

COVENANTS AND SACRIFICE

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CES Symposium on the Old Testament • 15 August 1995 • Brigham Young University



I am grateful that we can be together tonight as teachers. Those of you who will face a class this year teaching the Old Testament have an opportunity I wish I had at least once again. The first year I taught early-morning seminary the course of study was the Old Testament. I was a professor in a university. I had taught the gospel for

many years, and yet I still can recall my anxiety as I pulled into the parking lot, walked into the church classroom across from Cubberly High School in Palo Alto, California, and looked into the faces of those sleepy students, knowing I was going to try to change their lives with the study of the Old Testament.

Cubberly High School is gone now. There are only two high schools left in Palo Alto, where then there were three. My students are grown, with children who may be in your classes. But from that year of teaching, one series of lessons has stayed with me, as if it were yesterday. Most of the rest of the curriculum of that year is forgotten, completely lost to me, but that one part remains. It was the lesson—I think I extended it over two or three days—on the book of Hosea.

I can think of at least three reasons for my vivid memory of those few mornings. First, Hosea is a book full of difficult and apparently dark symbolism. It is hard to teach to teenagers in a way that uplifts them. Second, I had just been married, very happily; and so a story that used marriage as a metaphor had great power for me. And third, what I learned in those few days changed the way I would teach the Old Testament if I ever had the chance again. And it has been changing my life ever since.

As you would expect, I taught Hosea late in the year. I had struggled for all those months to find some theme to weave through my lessons that seemed so separate, so disconnected. And, perhaps even more, I had

struggled personally with a feeling my students had quietly expressed, and sometimes shown in their faces. That feeling was of the harshness of the God of the Old Testament. In those few days spent in Hosea, something happened to resolve all of that for me. The year was almost over, so I could not take much advantage of it then for those students. But your year is about to begin. Let me tell you what I wish I had known and felt as I walked into that classroom the first time. I certainly wouldn't start with Hosea. I'm not even sure whether those Hosea lessons were more for me than for my students. But from my experience I can tell you what I would try to do in every part of the Old Testament I might be teaching.

The book of Hosea, like the writings of Isaiah, uses what seem to me almost poetic images. The symbols in Hosea are a husband, his bride, her betrayal, and a test of marriage covenants almost beyond comprehension. In your mind, go with me to that early-morning class near Cubberly High School and let me read what I read to my students then. This is from Hosea 2:6–7. Here are the fierce words of the husband, spoken after his wife has betrayed him in adultery:

“Therefore, behold, I will hedge up thy way with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths.

“And she shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now.”

He goes on (through verse 13) to describe the punishment she deserves, and then comes a remarkable change in the verses that follow. I'll give you verse 13, and then you will better sense a change so sharp that it sounds almost as if it were a disconnection. Listen:

“And I will visit upon her the days of Baalim, wherein she burned incense to them, and she decked herself with her earrings and her jewels, and she went after her lovers, and forgot me, saith the Lord.”

And then in the very next verse comes the apparent sudden shift:

“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her.

“And I will give her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the days when she came up out of the land of Egypt” (vv. 14–15).

And now listen to this conclusion of the promise:

“And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving kindness, and in mercies.

“I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord.

“And it shall come to pass in that day, I will hear, saith the Lord, I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth;

“And the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil; and they shall hear Jezreel.

“And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God” (vv. 19–23).

At that early point in the story, in just two chapters, even my youngest students knew that the husband was a metaphor for Jehovah, Jesus Christ. And they knew that the wife represented his covenant people, Israel, who had gone after strange gods. They understood that the Lord was teaching them, through this metaphor, an important principle. Even though those with whom he has covenanted may be horribly unfaithful to him, he would not divorce them if they would only turn back to him with full purpose of heart.

I knew that too, but even more than that, I felt something. I had a new feeling about what it means to make a covenant with the Lord. All my life I had heard explanations of covenants as being like a contract, an agreement where one person agrees to do something and the other agrees to do something else in return.

