Just Thinking is a teaching resource of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries and exists to engender thoughtful engagement with apologetics, Scripture, and the whole of life.

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RZIM seeks to engage audiences with the evangelistic message of the gospel at open forums and live events. Join us this fall as we livestream Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale on October 5, 2018, speaking on “You Shall Know” (That I Am Lord) at Penn State University, and then on October 9, 2018, at the Zacharias Institute when John Lennox launches a new evening series called #TrendingQuestions. Artificial Intelligence will be his topic and, in addition to being livestreamed, the event will be available on Facebook Live.

For additional information on these and other events, please go to our website at www.rzim.org/events

RZIM Live!
ISN’T IT amazing how words spoken long ago can still be life-altering? In Deena Kastor’s inspiring new book, Let Your Mind Run, she shares how one simple phrase by her new coach triggered a mindset and habits that transformed her running career and continues to affect every aspect of her life.

“Bring a good attitude,” Coach Joe Vigil said to Deena in their first meeting and repeated often. Whether running against stiff headwinds at altitude in Colorado or against fellow Olympians in sweltering Athens, she shares how being mindful to bring a good attitude each step of the way eventually brought not only victory but also freedom and joy.

I recall, too, one New England autumn afternoon many years ago. A seminary student at the time, I hastily read a theological essay in the school library and hurried home. I needed to lug two cords of firewood before dark from the driveway to the deck and stack each log. My hands bled as I clutched the splintered wood, my pace feverish, but my thoughts soared beyond my work. The opening paragraph of the essay I had just rushed through had unexpectedly prompted me to reconsider my relationship with God.

In “The Theologian’s Craft,” my professor David Wells observed,

[Our] understanding of God, of ourselves, of the world—comes so slowly, so painfully slowly, that [life’s] summer passes and the winter arrives long before this fruit is ripe to be picked. Or so it seems... God, however... is not a quantity that can be “mastered” even though he can be known; and though he has revealed himself with clarity, the depth of our understanding of him is measured, not by the speed with which theological knowledge is processed, but by the quality of our determination to own his ownership of us through Christ in thought, word, and deed.

I kept mulling over that last line: “to own his ownership of us through Christ in thought, word, and deed.” As a child I had memorized “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Yet somehow, I had never really considered what it meant to belong to God, to be a part of his covenant family. In the years since, that line still informs my prayers, buoys my hopes, and encourages me to ask, “Am I growing in my love and knowledge of God as his beloved child?”

The ancient words of Scripture remind us, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

If you are a child of God, you are a “special possession” and belong to a “holy nation.” What a life-altering promise!
The story is told of the time when Winston Churchill was being shown around Colonial Williamsburg, and the guide began to wax eloquent about the town that was the cradle of “the revolution against the English.”

“Revolution against the English!” the future Prime Minister snorted. “Nay, it was a reaffirmation of English rights. Englishmen battling a Hun king and his Hessian hirelings to protect their English birthright.” Or as he said on a more formal occasion, “The Declaration of Independence is not only an American document. It follows on the Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights as the third great title-deed in which the liberties of the English-speaking people are founded.”

Churchill well knew that King George III was English-born and spoke English, unlike his German father and grandfather. But he was referring to what the colonists called “the ancient liberties of the English,” or what have more recently been called the distinctive benefits of the English speaking world or “Anglosphere.”

The revolutionaries certainly portrayed themselves as oppressed and aggrieved (the “slaves of King George”), but they were actually fighting for freedom, from freedom, and as some of the freest people in the world of their times, and they believed that freedom was their birthright as Englishmen. As John Adams put it, “The patriots of this province desire nothing new; they wish only to keep their old privileges.”

What was Adams referring to? Even before Magna Carta, there had been a robust tradition in common law that set out the liberties of Englishmen that no king or noble could transgress. These ancient liberties included the common law, the right of habeas corpus, trial by a jury of one’s peers, elected parliaments, taxation by consent, safeguards for property, and above all the notion of government by consent (King Edward I: “What touches all should be approved by all”). And they expressly stood against the statist trends in their day, and especially the Renaissance restoration of the Roman principle of lex regia, the idea that the will and pleasure of the king was law—which James I had given a Christian twist in his notion of the divine right of kings.

Not long before the sailing of the Mayflower, Sir Edward Coke had been foremost in championing these ancient liberties, as in his ringing declaration on behalf of Parliament against James’s son, Charles I. The sovereign power, or the power claimed by the sovereign, weakened the Magna Carta, he trumpeted. “Take heed what we yield unto; Magna Carta is such a fellow that he will have no sovereign.”

The “ancient liberties of the English” have been traced back to their origins in German forests and open-air clan meetings, their crossing the English Channel with the Saxons, their repression under the Normans Conquest after 1066, and their reemergence under the barons who faced down King John at Runnymede. The line between the ancient Witan (council of the “wise men”) and modern Westminster is not always clear and straight, but it never disappears and it grew stronger all the time. Following the English Revolution and the rise of the Whigs, these ancient liberties became a well-known feature of the English in Europe. (In Mozart’s opera The Abduction from the Seraglio, one of the characters says with pride, “I am English, born of freedom.”)
This strong and ancient notion of personal freedom crossed the Atlantic with the American colonists, along with many cherished symbols of freedom, such as the liberty tree and liberty poles. In William Penn’s words, “Every Free-born subject of England is heir by Birth-right unto that unparalleled privilege of Liberty and Property, beyond all the Nations in the world beside.” There is no question that, viewed together, these “ancient liberties” were crucial to the spirit and the demands that led to the Revolution, but by that name they have little appeal today. They would be familiar to historians, lawyers, and devotees of Winston Churchill and his vision of the English-speaking peoples. But in the wider American culture they have been eclipsed.

Where then is the source of American freedom, and why does the story of freedom matter? The first question therefore asks, do Americans realize where their freedom came from? The story of freedom is essential and foundational to the sustaining of freedom. Scholars have recently explored the contribution to freedom of the eleventh century “Paleo-Indians” in the American Northwest, but their direct contributions to American freedom and to 1776 are vague at best. Far more people assume quickly that “American democracy” must obviously come from democratic Athens or perhaps from Roman civic virtue, but that too would be wrong. For much as the founders tried to learn from classical models of Greek and Roman governance, and to build Capitol Hill in honor of their style, they were extremely wary of direct democracy because of its short-lived history and its turbulent record. A different, surprising, and far more important past deserves to be remembered and brought into the discussion today: the forgotten contribution of the Jews and Mt. Sinai, and the way in which it both built on and decisively advanced the “ancient liberties of the English.”

The Great Gift of the Jews

“What makes this night unlike all other nights?” This famous two-thousand-year-old question from Second Temple times has always been asked by the youngest Jewish child at a Seder. It was designed to provoke an annual commemoration and retelling of the defining moment of Jewish history—the Passover night more than three thousand years ago that launched the exodus from Egypt, which formed the birth of the Jewish nation. Like all traditions, it has doubtless been reduced at times to rite words in rote order, but it is one of the world’s oldest surviving rituals. It is also history’s most successful retelling of history and an indispensable key to the miraculous survival of the Jewish people across the centuries and across the world, despite their persecution and their scattering. No other people can lay claim to any similar long-enduring celebration, but the exodus stands as much more than a Jewish parallel to the celebration of July Fourth. As the oldest political vision in the West, it is the direct ancestor of the Fourth of July, and it holds the missing key to America’s independence, to America’s freedom, to America’s history, and therefore to the renewal of America’s freedom today—but in ways that few Americans now appear to understand.

Daniel Elazar, Michael Walzer, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and others have all argued that the book of Exodus is the master story of Western freedom and the ultimate regime change in history. Savonarola, the reforming monk, cited it in his celebrated “bonfire of the vanities” in Florence. John Calvin expounded it in Geneva, and Zwingli in Zurich. John Knox thundered...
its lessons in Edinburgh. Oliver Cromwell declared that it was “the only parallel of God’s dealing with us that I know” as he and his fellow Puritans led the English Revolution. William Bradford sailed the Mayflower under its inspiration; John Winthrop cited it in his famous sermon “A Modell of Christian Charity” on board the Arbella, both Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson proposed to use its themes in the Great Seal of the United States, the African American slaves use it to express their longings for freedom in their immortal spirituals (“Go down, Moses”), and Martin Luther King Jr. preached from the story in his last sermon the night before he was assassinated in April 1968. To anyone who knows the story and the lessons of Exodus, there is no situation so bad that need stay as it is. There is always the possibility of another way and a better situation. There is always the possibility of liberation. There is always the hope of freedom.

