

## The Doctrine of God: Introduction

Let us turn our attention now to the doctrine of God in the second half of this course. God is the covenant Lord. John Frame, in his book *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, begins not just with 'God' in a generic sense, without qualification, but with God as the covenant Lord. The reason Dr. Frame begins with the covenant is that we do not know God, or anything else for that matter, in abstraction, in a vacuum. Knowing God is a matter of knowing His relations to the world. A fundamental reality of that divine-creaturely relating is that God is the covenant Lord.

What do we mean by the phrase 'covenant Lord?' Scripture describes God in a number of ways. His lordship and the covenant are not the only ways, but we could do a lot worse than to begin there. Covenant and kingdom—the latter term 'kingdom' is implied in the term 'lord.' Covenant and kingdom complement one another within the biblical revelation and the two of them together embrace the entirety of the biblical revelation. The two concepts covenant and kingdom are merely two different ways of speaking of the same reality. I said covenant and kingdom complement one another; they are merely two ways of speaking of the same reality.

All things are dependent upon God. All things relate to God. All things live, move, and have their being in God. Nothing is separate from His concern or His sovereign lordship. We have already suggested that kingdom is implied in the term 'lord,' but the title 'lord' embraces both covenant and kingship. *Yahweh*, the name of God, is often translated as Lord, and as such it is the covenant name that God gives Himself. 'Lord' is not simply a name or term of kingship, but it is also a term of covenant. Thus our New Testament word 'lord,' *kurios*, is a title given to Jesus as the head of the new covenant, as the head of a redeemed humanity.

While the term 'kingdom' is fairly familiar for most of us, the term 'covenant' may not be. I want to talk about the covenant in broad terms. The covenant is a relationship of love and obligation between parties. In the case of the biblical covenant, these parties are unequal. They are not equal parties. One of the parties to the covenant is the suzerain; the other party is the vassal. One party is the speaker; the other party is the listener or the answerer. One party is the sovereign; the other is dependent. One party is the king; the other is the subject. In fairly broad terms, all of God's dealings with His creation are covenantal in character.

Meredith Kline and others have argued that in certain respects the creational stories of Genesis 1 and 2 parallel other biblical narratives that describe the establishment of other covenants. Genesis 1 and 2 powerfully make the case that God is the sovereign Lord and the King over all things, from astronomical things to the lowliest microbe. All of these are His servants. All of them are vassals. All of them are dependent. All of them are called to obey His commands, His law. And they are all called to be instruments of God's gracious intention. In kingdom terms, we would say that all things are subject to the divine demand. In covenant language, we would say all things are vassals. All things are in covenant relationship with God. Either way, all of reality is experienced in terms of a lord-servant relationship. That is not merely true of you and me, but it is also true of the sun (see Psalm 119), of the animal world, and of the very planet we live on. Thus our starting point is that God is the covenant Lord. This should be our fundamental presupposition about God: God is the covenant Lord. Now I really do not have to call this a presupposition, for a presupposition is something which is assumed rather than proven. But I do not have to call it that because this is something that is proven and argued thousands of times within the pages of Scripture. But I call it a presupposition because it is the final criterion and contextual reality for all other statements about God.

Far too many treatments about the doctrine of God fall to the ground and they do so because they begin poorly. They assume the wrong things. We have begun with the presupposition that God is the covenant Lord. As we are going to see, the doctrine of God, far more than any other doctrine, is laden with presuppositions. It is laden with commitments about epistemology. That is, how do we know? And it is laden with notions about the purpose of theological inquiry, so when we talk about the doctrine of God at this point in this course, we begin not only talking about content but we are going to be talking a lot about process and method.

Already by the Middle Ages, theologians assumed that theology is a kind of science, an accumulated body of knowledge about God. Thus the doctrine of God became the accumulated facts about God. And one comes to those facts and organizes them, so it was held, in the same way that one studies any other thing. But to that idea we need to offer a number of responses. The first response is this: the purpose of our study, the purpose of knowing God, is not primarily so that we can master the facts about God. There are facts to know but they must serve relationship. The cognitive must be understood in light of and must serve the relational. Perhaps I can put it this way: the chief end of man is not to be able to pass a final examination regarding the facts about God. The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. And to be sure to do that, to glorify God, it will mean knowing some things about God, but we should recognize that the demons know more about God in the scientific sense than we ever will, but they do not know God in the biblical sense of knowing Him.