For more reasons than I can explain, during those days teaching Hosea, I felt something new, something more powerful. This was not a story about a business deal between partners, nor about business law. This was not a story of business. This was a love story. This

was a story of a marriage covenant bound by love, by steadfast love. What I felt then, and it has increased over the years, was that the Lord, with whom I am blessed to have made covenants, loves me, and you, and those we teach, with a steadfastness about which I continually marvel and which I want with all my heart to emulate.

And just a little later in the story, I again found my theme and with it my answer to the puzzle of what to do about the harshness some of my students had found in the God of the Old Testament. It comes in Hosea 6:6, the very place to which Jesus in his earthly ministry had sent his listeners to read more than once. Here it is. I hope you can feel something of what I felt nearly thirty years ago when I read it in a classroom.

Again, the Lord, speaking as the husband, says what it is that he expected from covenant Israel, which he has likened to a faithless wife. In verse 5 before it, we have another description of punishment, and then another shift in verse 6, which for me was like a light appearing:

“Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth: and thy judgments are as the light that goeth forth.

“For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”

If I could go back again to that group of students of mine, I would see every classroom day throughout the year as the opportunity for them to know a little better Jesus Christ as he is. He is the God speaking through these verses in Hosea. The exactness, the demand for perfect fidelity, combined with the willingness to reach out with mercy, apparently almost endlessly, are not in conflict. They do not create a paradox. Jesus Christ, the God of the Old Testament, shares his Father’s desire that all of us might have eternal life, to live the life that God lives. To do that we must become like him—perfectly faithful, clean without blemish. He knows that standard is not reachable for us, unless we do all that we can do and then rely on his mercy in faith.

Love as Christ Loves

If I could go back again, I would try to help my students see the stern justice of God and his mercy as twin evidences of his love. I would teach them this: what he offers us in every covenant with him is the opportunity to learn to love as he loves, so that we may

become, through the Atonement, like him and thus able to inherit eternal life. I would try to help them feel the Savior as unchangeable, the same God who speaks to them through the Old and New Testament, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and through his living prophets. He is not exacting one place and forgiving another. He is always both because he loves us and knows what we must have to receive the gift he offers us.

That theme of the love of God can be taught any number of ways as you journey with your students in the Old Testament. One of the great opportunities will recur as you teach about covenants. Let me suggest a few places I would try, and how I might try, to help my students feel the steadfast love of Jesus Christ for them by helping them sense some of his personal characteristics.

Somewhere during the year you will teach about the Abrahamic covenant. There are all sorts of ways to do it. But for me, I would try to find a moment to take a student into the presence of Abraham, in their imaginations, as God makes the covenant with him. You have had blessings given to you where you felt the love of God. But imagine yourself as Abraham, knowing what he knows, that the greatest of all the gifts of God is eternal life, and then imagine hearing these words both of promise to you and of inclusion in his great work:

“My name is Jehovah, and I know the end from the beginning; therefore my hand shall be over thee.

“And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee above measure, and make thy name great among all nations, and thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations;

“And I will bless them through thy name; for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father;

“And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee; and in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and in thy seed (that is, thy Priesthood), for I give unto thee a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal” (Abraham 2:8–11).

Perfect Fairness

You and I, and your students, are blessed by that Abrahamic covenant, and we are bound by it. But we are not bound by compulsion. We are bound by his love for us and by the love he evokes in us.

Now, some of your students may well react as some of mine have. They may become uneasy, perhaps even feeling some injustice, in the idea that God favors one people and chastises others. They may see in that evidence that he is less than loving. I would take that as a chance to teach them of one of the characteristics of the Savior: his perfect fairness. I think I would try to insert here the Book of Mormon:

“Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God. But behold, this people had rejected every word of God, and they were ripe in iniquity; and the fulness of the wrath of God was upon them; and the Lord did curse the land against them, and bless it unto our fathers; yea, he did curse it against them unto their destruction, and he did bless it unto our fathers unto their obtaining power over it. . . .

