



2

Living a Covenant Relationship

"Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the Lord. I will release you from your labours in Egypt. I will rescue you from slavery there. I will redeem you with arm outstretched and with mighty acts of judgment. I will adopt you as my people, and I will become your God' . . ." (Exodus 6:2, 6-7)

This familiar Old Testament quotation expresses the special feelings the Hebrew people had about their relationship with God. They trusted God to be with them no matter what happened. God did not promise to protect them from all harm, but that God would always be their God. The Hebrew people felt they were a specially chosen people because of their covenant with God.* They felt that God's promises to them would be fulfilled because God loved them. They learned through their experiences, that God would provide for their needs, and would love and forgive them even when they sinned.

In much the same way we covenant with our children to be their parents and to care for them. We intend to provide for their needs and to love them even when they do wrong. An infant cannot respond in the same way as could the Hebrew people, but

*Read Genesis 12:1-3, and Deuteronomy 7:6-9b.

our commitment to care for the child is real and the infant responds to this care. You and I are not God. We can never be like God, but our children see us as god-like and get their initial idea of what God is like from us.

Children need to have rules . . . rules which are specific, reasonable, and possible for the child to attain. The child needs to understand the reasons for a particular rule. The rules must be flexible enough to meet new and changing situations which confront the family without becoming legalistic. We must help our children to accept responsibility for their promises and actions and to accept the consequences of wrong choices in a spirit of firm but supportive love.

Living the covenant with preschool children means that they can trust us to provide for their needs. As they enter the preschool years, they begin to venture out into the world, but they still need the trust and comfort of home and family.

Living the covenant means dependability of life. It may mean meals on schedule, a suitable bedtime, or clothes ready to wear when they are needed. Of course our lives are not always perfectly orderly. Meals will be late sometimes. A mother will be

*Editor's Note

The Old Testament Covenant is an agreement between God and His chosen people, Israel. The agreement is binding on both parties: "I will be their God and they will be my people." Every covenant or agreement has certain stated conditions. The Covenant states the conditions and describes the way of life for those who are in a covenant relationship with God.

The Israelites promised to be God's people and to abide by God's laws. God promised:

- (1) to love them and be with them always,
- (2) that they would be the chosen people,
- (3) He would make them a great nation,
- (4) that all families would be happier because of them.

The Hebrews promised:

- (1) to go and do what God asked them to do,
- (2) to love and worship Yahweh as their God, and
- (3) to obey God's law and commandments.

The Bible records the history of God's continuing relationship with the Jewish people . . . a forgiving God who continually sought the

delayed in picking up a child. But if the basic style of our life is communicating to young children that we are dependable persons, then they will trust us.

What will be the effect on the children? Will they get enough sleep? Will they enjoy the company of a favorite babysitter? Will they feel forgotten as the parents are away several evenings in a row? All members of the family are persons whose needs must be considered. Living a covenant relationship with young children means we try to put ourselves in the child's place to see what life looks like to them.

Living the covenant means preparing children as much as possible for new or different experiences. Children can begin new experiences more easily when they know what to expect. They trust that we have not tricked them when things happen as they have been told.

Fred Rogers, television friend to children, has a song that expresses a child's concern about being told what will happen.

"I like to be told
When you're going away,

unfaithful and restored the broken relationship.

Jesus, in the New Testament, avoids the legalism of keeping the Law but teaches people to keep the spirit or intent of the Law through a life of love. He stresses the importance of "the Law written on the hearts of men." We obey the Law out of inner control and love, the deepest level of faithfulness to the covenant.

In the New Covenant, God promised the people they would have life with God forever, now and after death. In return, God asked the people to believe in Jesus and to follow the way of love which Jesus showed and taught. Through the Holy Spirit, God is constantly restoring and renewing relationships with the chosen people. The responsibility is now ours. God will guide us, but we must be willing to follow and accept God's way. (Read John 3:16, Matthew 26:28, Hebrews 8:8-12).

When the family makes a covenant, it, too, must be a mutual agreement. When possible, all family members should participate in setting down rules and consequences. When rules are broken, the covenant family still loves, forgives, and restores the person to loving membership within the family.

