

# **The Covenantal Life**





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# The Covenantal Life

*Appreciating the Beauty of Theology and Community*

Sarah Ivill



**Reformation Heritage Books**  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

*The Covenantal Life*

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**Reformation Heritage Books**

2965 Leonard St. NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49525

616-977-0889

orders@heritagebooks.org

www.heritagebooks.org

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*Printed in the United States of America*

18 19 20 21 22 23/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ivill, Sarah, author.

Title: The covenantal life : appreciating the beauty of theology and community / Sarah Ivill.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Reformation Heritage Books, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017058508 (print) | LCCN 2017060775 (ebook) | ISBN 9781601785930 (epub) | ISBN 9781601785923 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Reformed Church—Doctrines. | Covenant theology.

Classification: LCC BX9422.3 (ebook) | LCC BX9422.3 .I95 2018 (print) | DDC 230/.51—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017058508>

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*To the Covenant King and Covenant Keeper, Jesus Christ,  
and to His bride, the covenant community,  
especially my sisters at Christ Covenant Church*





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# Foreword

I know Sarah personally. That always makes a difference when picking up a book. Reading through these pages, I can recognize her personality, hear her tone, and track with her heart. As Sarah's pastor and friend, I can tell you she is as genuine as they come. She takes Bible study and writing as seriously as any layperson I know. It's no wonder her classes for women at Christ Covenant are usually packed out. She has a hunger for God's Word and a passion for other women to see the riches of the Bible for themselves.

But more important than Sarah being someone you would like, the content in this book is truth you should like. If you are from a Presbyterian or Reformed background, you may be tired of hearing about the covenants. And if you are from a different church tradition, you may not have heard much about "covenant" at all. In either case, don't let the title scare you off. Yes, this is a book about the covenantal life. But that's just another way of saying this is a book about the Christian life. Our God is a God who establishes relationship with His people, a relationship rooted in covenant patterns

and covenant promises. To be a Christian is to worship a covenant-keeping God, to dwell in covenant community, and to partake of the new covenant meal of bread and cup.

*The Covenantal Life* is a great resource for introducing (or reaffirming) these truths. Sarah writes clearly and carefully, with important lessons drawn from the Bible and the confessions of the church (and good alliteration to boot!). She focuses on The Story, but she's not afraid to share her own stories as well. Women will find Sarah to be a sure guide in our confusing cultural moment. And just as crucially, they will find the covenantal life to be God's best for them now and forever.

Kevin DeYoung  
Senior Pastor  
Christ Covenant Church  
Matthews, North Carolina

# A Note from Sarah

We are living in a day when many of us have lost our appreciation for the beauty of covenant theology. This has had dire consequences. Much of the church has traded in a God-centered theology for a self-centered one. Many believers have exchanged Bible studies for book studies. They have exalted heroes of the faith more than the Hero of the faith, Jesus Christ. They have exchanged God's promises and freedom for the world's promises and enslavement. And they have forgotten the doctrines of grace, thinking they are pretty good people who can earn God's favor, that there are many ways to heaven, that God's grace is license to sin, and that they are capable of preserving their destinies.

We are also living in a day when many of us have lost our appreciation for the beauty of covenant community. And this too has had dire consequences. Many believers have traded in interdependence in the community of grace for individualism and isolationism. They have exchanged biblical womanhood for feminism. They have taken liberty to speak whatever is on their mind instead of speaking the truth in love. They

have forgotten their mission, thinking their life plans and dreams are for their own choosing and glory. And they have forgotten their destination, failing to live with an eternal perspective.

It is my conviction that a key solution to this problem is a return to a robust knowledge of Reformed theology, which, rightly understood, is covenant theology. Such a robust understanding of covenant theology should in turn lead to a rich engagement with the covenant community.

Covenant theology is not a system of doctrine imposed on Scripture; rather, it is God's own way of speaking about the gospel in all the Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. Therefore, knowledge of covenant theology deepens our knowledge and appreciation of the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom He sent, and our relationship to one another as the people of God—the covenant community.

Covenant theology deepened my appreciation for Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension. It heightened my appreciation for all the spiritual blessings I have in Christ. It broadened my appreciation of the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. It deepened my sense of wonder at how God's sovereignty and my responsibility go hand in hand. And it heightened my appreciation of how Scripture fit together as one big covenant story stretching from Genesis to Revelation, with Christ as the center of it all. In turn, it deepened my appreciation and love for the covenant community, heightened my awareness of my design as a woman, broadened my love for multigenerational ministry, helped me understand how the cultural mandate and

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the Great Commission go hand in hand, and filled me with hope for the city that is to come.