Our second response to the medieval notion of theology as science is this: we do not know God in the same way that we know trees or mathematics. God is never the subject of our scientific observations. He does not hold still while we squeeze Him under our microscopes or pin Him to our dissection tables. All this suggests that the questions we ask, the method and the process, are going to be every bit as important as the content. The questions we ask are going to be crucial to getting good answers.

Third, we need to be properly humble. In Exodus 3 when Moses ascends Mt. Sinai, *Yahweh* tells him that he needs to take off his shoes, for the ground he is about to walk on is holy ground. A biblically Christian discussion about God is not just a study about God in the abstract, a generic examination of deity. Rather it is a confrontation with the covenant Lord of all creation. It is the confrontation of a vassal with the King. With Moses, we too are entering holy space when we talk about God. We must never forget that the God we speak of, the God of Scripture, is the King of the universe. He is our covenant Lord.

Fourth is that our knowing about God, our speech about God, and all the rest, are themselves covenantal activities. That is to say, they are acts of covenant servanthood. They are the acts of a vassal in reverence to a King, and again they demand reverence and humility. Our human knowledge of God is always the knowledge of a lesser about a greater, of a vassal about a lord. We dare not aspire to the kind of knowledge of God that God has of Himself. We will never have that kind of knowledge. Rather we must be satisfied with the knowledge that a servant has of his master. This is simply to say that our knowledge of God is the knowing that it is always subject to his lordship. Not only are we His vassals but our knowledge of Him as His vassal as well. And again this suggests that our knowledge of God can never be purely or simply theoretical. As Dr. Frame puts it, "Knowing God is knowing Him as Lord, knowing His name *Yahweh*."

Our fifth response to the medieval notion of facts about God is simply that knowing is purposeful. Biblical knowing is purposeful. The biblical knowledge of God is meant to tell us things about God, things that are important for us to know. One of the questions we will have to continually ask ourselves is, What is the point? What is the theological currency of this or that statement regarding God? What is

the consequence of thinking this way or that way about God? Our knowledge is meant to issue in obedience. It is meant to issue in a holy life. It is never merely cognitive. Many times in Scripture, knowledge and obedience function as virtual synonyms. Knowledge always has ethical implications. In knowing a particular truth, what obligation does it place upon me? The knowledge of God leads to obedience and obedience leads to knowledge.

A crucial conversation takes place in Exodus 5:22-6:8, so let me put it into context. Moses was sent by God to Egypt and his purpose in going there was to seek release of Israel from Egyptian rule, but things got off to a rather rocky start for Moses in Egypt. When he heard the command to release the Israelites, Pharaoh told Moses that the instruction of some unknown desert deity did not mean anything to him. There was no reason why he, mighty Pharaoh, should obey the command of this God, the God of a defaced, know-nothing slave people. You see, Pharaoh knew something about gods: they talk a lot. That is, their priests talk a lot: “Do this. Build that. Subsidize a third thing.” But the deity never does or says anything. In 1928, Howard Carter discovered King Tut’s tomb and something interesting happened when they opened the tomb. Do you know what it was? Nothing! That is what was interesting. The gods had not moved. They had been there for 3000 years and they had not moved against the wall. They were frozen like that forever. That is what Pharaoh knew about gods. Therefore, declaring ignorance about Moses’ God, Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go. Furthermore, for Moses’ effrontery, for having the time on his Israelite hands to dream up such nonsense, from that time forward Israel would have to make bricks without straw. And at this turn of events, Moses came back and he openly charged God with breach of promise. God sent him to seek the release of Israel from bondage but instead Israel was subjected to even harsher oppression. God had not rescued Israel at all.