In a Thanksgiving sermon in 1799, Abiel Abbot spoke for many Americans of his generation when he said, “It has often been remarked that the people of the United States come nearer to a parallel with ancient Israel, than any other nation upon the globe.”6 Years later, the poet Heinrich Heine widened the same point, “Since the Exodus, freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent.”7

To be sure, 1776 was soon countered by 1789. Later, Friedrich Nietzsche attacked exodus as the event that subverted the freedom that he advocated. In his first essay in The Genealogy of Morals, he argued that Israel’s liberation from Pharaoh was simply the beginning of a two-thousand year “slave revolt in morals,” the tragic moment when resentment won and the elevation of the herd overturned the rightful place of the hero.8 Unable to fight the strong with strength, Jews and Christians gained their revenge by a reversal of values, making the strong bad and the weak good. Thus the strength of the strong was turned into weakness, and the weakness of the weak into strength. This ignominy, Nietzsche held, was started by the Jews and continued by Christians, and it needed to be redressed by the rise of the Superman. For the same reason, it is plain that the exodus theme does not resonate through the revolutions of 1789, 1917, and 1949. Exodus for the leaders of those revolutions was a step backwards, and their revolutions had no time for the Bible, its ideals, and its ways of promoting change. Clearly, the Russian and Chinese revolutions were all for 1789 and not 1776.

Sinai Before Athens

Exodus was clearly central to the American Revolution and American revolutionaries. It was important as far more than a one-off precedent, far more than a template for personal salvation, and far more than merely a matter of heart-stirring rhetoric.
(“Let my people go!” “Proclaim liberty throughout the land” [Ex 5:1; Lev 25:10]). For at the heart of the exodus story is a template for society, for human personhood, for freedom, for justice, and for social change that shaped the American Revolution in highly practical ways. So much so that it has been truly said that Exodus and its influence on freedom long preceded Athens, has far outlasted Athens, and has strongly surpassed Athens in shaping some of the most important features of modern freedom in the eighteenth century and today. As Rabbi Sacks claims, “Ancient Israel was where the idea of freedom was born, and in many respects it remains a surer guide to liberty than the short-lived democracy of Athens.”

The Sinai covenant at the heart of the exodus story came to America with the English and put its stamp on American history through its decisive contribution to the US Constitution and the notion of constitutionalism. For as Elazar, Walzer, and other scholars have demonstrated, the classical categories of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy are not the only way to classify societies. A different and helpful perspective emerges if societies are classified according to their founding, rather than their types of government.

When classified according to their founding, four major types of society are prominent. First, there are organic societies, societies that are linked by blood, kinship, ancestral ties, and intimate acquaintance, often appearing to go back into the mists of time—for example, Scottish clans and African tribes. In such societies the individual tends to be regarded merely as part of the whole. Second, there are hierarchical societies, societies that are linked by force and conquest, such as kingdoms and empires—for example, the Roman Empire, the Prussian monarchy, and Chinese communism today (Voltaire described Prussia as “an army transformed into a state.”) Divisions, classes, and castes are usually a feature of such societies. Third, there are contractual societies, societies based on a series of legal contracts that serve the interests of the citizens and allow for a politics that promotes the pursuit of self-interest. And fourth, there are covenantal societies, societies that are linked by choice and binding agreement, such as ancient Israel after the Sinai covenant, Switzerland after the birth of the Helvetic Confederation in 1291, and the United States after rejecting the Articles of Confederacy and passing the US Constitution in 1787.

The Reformation’s application of covenantalism to politics, and its impact on the rise of constitutionalism, long preceded the work of Thomas Hobbes,
John Locke, and the notion of social contract, let alone the Enlightenment. And its rediscovery in the 1950s has been hailed as “a truly seminal concept in Western civilization” and “the jewel in the crown of the new science of politics of the modern epoch.” If Lincoln, Elazar, and Walzer are right, Americans are not simply an “almost chosen people.” They live in an “almost covenanted polity” and they were the heirs of the Jewish “almost democracy.”

**Unique and Influential**

To be sure, there were covenants outside the Bible, such as the Hittite suzerainty treaties, the Celtic oath societies, and Alexander the Great’s Corinthian League, by which he tried to provide bonding for his vast Hellenic empire. (“We have declared in our treaty that all Greeks shall bind themselves by oath to the mutual defense of their freedom and autonomy.”) There were also earlier covenants in the Bible: with Noah on behalf of humanity after the great flood, and with Abraham as father of his family. But Israel’s covenant at Mt. Sinai was unique.

First, God himself was a partner to the covenant, even though he was the sovereign king in relation to the subordinate king, the people of Israel.

Second, the covenant included all the people of Israel—men, women, children, and both the born and the yet to be born. (“Speak to the entire assembly of Israel, and say to them . . .” [Lev 19:1-2 NIV].) In Michael Walzer’s words, “The agreement is wholesale; all the people accept all the laws,” and the result is an “almost democracy.” This principle, as I said, stands in strong contrast to most of the other suzerainty treaties, which are usually agreements between two individuals, a sovereign king and a subordinate king. It is also in complete contrast to the hierarchical and top-down governments of the rulers of Babylon and Egypt, and in strong contrast to Athenian government too, whether by aristocrats or democrats.

Even Athenian democracy was strikingly different from the covenant at Mt. Sinai. While it differed from the earlier Greek oligarchy, it still included only men, and then only some men—those with the proper pedigree who had undergone military training, who were never more than 20 percent of the population. It excluded other men, such farmers, laborers, mechanics, and resident aliens, and it excluded women, children, and slaves. Behind this democratic view was the Greek notion of hierarchy that was the equivalent of the Hindu caste system. As Plato expressed it, some people were golden, some silver, and some merely bronze and baser metals. Or more simply, in Aristotle’s terms, some are born to be rulers and others to be ruled—these people are slaves by nature. Through the notion of the born and the unborn, the Sinai covenant also stands in marked contrast to America’s exaggerated generationalism. Far from marking off each generation as absolutely unique and radically different from the generation before and the generation after, it builds the Jewish people into an intergenerational community. It thus binds together the past, the present, and the future to form a live tradition that links the generations. No individual life, Rabbi Heschel writes, is a purely private concern. Each “is a movement in the symphony of ages.”

Third, the articles of the Sinai covenant covered the whole of life, so that freedom was not just a moment of liberation but a people’s way of life for generations. It included what they wore, how they worked and rested, how they farmed, how they ran their businesses, how they treated the poor and the stranger, how they understood time and history, and it was all aimed at creating a just, free, and good society that was decisively different from the pagan empires the Jews had been freed from.
In sum, all the people and all of life were included in the terms of the covenant, so that it has been said that Israel was quietly democratized long before fifth-century Athens, and quietly made egalitarian long before the American and French revolutions. But what mattered supremely, and what shaped the later course of covenants, constitutionalism, and republican freedom, were the three central features of the covenant at Mt. Sinai.

The Great Precedent and Pattern
First, the covenant was a matter of freely chosen consent. Three separate times the Jewish people were asked for their response, and they answered, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do,” and they answered “with one voice” (Ex 19:8; 24:3, 7). In other words, they ratified the covenant voluntarily. Jonathan Sacks underscores the profundity of this fact. “A far-reaching principle is here articulated for the first time: There is no legitimate government without the consent of the governed, even if the governor is creator of heaven and earth. . . . God is not a transcendental equivalent of a Pharaoh. The commonwealth he invites the Israelites to join him in creating is not one where power rules, even the power of heaven itself.”

Jewish commentators also point out that, though the Torah contains 613 specific commands, there is no Hebrew word for obey. The nearest is the old English terms hearken, heed, or pay attention, which put the emphasis on the freedom and responsibility to listen, to deliberate, to decide for oneself, and then to act accordingly. There is no sense of blind obedience in the Muslim sense of Islam as “submission.” The Jews were indeed bound by the covenant, but as Walzer underscores, they were “freely bound.” Their assent to the covenant was not simply a matter of power and obedience, as the Hittite vassal treaties were. Their assent and adherence was a threefold blend of obedience, gratitude for their liberation, and admiration—the recognition of the wisdom of the laws they were accepting. (“What great nation is there that has the statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law that I am setting before you this day?” [Deut 4:8].)

Importantly, the result is a nomocracy, the freely chosen rule of law, rather than a theocracy, the direct rule of God. The latter term was chosen fatefully by the Jewish writer Josephus, but ignored the key place of the people’s consent. Importantly too, this incident is the earliest and weightiest example of the notion that is vital to free societies—“the consent of the governed.”

Second, the covenant was a matter of a morally binding pledge. It is this moral dimension that makes a covenant different from a contract, a political covenant stronger than a social contract, and a covenant of marriage before God deeper and more lasting than a civil marriage.

A covenant is based on the foundational moral act of one person making a solemn promise to another person or to many others. This promise is both an expression of freedom and an assumption of responsibility. The freedom that is the heart of consent to the covenant carries within it the responsibility that is the heart of the obligation to the covenant. Thus people who covenant, whether in marriage or in nation building, make a morally informed and morally binding mutual pledge to each other that creates trust. The trust created by this mutual pledge is all-important because it replaces the need for force and regulation in rela-
Ancient Israel was where the idea of freedom was born, and in many respects it remains a surer guide to liberty than the short-lived democracy of Athens.
tionships. It acts as the glue that binds as well as the oil that smooths.

