

God of Promise

The Beauty of Covenant Theology

Part 3 – The Covenant of Grace (1)

The Covenant of Works made no provision for forgiveness. The terms were simple: Obedience results in life and disobedience results in death. If the man and woman transgressed the one law which God established in the garden (do not eat from the forbidden tree) then death would be the result. For anyone who sins, the Covenant of Works offers no means for blessing. It was only ever intended to bless those who remain free of actual and imputed sins.



In a technical sense the Covenant of Works has not been abrogated. That is, the covenant of works still stands. If it were possible for a man or woman to be born without the imputed sin of our federal head, Adam, and then remain perfectly sinless in every conceivable sense, then life everlasting would be the result. But we may as well imagine the possibility of a man flapping his arms and traveling to Jupiter.

So why even mention the technical case for the Covenant of Works? Because Jesus Christ kept the terms. He obeyed God's law impeccably. In thought, motive, word, and deed Jesus never once transgressed. Having been conceived of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was born without a sinful nature. Jesus is our Second Adam unpolluted by original sin. He succeeded where the first Adam failed. He kept the terms of the Covenant of Works and did so as our representative Head.

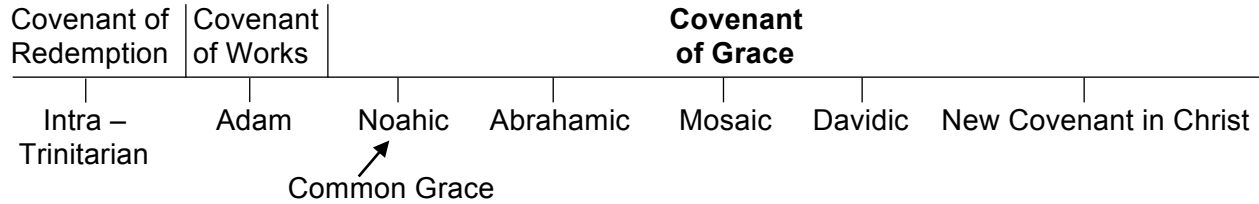
The Covenant of Grace

God turns catastrophes into blessings. He snatches life from the jaws of death. In his grace God answered the wickedness and tragedy of mankind's rebellion with a promise of redemption. The Creator was unwilling to walk away from his human creatures.

Man's redemption is inextricably bound with redemptive history, as God has progressively revealed Himself in covenant to His corporate people, culminating in His revelation in Christ. Knowledge of God is openly revealed in the concrete events of redemptive history in God's condescension to His fallen creatures. Beginning in the Old Testament, God covenanted with historical flesh-and-blood people, and He gave the new covenant through the God-man Jesus. Theologians, therefore, cannot merely start with the advent of Christ and the individual's profession of faith, but must account for God's covenantal dealings with His people from the very beginning in the garden-temple of Eden.¹

¹ Fesko, J.V., *Word, Water, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2010), 4.

The covenant of grace is that covenant by which God graciously saves all those who believe. Following the rebellion of Adam and Eve under the covenant of works God mercifully chose to save his fallen people in the only way that sinners can be saved: by grace.



There has been, is now, and ever will be only one covenant of grace. As we will see, the covenant of grace is that which God instituted with Abraham. But this gracious covenant was intimated in Genesis 3:15 as part of God’s curse upon the serpent:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.*

This is what Luther rightly called the first gospel announcement. It is also the first example we have of both unconditional election and irresistible grace. The woman had abandoned the covenant God had made and gave herself instead to the serpent. She chose to believe the enemy rather than God. But God sovereignly intervened and took the woman back from her self-imposed slavery to the evil one. Though she had chosen the serpent, God imposed his will and placed enmity between the woman and the tempter. God literally took her back. This was an act of sovereign grace. God then made the promise that has shaped human history ever since.

God promised to preserve through the woman a holy lineage culminating in the One who, though struck, would crush the serpent’s head. It is no stretch to say that beginning in Genesis 3:16 until the end of Revelation, the Bible tells the story of how God ultimately fulfills the promise of verse Genesis 3:15.

