

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

VII,

© Ray R. Sutton, 1993

March, 1993

## THE COVENANTAL JOURNEY

In the words of Mark Twain, "Life is just one 'darn' [paraphrase of the original] thing after another." Given the last twenty years in ministry, I **must say** that there is some truth in Mr. Twain's assessment. And, I've met many who sympathize with his statement.

One of the interesting implications of Twain's perspective is the never ending string of unexpected events. As my grandmother used to love to say, "Life is just full of surprises." We humans are just humans in the final analysis, which means we cannot infallibly predict the future, much less control it. People get sick and die. Stock markets crash. Cars break down. Mothers get pregnant (Trust me, with seven precious children I know that God's number is not always our number . . . PRAISE THE LORD!). The wrong presidents get elected, or, in some cases the right presidents are voted in and go back on their promises.

And, on and on life goes. Better stated, "on and on God goes with His plan," bringing to pass whatsoever He has ordained, to quote a portion of the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Standards. Indeed, God is full of surprises for us, which makes life very interesting.

For humans, the unexpected changes remind us of the Prophet Isaiah's statement, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of God lives forever." The only thing that does not change is God Himself, which of course includes His Word. People, places and possessions may take different courses, but the Holy Scriptures do not. The Bible always says the same, regardless of the situation, in spite of the new meaning that appears in different **circumstances**. This is a great comfort in a turbulent world such as ours. Nevertheless, peoples' situations do change around them.

### The Journey

In the last year, my whole world has changed. One minute I was living in the deep south, pastor of a congregation that I had served for nearly sixteen years, and the next moment, I was living in the northeast, the president of a one-hundred-year-old seminary. I must admit that our whole family went through culture shock at several levels, although, as usual my wife handled the changes better than I did.

As I look back over the past year, I continue to be amazed. In late 1991, I moved to Philadelphia by myself to establish some kind of appropriate housing and schooling for our children. My wife and family remained behind to pack up some of our 3,000 square foot home and prepare for the journey. At Christmas time, I returned home, loaded a truck, and headed northward with the entire family. Buckets of tears were shed by young and old along the way.

My children had never known an existence in any other place. My oldest son was leaving a lovely Christian girl

friend, **leadership** in his school, and all of his extended family" and **friends** in the middle of his junior year. Needless to say, it was difficult for him. Yet, I should add that he has done great. He has responded like a faithful Christian and we have seen God bless his life through the Lord's perfect will. I should further say that he too has come to recognize the will of God in the move, for which his mother and I are quite grateful; we're also quite proud as well. Our other children have done equally as well making new Christian friends, settling in and learning the ways of the far north, even though the transition has had its trying moments.

To complicate matters a bit further, I was invited by an Oxford scholar to pursue a doctorate at **Wycliffe** Hall in Oxford, England, the opportunity of a lifetime. But, if my dear wife had not been so supportive and encouraging (as she always is), I could have never ventured so far away for so long. In fact, I was reluctant to go, but she insisted. Moreover, the Board of Trustees for the seminary, my new ministry, were equally as encouraging. They unanimously approved **sabbatic** time.

So, in early spring of 1992, I left for a term of residence study, only to be joined the last two weeks by my wife. This meant that the children (all six of them) had to stay with friends. If we had not been in an area where there are so many of our denominational churches with pastors and their families so sympathetic to my ministry (and my wife), we probably couldn't have done this; in fact, I know we couldn't have done it; there is no doubt at all in my mind. Again, **we** saw God meet our needs, as this became a positive time for all of us, especially my wife who got a much deserved and needed two week vacation in England; she didn't once complain!

The biggest surprise of all for 1992, however, was the arrival of our seventh child, Raymond Austin. He brought even more change into our lives. Shortly after arriving from England, my wife and family returned briefly to Texas to finalize some details on the house and have the baby. Perfect timing!

