

“THE COVENANT OF WORKS”

This passage provides us with a second, and more detailed, account of the creation of man. Here we learn that God created man in some undisclosed location on the earth and then took him and placed him in Eden, a garden planted by God’s own hands. Eden is portrayed as a paradisaal land, beautiful to the eye and filled with everything that man would need for a happy life. It is no coincidence that the descriptions of the new heavens and new earth that we find elsewhere in Scripture borrow heavily from this picture of Eden. The author wants us to see Eden as the ideal place to live, and he expects us to realize something of the extent of what was lost when Adam sinned against God.

Verse 15 says that God placed the man in the garden of Eden in order to work and keep it. I will have more to say about this next week, when I address the topic of human work. This week, I want to focus upon the command recorded in verses 16-17, where God says to the man, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 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 die.” This is the basis for the doctrine known as the covenant of works, also referred to as the covenant of life, the covenant of nature, or the covenant of creation. It is the first of the two main biblical covenants by which God relates to mankind: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The covenant of works is defined by our *Westminster Confession of Faith* as follows: “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” [WCF 7.2] It is aptly called the covenant

of works because Adam had to do the work of perfectly keeping God's commands in order to receive what God promised in this covenant. And, as the quote from the confession said, Adam was not acting for himself alone in the covenant of works, but for all of his posterity as well. He acted on behalf of the whole human race. Representation is the key element in both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. In the covenant of works, Adam represented all mankind. And in the covenant of grace, Jesus represented all of God's elect.

Some Christians object to seeing a covenant of works in Genesis 2:16-17, arguing that the word 'covenant' does not appear in these verses or anywhere else in the surrounding context. While this is true, it is a fallacy to say that an idea can only be present when the word that is typically used for it is present. For example, the word "Trinity" does not appear in Matthew 28:19, but Jesus' command to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit still teaches the doctrine of the Trinity. In the same way, there are a variety of factors that indicate that this text in Genesis 2 is describing a covenant that God set up with Adam and all of his posterity.

First, there is the fact that God is referred to by his covenant name, *Yahweh* (or the older pronunciation *Jehovah*), all throughout chapters 2 and 3. In Genesis 1, God is only identified by the generic Hebrew name for God, which is *Elohim*. But in chapters 2-3, he is called "the LORD God," which is *Yahweh Elohim* in Hebrew. (By the way, whenever you see the name LORD spelled entirely in capital letters in the Old Testament of your English Bible, the Hebrew word being translated is *Yahweh*.) *Yahweh* is the personal

name that God revealed to Moses in the book of Exodus. It is the name that emphasizes his covenant relationship with the people of Israel. The fact that God is identified by his covenant name a passage that describes his initial dealings with man lend significant support to the claim that this relationship is covenantal in nature.

Second, there is the fact that Hosea 6:7 refers to God being in covenant with Adam. In describing Israel's covenant unfaithfulness, the LORD says: "But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me." In order for Adam to have transgressed the covenant, there had to be a covenant in place before he sinned.

And then there is the teaching of Paul in Romans 5, where both Adam and Christ are described as covenant heads. Sin and death came into the world for all men as a result of Adam's disobedience. But justification and eternal life came as a result of Christ's righteousness and obedience. Both Adam and Christ are covenant representatives.

Taken together, these factors lend strong support to seeing a covenant of works in Genesis 2, even though the term "covenant" is not used. And this becomes even more clear when we look for the key features of a covenant in these verses. There are three fundamental components in biblical covenants: (1) the parties of the covenant are bound together in a relationship; (2) the terms of the relationship are established and the parties are required to keep those terms; and (3) the consequences for both breaking and keeping the covenant terms are set forth. Each of these elements is present in Genesis 2. First, God sets up a relationship with Adam by revealing himself to him and communicating with him. Second, God establishes the terms of this relationship by exercising his

authority over Adam and commanding him what he may and may not eat. And third, God tells Adam that the consequence of disobedience will be death, from which we can also infer that the consequence of obedience will be eternal life. Let's take a few moments now to look at these things in more detail.

We begin by identifying the parties involved in this covenant. In any covenant, there are at least two parties that enter into a contract with each other. In a marriage covenant, the contract is made between a husband and his wife. In the covenant of works, the contract was made between God and Adam, with Adam serving as the representative head of the entire human race.