Here is the significance of the Pledge of Allegiance and of standing during the national anthem that America needs to recapture, and that those who “take a knee” need to remember. Both are a solemn commitment to the American republic’s obligation on behalf of “liberty and justice for all.” At least two considerations are at stake. First, the freedom of conscience includes the right to the freedom of dissent, but dissent from the pledge and disrespect for the anthem are far more than dissent over party or political policy. They are a tacit rejection of the covenant/constitution itself. Second, dissent from them in the name of justice is contradictory and self-defeating, for it undermines the very standard and the obligation through which justice in America is to be achieved.

Needless to say, both these points only carry weight if 1776 and the American republic are to continue as they have always been understood. For Americans who still believe in the American republic, the better way is to take the Pledge of Allegiance and the national anthem out of the realm of the platitudinous, and expand its obligations to any who are currently excluded—Dr. Martin Luther King’s “promissory note” once again. But of course, this point is null and void if taking a knee is in fact a stand on behalf of 1789 and a different concept of freedom and revolution from that of 1776.

Those who make a covenantal/constitutional pledge voluntarily shoulder a responsibility and become partners in an ongoing project that none of them could undertake alone. They freely mortgage themselves, and put themselves under an obligation to their fellow-citizen covenanters and to the future. They are promise makers and covenant partners, so they are promise keepers who have pledged to keep their word. The trust-creating reliability of the covenant partners over time is a key to the strength of the promise and therefore the success of the covenant.

Covenantal (and constitutional) societies therefore require a serious responsibility from their members (and citizens), which neither kings nor dictators require. Indeed, the personal and interpersonal takes priority over the political, responsibilities precede rights, and rights only grow out of responsibilities and have no meaning by themselves. The history of covenantal (or constitutional) societies can therefore be read as a commentary on the durability of the love and loyalty of the people and their leaders to the covenant partnership. This is surely a provocative reminder to America today. It is the antithesis of contemporary American relationships demonstrated in, say, the hookup culture of the sexual revolution, but the point is becoming ever clearer: Freedoms that frustrate the deepest longings of the human heart will always disappoint and prove to be a betrayal.

A covenant is broader and a contract is narrower, the one being emphatically moral and the other being purely legal. When the covenant is also “with God,” or a constitution is “under God,” the binding pledge is given the force of the ultimate standard of accountability (and in that sense the final “check and balance”). Both covenant and contract are completely different, of course, from modern “freedom of choice.” We live in a day when consumer choice has become more noncommittal and nonbinding. Indeed, it has to be so if there is to be a constant turnover of sales. Which modern person in their right mind would make a choice that mortgages their future and rules out a thousand new possibilities of the latest and greatest (and cheaper, faster, fresher, and more powerful) that will soon be on offer, whether a new smartphone, a new car, a new house, or a new husband, wife, or partner? Hence the growing preference for renting over
owning, cohabitation over marriage, and the rise of such fast-growing businesses as Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb. And hence the underlying contradiction between the attitudes of market-based consumer societies and the ethos of spiritual, moral, and political faithfulness. To be sure, advertising works to build brand loyalty, even though the essence of consumerism undercuts it, but brand loyalty is a pale shadow of covenantal-love loyalty.

All for One and One for All

Third, the covenant was a matter of reciprocal responsibility of all for all. Long before the celebrated maxim of the Three Musketeers, “All for one and one for all,” the Jewish covenant embedded the pledge of responsibility to God and all other Jews. It included the profound new ethic, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” and it reached out in care for the widow, the orphan, and even the stranger. (“Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” [Deut 10:19 NKJV].) Indeed, as the rabbis pointed out, the celebrated command to love of the neighbor comes only once in the Torah, whereas the far more unlikely command to the love of the stranger, and so to resist tribalism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia, comes no fewer than thirty-six times. In Walzer’s words, “We are responsible for our fellows—all of us for all of us.”

Remarkably, the reciprocal responsibility even included the rights of the future, for its terms covered not only the born but the unborn and yet to be born. (“The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all those of us alive here today” [Deut 5:3].) There was equality of dignity for each individual before the covenant, and there was also equality of responsibility for all for all others who were within the covenant. By definition, the “stranger,” the “foreigner,” the “outsider,” and the “other” are not “people like us,” to use Aristotle’s term. But while none of them are in our image and “people like us,” they are all in God’s image, and as such they must be treated with dignity and compassion.

This ethic of responsibility later became the Jewish principle that “All Israelites are responsible for one another.” It meant, one rabbi said, that there was not one covenant at Sinai but 600,000 covenants, as all the Israelite men signed onto the covenant’s pledge. No, said another rabbi, there were really 600,000 times 600,000 covenants as everyone made a covenant not only with God, but with all their fellow Israelites. When the celebrated Rabbi Hillel was asked if he could explain the essence of Judaism while standing on one leg, he replied that nothing could be simpler: “Do unto other as you will have others do unto you. The rest is commentary.”

In our own day, Rabbi Sacks underscores the simple but profound result: “A covenant is a pledge between two or more partners, each of whom respects the freedom and integrity of the other, to be loyal to one another and to do together what neither can do alone.” Excessive dependency is a problem in any society, and so also is excessive autonomy. But such is the covenantal responsibility of each person, and the responsibility of each for each other, and all for all, that a covenantal community becomes a community with a partnership and a project at its core. Our concern here is the decisive influence of covenantalism on politics, but it has major implications for other areas of life too. In a later chapter we will look at the notion of the civil public square as a form of covenantal pluralism, and its resolution of the problem of living with our deepest differences. Covenantalism has been applied to business too, as in the new economics of mutuality, pioneered by Bruno Roche and Jay Jakub, and set out in their Complementing Capitalism, and by Michael Schluter and David John Lee in Relational Manager.
The Tragedy of the Commons

Can it be said today that all Americans are responsible for all Americans? Or has American individualism shattered the bonds of solidarity and mutual responsibility beyond repair? The covenantal basis for both individuality and solidarity is quite clear, captured in the famous rabbinic saying “If I am not for myself, who will be? And if I am only for myself, what am I?” In the same vein, Elazar suggested that, just as the French saluted each other as “citizen” and the Russians and Chinese as “comrade” in the heyday of their respective revolutions, Americans should salute each other as “partner.” For every American should look at all other Americans and know that together they are partners in the American experiment, the American freedom project, and the American way of life. “We the people” have come together to form a partnership nation on behalf of freedom that creates a just and peaceful community of free people.

This means that the measure of the reciprocal responsibility of all Americans for all Americans is the yardstick of the health of the republic. The Pledge of Allegiance is therefore no idle recitation. It should be unthinkable that any American leader should regard other Americans as “deplorables” or as anything other than fellow Americans and partners in the great cause of human freedom and justice for all. It is a mark of great leaders, not just that their followers have faith in them but that they have faith in their followers and can inspire them to live up to their ideals.

Today, America shows signs of two clear contrasts to this solidarity of covenantal partnership. The first is politization, the idolatry of politics that trusts politics to do more than politics can do, and therefore turns all issues into political issues. The result is to prioritize the political at the expense of the personal. This priority grows from the Greek view that the polis, or city, is the highest form of allegiance, so that politics as service to the polis is the highest calling. From the covenantal perspective, by contrast, politics is important but is limited and kept in its place (“How small, of all that human hearts endure, / that part which laws or kings can cure”). Also, because power is the currency of politics, politics is especially prone to corruption and the abuse of power (“All power tends to corrupt”). Wisely understood, politics is downstream from the more creative and culture-shaping spheres of society, and it is always vital to remember the old maxim “The first thing to say about politics is that politics is not the first thing.”

The second contrast to covenantal solidarity is what is now known as the tragedy of the commons. In a highly individualistic society, each person takes back a little of their public commitment, thinking that their part is so small that no one will notice. Rabbi Sacks tells an old Hasidic story that captures the problem of such tiny acts of selfishness. There was a European village where it was decided that each villager should donate an amount of wine to fill a vat to present to the king on the occasion of his visit to the village. Secretly at night over the next few weeks, however, each villager took some of the wine, rationalizing the theft with the thought that such a small amount would not be missed. Each one then added water to the vat, so that the vat remained full to the top. When the king arrived, the villagers presented the vat to him, and he drank from it, but was disgusted. “It is just plain water!”

The point is clear. The responsibility for a covenantal (or constitutional) society lies with each citizen, and it begins and ends with each one doing their part—in solidarity with other covenant partners. In Elazar’s words, “In all its forms, the key focus of covenant is on relationships. A
covenant is the constitution of relationships.” Such a covenantal (constitutional) republic can die, not just because of bad government but death through a million tiny acts of selfishness. Americans should stop to ponder this point. Under the impact of radical individualism, America has become the land of the autonomous and unencumbered self, and the tragedy of the commons is far advanced in America.

George Bernard Shaw summed up the nihilism and irresponsibility of the European way of life in his own time when he said, “The golden rule today is that there is no golden rule.” Oswald Spengler blamed such selfish attitudes for the “failure of nerve” of the West at large, and such practical results as demographic childlessness that followed it: “It is all the same whether the case against children is the American lady who would not miss a season for anything, the Parisienne who fears that her lover would leave her, or the Ibsen heroine who belongs to herself—they all belong to themselves and they are all unfruitful.”

