ark. And, it’s an everlasting covenant, made for all time, a covenant for all future generations as long as the earth endures. And like all of God’s covenants, there is a sign of the covenant, **Genesis 9:12-16**, “***I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.***” This sign is for every living thing that takes a breath, not only humans, reminding them that God keeps His covenants! God can be trusted!

God wants His people to know that whenever He makes a covenant it’s binding, so He uses a sign as proof that we can depend upon Him. God always keeps His

word! And God keeps His part of the bargain even if we don't! So, the sign of the first everlasting covenant was the multicolored rainbow, and it's interesting that the LGBTQ+ community are using the same sign as their symbol as well! So, whenever **God's rainbow appears in the sky**, God wants His followers to remember His everlasting covenant with them, and by faith, believe that God will keep His word and never destroy the earth by a global flood!

As we look at this subject of covenant, let's first look at our beliefs – what we believe to be true, trustworthy, and good. For us to believe that something is true, trustworthy and good is one thing, but the Biblical concept of faith involves much more than our beliefs. Biblical faith involves our commitment to trust in God completely no matter what may come our way, regardless of our beliefs, *“for better or for worse.”* To help us understand this covenant relationship between God and us, we need to think of it a marriage covenant. The illustration of marriage best serves as the idea of how our faith in God is supposed to work. I married Laurie 49 years ago, not merely because of some belief I had about her. As well, I didn't marry Laurie because I knew everything about our future life together, believing that everything would work out perfectly. NO, I married Laurie because of faith, faith that everything would work out for the better and we would live happily ever after. So, 49 years ago we stood before Rev. Elgin Rintoul, and before our family and friends in the Dresden United Church and entered a marriage covenant by promising to trust each other, and put our faith in each other to make our marriage work, regardless of what would come along, *“for better or for worse.”* Placing rings on our fingers as a sign of the covenant, a reminder of the pledge we made to each other!

I married Laurie because I had faith in her without seeing any aspects of our future life together. YES, we could dream, and hope, and plan out our future life together the best we could, but we both went into this covenant agreement, regardless of the beliefs we had, we entered our marriage covenant with faith and trust in each other – NOTHING ELSE! The covenant we made that day before almighty God had absolutely nothing to do with absolute certainty or complete confidence that things would work out. We married in faith alone! Trusting each other to keep the promises we made until death do us part. Marriage is a lifelong commitment in which we tell each other in our vows, *“I will do my part,”* but we have no basis to believe that the other party will do their part, except by faith! Our promises to each other can only be made in faith!

So, marriage is not a contract agreement between two people – it’s not a legal business agreement made between two parties to keep the relationship working properly. When a man and a woman stand before God and say “*I DO*” they are making binding covenantal promises that they promise to keep, “*for better or for worse.*” And of course, we all enter marriage with uncertainty about the future. When we promise, saying “*I DO*”, it means that we trust the other person and have faith in the other person to keep those promises because of the love we have for each other. Love is the glue that makes marriage work properly and holds it together against all odds. Love is the binding force of the marriage covenant.

Using the example of marriage – we need to understand that a covenant relationship is the exact opposite of a legal contract. A lawyer is not required in making a covenant agreement; however, we do need to get our lawyers involved whenever we make a contract agreement, because we don’t trust the other party, and because we have no faith in them keeping their promises. So, a written legal document is required and essential to help the two parties keep their word. So, whenever we lack trust we make a legal agreement with another party, with everything listed in black-and-white, and every “*t*” crossed and every “*i*” dotted, to make sure all the loopholes are covered, so that we are not cheated, misled, or deceived in any way. There is no love involved in a legal contract, and when things end up going south, we pull out our agreement to point out the problems, and then get our lawyers together once again, this time to try and rectify the situation. A marriage can never work if it is based on a legal contract, a list of do’s-and-don’ts, with a lawyer keeping score on how things are going or not going. In the same way, neither can our relationship with God be kept by following a set of rules, keeping a list of do’s-and-don’ts, and keeping score. Much like a marriage relationship between a man and a woman, our covenant relationship with God can only be based on unconditional love and trust!

Biblical faith is a covenantal concept! However, we often have difficulty seeing it that way because of the way we see most of our relationships, even in how the world sees marriage. Most act like their relationships and marriages are contracts with specific terms – I will do this, if you will do that – otherwise, the relationship is over. We have a difficult time trusting others and depending on others in this self-centred individualistic society, where everyone is out for themselves. Today, everything is temporary, nothing is long-lasting, from electronic devices and appliances to marriages and relationships. One day that electronic device and appliance we depend on will work perfectly, the next day they don’t; one day a

man and woman wrap their arms around each other and embrace, saying “*I DO*,” and the next day they cross their arms in defiance and say, “*I DON’T*.”

