

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 10
THE SIMILARITY OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

This section deals with the doctrine of the Covenant (the agreement between God and God's people). This doctrine would become a center piece of Reformed theology and belief.

Summary: Calvin wants to make the argument that the Covenant with Abraham was God's way of binding people to God's own self just as surely as people are bound to God by Jesus. *"Now we can clearly see...that all people adopted by God into the company of his people since the beginning of the world were covenanted to him by the same law and by the same bond of the same doctrine as obtained among us"* (pg. 428). What Calvin means by this is that the great patriarchs, priests, kings and prophets of the Old Testament (people like Abraham, David, Isaiah and Job) are eternally connected to God just like those who believe in Jesus. We can hear this clearly when Calvin writes, *"The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same"* (pg. 429).

In order to reinforce his point, Calvin offers three arguments. First, the blessing held out for those who were part of God's covenant people was more spiritual than physical in nature. This can be seen in the fact that the patriarchs, though they suffered greatly in life, still believed in a future promise. Second, the covenant itself was maintained by God and God alone (meaning that God's grace was at work as much then as it is now). This truth can be seen in the fact that even though the covenant people constantly wandered far from God, God was still faithful to them. Third, and this is probably the most difficult one for us to grasp, is that the patriarchs *"...knew Christ as Mediator, through whom they were joined to God and were to share in his promises"* (pg. 430). In other words, those great Old Testament characters, knew that God was going to send a savior to save them and the world.

Calvin draws several important conclusions from his arguments. First, Christians are not supposed to see themselves as being superior to God's chosen people. Since we are bound by the same covenant, then we are all beneficiaries of God's grace. Second, God's Word, either from the Law or from Jesus, *"quickens the souls of all whom God grants participation in it"* (pg. 434). Thus God saves people in the past in the same way God saves them in the present. Third, when God calls someone (either before or after Jesus), God offers them salvation. Fourth, the goodness of God is always stronger than death. This means for Calvin that when the scriptures talk of God being the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it means that those three patriarchs are still alive in God, having obtained eternal life, along with the rest of God's people. All of this was summarized by Calvin in the following amusing sentence. *"For they (the patriarchs) would have been more stupid than blocks of wood to keep on pursuing the promises when no hope of those appeared on earth, unless they expected them to be fulfilled elsewhere (meaning through eternal life)"* (pg. 440).

Reflection: Calvin's belief that the covenant/promise made to Abraham is the same covenant/promise that is fulfilled in Jesus, is one of the hallmarks of Presbyterian theology. It sends a message that the God we know and worship in and through Jesus is the same God, working in the same way, as the God who worked through the patriarchs and prophets. It reminds us that God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Questions:

1. Do you see any differences between God in the Old Testament and God in the New Testament?
2. What does it mean to you to be a beneficiary of God's grace?
3. How do you think the people of the Old Testament could have "seen" Jesus?