Exodus 5:22-6:8: “Moses returned to the LORD and said, ‘O Lord, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.’ Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country.’ God also said to Moses, ‘I am *Yahweh*. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name, the LORD, I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant. Therefore, say to the Israelites: “I am *Yahweh*, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am *Yahweh* your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am *Yahweh*.”’”

God’s immediate reply to the charge of breach of promise was that the promised freedom is still promised. It is future but sure. Pharaoh will indeed let Israel go. In fact, God will make things so uncomfortable for Egypt that Pharaoh will not only emancipate Israel, but he will virtually expel her from the land. God’s further reply is much more extensive. It really addresses the “wait here,” part of Moses’ question, for it takes up the issue of God’s intention in all this. This reply is structured into two parts. The first part, Exodus 6:2-5, revolves around the issue of God’s self-identification. And the second, Exodus 6:6-8, consists of a series of instructions that God gives to Moses. And together the two of them (God’s self-identification as *Yahweh* and the instructions that He gives to Moses) constitute God’s reply to Moses’ question—“God, what are you doing? What are you up to anyway?”

I want to spend some time on God's self-identification as *Yahweh*. The NIV reads, "I am the LORD," and if you have the NIV, you will notice that every time that phrase came up I changed it to "*Yahweh*." In the reply, the statement "I am the LORD" appears four times: in Exodus 6:2 it introduces the reply, in Exodus 6:6 it confirms God's promise of redemption, in Exodus 6:7 it underscores God's intention to adopt Israel, and in Exodus 6:8 it confirms God's promise of the land and concludes His reply. Now in English, where we have simply "the LORD," the force of the statement here is not immediately apparent. God is identifying Himself here as *Yahweh*. Our English versions which say "LORD" are simply mistaken. Something important is lost in that translation. It is a name and not a title, not an office, that is at issue here. It is God's name that is the point. Ancient peoples put great stock in names. Our culture does not. We name our children things simply because we like the sound of it. In ancient Egypt, however, a name was not a mere sound. It said something about the person who bore it. It was a shorthand label representation of everything that a person was. A name caught something of the person's character or reputation or status.

A couple of examples will make the point. In 1 Samuel 25:25: "May my lord pay no attention to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name—his name is Fool, and folly goes with him." Or think of Jacob, the deceiver, the usurper. His name captures who he is and of course his name will be changed to Israel—'salvation is of the Lord.' While God is depicted as revealing His character to Israel in many different ways in Scripture, one of the ways which is most fundamental, one of the most significant modes of His self-disclosure, is in His naming of Himself. And here we have a disclosure, an important disclosure, of God's character. Yet it is the case that God's self-identification, His giving of His name that we have here in Exodus has been a problem for the church for a number of reasons. First of all is the question: What do we have here? *Yahweh*, as I read it, or 'LORD' as the NIV rendered it, are in Hebrew what has been called the tetragrammaton, 'the four letters.' In English it would be Y-H-W-H, then with vowels put in, we have *Yahweh*.

Now I need to tell you a little story. During the inter-testamental period, around the fourth century B.C., Jews started thinking that the divine name was too holy to be spoken. They were obviously being influenced by the Assyrians and Babylonians who had taken them into exile. These were people who thought that if you had the name of a god, you could control the god or you could manipulate the deity to do your bidding. That superstition came over to the Hebrews and from about the fourth century on, they started to think they could not say the divine name. Thus whenever they would come across the name *Yahweh* in the biblical text, they would not say *Yahweh*, but instead say *Adonai*, a Hebrew word meaning, 'master' or 'lord.' As a matter of fact, in the margins of many Hebrew Bibles, it would say right there, "Do not say *Yahweh*, say *Adonai*." So you would read one word, but you would say another. So you would not say the divine name. A Greek translation of the Old Testament was produced in the third century. That translation is sometimes called the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, and the Septuagint followed in that tradition. So rather than transliterate *Yahweh* into Greek characters, they translated *Adonai* into *Kurios*, which is Greek for the same thing as *Adonai*—lord or master. And the English translations we have today still follow in that tradition, however wrong the tradition is.

