

A photograph of a dirt path winding through a forest. The sun is shining brightly from the upper right, creating a strong lens flare and illuminating the path and the trees. The trees are mostly evergreens, and the ground is covered in fallen leaves and pine needles. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

*An Introduction to*

Covenant

Theology

A  
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*Teaching Series*

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# An Introduction to the Covenants

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# Covenant Theology

## *An Introduction*

### I. What is Covenant Theology?

Imagine that you have the day off, and you take a book with you to the park. After you stop off for a cup of coffee, you walk to the park and find a comfortable spot to read. You are excited. You love coffee, you love the park, and you love to read, especially when the book is good. And the book you've been reading is really good. You're almost done with it, just another few chapters to go. As you put the coffee down beside you and take the book out of your bag, trying to find the place where you left off, someone approaches you. It's a kind looking man about your age. He saw the title of the book as you pulled it out. He had heard really good things about the book but didn't know much about it. So as he was walking by, he stops and says to you, "Do you mind if I ask, what *is* that book all about?" Now, there's one more thing I haven't told you yet: the book that you have in your hand is *the Bible*. So, what would you say? How would you answer this man's question? How would you describe the Bible in just a few sentences?

What is the big picture of the Bible? How do you put it all together? Is it a reliable record of ancient history? Is it a handbook for life? Is it a book of rules (or examples) to follow? A love letter from God? Some of us get really interested about particular details in the Bible but find it hard to see the big picture. Maybe you love the Scriptures but never knew there *was* a big picture. Well, there *is* a big picture. And Covenant Theology is something that is meant to help us understand what it is. Covenant Theology helps us to see that the Bible is one beautiful story. There are lots of characters, there are lots of chapters, and there are still many things we don't fully understand yet, but there is one unifying, overarching story that runs from Genesis to Revelation: *The Bible is a story about redemption*. Well, actually, it's a story about *ruin and redemption*. It's a story about how through one man (Adam), ruin came *to us all*—but through another man (Jesus), redemption would come *for us all*. The Bible is a story about ruin and redemption.

How is it, you ask, that Covenant Theology helps us understand all of this? Because the primary way the Bible tells the story of ruin and redemption is through God's covenants. Adam hurled all humanity into *ruin* when he ate the fruit and transgressed the covenant God had made with him. But that wouldn't be the end of the story, for God would make a second covenant in and through a second Adam whereby He would *redeem* Adam's fallen race. These two covenants are the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace; and it's in and through these two covenants that Scripture tells us it's own story. Scottish pastor and theologian Thomas Boston put it this way: "As man's *ruin* was originally owing to the breaking of the covenant of works, so his *recovery*, from the first to the last step thereof, is owing purely to the fulfilling of the covenant of grace. . ." Or, to put it more simply: "Covenant Theology is just the gospel." The Bible is one beautiful story of redemption. And Covenant Theology helps to show us how it all fits together.<sup>1</sup>

### II. Why Study Covenant Theology?

1. We can't fully understand THE SCRIPTURES apart from the covenants:

A) *The covenants PERMEATE the Scriptures*: In other words, you can't get away from a covenantal way of thinking as you read through the Bible. Scripture itself won't let you do it! This is true, first of all, **NUMERICALLY**. The word "covenant" appears over 300 times in the Bible; roughly 30 times in the New Testament, and approximately 280 times in the Old Testament. That's pretty significant!

<sup>1</sup> The quote from Boston is the very first line in his work, *A View of the Covenant of Grace* (p1), a post-humorous publication that first appeared in 1734. The second quote is from Mark Dever, cited from Ligon Duncan's *Covenant Theology* course.

But there's more, because the covenants also permeate the Scriptures **THEMATICALLY**. It's not just that the word "covenant" shows up all over the Bible, it's that every page of the Bible is inherently related to God's covenantal dealings—even when the word itself isn't there. For instance, it would be difficult to make any sense of the book of *Genesis* apart from the context of the covenant God made with Abraham and with his seed after him. Nor could you make any sense of the book of *Exodus*, because it's in light of God's covenantal promises in *Genesis* that the Lord raises up Moses to deliver the people of Israel (*Exodus* 2:24). God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, in turn, serves as the contextual backdrop, not only of the book of *Exodus*, but of *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy*. And it doesn't stop there either, because when God brings Israel into Canaan in the book of *Joshua*, He does so on account of the covenant promises He had made to Abraham back in *Genesis* (*Joshua* 1:6; *Genesis* 15:18). We could go on and on, tracing God's covenantal dealings throughout Scripture.

Francis Roberts was an English Puritan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century who wrote a massive, 1700-page discourse on the covenants; and this is what he said: "God's covenant administrations [are] like a thread of gold running through the books both of Old and New Testament." And J.I. Packer put it this way: "The books of the Bible, from *Genesis* to *Revelation*, are. . . God's own record of the progressive unfolding of his purpose to have a people in covenant with himself here on earth. The covenantal character of God's relationships with human beings. . . is in fact reflected one way and another on just about every page of the Bible." Indeed, the concept of *covenant* is all over the Bible. So if we don't understand what *covenant* is all about, there's going to be a lot we don't understand in Scripture. For this reason alone, we ought to commit ourselves to better understanding the biblical doctrine of the covenants.<sup>2</sup>

*B) The covenants STRUCTURE the Scriptures:* God's covenants in Scripture are like the frame of a house. It's the covenants that frame and hold together everything else in the Bible. The rooms of a house and the furniture inside those rooms can only exist as they fit into the larger framework of that house. So too, the covenants are the framework that God himself has given us in His Word; and it's into this covenantal framework that all the various and particular truths and doctrines of the Bible fit together. Again, J.I. Packer gives us a helpful illustration as he explains this truth in his own words:

"If you are hunting on a map of the Pacific for a particular Polynesian island, your eye will catch dozens of island names, however small they are printed, but the chances are you will never notice the large letters spelling PACIFIC OCEAN that straddle the map completely. Similarly, we may, and I think often do, study such realities as God's promises; faith; the plan of salvation; Jesus Christ the God-man, our prophet, priest and king; the church in both testaments, along with circumcision, passover, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the intricacies of Old Testament worship and the simplicities of its New Testament counterpart; the work of the Holy Spirit in believers; the nature and standards of Christian obedience in holiness and neighbor-love; prayer and communion with God; and many more such themes, without noticing that these relational realities are all covenantal in their very essence. As each Polynesian island is anchored in the Pacific, so each of the matters just mentioned is anchored in God's resolve to relate to his human creatures, and have us relate to him, in covenant. . . From this, perhaps, we can begin to see how big and significant a thing the covenantal category is both in biblical teaching and in real life."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Roberts' massive work is called *The Mystery and Marrow of the Bible*; his quote is from p9. This volume was compiled over the course of weekly lectures to his congregation, taking the span of six years. You will see him quoted often throughout these lessons on the covenants. I personally regard Roberts' volume as the very best on the covenants from a biblical perspective, and Boston's *View of the Covenant of Grace* as the very best on the covenants from a systematic perspective. J.I. Packer's quote is from his Introduction to Herman Witsius' *Economy of the Covenants* (P&R Publishing, 1990). We could quote others here as well. Ezekiel Hopkins began his treatise on the covenants in this way: "Of all the mysterious depths in Christian religion, there is none more necessary for our information, or more influential upon our practice, than a right apprehension and a distinct knowledge of the doctrine of the covenants. For if we be ignorant or mistaken in this, we must needs be liable to false or confused notions of the Law and Gospel, of our Fall in Adam and Restoration by Christ, of the true grounds of mens condemnation, and the means and terms of their justification; of the justice of God in punishing sinners, and His glorious mercy in saving believers. And consequently neither can many perplexing doubts and questions be resolved, the necessity and yet different concurrence of faith and obedience unto salvation cleared, the utter insufficiency of our own righteousness to procure acceptance for us with God evinced, His justice vindicated, nor His grace glorified. For all these great and important truths will readily own themselves to be built upon the foundation of God's covenant and stipulation with man. . ." (*Doctrine of the Two Covenants*, pp2-3). Charles Spurgeon said: "The doctrine of the Covenant lies at the root of all true theology. It has been said that he who well understands the distinction between the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace is a master of divinity. I am persuaded that most of the mistakes which men make concerning the doctrines of Scriptures are based upon fundamental errors with regard to the covenants of law and the covenants of grace." (*Wondrous Covenant*; Sermon #3326).