The first formal announcement of the covenant of grace is found in Genesis 12:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (vv. 1-3).

Abram was a typical moon worshiping pagan living in the region of Haran. The Lord graciously chose him from among all the people on earth to be His own. There was nothing about Abram that made him more “choosable” than any of the other pagans in the world. Rather in the mystery of His providence God chose to place his affections on this man and from him to make a people all His own.

When God called Abram, he made three promises to him. **He promised to give Abram a people, a place, and his presence.** And if you are following along, those promises represented

a restoration of what was lost in Eden when the covenant of works was broken by the first humans.

Abraham, understandably asked, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess [the land]?” (Gen 15:8). God answered by employing what would have been familiar covenant traditions. This would have given assurance to Abraham that God would keep his promises.

Covenants between persons were not uncommon in the Ancient Near East. Often kings would enter into covenants with those who dwelled within their domain. Promises were made and obligations imposed. Of course, it was the more powerful partner who would define the terms of the covenant. The arrangement would then be sealed by a ratification ceremony. Typically, those ceremonies would include the shedding of blood. Thus “cutting a covenant” became a common way to refer to covenant ceremony. In these ceremonies various animals would be slaughtered and cut in two. The covenant participants would then pass together through the pieces. It was a rather gruesome scene to be sure.



The act of the covenant partners passing through the middle of the bisected animals was highly significant. It was a *self-maledictory* act or self-curse. That is, the covenant partners were publicly declaring that if they broke the terms of the covenant then they deserved to be obliterated just as the slaughtered beasts had been.

So Abraham obeyed the word of the Lord and arranged the animal carcasses as God had prescribed. After the work was done Abraham fell into “a deep sleep” (Gen 15:12). As he slept, he received a vision from God.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (Genesis 15:17-18).

God appeared in Abraham’s dream in the form of “a smoking fire pot.” Of chief significance in this vision is the fact that only God passes through the middle of the slaughtered animals. It is this symbolic act that confirms the gracious nature of the covenant. God did not entrust to sinful mankind the successful outworking of his covenant.

The covenant becomes the key to the administration of God’s grace at several important moments in Israel’s history. For example, in 2 Kings 13, we read of how Hazael, king of Syria (whom the Lord had raised up to discipline his own people, 1 Kgs 19:15–17), had been oppressing the kingdom of Israel. We are told that the Lord decided to be gracious toward his people and to preserve them “because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (v. 23). In other words, the basis for God’s gracious dealings with his people in the midst of their continual sin and rebellion was the covenant promises he had made to the patriarchs. Righteous kings such as Hezekiah realized this, and in 2 Chronicles 30 we see him citing God’s

gracious covenant when he called the nation to repentance. The Jews were conscious of their covenant history with God and deeply aware that these promises formed the basis of their gracious standing before him.

Given the importance of the covenant in God's gracious dealings with his people, the narrative of God's grace toward them was vital to Israel's identity. It shaped what we might call the liturgical life of the nation, both in the stories recited in their homes and in the great public declarations that it made before the world.

In Exodus 12 Moses warns the people that a time will come when their descendants will have no firsthand memory of the events of the exodus and no immediate understanding of the meaning of the Passover meal. Therefore, he instructs them to recite and retell the story of God's great rescue of his people from Egypt. When a new generation asks, "Who are we?" the answer is clear: "We are God's special people whom he graciously rescued from slavery in Egypt." God's grace forms the foundation of their national identity. They are a people formed by grace and sustained by grace.

Some Christians have often wondered how the Old Testament saints were saved. It is not unusual to meet a Christian who is under the impression that prior to Jesus' atoning death God's people were saved somehow through obedience to the law. But nothing could be further from the truth (Rom 4:5). God has always saved his people in precisely the same way: by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Before the advent of Jesus God's people looked forward in faith to the redemption the Messiah would accomplish. We, on the other hand look back in faith to what the Messiah has accomplished. In the both cases it is God's covenant with Abraham that is being fulfilled. That is why the apostles were fond of calling Christians children of Abraham or Abraham's seed.