“And he loveth those who will have him to be their God. Behold, he loved our fathers, and he covenanted with them, yea, even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and he remembered the covenants which he had made; wherefore, he did bring them out of the land of Egypt” (1 Nephi 17:35, 40).

Liberating, Not Constraining

From time to time, you may sense in your students a perception that God tries by harsh events to compel people to do right and to do what he wants. I would try to find ways then to teach them another of his characteristics: he is liberating, not constraining. He is that way because what he wants so much to give us can only be granted if we choose to make and keep covenants with him freely, in faith. Help your students feel that even the rebukes of the Lord are rooted in his love. He blesses us when we respond to his proffered gifts. We must merit blessings by obedience to our covenants, not simply because we made those covenants. And when any of us choose to make and keep the covenants, we will gain the blessings. In this there is no favoritism. All who obey are blessed. And in fact, Nephi taught us that this is what it means to truly be God’s covenant people:

“For behold, I say unto you that as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off; for the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, who is the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 30:2).

The Savior never compels righteousness. Your students will have felt at times that they have been coerced to keep a covenant. But the Lord wants us to come unto him out of love, for that is the only way we can receive the blessings he wants so much to give us. This is the purpose for which covenants were established. You will find places to teach that from the Old Testament. I would try also to find a way to weave in this great teaching from Alma:

“Therefore, O my son, whosoever will come may come and partake of the waters of life freely; and whosoever will not come the same is not compelled to come; but in the last day it shall be restored unto him according to his deeds” (Alma 42:27).

Some of your students, maybe more than a few, will be troubled by the apparent harshness of the laws God gives his people through his prophets. They may even get that same feeling from what they see as binding and constricting rules in the Church today or in their homes. You can find instance after instance where the servants of God tried to help the people feel the liberating intent of the Savior, even as he gave commandments and covenants. I might use Moses as an example as he tried to teach his people that very fact about the love of God. Here is the way he tried to do it:

“Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it.

“Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

“For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon him for?

“And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?” (Deuteronomy 4:5–8).

In a similar way, in this dispensation the Lord promised that those who are obedient should be

“crowned with blessings from above” and, note this, “with commandments not a few” (D&C 59:4). Our task is to help our students see that commandments are really like a crown of blessings.

Eager to Help

Some of your students, rather than feeling hemmed in by laws, commandments, and covenants may feel overwhelmed. For them, the temptation may be to say to themselves, “I am simply too weak to overcome the temptations and the trials that are swamping me.” You can give them courage by pointing out to them that each covenant they have made has with it the promise of help from God to keep them if they will only try. He truly gives no commandment without preparing a way for us to keep it. Just as we are heirs to the obligations of the Abrahamic covenant, we are heirs to the help Abraham had. That is because of another characteristic of the Savior: he is eager to help. Listen to this description of the way the Lord dealt with Abraham. It is the way he will deal with us as well:

“Abraham received all things, whatsoever he received, by revelation and commandment, by my word, saith the Lord, and hath entered into his exaltation and sitteth upon his throne.

“Abraham received promises concerning his seed, and of the fruit of his loins—from whose loins ye are, namely, my servant Joseph—which were to continue so long as they were in the world; and as touching Abraham and his seed, out of the world they should continue; both in the world and out of the world should they continue as innumerable as the stars; or, if ye were to count the sand upon the seashore ye could not number them.

“This promise is yours also, because ye are of Abraham, and the promise was made unto Abraham; and by this law is the continuation of the works of my Father, wherein he glorifieth himself.

“Go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham; enter ye into my law and ye shall be saved” (D&C 132:29–32).

Trust

As you teach the Abrahamic covenant, you may wish to go to the Doctrine and Covenants to help your students feel the care and the love of the Savior as he made sure that they and all of his Father’s children would someday

have access to covenants and the blessings covenants can bring. You may want to describe the wonderful manifestations the Lord gave to the Prophet Joseph and his fellow servants in the Kirtland Temple. Out of love for us all, the Lord sent messengers to make us eligible for the blessings of Abraham. The covenants restored make us the seed of Abraham.

