

Did God End the National Covenant Made with Israel?

Isaiah 62:1-5; Isaiah 50:1

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In the previous sermon, we saw that the division of one part of a covenanted nation from another part did not make null or void the National Covenant made with God when the two were previously one political entity.

Perhaps someone might further object that the reason why Israel (consisting of the ten tribes) was still bound by the National Covenant made with God at Mt. Sinai (even though Israel, under Jeroboam, declared its political independence from Judah) was because Israel's separation from Judah was unlawful—Israel did not have just cause to divide the kingdom promised to David and to his heirs. The mere threatening words of Rehoboam to Israel were not sufficient cause to divide a covenanted nation. And further there were no steps taken by Jeroboam or Israel to resolve their differences with King Rehoboam after hearing Rehoboam's foolish threat. Whereas (so the objection goes) the Thirteen Colonies had just cause to declare their political independence from Britain due to the many (not just one) obstinate crimes (not mere words) perpetrated by King George III against them over many years (not in just one day). Therefore (the objector argues), the National Covenant Britain had made with God (namely, the Solemn League and Covenant) no longer bound the Thirteen Colonies once they declared their independence from Britain. In other words, this objection states that where political division occurs that is for unjust reasons, a National Covenant made with God continues to bind that political entity that has declared its independence, but where political division occurs for just reasons, a National Covenant does not continue to bind that new nation that has declared its independence. What do we say to this?

Let us briefly respond to this objection before moving on to consider our text for this Lord's Day.

First, a covenant MADE WITH GOD (as distinguished from a covenant made with man) consisting of moral duties (whether it be national, familial, or ecclesiastical) does not cease to bind all of the parties involved in that covenant simply because a division occurs between those parties (regardless of whether the division is unjust or whether the division is just). For the covenant was MADE WITH GOD first and foremost, and He will hold us to our covenants MADE WITH HIM regardless of the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of others to that same covenant. Vows and covenants MADE WITH GOD must be paid, for God will require it (Deuteronomy 23:21; Ecclesiastes 5:4-6).

Second, will a son be released from a baptismal covenant made by his parents to God to trust, love, and obey Christ all the days of his life because his parents miserably abuse him for many years and seek to take his life and because he lawfully flees for his life to another country never to see them again and legally changes his name? If the son renounces his covenantal duties to God because his parents have done so by turning their backs upon God and abusing their son, will he not also be guilty of covenant-breaking if he turns his back upon his baptismal covenant made with God? Of course he will. His parent's covenant-breaking does not destroy his covenanted duties to God (Ezekiel 18:1-4; Hosea 4:15-17). So likewise, the unfaithfulness of King George III or his cruel treatment of the Thirteen Colonies may have allowed them to flee for their lives from his tyranny and may have allowed the Thirteen Colonies to legally change their name from one of his Majesty's dominions to the United States of America, but the tyranny of King George or the declaration of their independence did not allow the Thirteen Colonies (or the United States of America) to break their covenant with God.

Dear ones, likewise a lawful covenant MADE WITH GOD by a married couple not to look at pornography

continues to bind the man and the woman even if the marriage LAWFULLY is dissolved due to the unfaithfulness of one of them. Likewise a lawful covenant MADE WITH GOD by members of a church to worship God only in ways appointed in His Word continues to bind the individual parties to perform that covenanted duty even if the members LAWFULLY leave that church for its unfaithfulness or even if that church dissolves so that there is no longer membership within that church. A lawful “declaration of independence” from a covenanted entity or moral person does not terminate the covenanted moral duties that the individual human parties owe to God (please note that I am not saying that human marital covenants and commercial covenants may not be lawfully dissolved when there is gross violation of the covenant—I am specifically speaking here only of covenants MADE WITH GOD—and the reason that such covenants MADE WITH GOD cannot be terminated is because He will never break them and will forever hold those who have made them with Him responsible to keep them). Thus, the Church of Scotland argued that the unfaithfulness of England, Ireland, or Scotland, king or subjects, church or state could not remove the duties that individuals, families, church or kingdom owed to God, for the *Solemn League and Covenant* was made first and foremost with God. And if political unions were dissolved, or ecclesiastical unions were dissolved, or familial unions were dissolved, or marital unions were dissolved, the covenant made with God could not be dissolved—the Lord would require it. I remind you of the words of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (*The Acts of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland*, August 6, 1649, pp. 474-475, emphases added) already quoted in a previous sermon:

Although there were none in the one kingdom who did adhere to the Covenant, yet thereby were not the other kingdom nor any person in either of them absolved from the bond thereof, **since in it we have not only sworn by the Lord, but also covenanted with Him.** It is not the failing of one or more that can absolve the other from their duty or tie to Him: Besides, the duties therein contained, being in themselves lawful, and the grounds of our tie thereunto moral, though the other do forget their duty, yet doth not their defection free us from that obligation which lies upon us by the Covenant in our places and stations. And the Covenant being intended and entered into by these kingdoms, as one of the best means of steadfastness, for guarding against declining times: It were strange to say that the backsliding of any should absolve others from the tie thereof, especially seeing our engagement therein is not only National, but also personal, everyone with uplifted hands swearing by himself, as it is evident by the tenor of the Covenant. From these and other important reasons, it may appear that all these kingdoms joining together to abolish that oath by law, yet could they not dispense therewith; Much less can any one of them, or any part in either of them do the same. The dispensing with oaths have hitherto been abhorred as Antichristian, and never practised and avowed by any but by that man of sin; therefore those who take the same upon them, as they join with him in his sin, so must they expect to partake of his plagues.

We come now to briefly consider our text for this Lord’s Day: Isaiah 62:1-5. From a consideration of God’s divorcement of Israel as alluded to earlier in this sermon (in Isaiah 50:1), how can it be said that covenanted duties still existed for Israel after having been lawfully divorced by God? When a lawful divorce occurs doesn’t the marital covenant and the marital obligations due to that particular spouse then come to an end? In order to answer this question, we must seek to understand the nature of God’s divorcement of Israel.

I. Objection: Doesn’t the fact that God gave to Israel a certificate of divorce indicate that the National Covenant between God and Israel came to an end (Isaiah 62:1-5)?

A. The simple answer to the question is “No”! The certificate of divorce does not bring to an end

the National Covenant between God and Israel. Let us consider our text.

1. The background to this text is in fact the matter of God's divorcement of Israel. The subject of God's being married to Israel as herein stated in Isaiah 62 would not have been an issue if the matter of her divorce was not under consideration.

2. God gave to Israel a letter of divorce because of Israel's gross, unrepentant, and habitual marital unfaithfulness to God (Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 3:20). But what does that letter of divorce mean? Does it mean that Israel was no longer God's covenanted people? Does it mean that the National Covenant between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai was made null and void? If that was what really happened, then a National Covenant made with God can be made null and void by the unfaithfulness of a kingdom or a nation.

B. The context of Isaiah 62 is one of national restoration of Israel. There may be some limited historical fulfillment of this passage in the return of God's people from captivity by way of the decree of Cyrus, but only as a preview of greater things to come in the future when at the time of the millennium Israel as united nation will be restored unto the Lord. When this passage speaks of Zion and Jerusalem, I do not think it is accurate to interpret these names as referring to some spiritual blessing to be brought to the Church of Christ composed of both Jews and Gentiles. For in Isaiah 62:2, the capital city of Jerusalem seems clearly to be distinguished from Gentiles, from Gentile nations, and from Gentile kings as they behold the gracious glory bestowed by God upon the undeserving covenanted nation of Israel. There are places in Scripture where the name "Israel" has a spiritual significance (Galatians 6:16), but we ought not to deny a future political, national meaning to Israel when Israel or Jerusalem is distinguished within a context from Gentiles, from Gentile nations, and from Gentile kings (as we see here in Isaiah 62:2 and in other passages).

C. Isaiah 62:4 helps us to understand what Israel's divorce meant. When Israel is restored, God says she who was called "Forsaken" shall be called "Hephzibah" (i.e. "My delight is in her") for "the LORD delighteth in thee". God also says the LAND of Israel which was called "Desolate" shall be called "Beulah" (i.e. "married") for "thy land shall be married." Also note that the bill of divorcement God gave to Israel was a cutting off of Israel from their land due to their unbelief and unfaithfulness to the marital covenant (or National Covenant), and the restoration of Israel is a bringing them back into their land (or a marrying them with their land again) in a state of faith in Christ and obedience to their National Covenant (which is called a New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 due to the coming of their covenant-keeper, Jesus Christ). In other words, God's national certificate of divorce was issued when Israel was cast out of her land away from the presence of God her husband. Israel was in that sense put away or cut off from her heavenly Husband whose earthly throne was said to be in Jerusalem. The bill of divorcement does not mean that God made the National Covenant of Israel null and void as if they were no longer a covenanted nation while in captivity. If that were the case, how would we account for God's appeals to Israel, His covenanted people, even though cast into captivity (especially in the many prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel)? God actually warned Israel before Moses died that if they turned their backs upon God and the National Covenant made with Him that He would drive them away from Him and out of the land (Deuteronomy 28:64). But even from that land into which they have been taken into captivity, they remain God's covenanted people as Solomon indicates by his prayer at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8:44-53).