For this reason, my prayer for you as you read this book is the same as Paul's prayer for the saints who were in Ephesus:

that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph. 3:16–19)

*Soli Deo gloria!*



# Acknowledgments

I want to thank those in my life who have been a part of this writing process.

Thank you to Reformation Heritage Books, especially Jay Collier, for initiating this process and to Annette Gysen for her excellent editorial work.

Thank you to Jane Patete, former women's ministry coordinator for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), who first encouraged me to publish this material.

Thank you to Karen Hodge, women's ministry coordinator for the PCA, as well as Stephen Estock, coordinator for the PCA Discipleship Ministries, who read through an early version of this manuscript and gave me valuable feedback.

Thank you to my pastor, Kevin DeYoung, for writing the foreword, as well as to the women's ministry leadership at Christ Covenant Church for asking me to teach a women's class on this material, and to the women in the class who encouraged and supported this project.

Thank you to Westminster Theological Seminary for the many online class lectures, chapel messages, and books that I have benefited from, which have taught me

what it means to see Christ in all of Scripture and to understand more deeply the history of redemption and the beautiful truths of Reformed theology.

Thank you to Reformed Theological Seminary, for the many online classes I have benefited from, especially the class on covenant theology taught by Ligon Duncan.

Thank you to my parents, David and Judy Gelaude, who have always encouraged me to continue in the work of the Lord.

Thank you to my husband, Charles, who once again gave me his loyal support in the publishing process and who prayed for me and encouraged me as I wrote, and to our children, Caleb, Hannah, Daniel, and Lydia, who are a constant source of encouragement to me as I pray for the next generation of believers to love the Lord and His people.

Finally, thank you to my heavenly Father, to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and to the Spirit, who helps me in my weakness. To the triune God be the glory for what He has done through me, a broken vessel and a flawed instrument, yet one that is in the grip of His mighty and gracious hand.

# Introduction

Over the years I have been serving in women's ministry, I have had the privilege of counseling, teaching, and praying for many women—single women who longed to be married, married women who experienced the pain that comes with infidelity, mothers who grieved over a child who chose to live an ungodly lifestyle, daughters who experienced the stress of caring for aging parents, mothers who have struggled to walk away from a career to raise children or struggled to walk away from home to begin a career, women who suffered the painful journey of infertility or miscarriages, and women who couldn't shake the shame they felt over sexual sin.

These are not just women I have had the privilege to know, though; they are women you know too. They are women who sit beside us in the church pew or next to us in Bible study, or maybe they sing alongside us in the choir. They are sisters in Christ who often cry out for help through a conversation, text, email, or phone call, wondering if and how we will respond. Or maybe one of these women reminds you of your own circumstances,

and you are wondering how to respond to suffering, sin, or shame.

What do we say when our sisters come to us for help? Giving them a hug, taking them a meal, or sending them a note of encouragement is wonderful, but it isn't enough. We must lead them to a person—Jesus Christ. The same is true for us. When we find ourselves in a situation like these women, we must look to Jesus. Without a robust view of our Redeemer, we are all likely to revel in our sin, remain in our shame, retreat into our suffering, or run ashore in our service.

We must first learn how to think theologically when the storms of life come our way (suffering), when shame closes in around us (sin), and when we seek to serve the triune God in the midst of a fallen world (service)—and then help our sisters learn how. In other words, we must all be good theologians. This means we must have sound doctrine to interpret our life events and to help one another live accordingly.

It is instructive that when Paul wrote to the Galatians about a particular problem (they were turning to a different gospel), he began with, “Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Gal. 1:3–5). In other words, Paul began with the person who could solve their problems. He wasn't leading people through a ten-step program but to the person and work of Jesus Christ. He painted a robust picture of redemption as a backdrop for calling God's people

to repentance and renewal. As we journey through our own suffering, sin, and service, and as we help our sisters through theirs, we must do the same.

I have divided this book on the covenantal life into two parts: “Appreciating the Beauty of Covenant Theology” and “Appreciating the Beauty of Covenant Community.” After reading each chapter, you will have the opportunity under the “Thinking It Through” section to apply the truths you have learned to your present suffering, sin, and service so that you can better apply covenant theology to all of life, especially as it applies to life in the covenant community. I urge you to take the time to do this. It will bear much fruit if you apply what you are learning to your specific circumstances.

If you are studying this book with a group, I encourage you to be willing to share your answers and applications with your sisters so that you might comfort one another in your sufferings, challenge one another to repent of your sins, and strengthen one another as you serve Christ and His church. My hope and prayer is that you will come away with a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom He sent, and of our relationship to one another as sisters in Christ.



