

Leadership And Covenants (Part Three)

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Many people would evaluate the United States as a nation in serious decline. Economically, it is seriously deep in debt, and its morality issues are infamous worldwide. When we consider the overwhelming evidence from the Bible that poor leadership in government, business, religion, education, and family life contributed greatly to the Israelites' repeated departures from God, where does that leave us today? Is it not logical that the same deficiency is driving the confused and immoral condition of this nation?

The pressure to choose what to do about it in our lives is increasing. This may be partly due to unpleasant personal experiences, but it is mostly because societal conditions are gradually matching the prophetic evidence about the end times. The media report each day on America's intensifying cultural disintegration, indicating that the long decline we are experiencing will not change.

As for what to do, we have a number of options. Will we choose to do nothing about the building calamity, just continue to go with the flow? Will we make an effort to join with others, as in a political party or movement, to assist in changing the system that is operating in such a disgraceful, self-centered manner? Or will we decide to do neither of these, not supporting the way things are presently being done but making every effort to change *ourselves* so that we are no longer personally contributing poor leadership to the present system?

We usually begin to become more aware of the nature of this world when we move through our teen years and into young adulthood. In those years, we become more sensitive to the fact that we have no control over a great many things in this life. Some of these are huge life-issues, which can pressure a person to become resentful and defensive about life.

Consider for a moment that we had no control over when we were born, whether before Christ, in the Dark Ages, in colonial times, or in this present day. We had no control over where we were born, whether in China, Brazil, Africa, or a nation of modern Israel. We had no control at all whether that nation was prosperous or poor or whether its economy was based in agriculture, mining, manufacturing, or service. We had no control over who our parents were or what their characters, educational levels, income levels, temperaments, health, or religious convictions, if any, were.

We had no control over whether we were born into a minority family or not—whether of race or religion—perhaps being barely accepted as human by the dominant group. We had no control over perhaps being born into abject slavery with little or no education available to us. These and similar realities have had their effects in shaping us into who we are today. It is impossible to escape development by such unmanageable forces until we are equipped with the powers to exercise some control.

Righteous Control Begins With a Gift

Each of us has been born subject to a number of these forces, and it is likely we have felt victimized by some of them. Some of us, though, have received personally and directly from our Creator an awesome, life-changing gift that provides us with the chance to exercise a great deal of control over the direction and the events of life from this time until we die or Jesus Christ returns as promised.

In John 6:44, Jesus declares, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” Our Creator has invited us to participate in His ongoing spiritual creation. This gift was not given because we were well-qualified to receive it. Actually, the opposite is true: We needed this gift very much. Of our lives before receiving this gift, Paul writes:

For you see your calling [invitation], brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world, to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. (I Corinthians 1:26-29)

A magnanimous act of God’s grace opens the door to provide us a far larger measure of control over the quality and outcome of our lives than we ever had before.

We are all victims of sin, not only of those we have committed along the way, but also of the sins of those who preceded us. The Bible calls the overall result of this mountainous mass of sin “spiritual slavery,” that we were “slaves of sin.” Most people live slavish lives that end only in death. A slave can be accurately defined as a person who has few, if any, choices in life. Someone else or an addiction or a lifestyle makes choices for the slave, and he merely follows, stumbling along in resentful submission to the choices of the one who owns him.

Needed: A Change of Leaders

God chose to illustrate our enslaved condition through His rescue of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from their bondage to Egypt. He desired to free them from their servitude and establish them as a separate nation of their own, a people free to determine the quality and outcome of their lives. Once at liberty, they were no longer subject to the orders and decisions of the pagan Egyptians.

Working through Moses, God succeeded in His purpose, and Israel was settled as a free people in their own land. However, the Israelites never truly learned the lesson of what having the liberty to choose required of them. John 8:31-37 gives evidence of this when Jesus confronted them about it nearly 1,500 years later.

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, ‘You will be made free?’” Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. I know that you are Abraham’s descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you.”

Even during the Israelites' wilderness journey after being freed from Egypt, the flaws in their thinking began to surface in their conduct. Within just two years, they rejected the righteous leadership of Moses, refusing to exercise their liberty to choose to enter the Promised Land and take it as their possession.