With the exception of Switzerland, Europe is not committed to covenantal arrangements, whereas America ostensibly still is. Yet the reality is now hard to see in America. The irresponsible society and the irresponsible generation think only of themselves. They take no thought for others, including the wider world and those as yet unborn.

There is an elemental lesson here that Americans must not miss. The term republic was coined by Cicero in the first century BC, but its meaning “public things” or “the property of the public” was anchored by the Sinai covenant centuries earlier. Democracy as a notion has next to no moral content and absolutely no social content whatsoever, whereas covenantal (or constitutional) republicanism is moral at its heart and it creates a society before it creates a state. It therefore puts responsible relationships and the common good at the heart of life and society. Covenantal (or constitutional) republicanism rises and falls on the moral integrity and the social responsibility of the relationships of the citizens and on the condition of the common good. The implications for America could not be plainer and more challenging. Vital though presidents and governments are, relationships matter more to freedom than regimes. The personal and the interpersonal precede the political. Both the American family and the American republic were once rooted in covenants, so there is an iron link between the health of marriage, the health of families, the health of schools, the health of the common good, and the health of America, and to loosen one is to loosen the others. Improved gun laws may or may not help to curb the destructive ugliness of America’s social violence, but there is no question that good relationships will always do more than the best of gun laws.

Thus the importance of the condition of American society, its marriages, its families, its schools, its voluntary associations, its civic education, and its handing down from generation to generation—all these things will always determine the state of the union more than the character of the president, the nature of the state, the size of the military, or the condition of America’s roads, railways, bridges, and tunnels. America’s obsession with presidents and presidential elections is expensive, diverting, and foolish.

The notion of democracy is designed to answer the question, Who rules? (Though as we shall see, even its answer to that question is weaker and less clear than many people think.) But covenantal republicanism answers a far deeper question, How are the democratic citizens who rule to relate to each other in ways that ensure a just, free, open, and caring society? Americans today celebrate democracy and downplay republicanism, when for those who prize freedom the priority should be the other way around.
Rediscovery at the Reformation

The impact of the covenant and the notion of covenantalism can be seen in three periods in history. First, and most obviously, the Sinai covenant constituted the Jewish people and formed the Jewish nation. It is notable that the covenant constituted the Jewish way of life and the Jewish political arrangements centuries before Israel chose a Jewish king hundreds of years later. And the covenant continued to be the decisive factor in the way they lived long after the catastrophic disasters of AD 70 and AD 133. The Jews had lost their temple, their monarchy, their capital city, their priests, their prophets, their homeland, their independence, and almost their will to survive. (At the climax of the persecution under the Emperor Hadrian, there were rabbis who said that “by rights we should issue a decree that Jews should not marry and have children, so that the seed of Abraham comes to an end of its own accord.”) In other words, in the blackest night of Jewish experience the covenant was the key to Jewish survival. It was not only a framework for life but an anchor and a lifeline in the storms of evil that the Jewish people suffered.

The basic lesson of Jewish covenantalism is unmistakable. Relationships matter more than regimes, the character of society preceded the character of the state, and the law came into being before the entry into the land. This central concern for the quality of a community means that the character of the state follows the quality of the relationships of the people who comprise it. As the community and the society go, starting with the family and the school, so goes the state, and not the other way around.

Second, the precedent and pattern of the Sinai covenant was rediscovered and developed by the Reformation. Along with the truths of calling and conscience, it became one of the three most decisive gifts of the Reformation that shaped the rise of the modern world. Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scotland, England, and the United States—each was powerfully shaped by the Reformation and in its turn helped to shape the modern world, the last two in particular because of their influence in secular history. The Sinai covenant was especially important to the Reformed wing of the Reformation and the thinking that spread out from Calvin’s Geneva and Zwingli’s Zurich. The Jews had famously said, “Our people is a people only in virtue of its Torah,” and an old Calvinist adage made the same point: “Where the Reformed are, there will be the covenant.” The Jews were constituted by the Torah, and the Reformers were constituted by the covenant, and without them neither would have been anything. In the words of William Perkins, the great Cambridge teacher of countless Puritans, “We are by nature covenant creatures, bound together by covenants innumerable and together bound by covenant to our God . . . . Blessed be the ties that bind us.”

From the Mayflower to the Arbella, and from Plymouth Rock to the Massachusetts Bay and beyond, the notion of covenant was applied to churches and marriages, and then to townships and commonwealths. It became the characteristic and unmistakable form of governance in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, for example, is the oldest surviving written constitution in the modern world, and John Adams drafted it expressly in covenantal terms. (“It is a social compact, by which the whole people covenants with the each citizen, and each citizen with the whole people, that all shall be governed by certain laws for the common good.”) As if to doff his cap to what he knew was the wellspring of constitutionalism, John Adams wrote, “I will insist that the
The basic lesson of Jewish covenantalism is unmistakable. Relationships matter more than regimes.
Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation.  

The third period of influence is the most recent. In the eighteenth century, the covenant tradition merged with the new science of politics and flowered into the notion of constitutionalism, and in that form it has influenced many countries across the world ever since. Yet many Americans today still fail to appreciate the fundamental point. The US Constitution, which has been the pacesetter document for so many other countries and constitutions, is in essence a form of national and somewhat secularized covenant—and a notion that goes back to Mt. Sinai. As such, it has all the strengths and weaknesses of the covenantal form of government, but it represents a direct and comprehensive contrast to the alternative of organic, hierarchical, and purely contractual forms of government. In Lord Acton’s estimate, covenantal federalism in America (the term federal comes foedus, the Latin for covenant) “has produced a community more powerful, more prosperous, more intelligent, and more free than any other which the world has seen.”

Promise Makers, Promise Breakers

It is important to say that there are weaknesses in covenantal politics, as in all forms of human politics, and these should be understood clearly—two above all. The first weakness is that covenantalism requires promise keeping, but we humans do not keep promises well. We make and break promises, both as individuals and as groups and nations. Making promises is the natural expression of human freedom.

However, making promises and keeping promises are two different things, and the Bible itself candidly exposes this weakness in promise keeping. The problem is writ large in the cycle of degeneration and renewal in the book of Judges, which comes not long after Exodus, and later in the checkered story of the Jewish kings. There is a cycle of nature (spring, summer, autumn, and winter), and there is a cycle of human failure (corruption, oppression, capitulation, redemption, and corruption again). They each require festivals to address the significance of their differences, but the first cycle is inevitable, whereas the second is preventable. Strikingly, the greatest, wisest, and richest of all the Hebrew kings, Solomon, demonstrates the corruption the most clearly. He so glorifies himself and his building ventures that he turns his entire people back into a slave labor force and turns himself into “another Pharaoh” and Israel into a “second Egypt.”

This candidly acknowledged failure creates the impetus for the characteristically Jewish notion of the Messiah and messianism. Whether the longed for Messiah is true or false, religious (as in the desired Son of David) or secular (as in the nineteenth-century visions of Rabbi Marx), the messianic longing is for a second liberation to fulfill the first. It is a radical and visionary response that springs from the assumption that the exodus of the first liberation has proved crucially incomplete or has failed. The messianic hope is pregnant with meaning for the Jewish and Christian sense of history. But it is also crucial for the revolutionary secular Left, because secular messianism is essentially an expression of the failure of secular liberationism. With no divine Messiah in view, secular messianism becomes a dream politics of the Left. It is called on whenever history’s progressives have not progressed as promised, when the “long march” has gone through the institutions and got nowhere, and when the Babel project has foundered yet again.

To counter the dynamics of this spiritual and moral entropy, the Bible constantly warns against the danger of idolatry and self-glorification. It demonstrates the cru-
cial importance of the prophetic corrective and teaches the requirement of faithful transmission of covenental commitments—from leaders to their people, from parents to children, and from generation to generation, and it underscores the necessity of renewing the covenant when it is forgotten or broken. Yet in spite of all this, the record of covenant keeping will never be perfect. It will often be broken, and the messianic hope will burn brightly in contrast. Moses, the first liberator, and the coming Messiah, the second liberator, are the Bible's two bookends for holding together freedom and hope. Thus the free person's task in any age is to live responsibly in the roller-coaster interim, always looking to the past with gratitude and humility, but always working toward the future with hope and energy. Life lived this way calls for engagement with hope and humility. Where we are going gives strength to what we are doing, and what we are doing becomes a sign of where we are going.

Many people have recognized this core problem of promise keeping and responded to it in different ways. One response was to see the flaw and exploit it cynically. In the Renaissance, for instance, Machiavelli turned the weakness into a virtue when he openly called for the prince to break his word whenever he needed to as a matter of statecraft. “The promise given was a necessity of the past: the word broken is a necessity of the present.” Since politics has no relation to ethics, “A wise ruler ought never to keep faith when by doing so it would be against his interests.”

Power, not trust, is the coin of the realm for Machiavelli’s prince—a philosophy and an attitude that is common again under the terms of postmodernism.