That use of servants to represent him displays another characteristic of the Savior: trust. He has trusted his servants to do his work in his name when that work was of incalculable importance. And your students will sense in that the possibility that they could earn his trust as well.

Here is one of those great events of trust, as one servant brought to another a blessing that is now offered to all of us:

“After this, Elias appeared, and committed the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham, saying that in us and our seed all generations after us should be blessed” (D&C 110:12).

If I had the chance to teach the Old Testament again, I would take every opportunity, and there are many in the stories of prophets in the Old Testament, to teach why it is that the Lord’s servants are so much like him. They seem to teach and lead with that same combination of exactness and mercy. I might even read some passages from Old Testament prophets interspersed with President Spencer W. Kimball’s, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, to allow them to sense the consistency.

The reason for the exactness lies not in personalities but in what it takes for us to gain eternal life, to become like our Father and his Beloved Son. One reason for this is that we cannot be half-hearted in our acceptance of covenants. If we would have all the blessings, which is what God wants us to have, we must be prepared to give all that we have and are. Another reason is that we can only make those covenants that will bring eternal life through the servants authorized by God to offer them. And because those servants know they are accountable to be sure that those they teach can qualify for the mercy the Savior offers, they go to great lengths to be sure that they have been clear in what is required. Sometime when you are in the middle of one of the stronger statements by an Old Testament prophet, you might take your students to this part of Doctrine and Covenants 132. It will help them feel not only the

consistency of the Savior but also the consistency of his servants. And it will help them love and understand those servants, both those from long ago and those leading us now:

“For all who will have a blessing at my hands shall abide the law which was appointed for that blessing, and the conditions thereof, as were instituted from before the foundation of the world.

“And as pertaining to the new and everlasting covenant, it was instituted for the fulness of my glory; and he that receiveth a fulness thereof must and shall abide the law, or he shall be damned, saith the Lord God.

“And verily I say unto you, that the conditions of this law are these: All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations, that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, of him who is anointed, both as well for time and for all eternity, and that too most holy, by revelation and commandment through the medium of mine anointed, whom I have appointed on the earth to hold this power (and I have appointed unto my servant Joseph to hold this power in the last days, and there is never but one on the earth at a time on whom this power and the keys of this priesthood are conferred), are of no efficacy, virtue, or force in and after the resurrection from the dead; for all contracts that are not made unto this end have an end when men are dead.

“Behold, mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God, and not a house of confusion” (vv. 5–8).

Simplicity

As you teach about covenants, you have an opportunity to teach another characteristic of the Savior: he makes things as simple for us as he can, because he wants so much for us to understand. Your students will need to have that reassurance when they find what seem to be obscure and complicated passages in the Old Testament. They will find long lists of rules, numerous references to what appear to be different covenants, and so they may feel that it is all too complicated and detailed for them to grasp.

I would try to find the opportunity to suggest that all the covenants are part of only one covenant. I might teach that with this passage from Doctrine and Covenants 22. In it, the Lord tells us that the entire

gospel is the new and everlasting covenant. Through it, God offers us all he has while we covenant to keep all his commandments. You don't have to memorize a list, you simply must be ready to listen and then obey. Here is the way you might try to teach it:

"Behold, I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this thing; and this is a new and an everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning.

"Wherefore, although a man should be baptized an hundred times it availeth him nothing, for you cannot enter in at the strait gate by the law of Moses, neither by your dead works.

"For it is because of your dead works that I have caused this last covenant and this church to be built up unto me, even as in days of old.

"Wherefore, enter ye in at the gate, as I have commanded, and seek not to counsel your God. Amen" (vv. 1-4).

Whenever you teach that, you can be sure that a few of your students will be overwhelmed. In an Old Testament passage, the Lord summed up all that he requests of us in equally simple terms. Through the prophet Micah:

"He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8).

The Lord clearly told us of his love for simplicity when he gave us Doctrine and Covenants 133:

"And for this cause, that men might be made partakers of the glories which were to be revealed, the Lord sent forth the fulness of his gospel, his everlasting covenant, reasoning in plainness and simplicity—

"To prepare the weak for those things which are coming on the earth, and for the Lord's errand in the day when the weak shall confound the wise, and the little one become a strong nation, and two shall put their tens of thousands to flight.