Today, we don’t see people trusting like they once did – a handshake is no longer good enough in making a deal. People constantly break their promises! The words, “*I DO*” and “*I PROMISE*” mean nothing! Today, people put their trust in the binding clauses of their legal agreements, rather than in each other. And that’s why people are reluctant to enter into covenants, especially marriage covenants, where they pledge their very lives to each other. Where their future becomes interwoven together so they are no longer two but become one, as we are told in **Genesis 2:24**, “*That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.*” A covenant relationship is never about keeping a bunch of rules, and a long list of do’s-and-don’ts and keeping score; a covenant relationship between two parties means trusting in each other and being other-oriented, the two becoming one!

Even though covenants and contracts may look similar – they are worlds apart, in fact they are direct opposites:

- People enter covenants because they trust each other – people enter into legal contracts because they don’t trust each other.
- Covenants are based on people pledging themselves to one another in unselfish ways – legal contracts are based on people protecting themselves and their rights from one another who act in selfish ways.

Taking all of this into account – whenever you read the Scriptures, “*How do you see God, and how do you see your faith?*” If you reading the Scriptures with a legal contract type of mentality (thinking the Bible is filled with rules, do’s-and-don’ts with God keeping score) then your thinking will be distorted, and your understanding of faith will be distorted. With a contract mentality you will never see God as your loving heavenly Father who is on your side; instead, you will see God as judge and jury that you need to please and see your faith dependent on fulfilling all of His requirements – trying hard to reach a certain percentage on that faith-o-meter, in order to receive God’s favour and blessings and have your prayers answered!

God enters into covenants with His people – NEVER contracts! God always keeps His promises and asks His followers to trust Him in return. We see this played out in **Genesis 9:4-7**, while God makes a covenant promise to Noah that He

will never flood the earth again, God expected something in return: ***“You must never eat animals that still have their lifeblood in them. And murder is forbidden. Animals that kill people must also die, and any person who murders must be killed. Yes, you must execute anyone who murders another person, for to kill a person is to kill a living being made in the image of God. Now you must be fruitful, have many children and repopulate the earth. Yes, multiply and fill the earth.”*** God is a covenant making God! God does His part, and He expects us to do our part. God made covenants with Abraham, with Moses, with King David, and finally, God entered into the most beautiful covenant of them all, when God made an everlasting covenant with everyone who is willing to believe and accept Jesus as the Son of God, accepting His death on the cross as full payment for their sins. And none of those covenants are based on our works or anything else that we could ever do to make ourselves right before God, but only by His loving grace poured out onto His people, who He loves unconditionally!

Christians who treat the Bible as a legal manual – don’t understand or accept grace and will come to church and Bible studies to hear from the experts, trained professionals (Bible teachers/pastors) to help them correctly interpret this legal document to make sure they are fulfilling all the necessary requirements for salvation and entrance into Heaven. The Pharisees and religious leaders, during Jesus’ day, are good examples of this kind of thinking, they were experts at interpreting and keeping the Law, but Jesus had no use for them, only condemnation. All because the Bible is not a legal manual to follow – it’s God’s love story – to broken people like you and me, who are working out their faith with fear and trembling!

As well, we need to understand that salvation isn’t a one-time event, it’s not about getting one of those Monopoly “*get out of jail free*” card that we hang on to until we need it. Instead, salvation is a vital part of our faith journey, it’s an on-going event; it’s about participating in the abundant life right now, while we are still living on this earth. So, we should never talk about salvation in just the past tense – saying, “*When were you saved?*” Because the New Testament speaks about salvation in all three tenses, past present and future:

- It speaks in the past tense, “*we were saved*” (**Ephesians 2:4-6, “*Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved”*)**)

- It speaks in the present tense, “*we’re being saved*” (1Corinthians 1:18, “*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*”)
- And it speaks in the future tense, “*we shall be saved*” (Romans 5:10, “*For if, while we were still God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life*”). Our salvation is part of our ongoing faith journey!