Another response was to rue the flaw and then use it to reject the notion of covenentalism itself. Philosopher David Hume, for example, writing from covenanting Scotland, raised the simple question, “Why are we bound to keep our promises?” He argued that promise making is “the most mysterious and incomprehensible operation that can possibly be imagined.” Famously, he demonstrated in his own life that he had no intention of upholding what he considered impossible and unnecessary. Once, after he had fallen into a bog near Edinburgh, he called for help and said he was willing to recite the Lord's Prayer to induce a rescuer to help him, only to mock the woman once he was on back on terra firma. If Paris was worth a mass for Henry IV, reciting the Lord’s Prayer was an easy price for Hume to pay for his rescue. What was one more false and fickle oath if all oaths were false and fickle?

Yet another response was to face the flaw realistically and then attempt to strengthen promise keeping by safeguarding the place of truth, trust, oaths, vows, and loyalty. (“So help me, God.”) That concern was the reason why John Locke advised against respecting freedom of conscience for atheists. The problem was not that he was prejudiced, that his much-vaunted “tolerance” stopped short of tolerating atheists, or that he was inconsistent and hypocritical, as he is often accused of being. It was rather that since atheists did not believe in God, Locke did not think they had a standard by which to make oaths that were needed if the bonds of social trust were to be maintained.

Accountable? Who Says?

The second major weakness of covenantalism is closely related to the first. Any rejection of the standard, before which the covenantal pledge was made, means an automatic relaxing of accountability, and without accountability, covenantalism and constitutionalism weaken and fall apart. For the Jews at Sinai, the covenant was “with God,” for most of American history, the covenant was genuinely “under God,” but now it has become a constitution
“without God.” The recent determination to remove both the term and the truth of “One nation under God” raises the question of accountability again. Kingdoms, empires, dictatorships, totalitarian governments, and authoritarian religions require no consent other than submission, blind, grudging, and sullen if necessary. But covenantal faiths and constitutional societies are nothing without the free and uncoerced promise making and promise keeping of their adherents and their citizens. Tether-free societies simply do not last. Hence the importance of the Pledge of Allegiance and civic education again, not as a formality but a reality.

Needless to say, the alternative to promise keeping is a resort to force, and therefore to the state as the only agent strong enough to hold citizens accountable and to provide the common super standard of accountability. Statism and the creation of Leviathan was Thomas Hobbes alternative to covenantalism. Despite his formal nod to God and his multiple references to the Bible (far more than to the Greeks and the Romans), Hobbes had no real place for God in his “new science of politics.” It was to be a secularized form of contractual, not covenantal, governance. But he was candid enough to spell out the price that people would have to pay—and that Americans will have to pay today—if they reject God as the final standard of accountability. If the government was to do what Hobbes needed the government to do, and to help people escape the brutal state of nature, Hobbes promises. Peace, order, and stability can all be yours, but the price is steep. You may escape the “war of all against all” on one side, and you may step away from your dislike of any binding agreement with God on the other side. But your only option is to surrender to the “mortal god” of the all-powerful state, which as it grows will claim absolute arbitrary power over everyone and everything.

Make no mistake: The logical outcome of those who reject covenantalism (or constitutionalism) today is state control. There is undoubtedly a danger in what Leo Strauss called reductio ad Hitlerum—making Hitler the essence of all evil, and using him as the final argument to win arguments. But there have been too many political religions and too many semi-divine states on both the left and the right to ignore the problem of statism, or what used to be called statolatry. “Man . . . must venerate the state as a secular deity,” Hegel said. “To be a nation . . . is the religion of our time,” Ernst Arndt, the German nationalist declared. Abolish God, Chesterton commented on such claims, “and the Government becomes God. That fact is written all across human history.”

Supporters of 1789 and Left/liberalism should take careful note. The invasion of the private sphere, Christopher Dawson wrote, is “the original sin of every totalitarian system.” For all the fancy Left/liberal blather about diversity, unity without God soon becomes enforced unity, which is another name for coercion and uniformity and the totalitarian suppression of real diversity. Thanks to political correctness, the process is well underway in America, and there is no greater need than the need to defend and expand the remaining spheres of freedom.
The Real Breaking of the Covenant

Far more than fussiness over history is at stake in these issues. If the notions of covenant and constitution are central to the founding of the American republic, then the health or sickness of their condition must be central any assessment of the state of the union, for quite literally they constitute America. A founding creates a nation’s DNA and establishes the lines along which it will develop until and unless it is defeated or taken in a completely different direction. No one can hope to make America great again in any direction without understanding what made America great in the first place. America can neither be understood right nor led well unless the covenantal and constitutional character of American freedom is taken into account. Covenantalism and the essential responsibility it requires of citizens provide the missing key to restoring American freedom today—unless it is taken a quite different direction.

When Abraham Lincoln traveled to Washington to begin his presidency in February 1861, the storm clouds of war were darkening. He stopped in Philadelphia to pay his respects to Independence Hall and the two great documents that had been debated and framed there, the first being nothing less than America’s “birth certificate.” Citing Psalm 137, he solemnly made his own covenantal pledge: “I have never asked anything that does not breathe from those walls. All my political warfare has been in favor of the teachings coming forth from that sacred hall. May my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I ever prove false to those teachings.”36 Lincoln’s parallel with the Hebrew psalm and its undying devotion to Jerusalem is stunning, and it shows up the chasm between him and many American leaders today. No people in all history have had a love for their city like the Jews for Jerusalem, even when they were separated from it for nearly two thousand years, yet Lincoln takes that supreme attachment as the standard for his love for the principles enshrined in America’s founding documents.

Few American leaders today have such an understanding of where the greatness of America came from. Such an inaugural trip to Philadelphia now would be little more than “optics” or tourism at best and hypocrisy at worst, for both the founders and their ideas are now under a cloud. There are four main ways Americans dismiss their covenantal past and weaken the role of the founders and the Constitution today. Indeed, it was the fateful convergence of these dismissals in the 1960s that created the cultural chasm between 1776 and 1789 that divides America now.

First and foremost, many Americans have rejected the founders because of their failure to address “America’s original sin”—the evil of slavery and their treatment of women and Native Americans, and the rank hypocrisy that was the result. Many people outside the United States had pointed to this hypocrisy—most famously the English writer Samuel Johnson: “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?”37 Unquestionably, then, the founders’ silence over slavery was not unwitting. It was the bargain made by the supporters of the US Constitution in 1787. Many of them personally opposed slavery, but they remained silent at the convention because if they had insisted on tackling the problem, as Samuel Hopkins and others urged, the Southern states would never have signed the Constitution. This devilish agreement carried over an egregious evil and created a blatant hypocrisy, the gap between the American genius for freedom and the reality of slavery, and thus between America’s ideals and self-image as the “land of the free” and the sordid realities of the long
degradation of the African slaves and then of African Americans. Plastering over this blatant hypocrisy left the evil unaddressed, and the contradiction festered like an open wound until the stench could be disguised no longer. The hypocrisy was then ripped open by the civil rights movement to expose the ugly gangrene of racism for what it was.

The same was true of other inconsistencies and distortions from the founders’ America—supremely the treatment of women, of Native Americans, and the treatment of other nations through America’s sense of manifest destiny and exceptionalism. One after another, different sixties movements such as the women’s movement, the sexual revolution, and the antiwar movement echoed the civil rights movement, called the status quo into question, and sent shockwaves through the complacency and triumphalism of postwar America. What happened next is what matters today and what shaped the present polarizations: American liberalism lurch sharp to the left in the sixties and became the Left/liberalism of today. Since then, Left/liberalism has been characterized by liberal shame, a discomfort with the founders, a decisive distancing from the American past, an unease with white dominance, an open animosity toward religion, a tendency to view ethics in public rather than personal terms, a proneness to disrespect the flag, and—fatefully—an openness to ideas and trends that owe more to 1789 than to 1776.

With hindsight, it is now clear that this lurch leftward was the real broken covenant. The critical shift led in its turn to the celebrated Rudi Dutschkestyle, Left/liberal “long march through the institutions” in the decades after the sixties. The outcome was that Left/liberalism has captured the three main centers of American ideas and educated opinion that shape American culture: the universities, the press and media, and the world of entertainment. In the process, the triumph of Left/liberalism has turned American history into a museum of evils, inflamed the culture wars, and bred the disagreements that have created the present bitter divisions between ordinary Americans and the educated American elites—and called into question the great experiment itself. Theodore Roszak wrote famously of “the making of the counter-culture” in the 1960s. It took much longer than he thought, but fifty years later its success is close even though many of the original revolutionaries did not live to see their triumph.

