

“The Covenant of Works”
(Genesis 2:15-17)

I. Introduction.

A. Last week, we were looking at what the Bible teaches about God’s Providence.

1. God preserves what He made.
2. God governs all things, moving them along according to His plan.
3. This includes absolutely everything, including the eternal destination of all men.
4. But this work of God does not force anyone to do anything against their will.
5. Creation is the setting of the stage, and providence is the acting out of God’s plan.

B. This evening, we will be looking at a very special part of God’s plan, called the Covenant of Works.

1. The Covenant of Works is the covenant God entered into with Adam, and through Adam, with the whole human race, except for one: the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. It basically works like this: if Adam obeyed, he would gain eternal life for all his descendants, but if he failed, he would condemn them all to hell.
3. This evening, we’ll look at what a covenant is in general and what this covenant is in particular.
4. Next week, we’ll consider again how Adam failed to keep that covenant.

II. Sermon.

A. First, I want us to consider what a covenant is.

1. It is an arrangement between two parties, an agreement.

a. There are different kinds of covenants in the Bible: the two main kinds being parity and suzerainty.

(i) Parity: this is an agreement between equals.

(a) Such as that between Abraham and Abimelech, when they argued over the well Abraham’s servants dug (Gen. 21:27).

(b) Or as the one between Jacob and Laban, where they set up stones and promised not to cross them to harm each other (Gen. 31:44-53).

(ii) Suzerainty: an agreement of a greater party with a lesser one.

(a) This would be the kind a conquering king would make with the king he defeated.

(b) Or the kind a weaker kingdom might make with a stronger kingdom to ensure that it might continue.

(c) But even if it’s forced on the weaker kingdom, it’s still an agreement, since if the party doesn’t accept it, they would be destroyed.

(d) In cases like this, it’s like protection from the Mafia.

b. The kind that God makes with man is a Suzerainty Treaty. He is the Suzerain, or the Lord, and man is His vassal, or servant; only in His case, though the covenant is imposed on the vassal, the Suzerain is kind and worthy to receive whatever He asks.

c. This kind of Covenant has five parts: See Exodus 20:1-17.

(i) Preamble: which tells who the Suzerain is: “I am the Lord your God” (Ex. 20:2).

(ii) Historic Prologue: tells what the Suzerain has done: “Who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (v. 2).

(iii) Stipulations: commandments: “You shall have no other gods before Me, *etc.*” (vv. 3-17).

(iv) Sanctions: blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience: “Honor you father and mother that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (v. 12).

(v) Disposition: where the copies of the covenant are to be placed, how often to be taken out and read; usually placed in the temple of the Suzerain’s and vassal’s god.

(a) It is believed that the two tablets of the Ten Commandments were really two copies of the covenant.

(b) Both were placed in the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle and in the Temple, because the Lord was both the Suzerain and the God of the vassal.

2. And so a covenant is an agreement. But when it comes to God, it is also a special act of Providence.

(i) The Lord doesn't have to enter into covenant with anyone.

(a) He isn't bound to do anything for His creatures.

(b) He could have made them all just to watch them all die.

(ii) He doesn't have to promise us anything.

(a) He could require absolute and perfect obedience without reward.

(b) Man owes this to God by virtue of the fact that He made him.

B. But second, I want us to see that the Lord did very graciously enter into a covenant with Adam in the garden, which we call the Covenant of Works.

1. When God created Adam, He entered into this covenant with him.

a. Even though all the parts are not mentioned here, it was called a covenant: "But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; there they have dealt treacherously against Me" (Hos. 6:7).

b. The different parts were also there, even if they all weren't explicitly spoken:

(i) God revealed Himself to Adam as the God of Creation: Elohim. (Preamble)

(ii) He revealed Himself to Adam as the One who made him. (Historic Prologue)

(iii) He told Adam what he was to do: not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Stipulation).

(iv) He told him what would happen if he did: he would die. (Sanction).

(v) The tree of life in the garden represented what would happen if he obeyed: he would live forever. (Sanction).

(vi) Certainly, Adam would have thought about this commandment every time he looked at the tree. (Disposition).

2. This covenant we call the Covenant of Works, because it depended on his works in order for him to receive the blessing of life.

a. The condition was perfect obedience to His command not to eat of the tree.

b. If he obeyed, he would live. If he disobeyed, he would die.

c. And remember, this applied not only to him, but to the whole human race: As Paul wrote, "Through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men" (Romans 5:18).

d. The only exception, as we will see, was the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. But at the same time, there was grace in the Covenant of Works.

a. God did not have to make this covenant with Adam; He didn't have to promise him eternal life for obedience: Adam already owed God obedience by virtue of the fact that He made him.

b. And eternal life was more than Adam's works would have earned.

c. That extra kindness is grace.

III. Application.

A. First, we should be thankful for God's entering into a covenant with us in the first place.

1. He wasn't bound to take care of us, but it is His nature to be kind.

2. He certainly didn't have to enter into a relationship with us, but He did.

3. Even the Covenant of Works shows the kindness of God.

4. That kindness was rejected, as we'll see next week, bringing judgment on all mankind.

B. But second, we especially need to be thankful that God did not leave all men to perish in that covenant, but made a second, called the Covenant of Grace.

1. All men today, outside of Christ, are in the Covenant of Works.
 - a. That Covenant still tells them, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them” (Gal. 3:10).
 - b. They are still bound to do everything the Lord calls them to do.
 - c. But they are under its curse because Adam failed, and they have many times as well.

2. But the Lord, in His mercy, made a second covenant, the Covenant of Grace.
 - a. In this covenant, Jesus took the same obligation to obey on Himself, and did so, even to the point of dying on the cross for the sins of His people.
 - b. If you are trusting in Him this evening, what He did has become yours.
 - c. Make sure that you are trusting in Christ, for if you’re not, then Adam’s sins and your sins will destroy you.
 - d. But if you are, then Christ’s blood and righteousness will save you.
 - e. Next week, we’ll look at the Fall. Amen.