These events were certainly not something any of us could have planned to happen. There were too many, "I never expected." Believe me, I never even dreamed of being asked to be president of our seminary. I couldn't have known we were going to have a child during this time. I didn't know what to expect, quite frankly, in the hallowed halls of Oxford University. And, my first year on the new job was a series of the unexpected. So, there you have it, a journey of journeys in the life of the Sutton family.

The Sutton journey represents many changes in our lives. I have often thought and prayed, "God, what is your purpose in all of this?" "Do you have greater purposes than simply relocating the family and repositioning my **call-**

ing?" "What are You doing in the life of my family anyway?" And then there is the nagging concern to evaluate what God taught us in all of those years of parish life. In many ways, God has completely, although not unrelated, redirected the course of my ministry. I have been provoked to such simple questions, "What should be my response to God?" "How should my family view this?" These among many questions have surfaced, as we have moved from one sphere of service into another.

I have found significant answers in the research of a doctoral student at **Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary**, the Rev. Lee B. Spitzer. I do not know this scholar, and in no way do I intend to imply anything about his personal theological persuasion by the use of his work. I do not know where he is on the compass of **denominationalism**. It doesn't matter. For my purposes, I have found his doctoral dissertation to be quite informative. **Without knowing it, he has analyzed a progression in spiritual growth that follows the pattern and definition of the Biblical covenant.** In this study, I will draw heavily from the Rev. **Spitzer's** research to consider the **covenantal** journey of spirituality.

A caveat: I must admit, the word, **journey**, is one of those misused liberal words that I have come to mistrust. Usually, when people use the word it means they are headed toward major change, often for the worst, most of the time with an agenda, and almost always in the direction away from orthodoxy. But, I am not using the word in this way. I am referring to a journey in the sense of the pilgrimage through life that takes us all in our own various directions according to the Lord's will. The journey, nevertheless, involves changes as well as constants. It will introduce the **traveller** to new doors leading to different paths. It will also involve the repetition of certain basic principles, however; as the saying goes, particularly pertinent to the present political administration, "The more things change the more they remain the same." In no way do I understand this journey to be a rationalization for abandoning the faith. Quite the contrary, the truly Biblical and **covenantal** journey will bring about movement toward a closer walk with God, unless covenant breaking is involved. Unrepentant disobedience turns the journey into a wandering that never comes out of the desert. The result most definitely can be death. If it is death without returning to Christ, the journey has been a path of damnation. My concern, however, is with the stages of spiritual development in the journey.

### Stages of Development

For half a century, conservative factions **within the** evangelical community have fought over whether or not there are stages of development. The psychological community (secular and sacred) has argued on the basis of any number of paradigms that human beings go through stages. Many conservative Christians have objected. Some have held that the stage development approach undermines conversion. Others have simply denied that Scripture teaches such a thing.

As for the issue of conversion, Luther no doubt affected the classical paradigm of spiritual development. In the middle ages, the paradigm followed a definite understanding of progression:

#### Assumed Conversion of the Monk

- Stage 1: Purgation – Repentance of Sins
- Stage 2: Illumination – Progress in the perfecting of the virtuous life.
- Stage 3: **Union/Marriage** – Perfection of the soul in the existential realization of the fullness of God's love.

In all fairness to this model, **the** language, "Assumed conversion of the Monk," simply means that the process was understood as taking place within salvation. What became muddled by the time of Luther was the precise nature of salvation. Under the Medieval theological system, one could never know for sure that he/she was saved. The process of spiritual development became a means of salvation.

The process view of conversion is somewhat of a perversion of the classical paradigm of spirituality predating the Middle Ages. Luther's view of salvation attempted to correct this position. His three stages looked like the following:

#### No assumed conversion

- Stage 1: Conversion - **Union/forgiveness**
- Stage 2: Good Works – progress in the perfecting of the life of faith.
- Stage 3: Perfection – In **the** life to come.