The result of that dreadful choice was that every Israelite adult over twenty years of age except for Joshua and Caleb perished on the journey. Thirty-eight years later, the younger generation entered the land under Joshua and took it. However, after he died, the nation quickly deteriorated from the dynamic bastion of righteousness that God intended, choosing to abandon the godly causes that they had followed under Joshua. In their decline, the Israelites showed they were still enslaved by their own carnality.

John 8 proves that, despite possessing both biblical and historical records—as well as being taught by the very God of creation right in their presence—individual Israelites failed to choose to be free of the spiritual slavery to which they were currently in bondage. Why? They never overcame the slave mentality that their ancestors learned in Egypt and which they succeeded in passing on to successive generations.

Like their ancestors, they were slaves of sin and passed the same self-centered thinking processes on to their children. They persisted in the same old, carnal ways. They were each unwilling to make the changes in their thinking that God demanded after He called them out of Egypt. Why, despite their advantages, did they not change?

Freedom Is Not Free

John 8 is proof of how tightly bound we are to the anti-God carnality ingrained in our hearts. The Jews ended Jesus' teaching session with their violent intentions toward Him so filling their hearts that He escaped only because God intervened to protect His life. They grasped that He was telling them that they had to make changes in their thinking, but they could not bring themselves to make those choices. They could not change because they were deeply enslaved by a deadly combination of factors. Simply stated, they did not believe *who He was* and *what He said*. Rather than submit to them, they fought against these truths.

God warns those who come to Him that He lays a requirement on all who want to be free. He teaches this with startling clarity in Deuteronomy 30:15-19:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.

Though His admonition is clear, some will say that this pertains only to those who made the Old Covenant with God. They argue that salvation under the New Covenant is free by means of God's grace. That, however, is a bald-faced lie. Notice how John the Baptist warns those coming for baptism just prior to the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 3:7-10)

As God's representative, John demands the repentance that precedes change, as well as a high degree of loyalty in obedience to God. That level of personal loyalty does not come cheap.

Jesus Himself says in John 14:15, "If you love Me keep My commandments." Does anyone think that keeping the commandments is easy? Our carnal natures and this world are constantly pressuring us to break the commandments to fulfill some desire we think needs to be satisfied. Undoubtedly, many found what Jesus said appealing. Yet, when He spoke as He does in Luke 14:25-27, it gave them pause to reflect carefully—and very few took up His challenge. Consider Jesus' admonishment to each person who wants to be His follower:

Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."

Jesus demands submission to Him above everything else in life, including the self. If we think that is not costly, we need to think again! Discipleship can cost a person his relationship with the family he was born into, his livelihood, and even at times his life. At issue is how much we value the life our Savior gave to pay for our sins, as well as the gifts of forgiveness and eternal life. Is our treasure in heaven, or are our hearts still bound to earth and its ways?

Christian Leadership Must Be Created

As shown earlier, when God calls us, we are not qualified for what He desires us to become. Yes, we are indeed alive in Christ, but at the same time we are carnal and worldly. The new convert is still driven by his old nature. Being in this state will not satisfy His purposes for us, to glorify Him by our lives and to be prepared to serve in His Family for all eternity. In fact, considering what God wants to prepare us for, it is almost as though we have just been born.

A major creative process must take place. Why? We must have a new heart if we are to be useful within the purposes of our Creator God. Jesus makes this plain in Matthew 15:15-20:

Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Explain this parable to us." So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil

thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”

This “heart” issue is the reason for the apostle Paul’s statement in II Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new.” The new convert is a new creation, a parallel to Adam and Eve in their creation. God formed them both in His image (Genesis 1:26), though the material source of them was of the earth, which God also created. Isaiah 64:8 affirms what is occurring in those whom God calls: “But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter; and all we are the work of Your hand.”

In like manner, in the new creation, the new convert, it is God who calls (I Corinthians 7:15), who provides faith (Ephesians 2:8), who grants repentance (Acts 5:31), and who gives His Holy Spirit (Acts 5:32). Just as God provided the means for Adam and Eve to function responsibly toward Him, so has He also supplied the means we need to function responsibly as a new creation.