D. Thus, it cannot be maintained, dear ones, that a covenanted nation, kingdom, or dominion can ever be anything other than a covenanted nation, kingdom, or dominion unto God in spite of their unfaithfulness. Israel is a covenanted nation (and presently a covenant-breaking nation), and although there is presently a national state of Israel, she is not yet married to her land because she is not married to her land in faith to Jesus Christ (which is what the prophecies of the Old Testament predict). Likewise, let no one think for

a moment that Israel's divorce implies that either she or any other covenanted nation can cease to be a covenanted nation unto God.

II. Objection: The *Solemn League and Covenant* does not bind posterity formally, but only materially, because posterity did not actually swear it.

A. This objection claims that there are no lawful covenants that can be passed on to posterity if posterity did not actually, formally lift up their hands and utter with their mouths that lawful covenant. This objection argues that the moral precepts in the covenant do materially bind posterity because they are God's moral commandments. But the objection states that it is only the commandments in the covenant and not the covenant itself that binds posterity. Therefore, the objection concludes that it is not the *Solemn League and Covenant* that binds posterity (since posterity did not swear it); rather it is only that which is moral in nature within the *Solemn League and Covenant* that binds posterity. Some would say, it is the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, the *Directory for Public Worship*, and the *Presbyterial Form of Church Government* that bind (others would disagree and simply say that it is whatever is lawful in the *Solemn League and Covenant* that binds).

B. This objection makes nonsense out of God's Word, for it implies that no covenant is binding that one did not formally and personally make for oneself. What about the Covenant of Works made with Adam (Genesis 2)? All posterity of Adam by ordinary generation are bound by it even though all posterity did not personally engage themselves as did Adam (1 Corinthians 15:22). What about the covenant Israel made with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9)? King Saul did not personally take the covenant made with the Gibeonites at the time of Joshua and yet he broke that covenant and brought God's judgment upon Israel (2 Samuel 21:1-2). What about the National Covenant God made with Israel and Israel made with God (Deuteronomy 29:14-15)? If a covenant does not formally bind posterity who did not personally swear it, how could Judah and Israel living at the time of Jeremiah be guilty of breaking a covenant that their forefathers made hundreds of years earlier with God (Jeremiah 11:10)? Why were they not simply guilty of breaking God's law?

III. Objection: King Charles II was forced to take the *Solemn League and Covenant*, and therefore it was not taken willingly. Thus, he could subsequently rescind it.

A. First, a lawful covenant may be lawfully imposed upon a person or upon a nation by a lawful authority (2 Chronicles 34:32). It is a great sin against God to refuse to swear a lawful covenant imposed by lawful authority. Thus, the Parliament of Scotland having the authority of the kingdom to impose a lawful covenant upon Charles II, Charles II was required to take it.

B. Second, even a lawful covenant imposed by an unlawful authority can bind one to fulfill the terms of that covenant. Zedekiah was forced to swear on behalf of himself and the kingdom of Judah to Nebuchadnezzar (a tyrant) that he would not rebel against Nebuchadnezzar. When Zedekiah broke that covenant with Nebuchadnezzar by seeking the help of the Egyptians, God held him guilty of covenant-breaking (Ezekiel 17:19). Thus, even if (hypothetically) Charles II was forced to take the *Solemn League and Covenant*, he cannot release himself from a lawful covenant on the basis of being forced to take it.

C. Finally, Charles II was not forced to take it. No one held a gun to his head. He voluntarily took it, and lied in taking it in order to gain the crown. Charles II took the *Solemn League and Covenant* deceitfully, but he did not take it unwillingly.

Dear ones, in closing, consider with me that a baptismal covenant is one that is not made personally and intelligently to God by the child, but by the parents on behalf of the child that the child is bound to trust, love and serve Christ all the days of his life. Just as circumcision was called “the covenant of circumcision” because it was the sign of God’s covenant with that child and that child with God (Acts 7:8), so baptism may be likewise called “the covenant of baptism”. Herein is illustrated for us the nature of a binding covenant upon that child even if that child never trusts Christ or refuses to personally own the covenant by which he is bound unto God. He is then a covenant-breaker. But so was Israel and Judah. Israel and Judah were divorced by God and sent away from His presence in the land of Israel into foreign captivity. But the Lord even after thousands of years does not forget His covenants. The future restoration of Israel and Judah (Romans 11:25-29) gives us great hope and comfort for our backslidden covenant children and for our backslidden covenanted nation. The final word has not been uttered in regard to either our children or our nation. For the Lord does not forget our covenants made with Him. Let us continue to appeal to those covenants when we pray for our children and for our nation.

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