<sup>3</sup> J.I. Packer, Introduction to Herman Witsius' *The Economy of the Covenants*. Again, Packer says it this way: "The backbone

One way we see this truth exemplified is through the very names, *Old and New Testament*. It's true that we call them by these names, but it would actually be more accurate to call them the Old and the New *Covenants*. This is because the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and the word used for covenant in the original Hebrew is *berith*. This Hebrew word, *berith*, was consistently translated into the New Testament Greek as *diatheke*. And it's the Greek *diatheke*, which, in turn, was commonly translated into Latin as *testamentum*. And, as you might guess, this is where we get the English word *Testament*. So, "Although we tend to think of Old Testament and New Testament. . .your Scriptures bear the titles of the covenants, old and new. . .We just call them testaments, but more accurately, they are really covenants. So, why study the covenants? Because they structure the Scriptures."<sup>4</sup>

#### HOW OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS IS REALLY OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

HEBREW word for Covenant in original Old Testament	GREEK word for covenant translated from the Hebrew	LATIN word for covenant translated from the Greek	ENGLISH word for covenant translated from the Latin
<i>Berith</i>	<i>Diatheke</i>	<i>Testamentum</i>	<i>Testament</i>

C) *The covenants UNIFY the Scriptures*: The covenants help us to tie all of Scripture into one story. They help us see how everything fits together. Most of the Bible is made up of the Old Testament, and unfortunately, many of us as Christians don't know what to do with it. For some of us, the Old Testament is *pre-Christian*, or even *sub-Christian* revelation; and we just can't wait to get to the New Testament. But Covenant Theology helps us understand how to rightly interpret the Old Testament, doing so in such a way that allows us, on the one hand, to recognize the distinctions between the Old and the New Testaments, while at the same time, acknowledging their profound unity. Indeed, what we're going to see is that the Old Covenant is just as much about the gospel as the New; for the only way sinners have ever come to God is *by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone*. Covenant Theology is the Bible's way of deepening our understanding of the unity and continuity of Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

of the Bible, to which all the expository, homiletical, moral, liturgical, and devotional material relates, is the unfolding in space and time of God's unchanging intention of having a people on earth to whom he would relate covenantally for his and their joy. . .The story that forms this backbone of the Bible has to do with man's covenant relationship with God first ruined and then restored. . .[E]very book of the Bible in effect asks to be read in terms of these unities, and as contributing to the exposition of them, and is actually misunderstood if it is not so read." Packer continues: "As artists and decorators know, the frame is important for setting off the picture, and you do in fact see the picture better when it is appropriately framed. So with the riches of the gospel; the covenant is their proper frame, and you only see them in their full glory when this frame surrounds them, as in Scripture it actually does, and as in theology it always should." And again: "[T]he gospel of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame. *Jesus Christ*, whose saving ministry is the sum and substance of the gospel, is announced in Hebrews the mediator and guarantor of the covenant relationship (Hebrews 7:22; 8:6). *The gospel promises*. . .are therefore invitations to enter and enjoy a covenant relationship with God. *Faith in Jesus Christ* is accordingly the embracing of the covenant, and *the Christian life*. . .has at its heart covenant communion between the Savior and the sinner. *The church*. . .is the community of the covenant, and *the preaching of the Word*, the practice of *pastoral care and discipline*, and *manifold exercises of worship together*, and *the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper* (corresponding to circumcision and Passover in former days) are all signs, tokens, expressions, and instruments of the covenant. . .As artists and decorators know, the frame is important for setting off the picture, and you do in fact see the picture better when it is appropriately framed. So with the riches of the gospel; the covenant is their proper frame, and you only see them in their full glory when this frame surrounds them, as in Scripture it actually does, and as in theology it always should."

<sup>4</sup> The quote is from Ligon Duncan in his *Covenant Theology* course. Francis Roberts drew out the same truth when he wrote: "This covenant of God is the key that unlocks the whole Scriptures. . .Yea God's covenant is such a primary subject of the whole Scripture, that the whole Word of God receives its denomination from God's covenant, being styled *The Old and New Testament*; or, *The Old and New Covenant*. And surely no context of holy Scripture can be solidly explicated, no common place of divinity can be rightly handled, no polemical or controversial point can be dexterously decided, no case of conscience or practical question can be accurately resolved, no Christian duty can be skillfully urged or advised, without due respect and scope had to the Covenant of God. Hereupon it is reported of Olevianus, that he styled himself, *Concionatorem foederis*; that is, *a preacher of the Covenant*. And so should every faithful and skillful minister have it principally in design, to be a preacher of God's Covenant; and every prudent Christian to be a hearer and practitioner of God's Covenant. . ." (Roberts, p9).

<sup>5</sup> We'll get into this in more detail later in this lesson. But for now, Ezekiel 37:24-28 can serve as an example, where the New Covenant is spoken of as the fulfillment of the Davidic, Mosaic, and Abrahamic Covenants; which means it's not something fundamentally different but rather the fulfillment of everything that went before. Duncan cites an example from the gospels: "If you pick up the Last Supper narratives in any of the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, or Luke, and you look at Jesus' words as He is explaining the bread and the cup, those passages are undergirded by Old Testament passages, especially Isaiah 53, Exodus 24. . .and Jeremiah 31. . .What is Jesus claiming as He explains His death. . .? What He is saying is, 'I am the fulfillment of these covenant signs and forms for which we have been waiting to be fulfilled, as the people of God, for hundreds of years, for over a millennium.' So, Covenant Theology is important to study because the covenants unify the Scriptures." And

## 2. We can't fully understand THE SAVIOR apart from the covenants:

At the very beginning of the gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel comes to a man named Zacharias, and tells him that he would have a son in his old age—and not just any son—but that his child would be the one who would go as a forerunner before the Messiah. Because he doesn't believe God's message at first (maybe it sounded too good to be true), he's unable to speak for a time; but when God opens up his lips once again, he begins to prophesy about the coming of the Savior; and this is what he says:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a *horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant*—as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old—salvation from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us; to show mercy toward our fathers, and *to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to Abraham our father*, to grant that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear. . .” (Luke 1:68-74).

Here as Zacharias glories in the coming of the Christ, there's two references that he makes to the Old Testament Scriptures. His first reference, to 'the house of David', is an allusion to *the covenant that God had made with David* back in 2 Samuel. And his second reference is to *the covenant that God had made with Abraham*. And so, here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Scriptures themselves are trying to help us see that we can only properly understand who Jesus is in light of all the covenant promises that have gone before. Indeed, we can't understand the Savior apart from the covenants.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. We can't fully understand THE CROSS apart from the covenants:

At the Last Supper, when Jesus wanted to explain the significance of His death to His disciples, how did He do it? He referred back to the doctrines of the covenant. Jesus said in Matthew 26:28, “This is My blood of the covenant.” What's He saying? He's quoting *Exodus 24:8*, which is a reference to the covenant that God had made with Israel at Sinai, when Moses had taken the blood and sprinkled it on the people, saying, “Behold, the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you. . .” In Luke's description, Jesus says it a little differently: “This cup. . . is the new covenant in My blood” (22:20). This language of “new covenant” is a reference to *Jeremiah 31*. But in both instances, what's Jesus doing? He's telling His disciples that what He's about to do on the cross is bring to fulfillment the covenant realities that Moses and Jeremiah had foretold. Surely, there's nothing more important for us to understand than the cross; and we can't fully understand the cross apart from the covenants.<sup>7</sup>

## 4. We can't fully understand OUR SALVATION apart from the covenants:

This is really clear from Romans 5. In Romans 5:12-21, Paul is teaching us about justification. And the way that he explains it is by setting forth Adam and Christ as two distinct covenant representatives. Paul tells us that we are justified in Christ in exactly the same way that we were condemned in Adam. And what we learn is that God deals with men through covenant representatives. Adam represented all humanity, so that when he fell, all humanity was condemned with him. And it works the same way with justification. Christ came into the world as the second Adam. And Paul argues here in Romans 5 that just like Adam, Christ is the covenant representative of all those who believe in Him. So, just as all humanity was *condemned on the basis of Adam's disobedience*, so too, all those who belong to the Savior are *justified on the basis of Jesus' obedience* as their covenant representative. What we see here is that the doctrine of justification is wholly covenantal; indeed, we can't understand our salvation apart from a covenantal framework, for: “It is by a covenantal redemptive design that God saves us.”<sup>8</sup>

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Jonty Rhodes notes: “Covenant is the theme that links the different books of the Bible to make them one united story, blazing through the Old Testament like a firework, before exploding into full color in the coming of Christ.” (*Covenants Made Simple*).

<sup>6</sup> As Rhodes notes again: “Zechariah knew that God was about to do something enormous, something that would shake the world. He also knew that the origin of this plan had been the covenant God had made with Abraham right back in Genesis.”

<sup>7</sup> Insight gleaned from Ligon Duncan in his *Covenant Theology* course. Jonty Rhodes writes: “My blood of *the covenant* [Matthew 26:28]. Why 'covenant'? Wouldn't 'This is my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' have been enough? Most Christians have at least some understanding that Jesus shed his blood so that we might be forgiven. Far fewer, I suggest, would be able to explain what Jesus meant by calling his blood *covenant* blood. In fact, many of us could put our finger over the word 'covenant' and read the verse just the same. . . The death of Christ stands at the heart of the Christian gospel. And Jesus, for one, thought 'covenant' best unlocked the meaning of that death.” (*Covenants Made Simple*, chapter 1).