This only makes sense if we think of our salvation as a covenantal marriage to Christ rather than as a legal contract! We need to think in this manner: we were saved when we first responded to Christ’s marriage proposal from the cross, responding “*I DO.*” Then, we are being saved as we learn to continue to yield our lives to Him, dying to self on a daily basis, being transformed step-by-step into the radiant bride that Jesus is returning for. And lastly, we shall be saved, when Christ returns in His full glory to claim His bride, at which time we will appear with Him in glory (Colossians 3:4, “*When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory,*” as well as Revelation 19:7, “*Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready*”). Our heavenly bridegroom Jesus had proposed to us when He gave His life for us on the cross, so now we are in that engagement period getting ourselves ready for that future wedding day, and we do that in faith, believing that Jesus will return for us and take us to the wedding feast of the Lamb in Heaven one day!

This is the kind of Biblical faith we are to have in our covenantal relationship with Christ – we act in faith, honouring the pledge made to our bridegroom by being committed to live as a trustworthy bride right now and right here, in the present as we wait. Remembering that faith is an action word, faith is something that you can see and observe. We see visible evidence of faith by looking at how we are acting on our covenant vows, by remaining faithful to Him alone, like in our earthly marriage. We don’t take anything for granted; we continue to work on this spiritual marriage by being committed, knowing that Christ will never divorce us, and is preparing to return for His bride. Once we say, “*I DO*” and put our faith in Christ, and remain faithful to Him, we are married to Him for all of eternity and are His alone!

I want to warn us that we can easily be deceived in thinking everything is OK with our covenantal relationship with Christ. So, we need to test our relationship with

Christ, much like the relationship we have in marriage, and the best way to find out if you're being a good marriage partner is to ask your spouse or ask those closest to you. You can only determine how you are doing by asking them for honest feedback about how you love, honour, cherish and respect your spouse, because our covenantal relationship is visible to those around us. And it's the same with our covenantal relationship with Christ. We need to ask those closest to us if they see us moving forward in the direction of the Kingdom; and if they can see evidence of our faith, in how we are trusting in God, especially as we go through our trials; and if they can see our life, worth and identity rooted in Christ. Faith is always visible and is usually much more visible to others than it is to ourselves. That's why we need to be real and honest before God and each other, and never afraid to speak into each other's lives, especially coming alongside of them in their difficulties, showing them that we care!

Here's the takeaway – the Biblical concept of faith is a covenantal concept; it's a relational concept between two parties who trust each other – it's never a legal contract drawn up by lawyers, and it must be visible according to Jesus' half-brother James – **James 2:17, “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”** Biblical faith that doesn't exhibit deeds is useless! Biblical faith that's not real will have no impact on your life, or on your behaviour, or your impact on the lives of others. You will be like un-believers around you, having no kingdom impact! So, Biblical faith is never about trying to talk yourself into or work yourself into certainty to impress a judge; instead, Biblical faith is a matter of us pledging our complete trust in our heavenly Lord who loves us unconditionally.

To help us remember this concept, there's a good example in the old movie “*The Wizard of Oz*,” starring Judy Garland as Dorothy. When you're trying to understand the nature of Biblical faith, don't be like the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz by trying to convince yourself, “*I do, I do, I do believe!*” Rather, think of two people at their wedding ceremony giving their wedding vows saying, “*I DO.*” “*I DO*” trust You Lord, and “*I DO*” pledge to be trustworthy to you, and you alone in return! And “*I DO*” pledge to move in the direction of no longer thinking of “*me*” but thinking of “*we.*” And remember, it's not where you're currently at, it's the direction that you're moving that is critical. So, keep moving towards Christ, reflecting the character of Christ to others, because faith that isn't visible, isn't genuine faith at all!

This isn't rocket science theology – it's not complicated, anyone can do it by beginning to ask themselves this question, “*Do I have enough confidence that Jesus Christ is Lord to re-commit my life to Him today?*” And if your answer is YES, then the next part is simple, all you need to do is to go back to your wedding vows to Christ and redo them, saying “*I DO*” “*for better or worse,*” and then submit yourself to the Lordship of Christ by praying this prayer:

“Lord Jesus, change me from the inside out! Send Your Holy Spirit and fill me so that I spill over and overflow with Your holy presence for all those around me to see! Lord Jesus, rekindle the flame of love in my heart that I may return to my first love and live out the covenantal vows that I have made with You! For I want to be a faithful, holy, and passionate bride who lives out my love for You, day in and day out, until the day you return to claim Your radiant bride, the faithful church! I pray all of this in Jesus' precious Name, Amen!”