Among the many consequences of the great lurch left, the change in America’s way of addressing evil is titanic. Despite their tragic blind spots, the founders were generally realistic about the potential for corruption and the abuse of power. Equally, both the Jewish and Christian faiths, though frank about evil and injustice, emphasize the necessity for repentance and the possibility of forgiveness when addressing wrongs. Only through a separation of powers can abuse be prevented, and only through repentance and forgiveness can wrongs be addressed as wrongs, the past be left behind as the past, and the future be opened as the arena of the genuine second chance. From Samuel Hopkins to Abraham Lincoln to Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr., those who addressed the evils and hypocrisies of their times did so within the double framework of the biblical faiths and America’s founding declarations (Lincoln’s “new birth” of freedom, for example, and King’s “promissory note” of the Declaration).

No excoriation of slavery is more searing than Frederick Douglass’s 1852 speech, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” Even today, it brings tears to the eyes, anger to the heart, and a stunned sense of wonder that such awful things could ever be countenanced in the “land of the free.” Distancing himself from the founders, he repeatedly calls them “your fathers,” and he then passionately attacks both the barbarism of slavery and the
multiple hypocrisies of the “nation’s inconsistencies” over slavery. Yet Douglass still finishes his magisterial speech with unshaken confidence in the Constitution—“interpreted as it ought to be interpreted, the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT. Read its preamble, consider its purposes. Is slavery among them? Is it at the gateway? It is neither.”

Many sixties radicals, and Left/liberals later, part company with Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King Jr. at that point. They reject that recourse emphatically, and in doing so they wittingly or unwittingly break with the American covenant decisively. Such was the depth of the evils exposed that they rejected the Bible, the founders, and the American founding altogether. Traditional America, they charged, had been shown up as inherently, foundationally, and chronically “racist,” “sexist,” “militarist,” and the like. And in the process of this dire shift in diagnosis, two fateful things happened. First, much of American liberalism itself lurched left and changed—from the classical and “capital L” liberalism of the founders and their heirs to the Left/liberalism of the radical movements that from then on have viewed America in a harsh and less flattering light. There could be no turning back to the America of the founders or to any serious talk of a “promissory note.”

Also in rejecting both the founders and the Jewish and Christian perspective that underlay them, the radicals also turned from the biblical vision of justice to a secular view of justice as all-out, power-based confrontation. Whereas the former requires repentance, which requires an acknowledgment of both wrongs and responsibility, and then works for reconciliation and restoration, the latter aims only for redress and reparation that can be little more than revenge. The result of this shift is turning America into the land of vengeance. Victims seeking vengeance for a lengthening list of past sins produce more victims, who in turn seek fiercer vengeance that produces even more victims. And so it goes, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, murder for murder, and massacre for massacre.

Where will it end? Oddly, these brave new radicals do not realize how they are prone to violence because they are Rousseau’s children and utopians rather than heirs of the realism of Madison and the Bible. Yet it is actually their utopianism that drives them to violence. With utopian visions dancing before their eyes, they believe that only a clean sweep of the past can usher in a world of justice and freedom. Thus baby, bath water, Bible—and now statuary, memorials, and all—have to be flung out of the window if there is to be a fresh start. As always the utopians’ fresh start has to begin with a clean slate, and as always it takes violence to wipe the slate completely clean. Once again the violent echoes of 1789 are drowning out the cautionary realism of 1776.

Second, there are Americans, such as historian Charles Beard and his progressive school, and many recent thinkers and historians, such as Howard Zinn, who claim that they have “seen through” the founders’ real agenda and exposed them for the economic interests that lay behind their thinking and their policies. Later historians have dismissed this charge as “quasi-Marxist nonsense,” but such charges gained their appeal because they debunked the mythical view of the founders, and they fit the postmodern analysis that everything can be reduced to its power equations. Far from disinterested statesmen and heroes, the founders had rigged the system to thwart true democracy, Beard and the postmodernists argue. They were “hard-fisted conservatives” out to “protect their own interests and those of their class.”

Third, there are other Americans, such as progressive leaders from Woodrow Wilson and John Dewey to Barack Obama, who have praised the founders for their contribution in their day, but insist that
their work, however brilliant in their time, is now outdated and needs to be revised for the changing needs of today’s generation. There are in fact inherent problems in such progressivism and its dismissal of the past. Above all, it stands or falls by the Enlightenment belief in continuous advance, whether through the state (for those on the left), the market (for those on the right), or science and technology (for everyone, but the elites above all). The Enlightenment’s continuous advance has simply stalled, at least for the moment, and it did nothing to prevent the horrors of the Holocaust, the world wars, and the genocides in the twentieth century. Whether the progress hoped for was for human advance in general or the American Dream of economic betterment in particular, the evident frustration and cynicism in the younger generation stems from its bitter conclusion: For most Americans, the promised future may not be better than the past.

Behind this practical weakness there were always theoretical flaws in progressivism. For a start, it was a parasite on the biblical view of time and hope, and it provided no standard by which to judge the progress that it claimed. Aside from the positive connotations of the word progress, the term progressivism could as easily be regressivism, for some of its “achievements,” such as the expanded state, are a step backwards for personal freedom, not forward. G. K. Chesterton noted this inherent problem when he remarked, “progress is simply a comparative of which we have not settled the superlative.” T. S. Eliot remarked similarly on “an age which advances progressively backwards.”

More importantly, progressivism requires certain assumptions for it to succeed. Many of its advocates do not hold these assumptions, and their philosophies have no right to them. Progressives often quote Martin Luther King Jr., who was quoting Theodore Parker from the nineteenth century: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” But in the very speech when King used this phrase, in his sermon from the Torah at Temple Israel of Hollywood in February 1965, he pointed out that many people do not have either the assumptions or the ideology to be able to undergird such a confident view of progress. Their idea of progress was no better than the notion King attacked, citing Thoreau, as “improved means to an unimproved end.” When progressives breezily claim to be on the “right side of history” and consign their opponents to “the dustbin of history,” they simply cannot justify their claims. Indeed, they have no more credibility than Nikita Khrushchev when he angrily pounded the podium at the United Nations with his shoe, and shouted, “Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you!”

Such is the power of hope, of course, that in good times the appeal of the progressive attitude will always be stronger than its rationale. And what affects politics is the progressive attitude, and in particular the overspill from its disdain for the past, in this case the past of the founders. Just before he retired as Secretary of State, Dean Acheson was speaking to a prominent European. “Looking back,” he said, “the gravest problem I had to deal with was how to steer, in this atomic age, the foreign policy of a world power saddled with the constitution of a small, eighteenth-century farmers’ republic.”

Fourth, there are still others, perhaps now the majority of Americans, who have simply forgotten the founders. They have grown hazier and hazier in their understanding of the founders and the genius of their contribution—beyond some scant references on July Fourth. For all practical purposes many Americans have simply forgotten the founders, and in the process have also lost touch with the founders’ view of covenant, and the Constitution and its requirements. For John Winthrop, in 1630, covenant was at the heart of their purpose incoming to America (“We are
entered into Covenant with him for this work, we have taken out a Commission.”45
But by the time of Lyndon Johnson’s inauguration in 1965, the terms of the covenant had changed in a marked way, and the covenant was with the land and not with each other, let alone God (“They came here—the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened—to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land.”)46 More recently, apart from a brief and ineffectual mention by President Clinton in his early days, the notion of covenant has disappeared almost completely.

These four dismissals are different, but their combined effect has been to sever America’s covenantal roots, banish the founders, distance the past, and stretch the elasticity of the Constitution to the breaking point. Now, under the fig leaf of the mantra “constitutional” and “unconstitutional,” the declining prestige of the Constitution can pressed into the service of any person or group that can grasp the levers of government power and press their own agenda. The irony is that in its assault on the past, contemporary America is becoming all the more captive to the past. Imagining itself free, it shows itself bound more than ever and unable to make real progress.

This is not the place for a comprehensive description of Left/liberalism and its links to 1789. My concern is the difference between 1776 and 1789 and its implications for freedom, which will unfold as we proceed. I am certainly not arguing that everyone on the American Left mimics the Jacobins and the sansculottes, works for a full-blown Marxist revival, or subscribes to what Roger Scruton calls the “stunning ‘nonsense machine’” of the foggy thought and impenetrable language of many postmodern European writers.47 But the undeniable links and clear resemblances between 1789 and the American Left are what matters. The former struggled for liberté and égalité, the latter for “liberation” and “social justice.” The former won through violent revolution, whereas the latter seeks to win through a cultural revolution, after which the elite imposes its will through administrative and bureaucratic procedures (regulative bodies and the law courts). And both are characterized by their reliance on the state, their open hostility toward religion, their radical separation of religion and public life, their attempt to control language in order to control reality (French and Soviet “Newspeak,” “doublespeak,” and American “political correctness”), their unashamed espousal of power, their egalitarian appeal to envy rather than liberty, and their naive utopianism that the removal of repression will mean the fulfillment of freedom.

No one should fail to see how these resemblances between Left/liberalism and 1789 add up to a triple tragedy after America’s triumph over the Soviet Union in 1989. America has not only rejected its covenantal/constitutional heritage of freedom but wasted the rare and historic opportunity of its “unipolar moment,” and is now in danger of surrendering to the way of thinking that led to the collapse of its former enemy.