<sup>8</sup> The quote is from Ligon Duncan's *Covenant Theology* course. Francis Roberts notes: “Man's enjoyment of God, by natural

## 5. We can't fully understand THE SACRAMENTS apart from the covenants:

The covenants are also the way Scripture explains and deepens our understanding of the sacraments. The two sacraments that we celebrate now in the new covenant—baptism and the Lord's Supper—are founded upon the reality of Old Testament covenant signs. Baptism has now replaced circumcision, which was *the sign of God's covenant with Abraham*; and the Lord's Supper has replaced Passover, which was given in the context of *God's covenant with Israel under Moses*. Scripture teaches us that sacraments are signs and seals of covenant promises. In God's covenant with Noah, the rainbow was given as an outward sign of God's covenantal promise (Genesis 9:12-13); and our sacraments function in exactly the same way. They're given as tangible representations of God's faithful mercies. They're things we can see and smell and taste in the midst of the darkness that so often surrounds us. They're given to confirm the covenant promises that God has made to us, and thereby to strengthen our faith. So truly, we cannot rightly understand the sacraments apart from an understanding of the covenants.<sup>9</sup>

*Summary:* In other words, understanding the covenants is something that's absolutely vital: “What we are talking about is not something peripheral. . . We are talking about something that strikes at the very heart of our understanding of the person and work of Christ, of the Gospel of salvation, of redemptive history, [and] of the relationship between the Old and the New Testament. Covenant Theology is that central.”<sup>10</sup>

## III. What is a Covenant?

### 1. The ORIGIN of the word covenant:

*A) The HEBREW WORD:* The Old Testament Hebrew word for covenant is *berith*. It's uncertain exactly where *berith* was derived from. Some think it was derived from the Hebrew verb *barah*, “to cut,” which alluded to the covenant ceremony of cutting the animals into pieces and passing between the parts (recorded in Genesis 15 and Jeremiah 34). Others think that *berith* was derived from the Assyrian word *baru*, meaning “to bind,” which would have related to the oath-binding commitment that was made between the parties involved. While both suggestions would fit with the nature of a covenant, it's not immediately clear where the word *berith* actually came from. At the end of the day, though, the origin of the word *berith* isn't all that important, since its exact meaning doesn't so much depend on where this word was derived from, but rather on the way that it's used in the Scriptures.<sup>11</sup>

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conformity to His will before the fall, and by supernatural union to Christ since the fall, are instrumentally established and effected by God's covenants with man: *that*, by his Covenant of Works; *this*, by His Covenant of Faith.” (pp1-2). And again: “God is pleased in all times and ages, from the beginning to the end of the world, to deal with His church and people by way of covenant. . . For, 1) Before the fall, God dealt with the first Adam, and in him with all his seed, then in a state of innocence and integrity, by way of covenant, and that a Covenant of Works. . . 2) After the fall God deals with His church and people also by way of covenant; and that the Covenant of Faith in Jesus Christ the last Adam.” (Roberts, pp3-5). And: “The Covenant of Works before man's fall; [and] the Covenants of Faith, since his fall—either in *Christ promised*, as all the covenant[s] of promise; or in *Christ performed*, as the new covenant, do plainly take up the whole body and series of the Scriptures.” (p1650). And Packer asserts: “Scripture directs us to covenantal thinking. . . by the specific parallel between Christ and Adam that Paul draws in Romans 5:12-18. . . God deals with mankind through two representative men, Adam and Christ. . . This far-reaching parallel is clearly foundational to Paul's understanding of God's ways with our race, and it is a covenantal way of thinking. . .”

<sup>9</sup> As the Westminster Confession says: “Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace. . .” (27:1). Alec Motyer puts it this way: “Covenant signs declare covenant promises to covenant people. [A covenant sign] is a token and guarantee of the word of God.” (*Covenant and Promise*; Evangel, 1983). We'll talk more about this in the lessons on Noah and Abraham.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from Ligon Duncan's *Covenant Theology* course (Chapter 1: *Introduction to Covenant Theology*).

<sup>11</sup> Berkhof notes: “The Hebrew word for covenant is always *berith*, a word of uncertain derivation. The most general opinion is that it is derived from the Hebrew verb *barah*, 'to cut,' and therefore contains a reminder of the ceremony mentioned in Genesis 15:17. Some, however, prefer to think that it is derived from the Assyrian word *beritu*, meaning 'to bind.' This would at once point to the covenant as a bond.” (Berkhof). Witsius says: “With respect to [the Hebrew word *berith*], the learned are not agreed. Some derive it from *barah*, which, in Piel, signifies 'to cut down'; because, as we shall presently observe, covenants were solemnly ratified by cutting or dividing animals asunder. It may also be derived from the same root in a very different signification; for, as *barah* properly signifies 'to create'; so, metaphorically, [it may signify] to 'ordain', or 'dispose'. . . Others had rather derive it from *bara*. . . signifying, besides other things, 'to choose'. And in covenants, especially of friendship, there is a choice of persons between whom, of things about which, and of condition upon which, a covenant is entered into. . .” (V1, p42). Along with the possibility that *berith* came from the Akkadian root *baru*, 'to bind, to fetter,' and its related noun *beritu*, 'band' or 'fetter', Robertson notes a few other options: “[Another] suggestion points to the verb *barah*, which means 'to eat.' If

**B) The GREEK TRANSLATION:** As we mentioned, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) consistently translated the Hebrew *berith* into the Greek word *diatheke*. Though the ordinary word for “covenant” in Greek is *suntheke*—not *diatheke*—the Greek word *suntheke* carries with it the idea of a *mutual* agreement or pact between *two equal parties*. The Greek word *diatheke* normally means “last will” or “testament” rather than “covenant,” but it seems to have been chosen in order to emphasize two truths: 1) The sovereign nature of God's covenant with man (*the fact that this isn't mutual*—God doesn't need our permission); and, 2) The vast difference between the two parties involved (*God's covenant with us isn't between equal parties*—rather, the Creator enters into covenant with His creatures). As *suntheke* was inadequate to describe what was happening when God enters into covenant with man, the word *diatheke* was chosen instead and “received a new meaning.”<sup>12</sup>

**C) The ENGLISH ROOTS:** We mentioned earlier that the Old and New Testaments derive their names from the word *covenant*. Again, this is because our English “testament” comes from the Latin *testamentum*, which, in turn, had come from the Greek *diatheke*, which, once again, had come from the Hebrew *berith*. But here we can also note that when the Greek word for covenant, *diatheke*, was translated into Latin, it was actually translated into three distinct Latin words. One of them, as we saw, was *testamentum*. But it's interesting to note that another way the Greek *diatheke* was translated into Latin is *foedus*. This is where we get the English word “federal” (IE, federal government); and it's also why covenant theology is sometimes called “federal theology.” The last way *diatheke* is translated into the Latin is *pactum*, which is where we get the English word “pact.” All three terms (*foedus*, *pactum*, and *testamentum*) are translations of the Greek *diatheke*, which had come from the Hebrew *berith*.<sup>13</sup>

THREE ENGLISH WORDS THAT COME FROM THE GREEK WORD FOR COVENANT

HEBREW word for covenant	GREEK word for covenant	LATIN words for covenant	ENGLISH words from the Latin
BERITH	DIATHEKE	<i>Testamentum</i>	Testament
		<i>Foedus</i>	Federal
		<i>Pactum</i>	Pact

2. The TYPES of Biblical covenants:

In the Scriptures we can find three different types of covenants: There are covenants that men make with each other (*human covenants*); covenants that God establishes with men (*divine covenants*); and covenants that God's people renew with the Lord (*covenants of renewal*). Let's take them one by one:

**A) HUMAN COVENANTS:** There are many different examples of human covenants in Scripture. We know, first of all, that *marriage is a covenant*; for the prophet confronted God's people with these words in Malachi 2:14, “the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.” But

this were the case, the reference would be to the sacred meal which often was associated with the covenant-making process. . . [And Martin] Noth favors the suggestion that 'covenant' derives from the Akkadian *birīt*, which relates to the Hebrew preposition 'between'. . . [which] took took on the substantival meaning of 'a mediation,' which consequently required the introduction of a second preposition 'between' and finally evolved into the normal word for 'covenant,' which could be used with verbs other than 'to cut' (between).” (p5). Robertson asserts that the etymology of the Old Testament term for covenant has proven inconclusive, but affirms that “the contextual usage of the term in Scripture points rather consistently to the concept of a 'bond' or 'relationship.’” (Robertson, p5). Roberts had earlier noted many of these possibilities in his volume (pp10-11).

<sup>12</sup> Berkhof writes: “In the Septuagint the word *berith* is rendered *diatheke* in every passage where it occurs with the exception of Deuteronomy 9:15 (*marturion*) and 1 Kings 11 (*entole*). . . This use of the word seems rather peculiar in view of the fact that it is not the usual Greek word for covenant, but really denotes a *disposition*, and consequently also a *testament*. The ordinary word for covenant is *suntheke*. Did the translators intend to substitute another idea for the covenant idea? Evidently not, for in Isaiah 28:15 they use the two words synonymously, and there *diatheke* evidently means a pact or an agreement. . . But the question remains: Why did they so generally avoid the use of *suntheke* and substitute for it a word which denotes a disposition rather than an agreement? In all probability the reason lies in the fact that in the Greek world the covenant idea expressed by *suntheke* was based to such an extent on the legal equality of the parties, that it could not, without considerable modification, be incorporated in the Scriptural system of thought. The idea that the priority belongs to God in the establishment of the covenant, and that He sovereignly imposes His covenant on man was absent from the usual Greek word. Hence the substitution of the word. . . The word *diatheke* thus. . . received new meaning.” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*).

<sup>13</sup> From Ligon Duncan's course on *Covenant Theology*.

there are other examples as well. In Scripture, covenants included *treaties between nations*, such as when Joshua “made a covenant” with the Gibeonites, “to let them live” (Joshua 9:15); or when “there was peace between Hiram and Solomon, and the two of them made a covenant” (1 Kings 5:12). Or, covenants could also be *laws and agreements between kings and their people*, as it was when “all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and David made a covenant with them. . .” (1 Chronicles 11:3). Covenants were also used as *binding contracts for business negotiations*, as it was in Genesis 21 with Abraham and Abimelech, when “the two of them made a covenant” (vv22-32). And covenants could be *deeply personal commitments between friends*, as it was when “Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David” and “made David vow” to deal with him and his posterity in lovingkindness (1 Samuel 20:12-17). Covenants also included *any other kind of agreement between two parties*, as it was when Laban and Jacob made a covenant to deal faithfully with one another (Genesis 31:44ff); or when Abner made a covenant with David to establish his throne over all Israel (1 Samuel 3:6-13ff).<sup>14</sup>

**B) DIVINE COVENANTS:** Throughout the Old Testament, we also see the Lord binding himself to His people through covenant. This is what we're going to be studying over the course of our time together. We're going to be looking at the covenants that God makes with *Adam, Noah, Abraham, with Israel at Sinai, David*, and ultimately *the new covenant* instituted by Christ, and we're going to be asking: What do these covenants mean? What do they teach us about who God is and what He has promised? What do they show us about the redemption He would accomplish for His people? And how is it that the covenants which the Lord establishes in the Old Testament find their fulfillment in the new covenant inaugurated in Christ? It's on these divine covenants that we'll be mainly focused.

