

The Covenant with Adam: “Do This and You Shall Live”

Scripture Readings: Genesis 2:15-17; Luke 10:25-28

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Dear Congregation of Christ: We begin today with a series on “God’s Covenants with Man.” But before we embark on this first sermon in this series, let us first briefly study the doctrine of Biblical covenants. There are six major covenants: God’s covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and the New Covenant under Christ. The framework of all Biblical history is grounded in these six covenants. How our gracious and merciful God saved his sinful people from all their sins are encompassed in these covenants, beginning with the Fall of Adam and ending with our Lord Jesus Christ’s life, death, resurrection, ascension and Second Coming.

These six covenants can be classed into two main covenants: the Covenant of Works with Adam before the Fall, and the Covenant of Grace after the Fall. The Covenant of Grace can be further divided into two main categories: the Old Covenant from the Fall to the incarnation of Christ, and the New Covenant after Christ’s incarnation. In the New Covenant, Christ fulfills all the provisions and promises God made to his chosen people in the Old Covenant. This is why he declared to his disciples in Matthew 5:17. *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”*

Most Reformed theologians also teach a Covenant of Redemption (“covenant of peace,” Zech 6:13) in which the three Persons of the Holy Trinity covenanted with each other before the creation of the world. The Father decreed to save his chosen people. The Son was anointed by the Father to accomplish this salvation through his incarnation, death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit then applies all the benefits of the Son’s finished work to the Father’s chosen people. This covenant from eternity past is found in many Scripture texts. The covenant between the Father and the Son is found in Psalm 2:7, 110; and John 6:38-40. The Spirit creates the Son in Mary’s womb (Luke 1:35); empowers him in his ministry (Isa 11:2, 61:1; Luke 4:17-21) and in his sacrifice (Heb 9:14). The Holy Trinity in concert was evident when Jesus was baptized (Matt 3:16-17).

The doctrine of the covenants was first taught by the early church fathers but was mostly lost by the medieval church. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Protestant Reformers expounded more fully what the Apostles and the early church taught. They diligently studied all the New Testament teachings of Jesus and his apostles concerning the covenants in all Scriptures. This is why Reformed theology is also called covenant theology and vice versa.

But what is a covenant? The word “covenant” is part of the titles “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” The English word “testament” comes from the Latin *testamentum*, which means “covenant.” It is used about 300 times in the Old Testament and 30 times in the New Testament. Ligon Duncan, a Reformed pastor, defines God’s covenants with man simply as a “God-initiated, binding, living, relationship with blessings and obligations.” There are several important elements

in God’s covenants with man. The first is that the two parties are God and man, but the sovereign God alone dictates the terms of the covenants. Second, there is a covenant head who represents all his descendants. Third, there are conditions or stipulations: blessings for obedience to the terms, and curses for disobedience. Fourth, there is a sign or seal to ratify the covenant. Fifth and last, the ratification of the covenant is celebrated with a feast.

These elements are present even in human covenants, for example, in a marriage covenant. First, the parties are a man and a woman. Second, the man is the covenant head representing all his children. Third, both husband and wife affirm the marriage vow. If they are faithful to their “till death do us part” vow, they will enjoy the blessings of marriage. If they are not, then the marriage ends. Fourth, the sign and seal are the rings and a signed marriage contract. Fifth and last, the marriage covenant is celebrated with a wedding feast.

Except for God’s covenant with Adam, God explicitly affirms that he is making a covenant with the covenant heads Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and our Lord Jesus Christ with these words, “*I will establish my covenant with you...*” (Gen 6:18; 17:2; Exo 24:8; 2 Sam 23:5; Jer 31:33; Luke 22:20). However, there is one Scripture text clearly saying that God made a covenant with Adam. In Hosea 6:7, we read, “*But like Adam they [Israel] transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.*” And in Genesis 2:15-17, we see the main elements of God’s covenant with Adam. First, God and Adam are the two parties. Second, Adam represented all mankind. Third, Adam would die if he disobeyed God’s command, but inherit eternal life if he obeyed. Fourth, the sign of the covenant is the Tree of Life, representing eternal life in Christ. Fifth and last, if Adam passed his probation, God would give him the fruit of the Tree of Life (Rev 2:7). The tree of life symbolized God’s gift of eternal life to Adam and all his children if he was able to pass the test of obedience.