For the purposes of this chapter, however, the question is: Has the Left/liberal exposure of hypocrisy in the sixties helped America move beyond the evils and hypocrisies of the past? On the contrary. Within the worldview of Left/liberal secularism there was no repentance required and no forgiveness to be offered, in contrast to Lincoln and King. So the effect of the harping on the evils of America’s racism, sexism, and militarism has been to make America’s evils irredeemable. Pounding on the “sins of the fathers,” and assaulting the “structures of domination,” a brigade of angry activists has forged a culture of grievance, resentment, anger, and victim playing turned power mongering. But they have stoked the problems, not solved them. Instead of remedying the evils and reconciling the parties, the Left/
liberal activists have refought the battles of the past, widening the wounds to the present generation, and spreading the devastation far beyond their original victims. And they have done so in a way that poisons American life and American politics from top to bottom.

The result is an American past that can never be atoned, an American debt that can never be repaid, an American apology that will never be accepted, an American hope that will forever be dashed, and an American credibility that is increasingly threadbare to America’s own youth, let alone to the watching world. If this Left/ liberal view prevails finally, the American project of freedom is tainted forever and finished.

From a covenantal perspective, the ultimate challenge is to see what happens to America when Americans finally render the Constitution ineffectual—what happens when Americans lose the sense of purposeful history that came with covenant and close down their horizons to the endless currents, eddies, swings, counterswings, graphs, statistics, pie charts, and punditry of modern political science, what happens when the “parchment barriers” prove too flimsy and even the “flexible constitution” becomes too elastic and there is effectively no constitutional framework at all. What happens when freely chosen consent is only a charade, and there is no morally binding pledge, no reciprocal responsibility of all for all, no checks and balances, no insistence that no one is above the law, and every American and American movement does what is right in their own eyes? Will Yeats’s celebrated “center” still hold? Will the American falcon, “turning and turning in the widening gyre,” be able to hear the falconer? The overwhelming evidence of history would suggest that if such a day were to come, there would be only one possible outcome for the republic when “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

Richard Niebuhr captured the gravity of the earlier American view of covenant, and in a way that makes contemporary citizenship appear lightweight and casual by contrast.

Covenant was the binding together in one body politic of persons who assumed through unlimited promise responsibility to and for each other, and for the common laws, under God. It was government of the people, for the people, by the people, but always under God, and it was not natural birth into natural society that made one a complete member of the people, but always the moral act of taking upon oneself, through promise, the responsibility of a citizenship that bound itself in the very act of exercising its freedom. For in the covenant conception the essence of freedom does not lie in the liberty of choice among goods, but in the ability to commit oneself for the future to a cause and in the terrible liberty of being able to become a breaker of the promise, a traitor to the cause.

Will it be said that freedom was too hard a challenge for Americans to overcome? Here, then, is the first question on the checklist that Americans must answer constructively: Do you remember where your freedom came from?

Does the difference between republicanism and democracy still matter? What is the significance of the clash between supporters of the original constitution and supporters of an ever-changing living constitution? What is the state of the ethics of responsibility today? And if the notion of covenant is in the DNA of America, what happens if it is abandoned, deliberately or unwittingly? The challenge for Americans today, while they are still powerful and prosperous, is to remember the long road to freedom they have traveled, and to pay attention to its lessons while there is time for renewal.
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5William Penn, quoted in Hannan, Inventing Freedom, 127.
7Heinrich Heine, quoted in ibid., 76.
9Sacks, Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, 9.
11Elazar, Covenant and Constitutionalism, 15.
13Elazar, Covenant and Commonwealth, 22.
14Walzer, In God’s Shadow, 5.
20Ibid., 4.
21Jonathan Sacks, Covenant and Conversation: Exodus, the Book of Redemption (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2010), 14.
22Jonathan Sacks, Essays on Ethics: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2016), 133.

26William Perkins, quoted in Elazar, Covenant and Commonwealth, 239.
31David Hume, Treatise on Human Nature, bk. 3, sc. 4.
34Ernst Arndt, quoted in ibid., 212.
35G.K. Chesterton, quoted ibid., 327.
36Christopher Dawson, Beyond Politics (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939), 18.
44Martin Luther King Jr., sermon at Temple Israel of Hollywood, February 26, 1965.
“The way to the future runs through the past,” mused one author. In our contemporary ears, this may not ring true. We seem to live with a suffocating sense of immediacy, where demands and events come at a fast and furious pace, and where the “past” for many of us means two days ago.

Within such a sense of time, the historical emphasis of the church may seem obsolete, irrational even. Growing up in Scotland in a home that was not focused on religious or spiritual things, I had little sense of time holding much weight beyond the moment or any sort of transcendent continuity. Time simply came and went. There were, of course, special times loosely connected to an earlier age, such as Christmas and Easter. But these came to primarily symbolize time off from school, special food, and presents. If they were tied to any bigger or wider story or meaning, my attitude was: Who cares?

After moving to Austria, I recall a very different scenario. I had by then become a Christian and noticed that what the church calls “holy week” was taken much more seriously there. The sense of reverence, of something special, of consecrated time, all made an impact on me. Holy week was mentioned on the national news; preparations for the Easter service in the national cathedral were highlighted. Something was in the air. This was also seen in people’s behavior. I was struck that events so long in the past, centered on the ancient Jesus of Nazareth and his death, were seen to have lasting and important impact on modern life in a modern nation.

Here in America, there is less of a national focus. We, of course, know of holy week and many churches walk toward the vast and important events of Gethsemane, the upper room, and Golgotha. But outside the church, even inside some churches, it is simply one more thing in a list of occurrences. Sadly, as a nation, we are progressively abandoning the metanarratives—the larger story—that for centuries served to define and give shape to our society and individual lives, namely the understanding of God’s covenant with his people.

The prophet Habakkuk lived in a time of spiritual and moral decline, which led to the economic, social, and political tragedies of his people. Like the people to whom he preached, Habakkuk came from a storied nation. His life was informed by the knowledge of God and his work among his people: the Exodus, the tabernacle, the law, and the land. Habakkuk knew that all of Israel’s blessings were rooted in the covenantal faithfulness of God to his chosen people. They had come a long way since rejoicing over the miracle at the Red Sea and the completion of Solomon’s temple.

Yet Israel was established with the necessity of living in the three dimensions of time: past, present, and future. They were commanded to remember God’s words and mighty acts in history. They were called to see life as a present blessing, with faith and justice as a response to the God who gave it. And they were to live with hope in God’s good hands, such that neither death nor the future was a threat.

But Israel forgot. Neglecting their heritage, the people walked away. They pursued other loves and became enamored with the nations around them. Israel forgot their high calling, and the consequences were tragic.
The prophet Habakkuk was understandably grieved. Unable to understand what was happening to his community, the prophet walked through stages of depression, anger, acceptance, and faith. The chapters of his book move from asking “Why?” to expressing hopelessness or exclaiming anger, and finally, amazingly, to singing: “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines ... yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Time Interrupted

I believe there are times in life when we are on a similar journey. Though we may find ourselves stuck in one stage or another, we are invited to remember God’s involvement in our past, present, and future. Between the pages where Habakkuk cries out for God’s answer and where he ends in a mixture of fear and faith, we learn something of the ambiguity, tension, and struggle that is ours until the journey ends.

Moreover, as we turn to the pages of the gospel, we encounter this unflinching declaration and hope: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Jesus came to accomplish the Father’s work of restoration, and his face was set like a flint to see that work accomplished. The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us—in real space and time. God was on a mission and it culminated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In each of the gospel narratives, the passion of Christ, his wrestling in Gethsemane, his trial and torture, are a major portion of the narratives themselves. The gospel is simply not the gospel without this focused portion of history—the death of Christ and all that surrounded it. It was a significant death, a voluntary death, a purpose-filled death. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.

If this is true, if this really happened, if indeed normal time was interrupted by an invasion of the healing, forgiving, loving, and self-giving God, then time itself was altered, history changed, life redirected.

Surely, if such is the case, then some serious and dedicated time and space should be given to remembering God’s work in history and our lives. In a fast-paced, moment-central world, this is the countercultural message of the church for the world. Scripture reminds us that the crucifixion of Jesus took place in real space and time, and therefore all of time—past, present, and future—is both important and impacted. And thus, our acts of remembrance, worship, penitence, and hope are also holy moments, moments that invite an eternal God to overshadow the immediacy of life and other lesser stories of time. Great things are indeed available: the love of God, the sacrificial death of Christ for the world, the forgiveness of sins, and the offer of new life.

The events recorded in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation actually happened. They are not stories designed to make us feel good or guilty and guide the morals of culture and society. They are each part of God’s redemptive initiative to heal the broken heart, strike the heart of evil, conquer death and sorrow, and open a way to a new kind of life—a life redirected—and the restoration of all things.

The way to the future does indeed run through the past. As people of God, we are invited to discover anew that the ancient promises of God are sure. Might we remember what He has done, celebrate his grace today, and rejoice knowing that one day, in the words of the prophet Habakkuk, “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (2:14).