**C) COVENANTS OF RENEWAL:** This is the last type of biblical covenant. This kind of covenant has to do with what we might call covenant renewal, when God's people come together corporately in order to renew their covenant relationship with the Lord. We see examples of this in passages such as 2 Kings 11:17, where *Jehoiada* the priest “made a covenant between the Lord and the king and the people, that they would be the Lord's people. . .” In a similar way, *Hezekiah* gathered the priests and Levites together during the course of his reign, and told them it was in his heart “to make a covenant with the Lord God of Israel” that His anger would turn away from them (2 Chronicles 29:1ff). *Ezra* the priest likewise urges the people to repent of their sins and covenant afresh with the Lord (10:1-5). It's important to recognize that the ones making these covenants are already in covenant relationship with the Lord; but in these instances God's people are corporately seeking to *renew* their allegiance.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. The DEFINITION of a covenant:

What *is* a covenant? We see *human covenants* scattered throughout the pages of the Old Testament Scriptures. We know about the *divine covenants*, such as the ones that God establishes with *Noah, Abraham, and David*. And we're familiar with the Last Supper, when Christ spoke of inaugurating the *new covenant* in His blood. *But what actually is a covenant?* How does Scripture define for us what a covenant actually is? Theologian O Palmer Robertson gives what is perhaps the best definition (and possibly also the shortest!) when he says: “*A covenant is a bond in blood, sovereignly administered.*”<sup>16</sup>

**A) A BOND:** In other words, a covenant is “an oath-bound commitment.” When we examine the more prominent human covenants in Scripture, it's clear that this aspect of *oath-bound commitment* is what is at the absolute forefront of the covenant. Indeed, it would seem that the giving of a solemn oath isn't just something that takes place in the context of a covenant, but is rather the very thing that

<sup>14</sup> These three distinct categories of human covenants, divine covenants, and covenants of renewal are set forth by O Palmer Robertson, who speaks of “covenants inaugurated by man with man, covenants inaugurated by God with man, and covenants inaugurated by man with God” (p8). Zach Keele gives these helpful sub-categories to the human covenants in *Sacred Bond*.

<sup>15</sup> As O Palmer Robertson carefully notes: “These covenant relations initiated by man with God should be understood in a context of covenant renewal. It is only on the basis of a relation previously existing that man may presume to covenant with God (cf. 2 Kings 11:17; 23:3; 2 Chronicles 29:10).” (*Christ of the Covenants*, pp8-9). Probably the best way to understand the present significance of these covenants of renewal is by thinking about our corporate times of Sabbath worship: As we gather together every week, corporately presenting ourselves before the Lord, we are renewing our covenant relationship with Him.

<sup>16</sup> Robertson's definition is found in his *Christ of the Covenants* (p4). Ligon Duncan also follows Robertson's definition in his Covenant Theology course. One thing we should note is that though this is Robertson's definition for a covenant in general, it's clear from the context that he's speaking especially of *divine covenants*. Though we can say all covenants in Scripture are “bonds in blood”; human covenants are *mutually entered into*, while it's the divine covenants that are *sovereignly administered*.

constitutes the essence of a covenant. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this is in *the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech* in Genesis 21. Here, Abimelech asks Abraham to swear to him that he would deal faithfully with him and his posterity after him (verse 23). Abraham then swears to him (verse 24); and we're told that "the two of them made a covenant" (verse 27). Then, to sum up what had just taken place, Scripture goes on to tell us in verses 31-32: "Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because there the two of them took an oath. So they made a covenant at Beersheba. . ." Another example is *the covenant between Isaac and Abimelech* in Genesis 26. Here, we're told that Abimelech comes to Isaac, saying: "Let there now be an oath between us, even between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you" (verse 28). And though we don't hear anything more in the text about a covenant, Scripture implies this is exactly what took place the next day when "they arose early and exchanged oaths" (verse 31). And we see the same thing in *the covenant between Israel and the Gibeonites* in Joshua 9. Here, the Gibeonites come to Joshua and all Israel asking them to enter into a covenant with them (vv6,11); and when Joshua and the people agree, this is how Scripture describes what happened: "Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live; and the leaders of the congregation swore an oath to them." (verse 15). And again, a few verses later, the covenant is directly equated to the oath that they "had sworn" (verse 18). From all these passages, it's clear that an oath is at the heart of a covenant. Indeed, a covenant is *an oath-bound commitment*.<sup>17</sup>

It's in light of passages such as these that theologian John Murray concludes: "When all the instances of merely human covenants are examined, it would definitely appear that the notion of sworn fidelity is thrust into prominence in these covenants. . .It is not the contractual terms that are in prominence so much as the solemn engagement of one person to another. . .It is the giving of oneself over in the commitment. . .It is the promise of unreserved fidelity, of whole-souled commitment that appears to constitute the essence of the covenant." And O Palmer Robertson writes: "Scripture would suggest not merely that a covenant generally contains an oath. Instead, it may be affirmed that a covenant *is* an oath. . .'Oath' so adequately captures the relationship achieved by 'covenant' that the terms may be interchanged (Psalm 89:3, 34f; 105:8-10)." Indeed, the oath that was taken was so much a part of the covenant that it can truly be said, "in the Bible, promise and oath are often synonyms for covenant."<sup>18</sup>

There's a beautiful illustration of this in the covenant between Israel and the Gibeonites in *Joshua 9*. The Gibeonites were a tribe of Canaanites who were living in the land of Canaan; which was the land that God had promised to give to Israel—and was commanding them to go in and possess. Well, the Gibeonites got word that Israel was coming. They had heard all about the Lord; they knew Israel was coming to take possession of the land; and they realized they didn't stand a chance against them. So, they came up with a plan. A few of them traveled down the road to where Joshua and Israel had set up camp. And when they came to them, they pretended to live in a far away land, and asked Joshua and all Israel to enter into a covenant with them. Joshua and the people forget to ask the Lord about it; and so they agree and make a covenant with these Gibeonites—*an oath-bound commitment of total fidelity*. It's three days later they find out the truth, that the Gibeonites were actually living in the land. But at that point there was nothing they could do, because they had already given their word. There was no going back now. So when the people grumble about it, Joshua and the leaders of Israel say in response: "We have sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel, and now we cannot touch them." They even go on to say: "This we will do to them, even let them live, *so that wrath will not be upon us for the oath which we swore to them.*" (vv19-20). Once you make a covenant, there's no going back.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The phrase "oath-bound commitment" comes from Ligon Duncan's *Covenant Theology* course. We could also reference a few other examples that highlight the fact that a covenant was, in its essence, a solemn oath. We see the same truth in the covenant between Laban and Jacob in Genesis 31:44,53; as well as in that between Jonathan and David in 1 Samuel 20:16-17.

<sup>18</sup> The last quote is from Zach Keele's *Sacred Bond*. Murray's quote is from his pamphlet, *The Covenant of Grace*. He's reacting to the notion that a covenant is merely a pact or agreement; he argues it's much more—a wholehearted commitment of relational fidelity. Robertson likewise notes: "While the divine covenants invariably involve obligations, their ultimate purpose reaches beyond the guaranteed discharge of a duty. Instead, it is the personal interrelation of God with his people that is at the heart of the covenant." (p5). And again, he writes: "The prominence of oaths and signs in the divine covenants underlines the fact that a covenant in its essence is a bond. . .In several passages of Scripture the integral relation of the oath to the covenant is brought out most clearly by a parallelism of construction (Deuteronomy 29:12; 2 Kings 11:4; 1 Chronicles 16:16; Psalm 105:9; 89:3-4; Ezekiel 17:19). In these cases, the oath interchanges with the covenant, and the covenant with the oath. This closeness of relationship between oath and covenant emphasizes that a covenant in its essence is a bond." (pp6-7). Along with the passages already quoted, we could also reference Genesis 9:11 with Isaiah 54:9; 2 Samuel 7 with Acts 2:30; and Luke 1:72-73.