But the second problem here is the meaning or derivation of the name *Yahweh*. The name appears to be a play on the Hebrew verb 'to be,' which is *hayah*. It has been typical throughout the history of the church to take *Yahweh* as meaning something like 'I am,' 'I exist,' or 'I am the one who exists.' Thus the medieval Roman Catholic tradition took *Yahweh* not as a name but as a statement of self-existence, a statement of the certainty of God's existence. God is giving the meaning of His name here as existence. Theologians of the Catholic tradition believe that this is the philosophical key to the understanding of God. He is the one who most completely exists and thus He is the source or the derivation of all being.

In his *Summa Theologica*, the thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas understood *Yahweh* not as a name but as a philosophical assertion of being or existence. By calling himself *Yahweh*, God is saying He is the deity that truly exists over against the idols who have no existence. And that has really been the classical idea or understanding of *Yahweh* ever since the medieval period. This understanding of the divine name was thought of as being assured not only by the relationship between *Yahweh* and the verb ‘to be,’ but also by the introduction of the divine name in Exodus 3:13-15, a text we will look at later.

In the last century or so, sound biblical scholarship has pointed out that there are real problems with the classical view put forward by such people as Thomas Aquinas. Let me give you a couple of reasons for the problems. First of all, they understood that the Hebrews did not intend to think in abstract terms like existence, but rather they thought functionally. Thus, they did not think to ask whether things exist. They asked the more fundamental question of what a thing does. They did not intend to seek abstract definitions of things but rather relational descriptions. It is the function of something that is the key to its meaning in reality and we do see that in the Bible. Biblical thought tends to be concrete rather than speculative. It tends to be historical rather than philosophical. Certainly the Hebrew mind could think philosophically. It does on occasion. But the tendency is otherwise.

Secondly, entomological and philological studies on the name *Yahweh*, the tetragrammaton, have proven less than helpful. If *Yahweh* is a form of the verb ‘to be,’ how does it parse? And the parsing of *Yahweh* as a simple statement of being has proven to be highly dubious. It is so dubious that scholarly suggestions for what *Yahweh* means range from the funny to the absurd. A German biblical theologian by the name Mowinckel grew so exasperated that he put forth the inventive theory that *Yahweh* bears no relationship to *hayah* at all, but that it is rather the combination of an ejaculatory cry *ya* which we would translate ‘oh with the third person personal pronoun *hu*, which is ‘he.’ So that would make the divine name *ya-hu*. Karl Barth suggested that the divine name *Yahweh* is not actually a meaningful word at all, but a meaningless word, simply gibberish. It is a term that is deliberately enigmatic. He was working on the same notion that the Assyrians and the Babylonians had: if you know the name of the deity, you can manipulate the deity. Thus he held that God gave Israel a name that was no name at all and that preserves God’s transcendence and His freedom. He will come when He wills to come, not when He is called. The context, however, argues against Barth. God wants to reveal Himself. He wants His people to call upon Him. He is leaving His personal card. He is leaving His personal phone number.

Exodus 3:13-15 says, “Moses said to God, ‘Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” Then what shall I tell them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I am has sent me to you.”’” God also said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, “The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.” This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.’” The “I am that I am” statement of verse fourteen is usually parsed as a *qal* imperfect. But you should know that this parsing has not gone without assaults. It is sometimes suggested that it is really a causative imperfect, in which case it would be translated something like, “I will be who I will be.” And it is then associated with a certain reading of *Yahweh* so that *Yahweh* then becomes ‘the one who establishes.’ Yet others have argued that the doubling up of the verb here, “I am that I am,” is really simply for emphasis. This happens quite often, so that you will get a doubling up of verbs as a way of saying ‘indeed,’ as in, “I am indeed,” or “I am!”” While some of these suggestions about both Exodus 3:13-15 and Exodus 5:22-6:8 seem bazaar, they all come from the realization that a name focused on the mere existence of *Yahweh* fits neither the Hebrew worldview nor the context.

