



Part 11 – God’s Covenant with Adam

Genesis 2:4-17

The word “covenant” is not used in chapter two of Genesis. But though the word itself is not used, the concept of covenant is deeply imbedded in the narrative. Covenant is an essential element in understanding how God chooses to relate to his people. It may be rightly thought of as the steel girders upholding the super-structure of Scripture.

One writer defines a divine covenant as “An agreement between God and humankind, where God promises blessings if the conditions are kept and threatens curses if the conditions are broken.”¹ Perhaps the simplest definition comes from O. Palmer Robertson who defines covenant as “a bond in blood sovereignly administered.”² Robertson continues:

“The phrase ‘bond in blood’ or bond of life and death expresses the ultimacy of the commitment between God and man in the covenant context. By initiating covenants, God never enters into a casual or informal relationship with man. Instead, the implications of his bonds extend to the ultimate issues of life and death...”³

The word covenant is used over 300 times in the Bible. It is used in both Testaments to describe God’s relationship with his people. Specifically, it is used to describe the means by which God saves his people. It was through an “everlasting covenant” that God established his promise of salvation by grace through faith with Abraham and his offspring (Gen. 12, 15, 17). The prophets foretold that it would be through a gracious covenant that God would have a people for his own possession (Jer. 31:31-34). Anticipating the birth of Jesus, Zechariah said that God was going to “show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant the oath that he swore to our father Abraham” (Lk. 1:72-73). At the last supper Jesus called the cup “the new covenant in my blood” (Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). Christians are referred to as “heirs to the promise” God made to Abraham (Gal. 3:29; Heb. 6:17; 11:9).

1. Covenant Blessings

Vv. 4-14 – *“These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.”* (vs. 4)

- The section begins with a brief and selective recap of the creation account with a special focus upon the creation of the man. This is followed by an account of the creation of the woman and the nature of their relationship.
- The Hebrew word translated “account” in the NIV and, more accurately, “generations” in the ESV, is the Hebrew *toledot*. It carries with it the idea of “family history” or “descendants.” In Genesis this clause, “These are the generations of...” serves as a heading for each of the ten major sections of the book of Genesis. Some of the sections marked out by the clause “these are the generations of,” are simply genealogies. Others include extended narratives. For instance, the *toledot* which appears in 5:1 and 6:9 are genealogies. But the *toledot* which kicks off the last section of Genesis which begins in 37:2 and continues to the end of the book.
- Genesis 1-2:3 is the history of the creation. But beginning in 2:4 the intent is to give us the history of Adam and Eve. In the process we are reminded of the state of the earth before God began to order and fill it. Here is where we begin to appreciate the blessings which were lavished on the man and woman. Before the garden is described, Moses takes us back to the condition of the earth before the Lord began ordering and filling it. In 1:2 we’re told that the earth was “without form and void.” That is a wonderful Hebrew phrase *tohu wa bohu* which carries with the idea of chaos or incompleteness.

¹ Jonty Rhodes, *Covenants Made Simple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013) p. 18.

² O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980) p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 7

A) The breath (or Spirit) of God (Vs. 7; John 20:21)

- God is said to have “breathed” into man the breath (or “Spirit”) of life. The man would relate to God in a way that nothing else in all the world could. He would have communion with his Maker.

B) A perfect environment (Vv. 8-14)

- Eden means “delight.” God placed the man and woman in an unspoiled and harmonious environment. The garden may properly be understood as a temple for the Lord’s presence with his covenant partners. Eden was the garden temple. Later the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and temple will include reminders of the garden including the seven branched candle holder which harkened back to the tree of life.

C) Eternal life (Vs. 9)

- The tree of life stood as a reminder of God’s promise to bless them with eternal life. After the fall (Genesis 3) the tree of life disappears from the scene and is never mentioned again until the end of the age when the whole host of God’s redeemed dwell with him once more in a renewed garden temple (Revelation 22).

* *Concerning the location of the garden (vv. 10-14)* – It is highly likely that the climate in the region near the Persian Gulf has changed dramatically over the millennia. There is evidence that it was once much wetter than it is now, and that some of the rivers mentioned in this account may have dried up since. It may also be that the four rivers flowing out of the region of Eden into the Garden was a single watercourse that was fed by four tributaries which would indicate that these verses offer a view upstream rather than downstream. It is also possible that the Gihon is the Nile and the Pishon is the Indus River. Cush could refer to the mountainous regions of western Iran. There is an ancient river bed that has recently been traced that runs from the gold-bearing lands of Arabia near Medina, i.e. Havilah, northeast toward the head of the gulf. This could have been the Pishon.⁴

2. Covenant Obligations

Vv. 15-17

- Don’t miss the significance of the fact that what is described here is God’s kind initiative to enter into a special relationship with mankind. What is more, at this point, there is need on God’s part to overcome sin in man to enter into covenant with him. Later, God will establish a covenant of grace so that mankind may once again have access to the Divine (Genesis 12, 15, 17).
- The obligations of the Covenant of Works are both positive and negative. There are things which man must do (positive) and one thing that he must not do (negative). It must also be recognized that the obligations are wholly good. They in no way diminish man’s joy but serve to increase that joy.

A) The positive obligations are commonly referred to as the creation mandate. God gave mankind the responsibility to “keep” the garden and exercise dominion over the earth. He also called the man and woman to be “fruitful and multiply.” They are to fill the earth with fellow image-bearers of God who will expand the borders of the garden to cover the face of the earth (1:28; 2:15).

B) The negative obligation is the prohibition placed upon the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (vs. 17). A penalty of death is attached to the violation of this prohibition. So if Adam obeys he has unfettered access to the tree of life. That is, he enjoys eternal life in the unspoiled garden temple. But the violation of the covenant will carry with it the consequence of being cut off from life and being cast out of the garden temple. *The prohibition did not serve as a temptation since the man and woman had no sin nature. It would only be through the outward temptation of the enemy that they would be enticed to do wrong.*

- God’s covenant with Adam means that all mankind, believer and unbeliever alike, are accountable to the terms of the covenant. That is where the proclamation of the gospel begins. If a person doesn’t believe that they are under obligation to God, the gospel means nothing to them.
- The covenant of works has no provision for forgiveness. It was conditioned upon Adam’s obedience. And this is what makes the fall so seemingly final. Who will rescue sinful humanity? The covenant of works did not pass away. God’s expectations did not change. But God is also merciful. So he sent his Son, the Second Adam who obeyed to perfection the terms of the covenant of works and then shed his blood to fulfill the covenant of grace.

⁴ Kenneth Kitchen, *On The Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) pp. 428-429.