<sup>19</sup> Ligon Duncan gives this illustration in his course on *Covenant Theology*. He also goes on to draw out the implications of

This is a solemn thing—and it's also a precious thing as we think about what this means for us as God's covenant people. Old Testament scholar J. Alec Motyer sums it up beautifully when he writes: “The covenant idea in the Old Testament can be very simply expressed in the words *God makes and keeps promises.*” How do we know that God will continue to be faithful to us in the midst of all our sin and failure? How can we be sure He won't get fed up with us and cast us away? Because of His covenant promises: When God enters into covenant with us, He's binding himself with a solemn oath to be our God. What we're going to see as we continue our study is that at the heart of God's covenant with His people are solemn promises He's sworn to uphold; and when He makes promises, He keeps them.<sup>20</sup>

**B) A Bond IN BLOOD:** So, a covenant is the giving of a solemn oath; an oath-bound commitment. But as we examine the Scriptures, what we're going to find is that it's also more than that. A covenant is the kind of oath that carries life and death consequences. Life or death was at stake in a covenant. This is why we say that a covenant is “a bond *in blood.*” It's not just an oath—it's a *blood-bound oath.*

We can see this even in the terminology that's used for “making a covenant” in the Hebrew language. In Scripture, the English phrase “to make a covenant” is literally in Hebrew, “*to cut a covenant.*” And though other Hebrew phrases can also be used for God's covenant dealings (see chart below), it seems that this phrase, *to cut a covenant*, is consistently used for the *inauguration* of a covenant relationship. When God first made a covenant, He literally *cut* a covenant. And this phrase, “to cut a covenant,” vividly describes what would happen when a covenant was inaugurated. Both in extra-biblical sources, as well as in the Scriptures themselves, we have accounts of covenants ceremonies. And what would happen in covenant ceremonies is that animals were slaughtered and then *cut into pieces.* Those who were entering into a covenant would then symbolically walk between the pieces of the slain animals. What was the significance? “By walking between the pieces, they were taking what is known as a *self-maledictory oath.* . . In other words, 'Be it done to us, as we have done to these animals if we are not faithful to our commitments that we have made to you in the covenant. Slaughter us. . . just like we have slaughtered these animals, if we break our commitments that we have made in the covenant.’”<sup>21</sup>

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this oath even 400 years later, during the time of David, in a passage recorded in 2 Samuel 21. At this time, there is a famine in the land of Israel for three years in a row; so David goes about seeking the presence of the Lord as to why it was happening. When he does so, God tells David that the reason for the famine is that Saul had put some of the Gibeonites to death during the course of his bloody reign (verse 1). What this tells us is that even 400 years later—God still hadn't forgotten the oath.

<sup>20</sup> Alec Motyer's quote is from his article, *Covenant and Promise*, Part 1 (Evangel, January, 1983). Witsius says: “God, by this covenant, acquires no new right over man. . . Because God is the blessed, and self-sufficient Being. . . But man. . . does acquire [the] right to demand of God the promise; for God has, by his promises, made himself a debtor to man. Or, to speak in a manner more becoming [of] God, he was pleased to make his performing his promises, a debt due to himself, to his goodness, justice, and veracity. And to man in covenant, and continuing steadfast to it, he granted the right of expecting and requiring, that God should satisfy the demands of his goodness, justice, and truth, by the performance of the promises.” (Volume 1, p48).

<sup>21</sup> The quote is from Ligon Duncan, *Covenant Theology*. O Palmer Robertson notes here: “Particularly striking is the fact that the verb *to cut* may stand by itself and still clearly mean *to cut a covenant* (cf. 1Sam.11:1,2; 20:16; 22:8; 1Kings 8:9; 2Chron.7:18; Ps.105:9; Hag.2:5). This usage indicates just how essentially the concept of *cutting* had come to be related to the covenant idea in Scripture.” (p9). And again: “As the covenant is made, animals are 'cut' in ritual ceremony. The most obvious example of this procedure in Scripture is found in Genesis 15, at the time of the making of the Abrahamic covenant. First Abraham divides a series of animals and lays the pieces over against one another. Then a symbolic representation of God passes between the divided pieces of animals. The result is the 'making' or 'cutting' of a covenant. What is the meaning of this division of animals at the point of covenantal inauguration? Both biblical and extra-biblical evidence combine to confirm a specific significance for this ritual. The animal-division symbolizes a 'pledge to the death' at the point of covenant commitment. The dismembered animals represent the curse that the covenant-maker calls down on himself if he should violate the commitment which he has made. . . It is in this context of covenant inauguration that the biblical phrase 'to cut a covenant' is to be understood. Integral to the very terminology which describes the establishment of a covenantal relationship is the concept of a pledge to life and death. A covenant is indeed a 'bond in blood,' or a bond of life and death.” (*Christ of the Covenants*, pp9-10). Nor is this notion an idea invented by more modern thinkers. Long ago, Thomas Boston noted: “It was an ancient custom, in making of covenants, to cut a beast in twain, and to pass between the parts of it; and that passing between the parts, respected the falling of the curse of the covenant upon the breaker: Jeremiah 34:18, ' . . I will make the men that have transgressed my covenant—the calf which they cut in twain, and passed between the parts thereof; that is, I will make them as that calf which they cut in twain; I will execute the curse on them, cutting them asunder as covenant-breakers (Matthew 24:51).” (*View of the Covenant of Grace*, pp60-61). And Witsius had written: “Making a covenant, the Hebrews call, *karat berith*, 'to strike a covenant'. . . Which doubtless took its rise from the ancient ceremony of slaying animals, by which covenants were ratified. Of which rite we observe very ancient traces (Genesis 15:9-10). . . They also used to pass in the middle between the divided parts of the victim cut asunder (Jeremiah 34:18). . . Nor were these rites without their significancy. The cutting of the animals asunder, denoted, that, in the same manner, the perjured and covenant breakers should be cut asunder, by the vengeance of God. And to this purpose is what God says [in] Jeremiah 34:18-20: 'And I will give the men that have transgressed

## THE OLD TESTAMENT HEBREW VERBS USED IN CONJUNCTION WITH COVENANT

HEBREW VERB	ENGLISH TRANSLATION	EXAMPLE PASSAGES	SIGNIFICANCE
<i>karat</i>	To MAKE ( <i>literally, to CUT</i> ) a covenant	Gen.15:18; 21:27,32; 26:28; 31:44; Exod.24:8; 34:10; Deut.5:2; 2 Chron.21:7; Ps.89:3; Is.55:3; 61:8; Jer.31:31,32,33; 32:40; 34:13; Ezek.34:25; 37:26	Seems to signify the <i>Inauguration</i> of a covenant
<i>qum</i>	To ESTABLISH or CONFIRM a covenant	Gen.6:18; 9:9,11,17; 17:7,19,21; Exod.6:4; Lev.26:9; Deut.8:18; Ezek.16:60,62	Seems to signify the <i>Confirmation</i> of a covenant
<i>natan</i>	To GIVE a covenant	Genesis 9:12; 17:2; Numbers 25:12	

We see one example of this in *Jeremiah 34:1-22*. Here in this passage, the Babylonians had come up against Jerusalem to capture it; and the people in the city are terrified. Many of them had been living lives that didn't honor the Lord, but suddenly the people decide they want to follow God. One of the ways that they had been violating God's Word had to do with keeping their Hebrew slaves. The Law permitted them to do so for six years—and no more—but many of the people had been keeping them for much longer; so when the Babylonians come up against the city, the people decide to let them go. They come to the temple and make a solemn covenant before God (verse 15); and as they do so, they slaughter animals and pass between the pieces, telling God that they would be faithful to do what they had said (vv8-10,18). But what happens? The Babylonians go away. And when they do, the people remember that life is hard without their slaves; so they take their slaves back, breaking their word with God (vv10-11,15-16). And Jeremiah comes to them with this message: Do you not remember those animals which you slaughtered and walked between the pieces? God is going to make you like one of them, and the birds of the air are going to feast on your dead bodies; because you have broken your covenant with God (vv17-20). Indeed, a covenant is a life and death commitment—a bond *in blood*.<sup>22</sup>

There's another example in *Genesis 15:7-21*. Here, God had promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham and to his descendants after him. But when Abraham asks for some kind of confirmation, the Lord tells him to bring a heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtle-dove, and a pigeon. Abraham cuts them in two, laying the pieces opposite of each other; and we read in verse 17: "It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land. . ." (vv17-18). It's the same covenant ceremony with the self-maledictory oath; but in this case, it's not Abraham—but God himself who passes between the pieces. Abraham had actually fallen asleep (verse 12)! It's God, and Him alone, who takes the solemn vow. When Abraham asks, "*How do I know?*" God tells him, in effect, "*It's this certain.*" And it's so certain that the Lord uses *the past tense*: "To your descendants *I have* given this land" (verse 18); because in making this covenant, God was taking upon himself the blood-bound oath, calling down upon himself the curses of the covenant if He fails to make good on His word: "By this action. . .the Lord assumes to himself the full responsibility for seeing that every promise of the covenant shall be realized." And friends, this is exactly how certain every one of the promises are that God has made to us in Christ.<sup>23</sup>

my covenant, which have not performed the words of the covenant, which they had made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof. I will even give them into the hands of their enemies, and their dead bodies shall be for meat unto the fowls of the heaven, and to the beasts of the earth'. . .But when God in the solemnities of his covenants with men, thought proper to use these, or the like rites, the significancy was still more noble and divine. They who made covenant with God by sacrifice, not only submitted to punishment, if impiously revolting from God, they slighted His covenant; but God likewise signified to them, that all the stability of the covenant of grace was founded on the sacrifice of Christ, and that the soul and body of Christ were one day to be violently separated asunder. All the promises of God in him are yea, and in him amen (2 Corinthians 1:20). His blood is the blood of the New Testament (Matthew 26:28), in a far more excellent manner than that, with which Moses sprinkled both the altar and the people [who] entered into covenant (Exodus 24:8)." (V1, pp43-45).

<sup>22</sup> Example taken from Ligon Duncan, *Covenant Theology*.