In paradise, the Garden of Eden, God gave him a perfect body and soul and a perfect dwelling-place. God gave him the responsibility to work and keep God’s garden. Finally, Adam was also responsible to obey God’s one commandment not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Under these three things, we will meditate on our theme, “**The Covenant with Adam: ‘Do This and You Shall Live.’**”

First, Adam in the Garden-Paradise of God

We know that all of God’s creation was “very good,” including the first Adam who was created in God’s image. He was created perfectly righteous and holy and with true knowledge of God (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). And God wanted to confirm him in righteousness, placing him under probation by a covenant of works. Psalm 1:1-3 takes us back to Adam in the Garden of Eden. He was blessed, and he delighted in and meditated on the law of the Lord day and night. He was a fruitful tree planted by streams of water, prospering in all his work. He was a picture of Christ’s perfect righteousness and knowledge of his Father.

For Adam and Eve’s earthly pleasure, God planted a garden in Eden, with “*every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food*” (Gen 2:8). In the middle of the garden, God planted two trees:

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. He was pleased to give them all of this beautiful garden to enjoy. Psalm 23 is a picture of the Garden of Eden where God the Good Shepherd dwelt with Adam, leading him to green pastures, quiet waters, and paths of righteousness.

But there was one exception to this paradise: they may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or else they should surely die (Gen 2:15-17). Adam disobeyed God’s one commandment, failing his probation, and on that very day, he started dying.

The prohibition from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was God's first covenant with man, a covenant of works: disobey and you will die. The reverse is implied: obey and you will live. In short, God said to Adam, “*Do this and you shall live*” (Lev 18:5). If Adam successfully passed his probation in the garden, he would have been confirmed in the state of perfect holiness, righteousness, and communion with God in both body and soul for eternity. God would have bestowed on Adam and Eve godly wisdom and life to the fullest if they only partook of the tree of life. There would be no more threat of the curse of sin and death because of disobedience, an impossibility because Adam would be perfectly holy and righteous.

Like Adam, we are all sinners who desire more than what God has given us. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and all other multi-billionaires are never satisfied with their riches. But even those in the middle class who have thousands in the bank and multimillion-dollar homes want more. We all succumb to keeping up with the Joneses. We are all slaves of “*the course of this world... the prince of the power of the air... the passions of our flesh*” (Eph 2:2-3). These verses refer to the God-hating world, Satan the tempter and deceiver, and our sinful desires.

When God created Adam, his purpose for him and his children was to be a good and fruitful steward and guardian of his Garden-Paradise where God placed him. It was not to be.

Second, Adam’s Responsibility to Work and Keep the Garden-Paradise

Since Adam is the covenant head of all mankind, he would have passed this perfection onto all his descendants if he passed his probation. God's command to fill the earth and multiply (Gen 1:28) would have been completely fulfilled, because Adam's perfect descendants would overflow out of the garden of Eden into all the earth. The whole earth would then be filled with his glory, because it would be filled with glorious people worshiping him. The song of the psalmist praising God in Psalm 66:4 would then be fulfilled, “*All the earth worships you and sings praises to you; they sing praises to your name.*”

Not only will the whole earth be full of God's glory; the whole earth, not only Eden, will be God's garden-temple. The garden of Eden was the original temple of God on earth. God commanded Adam to “work” and “keep” Eden, two words that are used for the responsibilities of Levitical priests in the Tabernacle (“serve” in Num 4:23; “keep” in Num 18:7). The garden of Eden is also called “the garden of God” (Ezk 28:13). It is in Eden where God and Adam would fellowship together: where God would teach Adam his ways, where Adam would worship God. In “keeping” the garden, he is responsible for making sure that everything in God’s sanctuary is

according to God’s instructions. He must also guard and protect it from all outsiders, from anything that is not according to God’s will, such as when the serpent entered the garden.