"And by the weak things of the earth the Lord shall thrash the nations by the power of his Spirit" (vv. 57-59).

Submissive

To be weak and little may not seem to be much of an advantage to those you teach. Every playground experience they will have had is apt to refute that. But there is a good reason that weakness could become strength. Again, it is rooted in another characteristic of the Savior: he is submissive. When he was paying the price for all our sins, he did it as an act of submission to his Father's will.

I have seen the power of that submission in a young man sitting across my desk in a bishop's office. He described serious sin, said that he had borne the weight of it so long that he could not go further. He said that he would pay any price, do whatever I asked of him but that—as he said it—"I'm coming back." He had made the commitment to surrender completely to the Lord, and he had faith that his simple bishop was the Lord's agent for him.

Because he had decided to do whatever the Lord said he should do, however painful and hard, he in time qualified for the cleansing power of the Atonement. He knew that he could not rid himself of the pain and burden of sin by himself, because he had tried for years. He knew that the Lord had, by the Atonement, made it possible for him to be freed from that terrible burden. But because he was weak, he was willing to submit to whatever the Lord asked to gain the forgiveness he had faith would necessarily come. He knew this promise from the Lord was true:

"And again, I say unto you, I give unto you a new commandment, that you may understand my will concerning you;

"Or, in other words, I give unto you directions how you may act before me, that it may turn to you for your salvation.

"I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise" (D&C 82:8-10).

My young friend knew that the Atonement, worked out in submission to the Father, was to bless him as he too submitted to the will of God. The Lord made forgiveness available to us through his perfect submission, and we must gain its benefit by keeping our covenants in submission as well.

Conclusion

That brings me back to the lesson learned in teaching Hosea. You remember what the Lord said in Hosea 6:6, speaking through the betrayed husband:

“For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”

The footnote to that passage reads this way for the word *mercy*: “HEB charity, or loving-kindness.” The Savior asks sacrifice of us today as he asked those in other times for burnt offerings. It requires the sacrifice of earthly desires and passions to obtain the mercy available through the atonement of Jesus Christ. My submissive young friend in my bishop’s office knew that. But he knew, too, that his sacrifice must spring from his love for God just as the forgiveness he sought was made available through the love of the Savior for him and for all of us. He was determined to live his covenants at any sacrifice. That is what he declared when he said to me: “Bishop, I’ll pay any price; I’m coming back.” The Lord connected sacrifice with covenants in that way in these words recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants:

“Verily I say unto you, all among them who know their hearts are honest, and are broken, and their spirits contrite, and are willing to observe their covenants by sacrifice—yea, every sacrifice which I, the Lord, shall command—they are accepted of me” (D&C 97:8).

I hope that you will teach the history and the stories in the Old Testament. I hope that you will teach clearly

the doctrines of covenants and sacrifice which run through its pages. Perhaps as clearly as in any work of scripture we see the blessings that come when we keep our covenants and the sorrow that we reap when we do not. And in the Old Testament we can clearly show that both in his rigorous call for obedience and in his generous love and mercy for us, God is the same. He desires only what blesses us.

Above all, if I were there with you again, I would try to teach your students the knowledge of God. I would try, with the help of the Spirit, to touch them so they know of his love for them. I would teach them that he is always the same, that both what he asks of us and what he offers are rooted in his love for us and for our Heavenly Father. I would try to teach them that the Lord trusts his servants, that we can trust them, and that we can ourselves win the trust of the loving Savior. I would try to teach them what it means to be bound by covenants with him.

I testify to you that God the Father lives, that he sent his Son first as Creator and then as Redeemer. I testify Jesus of Nazareth was and is the promised Messiah. And I bear witness that he worked out the Atonement in perfect faithfulness and love, that he was resurrected, that he restored through his servants to the Prophet Joseph Smith the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the new and everlasting covenant. And I do it in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.