Driver and Delitzsch prefer a translation of Exodus 3:14 which would read, “I will be that I will be,” with the emphasis on the word ‘that,’ not the verb. And what they are suggesting is that the statement in Exodus 3:14 can be taken one of two ways. It can be taken as “I will be with you as I was with them.” Who are the ‘them’? They are the fathers who are referred to in Exodus 3:13, so it is referring to the past. That is one way of taking the text. Another way is, “I will be there with you in Egypt as I am here.” Instead of looking to the past, it is now looking to the future. Contextually, either of those make sense, and maybe both of them make good sense, if Exodus 6:2-5 refers back to the past and verses 6-8 are directed to the future. But it is the context that is the key to the meaning of *Yahweh*. Remember, context is the first word in good biblical interpretation, and maybe it is the last word. It is certainly the key here. The name *Yahweh* always appears in the context of the covenant, in the context of God entering into personal relationship with His people. Thomas Aquinas’ idea about a statement of being does not work contextually. *Yahweh* is God’s personal name, His covenant name. It is God’s promise of His presence with His people.

I believe that it is best to understand the name *Yahweh* as meaning something like: ‘I am the one who keeps promises. I am the one who is always faithful. I am the one who is always there for My people. I am the one who is here for you.’ The issue is not really being nor primarily being present. Geerhardus Vos, in his *Biblical Theology*, suggests that the biblical name *Yahweh* means “I am the one who is your sovereign help, and I am the one who is always faithful.” *Yahweh* is the divine name of God, which is associated with the ark, the tabernacle, and the temple—the very emblems of God’s presence with Israel. The name *Yahweh* is nothing less than an assurance of God’s continuing sovereign presence, His covenant love and His faithfulness to His people.

You can give someone your business card with your work-hours phone number on it, but then you can turn it over and write your after-hours number on it. *Yahweh* is not a generic word for god. *Elohim* is generic. God is turning over His business card. He is saying, “Here is where you can get Me, day or night. This is My personal number. This is My private name. This is who I am for you.” By announcing His name, *Yahweh* is revealing His essential character to Moses. He is the one who is there for His people, making and keeping promises. He is active, dynamic, working in history, sweating the details, entering into relationship, and making and protecting His covenant people.

This naming of God as *Yahweh* is important, and it is important for at least two reasons. First of all, this was a new revelation of divine power and divine action. For some 430 years, Israel has been in Egypt and she knows the same things about gods that Pharaoh knows. She has spent her time building the cities and the monuments and the tombs and the shrines. She has seen the statues, the paintings, and all the rest. She knows that gods do not act, that gods do not speak. They are impotent, mute, and deaf. In the exodus, however, very suddenly Israel has been introduced to a God who is none of those things, a God who does act, a God who is different. Later, Isaiah would powerfully make the case that the issue between the biblical God and the idols of the Ancient Near East, is not existence, but rather it is power and it is action. It is not a philosophical discussion concerning existence. It is character.

In one of the most sarcastic passage of all of Scripture, Isaiah mocks the idols in Isaiah 44. A short version of his criticism would be: A carpenter goes out into the forest and he cuts down a cedar or an oak. He measures and draws characters on the wood. He roughs out his work with chisels, and should he get tired, he stops and rests. If he hungers, he chops off a piece of the log and he builds a fire and he cooks his food. Later in the day when the weather gets cool and nasty, he cuts off another chunk and he makes another fire to warm himself. And from what is left of this oak or cedar, he carves his own face, the face of a man. Then he sets it up and he bows down to it and says, “Oh save me. Oh save me.” You can hear Isaiah laughing throughout the chapter. Existence, you see, is not the issue. Of course that god

exists, you just made it. The issue is action, person, and character. The false god of the idol-maker is blind. It sees nothing. It does nothing. It is made of wood. It is an impotent dead thing. But it is real. John Calvin would argue the same way. He said there are many gods. Calvin actually spoke of man as a veritable idol factory. He said we make the gods we want for ourselves. As a worshipping creature, man makes the gods he wants. He might carve his idols in wood or stone, he might cast it from metal; he might make his god something a bit more abstract; he might worship his skin color, his nation, his wealth, his science. He can worship his own sexuality or space aliens or Elvis. But he himself is made by God.