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Many years ago, my brother and I went on a backpacking trip in Washington State. My brother had done many such trips, but this would be my first. I was living in Tennessee at the time and had joined a hiking club that made frequent excursions into the Smoky Mountains. I practiced for my backpacking trip by carrying a school backpack filled with water and snacks. I believed I was ready for the more arduous hiking in the North Cascades. But I could not begin to be ready for the thirty-pound pack and the relentless switchbacks climbing a thousand feet or more up the backcountry peaks.

Often the act of remembering or revisiting a memory takes us back into the distant past. We remember people, events, cherished locales and details from days long gone. Of course, not all memories are pleasant, and traveling toward the distant past can also resemble something more like a nightmare than a nostalgic trip down Memory Lane.

Nostalgia is one such way of revisiting these times. Nostalgia can be defined as that bittersweet yearning for things in the past. The hunger it creates in us to return to another time and place lures us away from living in the realities of the present. Nostalgia wears a shade of rose-colored glasses as it envisions days that were always sweeter, richer, and better than the present day.

The writer Frederick Buechner suggests, “There are two ways of remembering. One way is to make an excursion from the living present back into the dead past…. The other way is to summon the dead past back into the living present.”

In either case, nostalgic remembering removes us from the present and tempts us to dwell in the unlivable past. Without finding ways to remember forward—to bring the past as the good, the bad, and the ugly into the present in a way that informs who we are and how we will live here and now—all we are left with is nostalgia.

It is far from a sense of nostalgia that drives Asaph, the writer of Psalm 78, to begin with these words:

*Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us.*  
(verses 1-3)

The psalmist recalls the history of Israel as a means of remembering forward, of bringing the full reality of the past into a place of honest remembrance —and not just for the present generation but also for the sake of generations to come. Asaph exhorts the people to listen, to incline their ears to the stories of their collective history: the Exodus, the wilder-
ness wanderings, and the entry into the
land of promise in which they currently
dwell. He says,

We will not hide them from their children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord,
and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.
He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments.
(verses 4-7)

Despite bearing witness to the work
of God among them, the people of Israel
forgot these crucial aspects of their his-
torical narrative. In so doing, they did not
keep the covenant God made with them,
and they began to live in ways that went
contrary to all that defined them. They
forgot the deeds and miraculous signs
that bore witness to God’s presence.
Moreover, they lost faith and did not trust
in God’s salvation. The psalmist acknowl-
edges that they all “grieved him in the
desert” and “did not remember his power
or the day when he redeemed them from
the foe” (verses 40 and 42).

There are no rose-colored remem-
brances here, no bittersweet yearnings to
which they can return. Rather, the darker
parts of their story are remembered even
as praise is offered up for God’s long-suf-
ferring and lovingkindness. The psalmist
urges the people to think about this God in
the midst of their present circumstances.
What had God done among them in the
past in spite of their own failings? And how
might they now live in light of that past?

Perhaps it is this collective remem-
bering Jesus has in mind when he instructs
those closest to him to remember. Jesus
tells his disciples during that last supper
together, “This is my body, which is given
for you; do this in remembrance of me”

He is not calling them to bittersweet
yearnings or simply to remember events
lived long ago. Rather, he calls them to
remember in a way that would shape their
living in the present—and for the future.
Surely these intimate friends of Jesus
could not have understood fully all that was
implied in his call to remember him. Yet,
they became his witnesses “in Jerusalem,
and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto
the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).
Remembering the death and resurrection
of Jesus was not just a fact they rehearsed;
rather, it was a lived reality that gave con-
tour and context for their generation and
for generations to come.

In the face of an uncertain future or
perhaps a painful present, we might be
tempted to dwell in nostalgic remember-
ing. We might wish for the comfort of
selective memories. Yet, for those who
want to follow Jesus, we have the oppor-
tunity to ask ourselves, “Am I seeking to
live in a place of honest remembrance?”

Are we remembering forward?
What stories do our lives tell? How do our
lives enact the great narrative of salvation
in our present day and the covenant God
made with his people long ago?

As we think about the kind of
remembrance that enlivens our present
gives hope for the future, we can join
in the song of praise with the psalmist of
old: “But we your people, the sheep of
your pasture, will give thanks to you
forever; from generation to generation we
will recount your praise” (Psalm 79:13).

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Frederick Buechner, Beyond Words: Daily
Readings on the ABCs of Faith (Harper:
San Francisco, 2004), 252.
The roots of our current self-destruction are deeper than many realize. Os Guinness argues that we face a fundamental crisis of freedom, as America’s genius for freedom has become her Achilles’ heel. Once again America has become a house divided, and Americans must make up their minds as to which freedom to follow. Will the constitutional republic be restored or replaced?

Available for purchase online at rzim.christianbook.com
You may have heard me tell the story about the one-time heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali. Ali was flying to one of his engagements and during the flight, the aircraft ran into foul weather. Moderate turbulence began to toss the plane about. Of course, all nervous fliers well know that when a pilot signals “moderate turbulence,” he or she is implying, “If you have any religious beliefs, it is time to start expressing them.”

The passengers were instructed to fasten their seatbelts immediately, and all complied but Ali. So the flight attendant approached him and requested that he observe the captain’s order, only to hear Ali audaciously respond, “Superman don’t need no seatbelt.”

The flight attendant, however, did not miss a beat but quickly fired in reply, “Superman don’t need no airplane either!”

Recently, another humorous story made the rounds about two of the most prominent football (soccer) players of our time: Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi. Somebody joked that Ronaldo made the comment that God had sent him into the world to show the world how to play football. A reporter told that story to Messi and followed up with the question, “What do you think of that?” Messi paused and said, “Honestly, I don’t remember sending him.”

Anyone who knows Messi would doubt that he would say anything like that. But it made for a great story.

Humor aside, that’s the way that often those in highly competitive sports see themselves. The best this, the greatest that, or the finest ever.

I draw attention to those stories because I would like to consider the larger context in which many of us find ourselves. Some of us will be granted access to the best education, others offered an array of possibilities for achievement. Many of us work diligently to position ourselves for extraordinary success in a rapidly-changing world. In any of these possible triumphs, a sense of invincibility can be engendered—regardless of what measure of turbulence may lie ahead.

Yet unfortunately, academic or material advancement does not necessarily confer wisdom. As someone rightly quipped, “It may be a smart phone, but it is not a wise phone.” How foolish it would be for us to take what generations preceding us have valued in coping with life’s turbu-
lence and cast it all aside because we are “modern.” Now, of course, even modern is not good enough; we are postmodern. We sound more and more like a product: “super” “ultra,” “ultra plus,” and so on. In the process of so-called advances, we unwittingly forget what is needed to preserve any gain. Those values are cast in stone.

G.K. Chesterton aptly advised his generation that before pulling down any fences, they should always pause long enough to find out why they were put there in the first place. Removing “ancient markers” or boundaries is a risky endeavor. It is a valuable day in life when we realize that laws are in place not just for another’s benefit but for ours as well.

As I look at our world, I see a sobering reality. Governments seem to falter along two extremes. There are demagogues who think they alone matter. There are so-called democracies where people think freedom alone matters. Both commit the blunder of forgetting there is a law above our laws—and ultimately a moral law giver, God. There are values by which we must be governed.

In other words, we need wisdom as we process and distill all knowledge. But where does one find it? The irony of the call to wisdom in the Bible is that the one who spoke most about it—Solomon—kept it all in the realm of writing great one-liners but did not apply that wisdom in living. He forgot the covenant God graciously made with him and his heritage—or conveniently chose to ignore it. This is a painful reminder that knowing does not guarantee doing. Doing engages the will and a preset commitment.

In one of his proverbs, King Solomon writes, “Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her” (Proverbs 3:13-15). From this same king we are told, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10; cf. Psalm 111:10).

Reverence for God is where wisdom starts, with a recognition that there is a giver of knowledge and wisdom. We begin with reverence for our creator and translate that into reverence for his creation and his call upon our lives.

The God of the Scriptures is the giver of life itself. What a gift to be enjoyed. What a treasure to guard! God gives to us a love that we do not deserve. We do not merit it.

Not only is the love of God unmerited, it is also a love that grows and is sustained by relationship. Remarkably, God even utters a wedding vow to his people, pledging his covenant love and faithfulness: “I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord” (Hosea 2:19-20).

In exchange, we receive the will of God by which to live and find delight. Nothing brings harmony more than remembering God’s love and embracing his will. Nothing brings fragmentation more than turning away. Our greatest weakness is not an enemy from without but one from within in our refusal to entrust our hearts to God.

On days when we are tempted by thoughts of invincibility, might we remember that falsely posing as a superman will only ensure a crash landing. There’s “kryptonite” at every turn in places where we are overwhelmed by turbulent forces and weakening attacks upon inner strength. We can only reach our potential strength when we remember who is all powerful and humbly bow before Him. I pray we will humbly seek wisdom and follow it to its source so that He will lift us to glorious heights for his honor and our purpose.

Warm Regards,

Ravi
“Blessed are those who find wisdom.”
—Proverbs 3:13