<sup>23</sup> The quote is from Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, p145. He describes it in this way: "Contrary to what might be expected, Abraham does not pass between the divided pieces representing the covenantal curse of self-malediction. The Lord of the covenant does not require that his servant take to himself the self-maledictory oath. Only God himself passes between the pieces. . .It is not that Abraham has no obligations in the covenant relation. . .But as the covenant is instituted formally in Genesis 15, the Lord dramatizes the gracious character of the covenantal relation by having himself alone to pass between the pieces. This covenant shall be fulfilled because God assumes to himself full responsibility in seeing to its realization." (p145). And Alec Motyer says: "[N]otice that in this ceremony, which now centers upon these slaughtered animals, God is the sole agent. 'A deep sleep fell upon Abraham' (15:12). He is immobilized in order that God might be the only one active in this situation. When Abraham was so immobilized and when the sun had gone down a furnace that smoked and flashed passed

*C) A Bond in Blood, SOVEREIGNLY ADMINISTERED:* This is the last part of the definition for a covenant. In our survey of human covenants, we learned that a covenant is an oath; and in our brief study of the covenant ceremonies in Genesis 15 and Jeremiah 34, we saw that it's not just an oath, but a blood-bound oath. So far, so good. But when it comes to the covenants that God makes with man, there's also one more aspect that we need to include. *Divine covenants are sovereignly administered.*

What does that mean? It means, first of all, that *it's God alone who initiates His covenant with man.* It's not man who chooses to enter into covenant with God. Nor is it a mutual agreement, as it is in the case of human covenants. Rather, in divine covenants, God alone establishes His covenant with those whom He chooses. We see this in *God's covenant with Noah*, where the Lord comes to him and tells him that He's going to destroy the earth; and He says to Noah: "But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife, and your sons' wives with you. . ." (Genesis 6:18). It's not Noah who chooses to establish this covenant with God; rather, it's God who draws near to Noah and enters into this covenant with him, for his own salvation, and the salvation of his household. God is the One who initiates the covenant. And it's the same thing in *God's covenant with Abraham*, for it's the Lord who comes to him in Genesis 12, telling him to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's house, for the land that He would show him (vv1-3). It's not Abraham who initiates this covenant with God, but God who initiates the covenant with Abraham. Old Testament scholar Alec Motyer sums it up well when he says: "The covenant men were what they were because God chose them to be so. . .What happened to Noah and Abraham happened by divine decision."<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, *it's God alone who sets the terms of His covenant with man.* In other words, God alone is the One who decides what He is requiring in the covenant, and what He is promising in the covenant. When God established *His covenant with Noah*, He didn't ask for suggestions; nor did He leave any room for negotiations. He simply came to him and told him: "This is how it's going to be." Again, it was the same way in *His covenant with Abraham*. The Lord sovereignly imposes both the promises and the requirements: Abraham is to leave behind everything he knows and journey to the land which God would show him; that was the requirement. There were also promises that were set before him: God would make him a great nation; and bless him; He would make his name great; and bless all the families of the earth through him. But Abraham has no say in any of it; it's God who sets the terms.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. The ELEMENTS of biblical covenants:

Often, in biblical covenants (both human and divine) there were certain elements that were connected with the making of the covenant. Probably the best example we have to help us understand this today is a wedding ceremony. At the heart of the wedding is *the marriage covenant*—the solemn oath-bound

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between these pieces (15:17). To pass between the severed pieces was the taking of a very vivid and terrible oath: 'So may it be done to me if this oath is broken.' God alone passes between these severed pieces. Not only does Abraham not pass, but he is disallowed from passing. God takes upon himself the total obligation of the covenant." (Motyer, *Covenant and Promise*).

<sup>24</sup> As you might guess, the fact that God initiates His covenant with those whom He chooses leads us inevitably to the doctrine of election; the truth that God chooses those whom He saves (rather than the other way around). This is what Motyer was saying as well; his full quote comes in the context of declaring that Noah and Abraham were "*The objects of divine election*: The covenant men were what they were because God chose them to be so. Noah was the man immersed in the world's corruption until grace found Noah. Abraham was the man to whom God said, 'I brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees.' What happened to Noah and Abraham happened by divine decision." (*Covenant and Promise*). Roberts says: "God alone is the author of the covenant; and His free grace or favor, is the only inward impulsive, or moving cause why He makes a covenant with His people. It's His gratuitous agreement with them. God is a most free agent, and works all things according to the counsel and good pleasure of His own will. It is an act of His grace and mercy to make covenant with His people; but having made a covenant with them, it is an act of His justice, truth and faithfulness to make good and perform covenant. God freely makes himself our debtor, by covenanting. . ." (p15). And Boston draws out how each member of the Trinity is at work in this sovereign administration: "All hands of the glorious Trinity are at work in this building. The Father chose the objects of mercy, and gave them to the Son to be redeemed; the Son purchased redemption for them; and the Holy Ghost applies the purchased redemption unto them. But it is specially attributed to the Son, on the account of his singular agency in the work: Zechariah 6:12, 'Behold, the man whose name is the Branch—He shall build the temple of the Lord'" (*Covenant of Grace*, p2).

<sup>25</sup> As O Palmer Robertson writes: "A long history has marked the analysis of the covenants in terms of mutual compacts or contracts. But recent scholarship has established rather certainly the sovereign character of the administration of the divine covenants in Scripture. . .The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth dictates the terms of his covenant. The successive covenants of Scripture may emphasize either promissory or legal aspects. But this point of emphasis does not alter the basic character of covenantal administration. Whatever may be the distinctive substance of a particular covenant, the mode of administration remains constant. A covenant is a bond in blood sovereignly administered." (*Christ of the Covenants*, p15).

vows that are exchanged between husband and wife. But there are often other elements that go along with the wedding as well. For instance, these oath-bound vows, which we just mentioned, usually take place in the context of a *marriage ceremony*. And in the context of the marriage ceremony there is (at least in the west) the symbolic giving of rings, which function as *covenant signs*—tokens of the marriage covenant. Often, the ceremony is also connected with the giving of a feast—the guests are summoned to partake together of what you could call a *covenant meal*. And just as these elements are included as part of the wedding, biblical covenants often include similar elements in the making of a covenant.

*A) A covenant was at times accompanied by a covenant CEREMONY:* This is what we described in the passages from Genesis 15 and Jeremiah 34, where the animals were slain and cut into pieces, and those who were making the covenant passed between the parts. It served as a visible representation of the oath that they were taking: “May what has happened to these animals also happen to me if I don't make good on my promise.” We've already talked about the significance of the ceremony and how it served to show that a covenant was a bond *in blood*. But here we can note that though the ceremony was a stark reminder of what a covenant oath really was, it wasn't something that was truly essential for the making of a covenant. It wasn't the ceremony that was the heart of the covenant, but the oath.<sup>26</sup>

*B) A covenant was often accompanied by a covenant MEAL:* Earlier we referenced the covenant that Isaac and Abimelech made with each other in *Genesis 26*. In this passage, Abimelech and his advisor come to Isaac, saying: “We see plainly that the Lord has been with you; so we said, 'Let there now be an oath between us, even between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you. . .’” (26:28). And we read of Isaac's response in verses 30-31: “Then he made them a feast, and they ate and drank. In the morning they arose early and exchanged oaths, then Isaac sent them away and they departed from him in peace.” As we've seen, the oath is the heart of the covenant. But this feast that Isaac prepares for Abimelech also plays a significant role in this covenant between them, because what they're doing is sitting down to partake of a covenant meal. We see the same thing in the covenant between Jacob and Laban in *Genesis 31*. When Jacob tries to get away from his father-in-law, Laban goes after him and overtakes him in the hill country. After they both argue their cases, Laban proposes they make a covenant. And when they do, this is what we read in verses 53-54: “So Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac. Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain.” Here again, what we see is a covenant meal.<sup>27</sup>

*C) A covenant could be accompanied by a covenant SIGN:* In the context of the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech in *Genesis 21*, we're told that Abraham takes seven ewe lambs of the flock and sets them aside by themselves. When Abimelech asks about them, Abraham says to him: “You shall take these seven ewe lambs from my hand so that it may be a witness to me, that I dug this well.” (verse 30). In other words, these ewe lambs were functioning as signs of the covenant between them. We see another example once again in the covenant between Jacob and Laban in *Genesis 31*. For in the context of this covenant, Jacob gathers stones together and makes them into a heap (vv45-46), and

<sup>26</sup> A covenant was always an oath, but a covenant oath didn't always include a ceremony. As Zach Keele says, “There is more to the covenant ceremonies than just the cutting of animals. Clearly, the verbal oath-taking of the parties was the central part.”

<sup>27</sup> We've mentioned only examples of human covenants here, but we could also think of the Passover (Exodus 12) and the meal which Moses and the elders ate before the Lord (Exodus 24:9-11) as examples of covenant meals in the context of divine covenants. Zach Keele notes: “A common gesture was a shared meal between the parties who made the covenant. Often, they ate the animals cut in the covenant ceremony. Such a meal was reflective of their committed relationship.” (*Sacred Bond*). And Witsius says: “It was likewise a custom, that agreements and compacts were ratified by solemn feasts. Examples of which are obvious in Scripture. Thus Isaac, having made a covenant with Abimelech, is said to have made a great feast, and to have eat[en] with them (Genesis 26:30). In like manner acted his son Jacob, after having made a covenant with Laban (Genesis 31:54). We read of a like federal feast (2 Samuel 3:20), where a relation is given of the feast which David made for Abner and his attendants, who came to make a covenant with him in the name of the people. . . These feasts were tokens of a sincere and lasting friendship. But when God in the solemnities of his covenants with men, thought proper to use these, or the like rites, the significancy was still more noble and divine. . . Those sacred banquets, to which the covenanted were admitted before the Lord, especially that instituted by the Lord Jesus, under the New Testament, do most effectually seal or ratify that intimate communion and fellowship there is between Christ and believers.” (*Economy of the Covenants*, VI, pp44-45). As Witsius here implies, *the Lord's Supper* is to be understood as a covenant meal—indeed, it is *the covenant meal* of the New Testament church. When we partake of the Lord's Supper, we're eating a covenant meal before the Lord. And each time we partake of the Lord's Supper, the Lord is renewing His covenant promises to us. He wants us to know that His promises are just as real as the bread and wine we can smell and taste. Further, every time we partake of the Lord's Supper, we're also pointed to the greatest covenant meal, still yet to come—an eternal feast—the marriage supper of the Lamb (Isaiah 25:6-8; Revelation 19:6-9).

