

Probation

Genesis 2:16-17

There is always a danger in using an imperfect analogy, because it is imperfect. But I'm going to do that this morning with the concept of probation. We know what probation means with reference to our criminal justice system. A convicted offender is sometimes granted a time of probation, either in lieu of actual prison time or perhaps at the conclusion of a defined but limited and prison time. And probation means this, that if you mess up, if you violate the terms of your probation, you go back to prison to serve the fullness of your sentence.

Probation has a very significant context. It is the guilty who are put on probation. Probation is for those judged guilty, condemned as guilty, either by their own guilty plea or by a guilty verdict at the conclusion of a trial. The point is that probation, as we understand it and practice it, is something which applies only to the guilty and gives them a conditional opportunity to escape their due punishment.

Probation, as we use that word with reference to Adam and Eve, has a different context, because, before the fall recorded in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve were innocent. They were not guilty; indeed, they had no knowledge of evil whatsoever, and we'll come to that point in a few minutes. But for now, as an introduction, I want you to recognize that at this point in Genesis 2, mankind was still in perfect fellowship with God. There is no sin, and yet there is probation. There is a condition placed upon mankind, represented by the headship of Adam. The condition is one of obedience, submission to God's laws and commands. And I stress this because I want to be sure that you never think of this probation, or this condition imposed by God upon Adam and Eve, as something of test or condition by which they would earn their

standing with God, if only they would pass the test. They had standing with God. Perfect standing. A perfectly unhindered relationship. They had life, spiritual life and physical life. Life in the presence of God without need of redemption or salvation. They had access to the tree of life in that Garden of Eden, which as we saw last week, is the same image used of the glories of heaven.

Gen. 2:8 "The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. 9 And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden."

Rev. 22:1 "And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

Rev. 2:7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

Adam and Eve enjoyed all the blessings of perfect fellowship with God. That blessed fellowship is well described by the words of,

Gen. 3:8 "And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day."

So this was the test, this was the probation—would they continue in that perfect relationship? They didn't have to restore a broken relationship, they only had to preserve the glorious blessing of the covenant relationship that God the creator had

established with his creatures whom he had created in his own image. They were not on probation in terms of under the threat of receiving the judgment they came to deserve because of their sins. Rather, they were on probation in terms of demonstrating whether or not they would continue to walk with God faithfully. That is rightly called free will, and man's will was perfectly free in this state of innocence before the fall. They had the ability not to sin; indeed, they were not sinful by nature.

In terms of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, we read these words to describe that relationship with God. Question 12, "When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon pain of death." Then the next question, "Our first parents, being left to the freedom of their own will, fell from the estate wherein they were created, by sinning against God."

Notice there the language of a covenant of life. This relationship with God before the fall is rightly identified as a covenant, and these were the terms of that covenant, that man, created in God's image, enjoyed full and perfect communion with God without sin on their part. The essence of the covenant relationship was simply whether or not they would remain without sin and, therefore, remain alive, in fellowship with God. And I stress all of that in order to emphasize this point,

I. THE ABUNDANT BLESSING OF THE COVENANT OF CREATION.

Too often we think only in terms of the threat of death in this first covenant, and though that is part of the picture, which we will also look at in a moment, that's not the whole picture. Nor is it the foundation of the covenant. This is a covenant of life in which Adam and Eve enjoyed life with God with all the blessings

bestowed upon them by God at creation. What glorious circumstances they enjoyed!

We saw some of that glory last week,

v.8 "The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. 9 And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food."

This was an absolutely delightful experience. And notice in verse 16 what I am identifying as,

A. The blessing of the freedom of grace.

v.16 "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat."

Every tree. They are all yours, every tree in the garden, except that one, of course. And God says, "You may freely eat." The ESV has "You may surely eat." Literally, the Hebrew is, "You may eat eat." And if you remember what I often say about Hebrew, emphasis is given in that language simply by repetition. So there is no exact English translation, but "surely eat" and "freely eat" are good attempts. The idea is not simply that they were permitted to eat, but that there is emphasis in that language emphasizing the great privilege and, I believe, freedom to eat. I call it the freedom of grace.