The promise of the covenant, or the reward for keeping the terms of the covenant, is eternal life. While this is not explicitly stated in the text, we can infer it from the fact that death is threatened as the penalty for disobedience. Furthermore, God says in Genesis 3:22 that man would have eaten from the tree of life and lived forever had he remained in Eden. This tells us that the command in Genesis 2:16-17 placed man under a type of probationary period. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a probation-tree. Adam should have learned to distinguish between good and evil by obeying the Lord's command. He should have submitted to what God had said about what was right and what was wrong. Instead, he chose to follow his own ideas about what would be best. Had he completed that probation-trial successfully, he would have been granted eternal life.

In order to receive what was promised in the covenant of works, Adam had to fulfill the condition of the covenant. And the condition of the covenant of works was perfect obedience. But Adam failed to meet this condition when he chose to eat from the tree. And his failure has plunged all of us into sin, which means that none of us can meet the condition of the covenant of works. In ourselves, we are completely unable to receive what is promised in the covenant of works - the promise of eternal life. Understanding this helps us to see the vital importance of the active obedience of Christ in securing our redemption. Jesus obtained our salvation through his passive and active obedience. Passive obedience refers to all of the sufferings and humiliations that he had to endure to atone for our sins. Active obedience refers to his perfect fulfillment of God's law on our behalf. In other words, Jesus not only takes away our sins; he also gives us his righteousness. The active obedience of Christ is the basis of our hope of standing before the Lord and being found acceptable in his sight. In the words of J. Gresham Machen,

“if Christ had merely paid the penalty of sin for us and had done nothing more we should be at best back in the situation in which Adam found himself when God placed him under the covenant of works.” [*God Transcendent*, 187]

The only way for us to enjoy the promise of the covenant, the promise of eternal life with God, is by fulfilling the condition of perfect obedience. We are unable to meet that condition, but Christ has met it for us if we place our trust in him.

The penalty of the covenant of works is death. God told Adam that on the day he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would surely die. The death with which God threatened Adam with was not just physical. This is confirmed by the fact that there is a wide range of meaning for the term “die” in the Hebrew Bible. While it often refers to physical death, it can also refer to spiritual death. We see this in two places in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 12:28 says, “In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death.” And Proverbs 23:13 says, “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die.” It is obvious that these passages are not talking about physical death. Walking in the path of righteousness, which is the Bible’s way of describing living a godly life, does not prevent a person from dying. Likewise, we cannot save our children from physical death by exercising biblical discipline over them. Lovingly administering corrective discipline when it is needed is an important part of biblical parenting, but it will not make our children immortal. Clearly, these passages are talking about another kind of death; the kind of death that is spiritual; the kind of death that is marked by how it separates people from the life-giving presence of God. It was in this sense that Adam experienced death on the day he ate the forbidden fruit.

This brings us to one final aspect of the covenant of works: the sacrament of the covenant of works. Now, it is true that the term ‘sacrament’ does not appear in this passage. But what I said earlier with respect to the covenant hold true here as well. The question we need to ask is whether anything in this passage functions like a sacrament. Well what is a sacrament? Our *Shorter Catechism* says that “A sacrament is a holy

ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.” [WSC 92] Consider how the basic parts of this definition apply to the tree of life in Genesis 2-3. God alone is the source of life, yet this tree is called the tree of life. And God even goes so far as to say that man will live forever if he eats the fruit of this tree. There wasn’t anything magical about the fruit of that tree, just as there isn’t anything magical about the waters of baptism or the elements in the Lord’s Supper. All throughout the history of redemption, God uses tangible, sensible signs to represent and guarantee the things that he promises his people. The fruit of the tree of life was a sensible sign of what God promised in the covenant of works. Those who met the qualifications for eating from the tree would receive what it represented: the promise of eternal life.

As we have said, none of us is able to meet the condition of the covenant of works. We have all broken the covenant of works, and this means that its curse - the curse of physical, spiritual, and eternal death - is upon us. In Adam, we are all lost. But God has not left all mankind in this estate of sin and misery. He has made Jesus Christ the representative head of a new covenant, the covenant of grace. And in that covenant, Christ perfectly fulfills everything that God required in the covenant of works. This is the basis of our confidence before God. Only by being united to Christ by faith can we obtain the right to eat from the tree of life. This is why, in a telegram sent to a friend from his deathbed, J. Gresham Machen said, “I am so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.” Even though we have all lost access to the tree of life by

virtue of our being in Adam, those of us who have been united to Christ have been given the right to eat of its fruit. As we read in the final chapter of the Bible: “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.” [Rev. 22:14]