But in disobeying God, Adam forfeited this blessedness in four ways. First, in believing Satan’s lie rather than God, he in effect served and worshiped the ancient serpent. Second, because he did not keep the serpent out of the garden, he himself was driven out of paradise because he had violated its holy ground with his sin. Third, his joy in working and tending God’s garden-paradise vanished into toilsome work. Because God cursed the ground, his field would not only bring fruits and flowers, but also thorns and thistles (Gen 3:17-18). All his days will be of “blood, sweat and tears.” This is why Solomon despaired as he worked even when he was a rich and powerful king, “*So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun*” (Ecc 2:20). And fourth, Adam forfeited God’s promise of eternal life and return to dust in death from where he came (Gen 3:19).

And Adam’s bane existence after the Fall is also the woeful existence of all his unrepentant and rebellious children. The world believes the lies of Satan instead of the truth of God’s word, in effect, becoming idolaters. In fact, the rebellious world hates God. Unbelievers do not worship God with God’s people in the church, so they are outside of God’s heavenly dwelling-place on earth. Like Solomon, they work without joy, but only work to enjoy the sinful pleasures of this world. Their toilsome work is marred by corruption, natural calamities, economic disasters, and violence. Finally, in death, their bodies return to dust, but their souls return to God for judgment (Dan 12:2).

All of these afflictions were the result of Adam’s disobedience to God’s one commandment.

Third, Adam’s Responsibility to Obey God’s One Commandment

Before Adam sinned, he had real “free will,” free in the sense of obeying or disobeying God. Unlike all his descendants who are sinners by nature from conception to death and slaves of sin, Adam was not enslaved by sin, not a child of that ancient serpent. When Satan came into the Garden deceiving Adam and Eve, their focus on the Tree of Life was diverted to the forbidden tree. Satan made Eve see that “*the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.*” He also deceived her that she would not die if she disobeyed; rather, she would be like God who knows good and evil (Gen 3:4-6).

Adam and Christ were alike in that both were tested by God through the devil. But Christ’s temptation was much more severe—40 days in a barren wilderness, with nothing to eat, and no companions except wild beasts. So in Romans 5:19, Paul makes a comparison between Adam and Christ, “*For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.*” Both Adam and Christ represented their people in their roles as covenant heads. All people belong to one of these two covenant heads—either “in Adam” or “in Christ” (1 Cor 15:22). In Adam, all mankind disobeys God, and in Christ, all believers obey God.

We hear today a somewhat humorous saying, “The devil made me do it,” as an excuse for being sinful. We are like Adam who blamed the woman, “She made me do it.” And the woman blamed

the serpent, "The serpent made me do it." We must not excuse ourselves with this saying, as if sin is a thing too light to take seriously. We all sin because we are sinners by nature, therefore, we are inclined to disobey God's commandments (Rom 7:15-20). All unbelievers are *willing* slaves of sin which leads to death (Rom 6:15-23).

Dear friends, as the Apostle Paul struggled against his sinful nature, he asked in despair in Romans 7:24, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*" And in the next verse, he knew the answer to his woeful state, "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" Let us praise God for sending his Son who merited salvation for us by being obedient all the way to the cross. To those of you who have faith in Christ, may God's abounding grace always bring you to awe, reverence and thankfulness before God! And because the perfect obedience of Christ has been credited to you, live as those who are godly and righteous before God. Because our Lord Jesus Christ calls you to live holy lives.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam's disobedience against God's covenant of works turned God's Garden-Paradise into Paradise Lost. But God has promised all his people that when Christ the Second Adam returns from heaven, he will take us to a more perfect Paradise. We will dwell in Paradise Regained forever. In that eternal Paradise, there will be no more tears, death, mourning and pain (Rev 21:4). Our eternal existence will only be of joy and blessedness because we will partake of the fruits of the Tree of Life, who is our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. Praise him for fulfilling God's eternal plan of salvation as our Savior in the covenant of grace.