When you're going to come back,
And how long you will stay,
I like to be told.

I like to be told
If it's going to hurt,
If it's going to be hard,
If it's not going to hurt,
I like to be told.
I like to be told.

It helps me to get ready for all those things,
All those things that are new.
I trust you more and more
Each time that I'm
Finding those things to be true.

I like to be told
'cause I'm trying to grow,
'cause I'm trying to learn
And I'm trying to know.
I like to be told.
I like to be told.”⁸

When children do not learn basis trust, their whole approach to life is affected. They live with a fear that keeps them from learning about the world and relating to the persons around them. I once had a child in a nursery school class who was literally terrified the first day of school. His mother told me that Lance usually cried when she left him. I assured her that we would help him feel safe in coming to school.

Several mothers stayed a few minutes that first morning until their children had developed a beginning trust for me and for what would happen at nursery school. The children needed some reassurance from their mothers on that first day as they ventured out into a new experience. Each of the mothers left after a time with the promise that they would return—each of the mothers except Lance's. I encouraged her to go because he seemed comfortable playing in the family living center. As soon as Lance

⁸“I Like To Be Told” © 1968 Fred M. Rogers, 1968. Used with permission.

saw that she was gone, however, he ran terrified from the room and would have run out of the building if the doors had not been too heavy. He really believed he had been abandoned. As we worked with Lance and his mother for several weeks, we were able to help him come to nursery school without his mother.

A Positive Self-Image Is Important

In a family that has a covenant relationship, children gain a sense of belonging which is basic to their being able to develop the potential God has given them. They gain an image of themselves as persons who are lovable and capable. A positive self-image is probably the most important gift a parent can give a child. When persons feel worthy of love—the love of God as well as of persons, then they are able to cope with whatever circumstances come.

How do children come to see themselves in a positive way? They learn it from the persons around them. As an infant, Justin can tell from the way he is cared for, even in the first day of life, whether the adults around him cherish him or just put up with him. Of course Justin does not realize that he is a person separate from his mother. He realizes that mother sometimes goes away. Her going away frightens him because he does not realize that persons and things that are out of sight are still in existence. But he learns that when he has a need, mother does come.

Learning to talk helps him understand the words other people use to describe him and to communicate with him. The use of words gives Justin a picture of how others see him. Since he sees adults as powerful and all-knowing, he accepts their description of him as accurate and their treatment of him as appropriate. We are, as Dorothy Briggs says,⁹ “mirrors to our children.” Whatever our words and our behavior reflect to our children about who they are and what their abilities are is the way the children see themselves.

If children grow up hearing parents say they are bad, then they see themselves that way. If children are not allowed to help at home because they do not have the skill, then they will see themselves as unskilled or incompetent.

When Jennifer's parents say, “You are a bad girl!” rather than “We don't like what you did,” Jennifer feels that judgment has

⁹By Dorothy Briggs. *Your Child's Self-Esteem: The Key to His Life*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970.

been passed on her person rather than on her actions. She cannot develop a positive self-image if she lives in fear that something she does will cancel her parent's love. Children need to know that our love and acceptance of them as persons is constant while our reaction to their behavior may be favorable or unfavorable.

They have a better idea of what we want changed when we say, "Let's clean up the juice that was spilled on the floor!" rather than, "You are so messy!"

It is even helpful to say "I like what you did," or "You did a good job," rather than "You are good." Good denotes a judgment on the person. You may feel acceptable only when you are good. Children react the same way. They know that they sometimes behave in unacceptable ways. They need to be assured that they are still loved at all times.

Allowing children to begin at an early age to help with household chores, getting dressed, or taking care of their toys, helps them feel competent. They begin to feel "I can do it!" We have all heard mothers say, "Oh, it takes so long for Melanie to make the bed that I'd rather do it myself. I always have to help her anyway!" Melanie is missing three valuable experiences.

1. She isn't learning how to make a bed.
2. She isn't gaining confidence in herself.
3. She doesn't have a chance to take some responsibility where she is capable of doing so.