*Yahweh* is not like them, because He is maker of all. He is not the thing made. The creature is one thing, the Creator is another. What sets *Yahweh* off from the idols is the fact that He is the sovereign one, the one who comes to us, rather than the one who comes from us. By giving His name to Israel, *Yahweh* is saying this: "If you want to know who I am, if you want to know Me, you are going to have to watch My actions. You are going to have to listen to My words, My faithfulness, My covenant, My keeping My word to you, Moses. That is the key to My character." We might think here of 1 Kings 18 and the story of Elijah and the priests of Baal. You will notice in that text, as in Isaiah 44, there is no kind of philosophical discussion about existence. You do not have a discussion anywhere that *Yahweh* is the only god who really exists and these other gods do not really exist. What you really get is, "Yes, they all exist; now what you going to do?" What happens on Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18? Two bowls are set up, one for Baal and one for *Yahweh*. The priests of Baal begin to invoke, they dance, they contort, and all the rest. Then, reminiscent of Isaiah's words, Elijah says, "Maybe they are sleeping. Call louder. Maybe they are on vacation." He goes on and nothing happens. Then water is brought in and the sacrifice for *Yahweh* is drenched, overflowing. But the fire comes down and not only consumes the sacrifice, but consumes the water as well. The issue there is the same as it is in Isaiah. It is not a philosophical question about existence. It is presence, power, and keeping promises.

The second reason that this theme is important is that what is being revealed here is that God personally relates in covenant. It is difficult for us to imagine but this whole business of personal relationship with a deity was startlingly new in the ancient Near East. The gods of the ancient Near Eastern pantheon did not enter into relationships with people. In most of those mythologies, the purpose of many people was merely to act as a feeder for the gods. Man was someone who offered sacrifice. Man is an end for the gods. The gods are saying, "Human beings, you are here for us." *Yahweh* is saying in His own way in the text, "I am here for you. I am committing Myself to you." In the ancient Near East, there was no relationship, no give and take, no communication, and no reciprocal relationship with the gods. There was only formal service. Now however, we have the revelation of a God who enters into covenant relationship with people, who makes promises and who keeps them. He is a God who is a person, a person who proves His character by His faithful action: "You can count on Me, and My deeds on your behalf are the proof of who I am. If you want to know Me, if you want to know My character, watch Me work." That is the difference between the biblical God and the idols. We might press it here and speak of the gods of our philosophical constructions as idols as well.

Let us move to the four-fold promise of Exodus 6:6-8. To establish His intent to be Moses' God, *Yahweh* makes a series of promises in this text. "I will bring you out. I will free you. I will redeem you. I will take you as My people. I will be your God. I will bring you to the land and I will give you the land." That litany of seven promises is tied up in that four-fold statement: I am *Yahweh*. It is almost as if God wants to make it absolutely clear to Moses just who Moses is dealing with. He wants Moses to know who is making these promises. God's name and His promise are so intimately tied together that the promises are a test of God's name. "I, *Yahweh*, promise these things to you." Now while there are seven "I will" statements here, they really break down into four issues or four promises. First is liberation from

oppression, and we have three statements about that: “I will bring you out. I will free you. I will redeem you.” The three of those should probably be understood by way of synonymous parallelism. Second is the creation of a community: “I will take you as My people.” Third is a promise of relationship: “I will be your God, and then you will know that I am *Yahweh*.” The fourth promise is abundance and blessing: “I will bring you to the land I have promised. I will give you the land.”

The first thing to note is that the guarantee of the fulfillment of these promises, or these seven statements, is God’s name. God Himself is the guarantee. One commentator speaks of God’s name *Yahweh* as the personal name on the check: “I will bring you out because I am *Yahweh*. I will take you to Myself because I am *Yahweh*. I am going to call you into relationship because I am *Yahweh*. I am going to bless you because I am *Yahweh*.”