Luther is careful to put spiritual development after conversion. Technically, sanctification is progressive, not salvation. What is the difference? If the act of salvation (conversion) is progressive, then it becomes a works system. Salvation is not of faith, contrary to what Scripture says. If **sanctification** (spiritual growth) is progressive, then the Biblical definition of conversion and salvation are protected. Moreover, sanctification as well is protected. Salvation is not viewed as instant perfection, nor can perfection ever be attained in this life. Growth is possible within the framework of faith. No growth can occur without faith. In other words, covenant faithfulness results in positive development, and covenant unfaithfulness leads to negative digression, even death. In this sense, Luther protected the truly classical paradigm, when he corrected the general Medieval version of spirituality.

The problem has surfaced in the last century, however, in the opposite direction of the problems of Medievalist. After centuries of the protestant emphasis on conversion, all sense of progressive sanctification in the individual, not to mention the complete neglect of progressive sanctification in the history, has all but been totally neglected. The modern evangelical church has so emphasized one time conversion that it has failed to develop a balance on spiritual growth, a progressive sanctification. Hence, as the first Reformation corrected the abuses of salvation by works, perhaps there is need of a second Reformation to overcome a view of salvation that advocates **faith without works**, to use James' words from his epistle, which by the way caused Luther so much consternation.

Apart from the larger issue of human development (physical and/or psychological), spiritual growth occurs in several stages. A number of scholars (secular and Christian) have addressed the issue and arrived at similar conclusions. The most significant contribution in my opinion is the work of the Rev. Dr. Lee Spitzer.

### The Covenantal Journey

The concept of the spiritual life as a journey is based on the concept of the believer as a pilgrim, who has set out to accomplish certain things for God. The spiritual journey can be viewed from a historic and corporate perspective, or from the individual and personal view.

The historical sense of God's people being on a journey appears throughout the sweep of Scripture. "From Genesis to Revelation, God's people are pictured journeying in response to God's sovereign call in a world that is fractured by sin. Sandwiched between two depictions of perfection (the Garden of Eden before humanity's fall and the New Jerusalem in which sinless perfection has been restored)

are the historical accounts of God's people journeying in response to God's call towards a goal or destination.

"Abraham leaves his homeland in order to discover the promised land. Joseph journeys to Egypt [unwillingly, to be sure] and is used by God to save his family and the Egyptians in a time of unforeseen famine. Moses leads Israel from Egypt to Canaan on a journey of liberation that was to last more than forty years. This particular journey became the central theme of Israel's religious experience, with its lessons ingrained into the hearts and minds of each succeeding generation of Jews. Even the prophets and kings of later Old Testament history epitomize the journeying motif. David's journeys are legendary and recounted in both the historical and poetic sections of the Old Testament. In the **post-exilic** era, Nehemiah and Ezra journey with God's people from captivity back to Judah. And perhaps the most well-known Old Testament story — that of Jonah and the sea monster — is a story of a reluctant prophet's **task-specific** spiritual journey away from and then back towards the ministry goals that God had ordained for him.

"In the New Testament, the journeying motif remains central. John the Baptist journeys throughout Israel in order to set the stage for Jesus' messianic ministry. Jesus Himself is depicted in all four Gospels as an itinerant teacher, who spends his whole ministry journeying from one town to another, with Jerusalem as his ultimate destination. The basic way in which Jesus taught his disciples was by allowing them to accompany him on his journeys, and by sending them on their own short-term journeys to practice what they had observed. Paul's Christian experience began while he was on a journey, and his subsequent life and ministry can easily be recounted as a series of personal and apostolic ministry journeys. Peter's **ministry** takes him from Jerusalem to Rome, and John's journey brings him to Patmos, where he records visions of the Messiah's return journey back to our world and the Church's journey through tribulation and into **eternity**."<sup>1</sup>

Old and New Testament present the people of God as constantly journeying from one place to another. More than the historic journey, however, the Apostle Paul specifies that, "Conversion is portrayed as a transfer or journey from one kingdom into another (**Colossians** 1:13). Paul characterizes the movement of the Christian life in the Philippians by saying that he 'pressed on' (**Gk. *dioko*** to pursue as a hunter) towards God's goal for his life. He is particularly fond of expressing the flow of the Christian by employing the 'walking' metaphor. To the Philippians, he says that those who follow him should 'walk according to the pattern you have in us' (Philippians 3:12-17). This same metaphor is used in other pastoral **contexts**."<sup>2</sup>

The Apostle Paul commonly uses "walk language." Consider the following passages:

1, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called . . . This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind (**Ephesians** 4:1,17).

Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more (1 **Thessalonians** 4:1).

Besides the passages that use "walk language, Paul

also speaks of the Christian life as a race, clearly another reference to the journey motif. He says,

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win . . . Therefore, **I** run in such a way, as not without aim (1 **Corinthians** 9:24,26a).

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat **down** at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The spiritual walk of the people of God, therefore, is a journey in the Old and New Testament. Not only is this the case in a corporate sense, but in the life of the individual covenant keeper, the Christian life is a **fivefold journey**.

### The Fivefold Journey

The Rev. Dr. Spitzer breaks down the spiritual journey into five phases. "Christians pass through five distinct phases in each journey which they should embrace in prayerful response to God's **call**."<sup>3</sup>

#### Phase One: Preparation or the Unconscious Journey

This phase is quite unique according to Dr. Spitzer because it is initiated before a person is ever aware of it. The journey starts before an individual actually knows it. "We begin heading towards a goal long before we discover what the goal actually is or even that the journey has begun. In this phase, we pack for the trip by picking up skills, tools and insights that will become invaluable later on when we discover how God intends to put them to use. This process of 'packing' is usually not the result of conscious choice on our part, but simply is the work of God within us so that we will be prepared for the demands and challenges of the **future**."<sup>4</sup>

"Theologically, phase one is an existential experience or personal realization of the **doctrines of grace and predestination**. This phase of the journey is wholly dependent on God's willingness to fashion our lives according to His vision of the future. He must **initiate** the process for it to be fruitful, and its fruitfulness is conditioned on God's ability to see what is precisely needed in our futures. God does not begin a process in our lives by chance or on a whim, but rather because He has a specific and achievable goal in mind for the course of our lives on this globe . . . It is vitally important to recognize that the initiation of the journey is not dependent on us or our actions, but rather on God's working out of His desires for our lives. Any other understanding of the process will inevitably lead to self-aggrandizement instead of the glorification of God in our **lives**."<sup>5</sup>

The first part of the Biblical covenant is God's initiation of the covenant through some means, especially the Verbal Word. For this reason, **I** have used the word, **Transcendence**. In relation to the spiritual journey, God starts leading in a direction often before we are aware of it. But the point is that God is the one who begins our journeys, not circumstances or anything else. This can save us from a lifetime of bitterness and anger, if we will simply acknowledge the leading of God, even when we do not know **all** of the details.

1. Lee B. Spitzer, *A Goal-Oriented Spiritual Journey Paradigm As a Basis For Pastoral Ministry* (Boston, 1 989), pp. 147-148. Unpublished doctoral dissertation at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

3. *ibid.*, p. 150.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

Many Biblical examples illustrate phase one of the **covenantal** journey. "Joseph is given the opportunity to hear from God in dreams as a youth, and this sets in motion a whole series of events which enable him to rise to the highest levels of power in Egypt and so save the people [and his own family] from starvation. Esther, through a beauty contest, becomes the Queen of Persia, and soon finds herself in a position to use her beauty, charm and **craftiness** to save the Jews from annihilation. She did not choose this journey, but God did, and behind the scenes He manipulated events so that His ends might be achieved. Saul of Tarsus is led by God as a youth to delve deeply into the wisdom of Judaism so that he will be able to articulate the intricacies of the New Covenant in an authoritative way. Luke, a physician by training, discovers later on in his life that the skills he learned for this profession equip him beautifully to complement Paul's apostolic ministry and to write Luke-Acts for the first-century **church**."<sup>6</sup>

God begins working in our lives before we are aware of it. We are in motion before we know it. And, the process on moving from one phase of the journey goes on all of the time.