God, in his grace, gives his creatures made in his image the privilege of enjoying fully and freely all the benefits of that glorious garden. That is an act of God's grace. He doesn't give man just what he needs, but he gives him graciously much more. You may surely eat of it all. It's all yours. You are free to enjoy it all. That is the sense of this simple Hebrew sentence. You may eat eat! God is giving his people evidence of his grace and a

demonstration of the freedom of that grace. “It is all yours to enjoy, he says to them,” expressing that freedom of grace as well as,

B. The blessing of the abundance of grace.

I’ve already made note of that. The whole garden was theirs to enjoy. The whole garden was provided by God for the benefit and blessing of mankind. That whole garden which, in the language of Revelation, takes on the word “paradise.” The paradise of God. It was all open to Adam and Eve just as it will be reopened to us when we enter heaven. “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”

Again, I am stressing this point to emphasize the expression of God’s grace. This original covenant with Adam and Eve was an expression of God’s grace. In that context, let me read from our Westminster Confession, because our confession identifies this original as a covenant of works. Chapter 7, “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.” Some people object to that language, thinking that a covenant of works always means that you earn and deserve the reward on the basis of your own works. And that is not what the confession means with that phrase, as I am stressing here.

It was a covenant of works in the sense that Adam and Eve were obligated to obey the law in order to remain in their relationship of communion with God. They weren’t earning life—they already had life. They had fellowship with God, perfect communion. They weren’t meriting anything before God, but they were obliged to keep the law in order to remain in that covenant relationship. And here’s the main point of the covenant of works

—there was no provision for redemption. There was a probationary test, and if they failed that test they would be condemned to death. Period. They would lose the life that they had. With no provision for salvation. Thus, the second covenant was necessary, that which we so often call the covenant of grace. It was established with Adam and Eve after the fall, a covenant in which God promised to provide a redeemer, a savior. We’ll get to all of that in Genesis, but here for today, in this first covenant, even if and when we call it a covenant of works, please recognize just how glorious is the evidence of God’s grace toward the creatures he made in his own image.

With that perspective, then, we come to,

II. THE PROBATIONARY TEST OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE.

There was a test, a test presented to Adam and Eve. The test was simple. They enjoyed all the blessings of God’s grace, its freedom and its abundance, as I’ve just described. But there was one prohibition. One restriction. Let’s look at that.

v.17 “...but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.”

Let me state first what is clearly implied in this whole text, namely that Adam and Eve were entirely capable of keeping that commandment, observing that prohibition. Because they were indeed innocent. So we have in their example,

A. The nature of true innocence.

Namely, they had no knowledge of evil. The tree forbidden to them was a particular tree, representing and symbolizing the knowledge of evil, the awareness, for it was “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” They already had the knowledge of good. Everything about them was good. God was good. God’s

creation was good. The heaven and the earth was good. Up to and including the sixth day of creation, “it was all very good.” Everything. Entirely. They didn’t know anything else. They didn’t know what sin was, they had no experience of it, no awareness of it. There was no shame, no guilt, nothing. Not in their heart, not in their mind, not in their actions. Nowhere. Nothing. True innocence, their entire soul being completely free and blissfully ignorant of all evil.

You and I can only imagine that, barely imagine that. Maybe we can’t even imagine it all all. For ever since the fall, all mankind has inherited a sinful nature with an inherited knowledge of evil in every part of our being. But before the fall, there was true innocence; which means, they were entirely capable of fulfilling this probationary test. So there is nothing unjust in God’s imposing this duty and obligation in this probation. There was nothing unfair. It was simply a test, and ultimately, a test of their devotion. Thus we see,

B. The nature of devotion.

What I would call obedience for obedience’ sake. Thus, with this display of God’s grace, he presents to his creatures a probationary test of whether or not they would remain faithfully devoted to their gracious God and creator.

The test of devotion is not hard to understand. You can imagine little children. Giving to a little child a prohibition is what makes the thing prohibited attractive. It is the attraction of that which is forbidden. And you don’t need to be a little child to understand that temptation. Anyone with a healthy self-awareness and humble self-examination is likely to recognize this very temptation. That which is forbidden is what which is attractive. Isn’t that the nature of sin? You want what you cannot have. You desire what you are forbidden to touch.