His purpose is to create us in His *spiritual* image, so that we have qualities of heart and character as He does. These qualities will enable us to provide leadership as members of the government He will establish under Jesus Christ at His return. The prophecy of Isaiah 9:6-7 speaks of this government:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

The parable that Jesus gives in Luke 19:15-19 confirms that the reward for faithful, yielded service and growth given by Christ to His saints is rulership in His Kingdom:

And so it was when he returned, having received the kingdom, he then commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. Then came the first saying, “Master, your mina has earned ten minas.” And he said to him, “Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.” And the second came, saying, “Master, your mina has earned five minas.” Likewise he said to him, “You also shall be over five cities.”

On the night before His death, Jesus promises the apostles, “And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29-30). Finally, in Revelation 3:21, Jesus declares, “To Him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.”

There can be no doubt that the ultimate destiny of those called into the church, who remain faithful and growing in the image of Jesus Christ, is to be given rulership with Christ in His Kingdom.

Submissive Cooperation Is Required

Creation is not magic. It requires work in all its forms, as well as vision, planning, sacrifice, wisdom, study, ingenuity, patience, cooperation, perseverance, and frequent testing of the product. These responses are required of us even though we are not literally the creator of the image of Christ. The Father and Son do the creating, knowing where They plan to place us in the government that They are forming, and only They have the spiritual powers to mold and shape us. We, however, must use the above qualities as we voluntarily cooperate by submitting to Their efforts to mold and shape us.

Jesus is our primary Model, even though examples of others who faithfully served God are included in Scripture and are available for us to follow too. Without doubt, He is the greatest leader who ever walked this earth. He was the Light of this world, showing and teaching the way of God (Acts 18:25-26). He led by perfectly following the way of God. The standard He set is without equal. We are to follow His example.

The fruit of our experiences of following Him will be the development of godly leadership that God can trust to be used in His Kingdom. We will not earn salvation by this means because we will never function perfectly as human beings. Salvation is by grace. However, the faithful loyalty of those living by means of the enabling God provides is thoroughly tested under all kinds of circumstances in life.

God seems to test us in such a way as to make it appear to us as though we are doing all the work, but all along the way, He is adding what we lack (I Corinthians 10:13). It is not easy to struggle against the desires of our carnality. The easy way is to give in and remain enslaved. It requires considerable sacrifice, and we are in fact called “living sacrifices” in Romans 12:1-2. Even Jesus had wrongful desires come to mind, and He had to overcome them (Revelation 3:21).

In order to develop the quality leadership suitable to serving with Jesus Christ in His Kingdom, we must meet the challenges of living God’s way in this evil world. Jesus humbled Himself and lived faithfully following the course laid out for Him by His Father. We are repeating the same basic pattern to create the same kind of loving leadership. We must take to heart the focus the apostle Paul laid before us in Colossians 3:1-4:

If you then were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

Faithfully Following the Word of God

In reality, every leader follows someone who trod the path before him. We follow Christ. Though we cannot literally see Him, we walk with Him. However, we can read what He did and taught because God has provided us a faithful witness of what we need to follow to be prepared to serve under Him in His Kingdom. We must faithfully abide by what we are shown in His Word.

God promises He will be faithful (Deuteronomy 7:9). The apostle Paul declares God is faithful (I Corinthians 1:9). Both Jesus and Moses are declared faithful (Hebrews 3:1-2), and all of those leaders named in Hebrews 11 were faithful in their times of service. Now is our time to walk faithfully beside them. To be faithful is to be trustworthy, reliable, and responsible in our interactions with both God and man.

What must we do? What must we follow? The same basic things the heroes of faith did. It is easy to say we must keep God's commandments, which is certainly true. However, notice that those great leaders of the past are all mentioned for accomplishing some task more specific than keeping the commandments. Keeping the commandments is a general responsibility for all, and doing so is important in itself. Yet, each leader also achieved a specific responsibility: Abel made a sacrifice, Enoch walked with God, Noah built an ark, Abraham offered Isaac, Moses stood fast before Pharaoh, etc.