Four-year-old Rene and his father were in the garage. Rene had stopped playing in the sawdust to watch his father hammering nails into a bookcase he was building.

"Can I help, Papa?" Rene asked.

"Well, yes," replied his father.

His father picked up a lighter hammer and showed Rene how to hammer the nails straight. Rene worked hard at hammering and drove in two nails. He was tired then. He laid down the hammer and said, "That's all I want to do right now, Papa."

"That's fine, son," replied his father. "You did a good job. I enjoyed having you work with me."

Rene's helping his father at four was only one instance of his experience in learning how to help at home. He couldn't really do much of the work—by adult standards, but he was learning. He felt good about himself and about new experiences.

Children try to live up to our expectations whether those expectations are realistic or not. Do we expect a young child to sit through morning worship as quietly as the adults? Children may complain if required to do it, but they will still feel that something must be wrong with them if they can't live up to the expectations of their parents. Parents need to become familiar with child development so that we do not expect children to achieve tasks before they are ready.

Each Child is Unique

Parents need to accept the uniqueness of children and not expect them to be who they are not. Our children are unique children of God, unique combinations of genes living in unique environments. Each child has their own existence. We may have dreams and expectations for our children but we must not impose these dreams upon them.

Are we trying to make our children fulfill our unrealized potential or our parent's, friend's, or society's expectations for them? Mrs. Smith had heard so many stories about two-year-olds being toilet-trained in one week that she was angry with her two-year-old because he was taking months. Mr. Johnson was concerned that the four-year-old neighbor could already read, but his child still preferred to play.

Take a minute to look at your child and to think about who he or she is. What are his or her abilities? Is the child friendly and outgoing or quiet and studious? Is the child good with words or with tools? All persons are persons of value. All our children are unique persons created and loved by God. We have the responsibility to love them and to take care of them as we help them grow according to their unique needs and abilities.

When our son was two, he did not live up to my expectations. He wasn't as outgoing a person as I wanted him to be. He didn't like to play outside as I thought he should. I was making him miserable by nagging him—by not accepting him. I was doing his self-esteem no good because I couldn't respect him. As I finally began to realize what I was doing to him, one of the things that helped me was one of Fred Rogers' songs.¹⁰ The song says in part, "It's you I like". My child and your child are who they are. It is our job to accept them and help them develop those abilities.

¹⁰"It's You I Like" © 1970 Fred M. Rogers.

Focused Attention Helps Communication

Spending some time with each child every day is important in showing appreciation for each of our children and in keeping the lines of communication open. It is difficult in our busy lives to find time, but it is important that we put away all thoughts about what we need to do next or what we will have for dinner and focus our attention on our child. What is our child really saying? What are they really interested in? Concerned about?

Children need focused attention most when they are under stress. A new baby, a move, or a disappointment makes spending time together imperative. Establish the habit of "time together," as my children call it, when there is no stress. This may be a time to share the events of the day or a small concern and to enjoy being together.

A working mother realized one evening as she was putting dinner on the table that her son wanted to talk to her. The concern did not seem urgent to her. Then she realized that in the hurry of her life, she had not taken time to sit and listen to her son. She also realized that the late supper was not as important as maintaining the lines of communication with her son.

It is the quality of time rather than the quantity of time we spend with our children that matters. Busy parents who are able to focus their attention on their children for just a few minutes communicate more interest and concern for their children than some parents who stay home all day but never really pay attention to their children. When children have been in day care all day, their reunion with their parents at the end of the day can be a joyous time of sharing. Or it may be a tired and grumpy time.

When Heather's mother picked her up at the day care center, she was pouting. Her mother was tired from a day at the office. She wasn't pleased that her daughter was also grumpy. She was able, however, to say to Heather, "You don't seem too happy today, Heather. Is something wrong?"

Heather replied with a vengeance, "Yes! I wanted to play outside this afternoon because it was my turn to swing on the tire swing first. But it rained and we didn't even get to go outside!"

"So you've felt angry the rest of the day?" her mother asked.

"Yes, I hate rain!" exclaimed Heather.