God had given Adam and Eve everything in the garden, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat.” Every tree except that one! “...but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” Why the test? Why the probation? It was a test of devotion. Will you obey me simply and purely for the sake of obedience? Will you obey me, simply because I ask you to?

Now, I am always quick to say with regard to God’s law, that his commands are not burdensome. Instead, as the Scriptures present them, they are the expression and definition of our love for God.

1 John 5:3 “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.”

So there is nothing burdensome here. Nothing that would bring any harm or hardship to Adam and Eve in the prohibition against eating from this one particular tree. But there is this deepest of all questions that could be posed to man by God, “Will you obey me for obedience’ sake?” Will you obey me as an act of devotion, an act of love? The question really is, “Will you love me?”

Will you love me? Do you love me? That’s the question posed by this probationary test. Will you live out your devotion to me by doing what I ask? Will you demonstrate your love by obeying my command?

1 John 5:3 “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.”

These are Jesus’ own words,

John 14:21 “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.”

So what is it that God wants from his creatures, above all else? How can we express the focal point of this probationary test given to Adam and Eve? The answer comes in Jesus' own response to the question of which is the greatest commandment.

Mat. 22:37 "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and great commandment."

We see the same thing in the Old Testament.

Deut. 10:12 "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?"

That's the test, the test for Adam and Eve. It is the same test that the word of God presents to us today. God says to us, "Will you love me?" Or to say the same thing a different way, will you serve me with all your heart, keeping my commandments and statutes which I command you? That test remains the same for us today.

However, one huge difference in this so-called covenant of works before the fall. Then, in that covenant, there was no provision for forgiveness and redemption. Only the curse of the covenant. Thus we read...

III. THE CONSEQUENTIAL WARNING OF THE COVENANT OF CREATION.

God doesn't mince words.

v.17 "...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 surely die."

If you disobey, you will die. That was the essence of the covenant of works. If you violate this covenant, you will perish. Period. Full stop.

A. A breach of the covenant brings death.

That concept isn't hard to explain either, is it? The Apostle Paul puts it this way,

Rom. 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We have to proclaim clearly this connection between sin and death, because too often in our day, the popular perception is that there really are no consequences for sin. But before God, there is. There always is! "For the wages of sin is death."

And that connection between sin and death has such a direct connection to the promise of life, because now, after the fall, the connection between death through Adam and life through Christ takes such a central role in the promise of the gospel.

Rom. 5:12 "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned— 13 (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. 15 But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. 16 And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. 17 For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive

abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.) 18 Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. 19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous."

Similarly, we read,

1 Cor. 15:21 "For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive."

So here is the gospel, built upon this foundation, that the consequences of sin brings death. The wages of sin is death. And in Adam, all have sinned. All of us have sinned. All of us are rendered covenant breakers because of Adam. And in Adam, we all died. We are born dead, dead in sin. And then, separated from God.

B. Death brings separation from God.

That's what death is, ultimately. Separation from God. And that's what death was for Adam and Even after the fall. They didn't immediately die in the flesh, but they did, immediately, loose fellowship with God. They were, immediately, separated from God. Banished from the garden of Eden.

Gen. 3:22 "Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— 23 therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life."

So it is with Adam, that under this first covenant, he rebelled against God. He sinned. And thus he died. So all mankind, descending from Adam, is born as an enemy of God, by nature, under his wrath and curse. That was the consequence of this broken covenant. But the story continues, as does the book of Genesis. And as I read a few moments ago,

Rom. 5:19 "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous."

Because of Adam, because of this broken covenant in the Garden of Eden, we can regain life only by the promise and grace of God, given to us in the gospel!

And that's what we look forward to, that's the gospel I continue to preach today, the gospel that will be preached until the day when Jesus returns. In the second covenant, the covenant of grace, there is provision for redemption. That's what that covenant is all about. By nature we are all children of Adam, subject to the curse he incurred with his sin. But by faith in Jesus, there is now salvation.

Rom. 5:15 "But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many."

It is that grace that I preach to you this morning, that you might have life.

1 John 5:11 "And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life."