*Part 1*

**Appreciating the Beauty  
of Covenant Theology**



Chapter 1

# Better Promises

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The day of my wedding, I was so nervous I thought I was going to be sick. I wasn't nervous about marrying my husband but about singing in front of all the wedding guests. What was even more nerve-wracking was that my solo was a surprise. What would my soon-to-be-husband do when I suddenly pulled out a microphone and started singing "I Will Be Here" to him? Even worse, what would I do? Would I be able to make it through the song without crying? Would he? I started having serious doubts that a surprise solo was a good idea. Nevertheless, before the ceremony was over, I had surprised my husband with a solo at our wedding—and the guests too!

The song I sang is rightly titled "I Will Be Here." I repeated the phrase twelve times before my solo was over, reiterating that through darkness, cold feelings, swings of emotions, an unclear future, and an aging body, I would remain faithful to my husband, for good or for bad, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until we are parted by death.

As wonderful a day as my wedding was and as solemn as my vows were, the story of my covenant marriage

pales in comparison to another bride and groom and wedding that is enacted on better promises. In this chapter I want to tell you about Someone who has made a promise to be here for us, whether we are naughty or nice, dressed in robes or rags, or are strong or sick. I want to tell you about the covenant-keeping God.

### **What Is God?**

In answer 7, the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) tells us that “God is a Spirit, in and of himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, every where present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.”

Don’t rush past this definition. Today, many people have brought God down to a level they can understand. For example, I have heard people refer to God as the daddy upstairs (in heaven). Or they think of God like they do Santa Claus, believing He brings gifts according to whether they’ve been naughty or nice. Or they treat God as they do a doctor; they go to Him only when they are in dire circumstances. But infinite in glory? Incomprehensible? Almighty? Most holy? Most merciful and gracious? These aren’t usually the words on people’s lips when they are asked, “What is God?”

Scripture reveals to us that this one true God is triune—one God existing in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He is sovereign over all things and is providentially bringing His plans and purposes to pass.

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It is amazing news that we serve a triune God who in and of Himself is infinite in being, all-sufficient, almighty, most merciful and gracious, and abundant in goodness and truth. Even more amazing is that He created us to glorify and enjoy Him forever. Stop and ponder that for a moment. Why would the Creator God want us to be in such a relationship with Him that we could actually enjoy Him? And how can we even have such a relationship with Him when there is a huge difference and distance between the Creator and His creatures, so great that there is no way we could possibly bridge it? To be sure, we are responsible to obey Him as our Creator, but to enjoy a relationship with Him and all the blessings such a relationship brings? We could never do that if He didn't intervene. It is incredible to learn, then, that God has bridged the gap for us. He voluntarily agreed to come and initiate a relationship with us. This relationship is displayed by way of covenant, a concept we will keep returning to in this book.

### **What Is Covenant?**

A thorough yet concise definition of covenant is *God's sovereign initiation to have a binding relationship with His people, grounded in His grace and promises, and secured by His own blood*. It might be helpful for you to think of four *P*'s when you are trying to grasp the word *covenant* according to the entirety of Scripture. These four *P*'s will also help you understand how the Old Testament and New Testament fit together.

The first word to keep in mind is the *promise* of God's presence. Over and over in Scripture you will read the

promise, “I will be your God, and you will be My people” (see, for example, Gen. 17:7–8; Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 32:38; Ezek. 14:11; Zech. 8:8; 2 Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:10; Rev. 21:3). When you find it, mark it in red. It will become a beautiful thread running through your Bible, reminding you of God’s covenant promise, sealed with His own blood.

Throughout redemptive history we see a progression of God dwelling with His people. First, we observe Him dwelling with Adam and Eve in the garden. He blessed them, gave them His instruction, and confronted them when they disobeyed (Gen. 1:28–30; 2:16–17; 3:8–13, 16–19). Then, after God delivered His people Israel from Egypt, we see Him meet with them in the tabernacle, which was a tent that contained the ark of the covenant with the mercy seat in the Most Holy Place, where the Lord would descend to meet with Moses in order to instruct him in the way He wanted His people to live (Ex. 25:10–22). Moses erected the tabernacle in the first month of the second year after the Lord delivered Israel. The cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day and fire was over it by night in order to lead Israel on their journeys through the wilderness (Ex. 40:16–18, 34–38). Eventually the Lord dwells with His people in the temple. The Lord chose King Solomon to build His temple in Jerusalem. Like the tabernacle, the temple had a Most Holy Place that contained the ark of the covenant where the Lord would meet with His people above the mercy seat (Ex. 25:17–22; 1 Kings 6:1–38; 8:1–11). But the climax of God dwelling with His people is when Jesus came to earth and lived among us, fulfilling God’s promise, “I will

be your God, and you will be My people.” The apostle John puts it this way: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt [literally “tabernacled”] among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). John is helping his readers understand that the true and final tabernacle has come! What the garden, the tabernacle, and the temple prefigured, Christ fulfilled. When Christ returns, He will consummately fulfill this promise as we dwell with the triune God in the new heaven and the new earth forever: “And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God’” (Rev. 21:3).