"Sometimes rain is a nuisance," agreed her mother.

Heather's mother didn't try to lecture Heather about the

inevitable disappointments in life or how we need rain. She would only have been arguing with Heather's feelings; and Heather would have only retreated further into her negative feelings. Her mother simply communicated that she understood Heather's disappointment. On the way home, Heather snuggled up to her mother in the car. Soon Heather had relaxed and could enjoy the evening. So could her mother.

At the end of a day, a scattered family comes together in much the same way as the scattered church comes together for worship at the beginning of the week. The church community can find comfort and hope and share triumphs and disappointments before going out again into the world. A family living the covenant can come together and share joys and sorrows, triumphs and defeats because the family provides the support, acceptance and love to go again. Young children who grow up in covenant families already understand the dynamics involved in a Christian community because they have experienced love and acceptance in their family and have learned to trust.

I have talked at great length about the needs of children in the family and about what adults need to do for them. It is time, however, to look at adults and their needs.

Parents Are Persons

You, as a parent, are a person with needs. You are a unique human being. You had an existence before you were a parent, and you will have an existence when your children are much less dependent. You can be a better parent if you spend some time on yourself. Pursue some of your interests. Spend some time in counseling if you are unhappy. Mothers at home with young children especially need time with other adults so they can see who they are once again.

When our children were young, my husband and I realized how great my need was when a trip to the dermatologist cheered me for days. I realized that I needed to have someone take care of me for a change. I needed some pampering.

As a nursery teacher, I have heard mothers express guilt at enrolling their child in school. When children are three-year-olds and come to nursery school, it may be a healthy change for both mothers and children. Young children need the companionship of other children and the intellectual stimulation of nursery

school. While the children are enjoying school, their mothers have some time to themselves, or time to focus on younger members of the family.

Parents need time to fulfill themselves as whole persons. Parents nourish their children better when they feel worthy of love and competent as persons. Dorothy Briggs says you nourish from overflow rather than emptiness. It is easy to look to our children to fulfill our need for love or to succeed where we have failed. But it is too much to ask children to work on their own tasks of growing and meet our needs as well. We do receive love and satisfaction from caring for our children, but we cannot expect them to supply all our needs.

We need to tend to ourself and our needs. We will be more interesting persons to our children. We will be better able to meet their needs because ours have been met. Our children will have opportunities to meet and be with new people while we are away from them. Both the parent and child will grow and have something to talk about!

Nourish the Marital Relationship

Parents covenant with their children to love and care for them, but there is another covenant in a family—the covenant between husband and wife. Hopefully, it will be a covenant of longer, active duration than that of the covenant between parents and children. Children will grow to independence and leave to establish their own homes. During your child's dependent years, continue to nourish the husband-wife relationship. Even when children are in diapers and needing attention at night, nourish this relationship. There is strength in being able to share the frustrations and joys of parenthood. Take time to be with your husband or wife. Go out to dinner or go away for a weekend.

Arrangements can be made for caring for the children even if you have no family near. Develop supporting relationships with other families so that you can help one another have time together as husband and wife. Recently a divorced man said that he loves his four children very much and still maintains a close relationship with them. He added, though, that during the last nine years of his thirteen year marriage, he and his wife were never alone overnight. They became so involved in being parents that they neglected their relationship as husband and wife.

A family can be a Christian community in which the members love, accept and trust one another. When children are born into covenant families, their Christian education has begun. This early experience with adults in living the Christian faith influences their feelings about God now and later when they can understand theological language. Whether children can understand God as accepting, loving, and forgiving will depend greatly upon their early experiences with adults.

Things to Think About

1. Describe your children. What are the major and minor strengths? What are their limitations? Special needs?
2. In what ways am I developing myself as a person? How will this help me to become a better parent?
 3. As parents, what are your covenant responsibilities to your children? What are their covenant responsibilities to the parents? To other children in the family?
4. As a family, discuss again your covenant relationship. How can it be nurtured and strengthened? Discuss implications related to the one-parent family.
5. Discuss your understanding of the Old and New Testament covenants. What implications do they have for you as a covenant family?