A second note is that all four of these promises speak to the nature of redemption. We need to realize that the promise of the exodus and the promise of redemption for us are far more than release from sin, far more than release from oppression. The initial act of deliverance is just that—it is initial. More is to come. As seen in the text, God wants not only to save, to deliver, He also wants to relate to a covenant community and to bless that community. That relationship and blessing stem from the very heart of redemption.

Third, if you look at the first promise and the fourth, they go together. Deliverance from oppression and coming into relationship are a pair. That first one is negative. The last one is positive. Redemption is never merely release from sin. Sometimes we Christians have this idea that if we flee from the sin, we can end up someplace good. We can sometimes flee something that is sinful and end up in something which is equally sinful. The point being made here is that you have to seek the good for its sake. You have to aim at it. Redemption is not only negative, it is also positive. It is the negation of something but it is also the affirmation of something. It is deliverance from that which brings oppression and it is entering into blessing.

Fourth, notice that the middle two promises go together as well: “I will take you as My people. I will be your God.” If you put those two together, those are sometimes called the covenant formula. “I will be your God; you will be My people.” That sentence or some variation of it appears about 25 times in the Bible, all the way from the book of Exodus right through Revelation 21. So we have the covenant as central right here. Years ago, when my oldest son Peter was about seven or eight, we had a church elder visitation, and Peter walked into the room and the elder asked him, “What is the covenant?” Peter’s reply was, “I will be your God, and you will be My people.” And I said, “Okay Pete, you have got it. You may leave the room now.” That is about as good a definition of the covenant as you will get.

That brings us to the question, What is the covenant? We have been nibbling around this question. What is the covenant? The Hebrew word *berith*, which we translate as ‘covenant,’ probably comes from an Akkadian verb which means ‘to fetter’ or ‘to bond.’ Think here of two horses that have been bound together, have been harnessed together into a single harness or chain for a particular function. Thus a covenant is a bound relationship, a binding relationship between parties. Now this binding may be legal or familial but it is always a relationship with mutual obligations. There are a number of kinds of covenants in the ancient Near East, a number of covenants in Scripture. We are not going to bother looking at all the different texts. Generally when we use the word ‘covenant,’ we mean God’s covenant with His creatures. We are not speaking about a marriage covenant or other kinds of covenant. God’s covenant, what we are going to call the biblical covenant, is not a covenant between equals. It is not a parity covenant, like the covenant between Jonathan and David. It is not a marriage covenant. It is what

is called a suzerain covenant—a covenant between a lord and a vassal. That definition is a very rough one that embraces the entirety of the biblical covenant materials.

A covenant is a relationship between parties, begun by the sovereign determination of the greater party, in which the greater commits himself to the lesser, in the context of mutual loyalty, in which the greater calls the lesser to obligation, and in which the obligations of each serve as illustrations of mutual loyalty. First of all, the covenant is made up between parties, yet the parties are not equal. One is greater and the other is lesser. The greater party calls the lesser party into the covenant. He even imposes the covenant. But there are also mutual obligations. Both parties have obligations. Yes, God is under obligations. We just read them. “I am going to do these things. If I do not, do not call me *Yahweh*.” God is staking His reputation on keeping His promises. So there are mutual obligations. God must keep His word. And finally, these obligations are illustrations of their mutual loyalty. That is to say, the obligations are not ends in themselves, but rather they serve relationship. One of the realities of biblical religion, beginning to end, is that law and obligation serve relationship. Law is not an end in itself.

All of God’s dealings are covenantal. The covenant is a divinely intended medium, or context, for our relationship with God. John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by saying, “The knowledge of God and the knowledge of man are interrelated.” He did not use the language of covenant, but he very easily could have. We only know God in the context of His revelational accommodation. We only know God in the context of His covenantal binding of Himself to His people. We only know God in covenant. We never know God in abstraction. We never know God ideally. We never know God philosophically. Our knowledge of God is always a committed, life-or-death knowledge. Conversely, we only know ourselves in that same relationship. Calvin argues, quite rightly, that we never have an abstract knowledge of ourselves either. We never have a purely scientific understanding of man. We know ourselves only as creatures. We know ourselves only as vassals. We know ourselves only as dependent subjects in God’s covenant.