

A Thorough Explanation of the Covenant¹

The Covenant of Works

When God created Adam, He made a covenant with him. A covenant is a binding agreement with specific terms. The promise was God's presence. This is amazing because the Creator entered into an arrangement in which the creature had a claim. The Creator obligated Himself to the creature. The condition was perfect obedience. God would keep the covenant promise. Adam must obey the covenant obligation. He could not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This was the test. This would demonstrate Adam's conscious acceptance of the covenant promise. This is called the *covenant of works*, but it does not mean that Adam worked to earn his relationship with God. God sovereignly initiated that relationship. It means that Adam had to make a choice to remain in God's presence by subjecting himself to God's authority.

While Adam and Eve lived in God's presence, they reflected His glory to one another and to creation. So they lived in harmony with one another and with creation.

But Adam ate the forbidden fruit. He broke covenant. His covenant-breaking severed his perfect relationship with God. Because God is holy, there can be nothing unholy in His presence. His holiness will consume anything unholy. Now when Adam and Eve faced each other, and when they faced creation, they reflected their own selfishness. Adam was our representative in the covenant agreement. The consequences of His covenant-breaking thundered through creation, through history, and into every human heart.

The Covenant of Grace

One night after hearing the story of Adam and Eve, our three-year old grandson Mac prayed, "Dear God, please let Adam and Eve go back to the Garden."

The good news is that God did just that. It was not a return to the literal Garden, but He made a way for them to return to His presence.

God was not obligated to do anything. He could have turned away from the creature and the creation. Instead, He intervened. He came to the Garden. He called to the man. And He clothed Adam and Eve in garments of skin (Genesis 3:8, 9, 21). Here is the essence of the covenant of grace—God came, He called, He clothed. God comes to us while we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1-9). He calls us into a relationship with Himself (Acts 2:38-39). And He covers our guilt with the perfect righteousness of Christ so that we can once again live in His presence (Isaiah 61:10)—glorious, sovereign grace from beginning to end.

It has to be that way. The penalty of sin is death. And dead people can do nothing—absolutely

¹ Susan Hunt, *Heirs of the Covenant*. (Crossway, 1998; Great Commission Publications, 2014), 24-27.

nothing to regain life.

As *The Westminster Confession of Faith* says:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.²

In *The Christ of the Covenants*, O. Palmer Robertson writes:

Some would discourage any effort to present a single definition of "covenant" which would embrace all the varied usages of the term in Scripture. They would suggest that the many different contexts in which the word appears imply many different meanings. Clearly any definition of the term "covenant" must allow for as broad a latitude as the data of Scripture demands. Yet the very wholeness of the biblical history in being determined by God's covenants suggests an overarching oneness in the concept of the covenant. What then is a covenant? How do you define the covenantal relation of God to his people? A covenant is a bond in blood sovereignly administered. When God enters into a covenantal relationship with men, he sovereignly institutes a life-and-death bond.³

When God came to the Garden, He made a promise to the man, and He pronounced a curse upon Satan. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

In his landmark work, *Promise and Deliverance*, S. G. DeGraaf said, "In principle, the whole of redemption is revealed in the mother-promise (Genesis 3:15 NIV)."⁴

This was not the establishment of the covenant of grace; it was the revelation of that covenant. This covenant was not established with Adam, but with Christ. This covenant was not an afterthought. It was not made in response to man's sin. The divine agreement to redeem man was in place before man was created. Jesus, the Mediator and Head of this covenant, is the "Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13:8 NIV). Because redemption was in the divine will of God, it was the same as done. "He will crush your head" was not a hoped-for future event; it was an accomplished fact. Neither were the beneficiaries of the covenant an afterthought. "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves" (Ephesians 1:4-6 NIV).

² *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, VII, 1. (PCA CDM, 2005), 24.

³ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (P & R Publishers, 1980), 3-4.

⁴ S. G. DeGraaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, vol. 1. (Paideia Press, 1977), 21.

In the first glimpse of this “mother-promise,” God reveals Jesus the Mediator who will crush the head of Satan and win the victory over sin and death. Even while Adam and Eve are trying to hide their nakedness, God tells them about Jesus.

In spite of man’s performance, God returned to the Garden and said, “I will still be your God; you will be My people; I will provide the way for you to live in My presence; I will dwell among you.” This is grace. It is undeserved. Adam demonstrated his belief in the promise by naming his wife Eve, which means life. He believed that she would bear children, including the Child who would leave the glory of God’s presence in order to secure a place for us in God’s presence.

Throughout the rest of Scripture, God unwraps His covenant promise that He is our God, that we are His people, and that we live in His presence.

Heirs of the Covenant
1998