Laban says: “This heap is a witness between you and me this day. . .” (verse 48). And Laban repeats these words again, saying: “Behold this heap and behold the pillar. . .This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass by this heap to you for harm, and you will not pass by this heap and this pillar to me, for harm.” (vv51-52). Again, the heap of stones was functioning as a sign of the covenant. And it's the same thing in the covenant that Joshua makes with all the people in *Joshua 24*. Here, Joshua urges Israel to serve the Lord, and when they assure him they will, Scripture tells us: “So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day. . .And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. Joshua said to all the people, 'Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, so that you do not deny your God.'” (vv25-27). Again, the stone Joshua set up functioned as a covenant sign.

And these covenant signs also serve an important role in *divine covenants*. When God establishes the covenant with Noah and his sons in *Genesis 9*, for example, He sets the rainbow in the clouds as “the sign of the covenant” He was making with them (9:12,13,17). The rainbow was *the sign* of the Noahic Covenant. And in the same way, when God comes to Abraham to confirm His covenant with him in *Genesis 17*, He gives circumcision as “the sign of the covenant” between them (17:11). Circumcision was thus *the sign* of the Abrahamic Covenant. And later, in the context of His covenant with Israel at Sinai, it seems that the Lord also institutes the Sabbath as *the sign* of the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Exodus 31:12-17). What's the function of these signs? When it comes to the divine covenants, these signs are meant, first of all, *to give assurance to God's people*. As one put it: “covenant signs declare covenant promises to covenant people. [They're] a token and guarantee of the word of God.” The reason God set the rainbow in the clouds was to remind Noah and his sons of the promise He had made to them. Earlier we mentioned that our sacraments are founded on the reality of covenant signs: Baptism and the Lord's Supper are tangible pictures of God's covenant promises to His people. They're meant to remind us of the promises God has bound himself to uphold. God's covenant signs are also meant *to exhibit consecration to the world*. When Abraham received the sign of circumcision, not only did it remind him of God's promises, but it forever marked him as a man who was now set apart, belonging to the Lord. So it is again with our sacraments: Baptism is a statement of allegiance. And Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:16 that when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the gospel to the world.<sup>28</sup>

**SUMMARY:** So then, these are the primary elements involved in the making of a covenant. But we should note here that though a covenant could certainly include all these elements, it wasn't necessary for all these things to be present in order for a covenant to be established. This is true in the realm of *human covenants*, for there's neither a ceremony nor a meal in the covenant that takes place between Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 21); there's neither a ceremony nor a sign in the covenant between Isaac and Abimelech (Genesis 26); and there's no ceremony recorded in the covenant between Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31). It's also true of *divine covenants*, as there's no ceremony recorded in God's covenants with Noah or David; there's no meal that takes place in God's covenants with Noah, David, or Abraham; and there's no sign that we're told about in the context of God's covenant with David.<sup>29</sup>

#### IV. An Overview of Covenant Theology

Covenant Theology is structured around two distinct covenants that God establishes with man: The first is the *Covenant of Works*, which God established with Adam, together with all who came from him; the second is the *Covenant of Grace*, which God establishes with Christ, together with all who belong to Him.

<sup>28</sup> The quote is from Alec Motyer, *Covenant and Promise*. On covenant signs and assurance, Ligon Duncan says: “When we waver in our faith, about the purposes of God towards us, what has God given us to be strengthened in assurance? The signs of the covenant: Communion, The Lord's Supper, the covenant meal; and Baptism, which we see administered from time after time, reminding us of God's initiative for us.” And on the covenant signs as consecration, Alec Motyer notes: “Abraham cannot look at the mark of circumcision and glory in the promises without at the same time being reminded over and over again in his commitment to God — 'Walk before me and be thou perfect.' ” (*Covenant and Promise*). And Ligon Duncan says: “this sign serves—not only to assure the believer, but it serves a witness function, to show the world whose you are.”

<sup>29</sup> As Zach Keele notes: “It is necessary to remember that, even though these covenant ceremonies had numerous common elements, they were still flexible. Parts could be added, subtracted, or fashioned to fit the specific relationship and occasion. We should not impute a false rigidity to the ceremonies, for the form and ceremony of the covenant matched the relationship. . . .Both marriage and international treaties are covenants; however, the forms of these covenants differ.” (*Sacred Bond*).

## 1. The Covenant of WORKS:

*The Covenant of Works* refers to the covenant relationship that God entered into with Adam in the garden before the fall. We read in Genesis 2:16-17: “The Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’” God was giving Adam a very specific command. His obedience would have meant life, but his disobedience would result in death.

This relationship that God initiated with Adam is called the *Covenant of Works*, because, as we’ll see, it was a *covenantal relationship*; and because the condition of this covenantal relationship with Adam was *his works*; that is, God was requiring of Adam perfect obedience to the command He had given. The Westminster Shorter Catechism describes it this way: “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 the pain of death.” This is the Covenant of Works.<sup>30</sup>

One thing that’s vital for us to understand about the Covenant of Works is the relationship that Adam shared with the entire human race who would descend from him. Though God’s command was given only to Adam, at the same time, Adam served as a representative for the entire human race. Indeed, the destiny of all humanity hinged on Adam’s obedience or disobedience. Scripture makes this clear in passages such as Romans 5:12-21. Had Adam obeyed, it would have meant life not only for him—but for all humanity; and in the same way, when he disobeyed, he brought ruin and death upon us all.

## 2. The Covenant of GRACE:

After Adam had fallen into sin in the garden, and all men with him, the Lord drew near to Adam and entered into a very different kind of covenant with him. Beginning with the promise of Genesis 3:15, God entered into a covenant of grace with fallen man. In the Covenant of Works, God had entered into a covenant with *sinless man* that was based on *human obedience*. But now, in the *Covenant of Grace*, wonder of wonders, God enters into a covenant with *fallen man* that is based on *divine grace*.

*The Covenant of Grace* is set forth in The Westminster Confession of Faith in this way: “Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.”<sup>31</sup>

Genesis 3:15 contains the first promise that Scripture makes of the coming of the Savior. Satan had triumphed; mankind had fallen. But that wouldn’t be the last word. God would send a Redeemer to save His people from their sins. A seed would come from the woman who would crush the serpent. God would act. *Ruin* had come through one man. But *redemption* would come through Another. And through God’s covenants with *Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David*, the Lord continues to expand on this promise more and more. These covenants aren’t to be understood as separate dispensations, but as progressive stages of one single, overarching covenant—the *Covenant of Grace*. And with each new stage, we come to learn more about the Savior and the salvation He would win for His people.

So, in its essence, the Covenant of Grace is really just another name for *the gospel*. God’s covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, teach us about *the gospel*. Through *pictures, prophecies, and promises*, these covenants point us forward to Christ and the salvation He would accomplish for His people. And with the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant, those *pictures* become *a reality*, and those *promises* find *their fulfillment*. In the Covenant of Grace, God would do so much more than make salvation *possible* for us again—He would make it *certain*. In the Covenant of Grace, God redeems sinners—and He does it by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> This is from the Westminster Shorter Catechism, *Question #12*. The Covenant of Works is also known by other names, such as the Covenant of Life, the Covenant of Nature, the Edenic Covenant, and the Covenant of Creation. There are some who deny that what took place with Adam was truly a covenant, but we’ll talk more about that in the next lesson of our study.