The second *P* word to remember is the *person* of Jesus Christ. All Scripture points to Christ. The prophets, priests, kings, and sacrifices of the Old Testament foreshadowed the Promised One to come. When the prophets proclaimed the words of God, they anticipated the living Word of God, Christ, who as the final and perfect prophet reveals to us by His Word and Spirit the will of God for our salvation (Westminster Shorter Catechism [WSC], A. 25). When the priests offered up the sacrifices year after year to atone for Israel’s sin, they anticipated the final and perfect priest, Jesus Christ, who offered Himself up for us on the cross to satisfy God’s divine justice, to reconcile us to God, and to continually intercede for us (WSC, A. 25). When the kings ruled over Israel, fighting their enemies and ruling over the people, they anticipated the final and perfect King, Jesus Christ, who rules and defends us and conquers all His

and our enemies (WSC, A. 26). What Augustine said is true: “The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.”

The third *P* word is the *people* of God. Throughout redemptive history we see God choose one man (Adam), then one family (Abraham’s), then one nation (Israel), and then, as Ephesians 2:14–16 says, one new man in place of the two, Jews and Gentiles, through the cross (the New Testament church) in order to continue the promised line through which the Promised One, Jesus Christ, would come. We rightly teach our covenant children:

Father Abraham had many sons,  
Many sons had Father Abraham.  
I am one of them, and so are you.  
So let’s all praise the Lord.

There has always been one people of God saved by grace alone through faith alone.

The final word to remember is the *practice* of God’s people. The Lord saved Israel out of Egypt and then instructed them how to live. It’s important that we get this in the right order! He saved them first and then gave them the Ten Commandments. Because God is the Covenant King, we are to respond to His grace as covenant servants by glorifying Him. We do this by loving Him, trusting Him, enjoying Him, and obeying Him. God’s people are to be holy because He is holy and are to proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into light (1 Peter 1:15–16; 2:9–12). Question 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “Why are you called a Christian,” and the answer is, “Because I am a

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member of Christ by faith and thus share in His anointing so that I may as prophet confess His Name, as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures.”

It is important to note that the concept of covenant is rooted in the first relationship between God and humankind in the garden of Eden. The Creator God initiated a relationship with His creation from the beginning. He put Adam in the garden and commanded him to live according to His word. He held out a blessing of life for obedience and a curse of death for disobedience: “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16–17).

After Adam and Eve sinned, we see God take the initiative in the relationship that was now broken. He called to them, questioned them, and punished them for disobedience. It is clear that He is king. But there is a gospel note of grace sounded in Genesis 3:15 we shouldn’t miss that we will discuss more fully in chapter 3, which anticipates Christ’s life, death, resurrection, ascension and return:

And I will put enmity  
Between you and the woman,  
And between your seed and her Seed;  
He shall bruise your head,  
And you shall bruise His heel.

**Self-Centered or God-Centered?**

Since the Creator God has voluntarily initiated a relationship with us, we should ask ourselves how often we delight in God. Do we enjoy praying to Him, reading His Word, and fellowshiping with His people as much as we enjoy art, entertainment, food, hiking, reading, or shopping? Because God created us to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever, it follows that our deepest contentment is found when He is most glorified in our lives. So why are we so often drawn to find our contentment in other things? It happens because our own flesh, the world, and the devil want us to believe that our deepest contentment is found when we glorify and enjoy ourselves. This leads us to have a self-centered approach to our life and faith instead of a God-centered one. For example, notice the difference in each case between statements A and B:

- A. If only I hadn't gotten myself into this mess!
  - B. The Lord has placed me in this circumstance. I wonder what He will teach me through this.
- 
- A. When I get done raising these four children, I am going to have a little more time to myself!
  - B. What a privilege it is to train these children for the Lord's service. When the years of training are over, I will continue the hard work of praying every day that the Lord will use them for His kingdom purposes.