### Phase Two: Discovery

In this phase, a person realizes for the first time what God is doing in his/her life. God's plan begins to unveil. "We look back on our past and realize for the first time why certain events took place. **Our past takes on new meaning when we see the future more clearly.** Seemingly isolated events now share a connectedness that had been hidden from us as we **travelled** through the unconscious phase of our journey. . . . Furthermore, phase two involves a spiritual awakening and the reception of new insights which have the potential of totally changing the way we view the world and our **role** in it."<sup>7</sup>

The second aspect of the Biblical covenant is hierarchy. It involves two elements, history and representation. In the suzerain treaties, the second aspect of the treaty was historical prologue, stating the history of the relationship between the Suzerain and the people. In Scripture, the second part of the covenant often takes this shape. The spiritual journey also has a historical element, as expressed by Dr. Spitzer, when the person "looks back on his past and realizes for the first time why certain events took place."

In addition, the second segment of the covenant concerns hierarchy or representation. Dr. Spitzer uses the word, "role." In the second phase of the spiritual journey, there is this hierarchical sense to it. The individual becomes aware of how God wants the person to represent Him. Thus, the journey takes even more **covenantal** form.

### Phase Three: Cooperation

In this phase, "God enlists our active intentional participation towards a goal-related end, based upon our commitment to serve Him and others in submission to His will. To pick up the journeying analogy once more, if phase one represents the packing for a trip, and if phase two involves finding out our destination, then phase three is characterized by actually getting into the car and traveling. It is a

time when knowledge becomes wedded with action, when conviction leads to concrete **application**."<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Spitzer calls this phase, "cooperation." He is careful to explain that in no sense does he mean this to imply a synergistic view of salvation. He is talking about **sanctification**.<sup>9</sup> He is describing the **obediential** aspect of responding to the work of God in one's life, which is the third part of the Biblical covenant. I have called it, **ethical stipulations**, because this part of the covenant describes the righteous requirements of the believer. From the point of view of the journey, however, it is compliance with the Word of God that Spitzer stresses.

### Phase Four: Reaching the Goal

The goal of the journey according to Dr. Spitzer is **worship**. "Reflection and **self-discovery** inevitably lead us to a renewal of worship. The only appropriate response to discovering the changes that have taken place within and through us is the worship of God. . . . The most grave temptation open to the Christian is to allow his or her agenda to gain the status of the most important thing in life, with everything and everyone else becoming subordinate to it."<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Spitzer also points out that this can have the impact of a **death experience** in the life of the journey. A let down can occur as one realizes that the journey has drawn to an end.

The fourth part of the covenant is **oath taking** or **ratification**, which is precisely what is supposed to happen in worship. This normally occurs in Scripture during a worship scene.

### Phase Five: Renewal

"After we have reached the goals of our spiritual journeys during this life, we experience death, resurrection and new life. Resurrection and new life are experienced when God begins the call to a new and different journey; when the letdown is replaced by a new sense of vitality and purpose, we feel like new people. Once this has occurred, we are already well on our way along a new unconscious journey [phase one] that will lead us into the **future**."<sup>11</sup>

The final aspect of the covenant is **succession, a transition**. In Scripture, the transition often involves a death and resurrection process, often in regard to the **covenantal** leader such as Moses, or ultimately Jesus. The resurrection of the new covenant head brings about renewal of the covenant and new directions. This is precisely what happens in the spiritual journey, although there is not necessarily an actual physical death. The point is that there is renewed direction as result of ratifying the Biblical covenant.

And, this brings me to the answer to all of those questions that were raised in my difficult year of transition. This process has occurred with me and the Sutton family has received a new sense of excitement and direction for what God has planned in our lives. The **covenantal** journey, therefore, is an opportunity worked out in history to experience the **presence** of God in our lives and renew our covenant with Him. May God help you to do it!

8. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 157-156.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-160.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 151-152.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.