We need to understand our calling to be more specific and distinct than being "merely" one of a multitude in the church. How specific it is for each called individual is not yet known. Even so, being individually and personally called by the Father is awesome all by itself.

The apostle Paul shows in I Corinthians 12 that we must not think our calling is merely random, a coincidence. Such thinking glorifies neither God's genius nor His magnanimous generosity in stooping to call us. God is following a plan. He is creating a family team, and within His actions, nothing happens by chance, not even our calling:

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. . . . But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the best gifts. (I Corinthians 12:12-13, 18, 27-31)

God is expanding His Family, the church, and at the same time filling positions of responsibility to be faithfully performed by the elect. The church is called and formed as a body of people led by the Holy Spirit to do works representing God. There is undoubtedly some overlap in what the elect are required to achieve, but plainly, everyone does not perform exactly the same specific responsibilities.

No employer, be it a large corporation or an individual entrepreneur, looks for potential employees who cannot perform the available positions. As we saw, no one, when first converted by God, is prepared to perform the tasks He has in mind for him, but each one has the potential to do just that if he will submit to the training God assigns. God is calling, training, and fitting us into the Body to follow Christ faithfully wherever He leads. This process is absolutely required of the elect because God reveals in Revelation 14:1-5 what He is preparing the firstfruits for.

Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing on their harps. They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are

virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God.

This vision, like the similar one in Revelation 7:1-8, shows another degree of specificity in God's purpose. The numbers are similar, but in Revelation 7 the origin of each is from one of the tribes of Israel. By way of contrast, those in the church are from all nations. Those in Revelation 7 are not shown headed for a specific position within God's Family, but those in Revelation 14 are given a specific responsibility. In any case, God is pursuing specific purposes in dealing with us, so we must consider that His training of us in this life may also reflect shades of difference from person to person.

An Exceedingly High Goal

We must not allow ourselves, like so many in the world, to consider that salvation is as easy as falling off a log. Did Jesus have to suffer hatred and persecution? Did the apostle Paul endure many tough trials? Certainly, each follower of Christ named in Hebrews 11 had to experience similar things in their times of service. We must adopt the mindset the apostle Paul followed to keep himself on track:

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. (Philippians 3:13-15)

He urges us not to allow our attention to be diverted toward some earthly desire that our carnality finds appealing and morphs into a need. Consider Adam and Eve's example. Despite the fact that they literally saw God and walked and talked with Him, how quickly their thoughts were turned away by Satan's presence and the highly desirable allure of what he presented! We must be aware of our vulnerability given the "right" time and appeal. A person can stay focused only for himself, so Paul implores us to keep our eyes on the goal God has revealed to us.

Jesus taught us to be keenly aware of where our treasure is (Matthew 6:20), and Paul exhorts us to be focused on our heavenly calling (Colossians 3:1-4). We are all somewhat different in what helps keep us inspired, motivated, and focused and thus more willing to trust God, patiently pressing on and persevering day by day to the end of the course He has set for us. For me, it helps considerably when I can grasp a logical progression of steps that lead to understanding. In me, this is combined with a worldview that is simultaneously vast in scope yet sharply focused so that I can see myself as a cog in a vast and wonderful plan He is directing. Not that I think I am a vital part of that plan, but I am certainly involved in it. This is such a significant and humbling honor that I do not want to disappoint Him!

This thought was the catalyst for this series. It began to form in my mind while preparing Feast of Tabernacles sermons in 2014 and sharpened during similar study of the book of Deuteronomy for the Feast of 2015. I was beginning to grasp the importance of the covenants to our salvation. Just one covenant—the Old Covenant, as we call it—is so vital that God devotes an entire book, Deuteronomy, to expounding it, using historical backgrounds, commentaries, and prophecies to help us comprehend its importance to our growth and salvation. Those meditations led me to consider the importance of the other covenants to our salvation, and so this series developed.

The covenants contain extensive foundational material that can bolster our awareness of why things are the way they are in this world, promoting understanding. Each covenant provides a clearer picture of God's desires and of His judgments, to which we can learn to submit and conform. In His children, God is creating righteous leadership so that the leadership failures of the past will not be repeated in His Kingdom under Jesus Christ.