- 
- A. If I treated my husband the way he treats me, he wouldn't like it one bit. I thought marriage was a 50/50 effort. I am pulling 100 percent.
  - B. The Lord gave my husband to me because this is who He knew was best for me. I can trust Him to bring good even out of difficult circumstances and to bring glory to His name.
- 
- A. I accepted Jesus into my heart.
  - B. God opened up my blind eyes, unstopped my deaf ears, and softened my hard heart, saving me by His grace alone.

These statements, and others like them, reveal how we think about God—our theology—and this theology affects every area of our lives. In order to have sound theology, we must renew our minds from the ruckus sounds of reckless and wrong theology surrounding us every day. And as I stated in my note at the beginning of this book, it is my conviction that a key solution to reckless and wrong theology is a return to a robust knowledge of Reformed theology, which, rightly understood, is covenant theology.

Theology is not just something we know; it is also something we do. We live out our theology every day. The way we define our purpose in life, the priorities we set, the meaning we assign to events or people, the hope that we have in life circumstances, the explanations that we give for blessings and suffering, and the reaction we have in the face of tragedy and pain convey our theology.

It is important, then, that we have a proper worldview from which to evaluate the events in our lives so that we form right conclusions about God, humanity, and the world around us. And since we are in a covenant relationship with God and with others, it makes sense that we need a covenantal worldview.

### **A Covenantal Worldview**

We must have a worldview that flows from the covenant story of the Bible, which can be summarized in four words: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. This covenant story, stretching from Genesis to Revelation, is found in seed form in the first three chapters of Genesis. The triune God created the world out of nothing. He created man in His own image, male and female (Gen. 1:27). He initiated a covenantal relationship with the first man and first woman, Adam and Eve, through a covenant of works (we'll learn more about this covenant in chapter 3), which laid out how things should work in His kingdom (Gen. 2:15–17). But Adam and Eve failed to obey God's word and fell into sin and separation from God. True to covenant form, God cursed them for such disobedience, but He also promised a way of reconciliation. One day Someone would come and crush the serpent, freeing humankind from sin and death and reconciling God's people to Him again. These first three chapters of Genesis, as well as the entirety of Scripture, help us understand what it means to have a covenantal worldview through which to interpret our lives.

First, we must view the world in which we live as God's world, created by Him. After He created Adam and Eve

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on the sixth day, He gave them a mandate that informed their worldview and subsequently informs ours: “Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Gen. 1:28).

In this verse we see four *W*'s that are important for understanding a covenantal worldview—worship, woman, work, and the Word of God. We will look more closely at these in chapter 9, but for now I want us to see that we are to be worshipers of God grounded in His Word, women who live out their design as life givers (more about this in chapter 7) grounded in His Word, and workers who go into the world grounded in His Word. Also, we should not forget the truth of Genesis 1:31: “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.” The song “This Is My Father’s World” should ring in our hearts each day.

Second, we must view the sin and suffering in our lives and in our world as a result of the fall. We must simultaneously remember three things—we are loved by God and called to be saints (Rom. 1:7), we will suffer for Christ’s name’s sake (Phil. 1:29), and we will continue to sin on this side of glory (Gal. 5:17). We will talk more about these three truths in chapter 8.

Third, we must see our solution as the only Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Salvation is of the Lord. Jesus is our Redeemer, freeing us from slavery to sin and death into eternal life with Him. We will look more closely at this solution in chapter 4.

The redeemed have a new mission that goes along with the cultural mandate in Genesis 1. Although we don't leave any of the *W*'s we've already considered behind, we do add one—witness. We are to be witnesses grounded in the Word of God, proclaiming Christ to a lost and dying world (more about this in chapter 9).

Finally, we must await Christ's second coming in hope and anticipation of the consummation of His kingdom, when He will make all things new. Jesus is presently seated at the right hand of God the Father, praying for us and awaiting the day He is charged by His Father to come and take us to our eternal home (Heb. 1:3–4; 4:14–16; 9:24–28).



I'm not sure I would recommend singing a surprise solo at your wedding, but I do recommend singing each day about the One who has made a covenant promise to be here for you. He loved you even when you were a covenant breaker. And He has reconciled you to Himself through His Son, the perfect Covenant Keeper, who is coming again to take you home to be with the triune God for all eternity. Now that's something to sing about!

### **Thinking It Through**

- Jot down your present sin, suffering, and service in light of what you have learned about God, the covenant, and a covenantal worldview in this chapter.

Sin—

Suffering—

Service—

- Spend time in thanksgiving today that the triune God has voluntarily initiated a relationship with you expressed by way of covenant.
- In what people, places, or things do you seek comfort? How has this chapter challenged you to find your deepest contentment in Christ?
- Would you say your thoughts are more God-centered or self-centered? Why?
- In what present circumstance would applying a covenantal worldview help you think through things clearly?