<sup>31</sup> From *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 7.3.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Boston writes: “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, beholding a lost world, his

### 3. The Covenant of REDEMPTION:

Though the *Covenant of Grace* comes after the *Covenant of Works* chronologically, Scripture makes it clear that God's plan of salvation was set in place long before the creation of the world. For indeed, before the earth's foundation, and even from all eternity, the Godhead of the Trinity, foreseeing and ordaining the fall of Adam, was pleased to construct a plan of redemption in which the Father would send the Son into the world to redeem for himself, through the working of the Holy Spirit, particular individuals among Adam's fallen race. This rescue plan is often called the *Covenant of Redemption*.<sup>33</sup>

Where do we see it in Scripture? *First*, we're told that God's plan to redeem a people for himself was put into place before the creation of the world. Ephesians 1:3-4 says: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . .[who] chose us in Him before the foundation of the world. . ." (cf. 3:9-11; 2 Timothy 1:9). *Secondly*, Scripture tells us that the Father commissioned the Son with a special task; the task of accomplishing redemption for His people. Christ is constantly testifying of the fact that the Father sent Him into the world to accomplish a particular work. He says in John 6:38: "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." And again He testifies in John 10:18, saying: "I have authority to lay [my life] down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father." And in John 17:4, as Jesus prays to the Father, He says: "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do." *Thirdly*, Scripture tells us that the Father had promised to give the Son a particular people—the same people He was sent to redeem. In Psalm 2, we read of a sacred exchange that took place in eternity past between the Father and the Son: "I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He [the Father] said to Me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession.'" (vv7-8). And Jesus speaks of a people that the Father had given Him when He says in John 6:39: "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day." Christ also prays again to the Father in John 17:6, saying: "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word."<sup>34</sup>

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mercy seeks a vent. . ." (*View of the Covenant of Grace*, p5). And: "The foundation on which the building of mercy stands, is a covenant, a divine covenant, a sure one. The first building for man's happiness was a building of bounty and goodness, but not of mercy; for man was not in misery, when it was a-rearing up. And it was founded on a covenant too; namely, on the covenant of works, made with the first Adam; but he broke the covenant, and the whole building tumbled down in an instant. But this is another covenant, and of another nature. . .The revelation, promulgation, and offer made unto the sons of men, of *this* covenant which lay hid in the depths of the eternal counsel, is called *the gospel*. . ." (p4). Again: "The design of this covenant was life, the most valuable interest of mankind. . .The first covenant was a covenant of life too; but there is this difference, to wit, that the first was for life in perfection to upright man having life before; the second, for life in perfection to sinful man legally and morally dead." (p7). And Boston writes: "He taketh not hold of angels, but of the seed of Abraham he taketh hold' (Hebrews 2:16). The original word signifies to take hold of a thing running away, or falling down; and in the same manner of construction, it is used of Christ's catching hold of Peter sinking in the water (Matthew 14:31). Fallen angels and men were both run away from God, and sinking in the sea of his wrath; and Christ, with the bond of the covenant, takes hold of men; but not of the fallen angels; them he leaves to sink unto the bottom. All the seed of Adam was sinking, as well as the seed of Abraham, which is but a part of the seed of Adam, even some of all mankind; but Christ is not said to have taken hold of *the seed of Adam*, that is, all mankind; but of *the seed of Abraham*, that is, all the elect, or the spiritual Israel, called the house of Jacob, (Luke 1:33)." (p28). Again: "God planted Adam a noble vine, made him as a green tree full of sap, for bringing forth all fruits of holiness; but breaking the first covenant, he and all mankind in him withered and died, under the curse; upon which ensued an absolute barrenness, that no fruit of holiness could be expected from them more. But the second Adam having engaged to satisfy the law, by bearing the curse; there was thereupon made a promise of raising them up again. . ." (p145).

<sup>33</sup> Historically known as the *Pactum Salutis*, it's also sometimes referred to as *the Eternal Covenant*, or the *Counsel of Peace*. Berkhof notes: "The name 'counsel of peace' is derived from Zechariah 6:13. Cocceius and others found in this passage a reference to an agreement between the Father and the Son. This was clearly a mistake, for the words refer to the union of the kingly and priestly offices in the Messiah. The Scriptural character of the name cannot be maintained, but this, of course, does not detract from the reality of the counsel of peace." And Packer says: "Scripture is explicit on the fact that from eternity, in light of human sin foreseen, a specific agreement existed between the Father and the Son that they would exalt each other in the following way: the Father would honor the Son by sending him to save lost sinners through a penal self-sacrifice leading to a cosmic reign in which the central activity would be the imparting to sinners through the Holy Spirit of the redemption He won for them; and the Son would honor the Father by becoming the Father's love-gift to sinners and by leading them through the Spirit to trust, love and glorify the Father on the model of His own obedience to the Father's will." (Witsius' *Introduction*).

<sup>34</sup> Packer notes: "All Jesus' references to His purpose in the world as the doing of His Father's will, and to His actual words and works as obedience to His Father's command. . .all His further references to His being sent by the Father into the world to perform a specific task. . .and all His references to the Father 'giving' Him particular persons to save, and to His acceptance

*So, to summarize:* Before the foundation of the world, and long before Adam sinned in the garden, God had constructed a plan of salvation. The Father was delighted to set apart particular individuals to redeem for himself from every tribe and tongue and nation under heaven; and He promised them to the Son. The Father would send the Son into the world for them; the Son would lay down His life for them; and the Spirit would draw each and every one of them to the Son, according to the Father's promise. This is what theologians call the *Covenant of Redemption*. How does it fit together with the Covenant of Grace? *Before the foundation of the world*, God planned to redeem a particular people; that's the Covenant of Redemption. *After the fall*, God began putting this plan into action, redeeming sinners like Adam and Eve, Noah and Abraham, Joseph and Moses and David; that's the Covenant of Grace. In other words, the Covenant of Redemption is the foundation of the Covenant of Grace; and in the same way, the Covenant of Grace is the practical outworking of the Covenant of Redemption.<sup>35</sup>

What Scripture clearly affirms is that long before the creation of the world, God had constructed this plan of redemption. What's not as clear is if this arrangement between the persons of the Trinity can properly be called *a covenant*. And though there's agreement as to how this Covenant of Redemption relates to the Covenant of Grace in general terms, it's also not entirely agreed upon how it is that they relate to one another more specifically. Some take the Covenant of Redemption as being something quite distinct from the Covenant of Grace, contending that the first of these was a covenant which was made between the persons of the Trinity, whereas the second is made between God and man. Others contend that the Covenant of Redemption isn't separate at all, but is rather one and the same with the Covenant of Grace. According to this view, the Covenant of Redemption is simply Jesus' unique task as the head and representative of the Covenant of Grace. In other words, as the Covenant of Works was made with Adam, and in and through him extended also to his posterity, so too, the Covenant of Grace is made with Christ as the head of all who belong to Him. But whether we see the Covenant of Redemption as being *distinct from* the Covenant of Grace or as *part of* the Covenant of Grace, there are some sweet applications for us as we meditate on the implications of God's plan of redemption.<sup>36</sup>

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of the task of rescuing them from perishing. . . are so many testimonies to the reality of the covenant of redemption." (Witsius' *Introduction*). Witsius says: "The Scriptures present the Father, in the economy of our salvation, as demanding the obedience of the Son even unto death; and upon condition of that obedience, promising him in his turn that name which is above every name, even that he should be the head of the elect in glory; but the Son, as presenting himself to do the will of the Father. . . When we have clearly demonstrated all these particulars from Scripture, it cannot, on any pretense be denied, that there is a compact between the Father and the Son, which is the foundation of our salvation." (V1, p166). Witsius also distinguishes three stages in the Covenant of Redemption: "I consider three periods, as it were, of this covenant. *Its commencement* was in the eternal counsel of the adorable Trinity; in which the Son of God was constituted by the Father, with the approbation of the Holy Spirit, the Savior of mankind; on this condition, that in the fullness of time he should be made of a woman, and made under the Law; which the Son undertook to perform. Peter has a view to this when he says [in] 1 Peter 1:20, that Christ 'was foreordained before the foundation of the world.' To this purpose is also what the supreme Wisdom testifies concerning itself [in] Proverbs 8:23, I was set up (anointed) from everlasting; that is, by my own and the will of my Father, which is one and the same, I was appointed to the performance of the mediatorial office in time. Paul likewise declares, that 'we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world,' (Ephesians 1:4). And consequently, Christ himself was constituted from everlasting the head of those that were to be saved, and they were given unto him (John 17:6) for whom he was to merit salvation, and in whom he was to be glorified and admired. From this constitution, the Son, from everlasting, bore a peculiar relation to those that were to be saved. Hence the book of life is especially appropriated to the Lamb (Revelation 13:8) as containing a description of the peculiar people assigned to the Lamb from all eternity. . . *The second period of this covenant* I place in that intercession of Christ, by which, immediately upon the fall of man, he offered himself to God, now offended, in order actually to perform those things, to which he had engaged himself from eternity; saying, thou hast given them to me, and I will make satisfaction for them; and so he made way for the word of grace to be declared to, and the covenant of grace to be made with them. Thus Christ was actually constituted Mediator, and revealed as such immediately upon the fall. . . *The third period of this covenant* is that, when on his assuming human nature he suffered his ears to be bored (compare Psalm 40:7 with Hebrews 10:5) that is, engaged himself as a voluntary servant to God, from love to his Lord the Father, and to his spouse the church, and his spiritual children (for the ears of such voluntary servants were bored, Exodus 21:5-6), 'was made under the law,' (Galatians 4:4) by subjecting himself to the law; which he solemnly testified by his circumcision on the eighth day after his birth, whereby he made himself 'a debtor to do the whole law' (Galatians 5:3)." (*Economy of the Covenants*, V1, pp177-79).

<sup>35</sup> As Berkhof says: "The counsel of redemption is the eternal prototype of the historical covenant of grace. . . The former is eternal, that is, from eternity, and the latter, temporal in the sense that it is realized in time. . . The counsel of redemption is the firm and eternal foundation of the covenant of grace." Vos likewise notes: "the first is eternal and the second is temporal." (V2, p92). And Hodge says: "The [Covenant of Grace] supposes [the Covenant of Redemption], and is founded upon it."

<sup>36</sup> This question relates to the parties of the Covenant of Grace. *The first view*, as we mentioned above, takes the Covenant of Redemption as being made between the Father and the Son, and the Covenant of Grace as being made between God and elect sinners; whereas *the second view* takes the Covenant of Grace as being made not between God and elect sinners directly and without qualification, but rather, with Christ as the head and representative of the Covenant of Grace, and in and through him,

THE COVENANT OF REDEMPTION AND THE COVENANT OF GRACE

	THEIR ESSENCE	COVENANT OF REDEMPTION	COVENANT OF GRACE
SOME SAY	Two distinct covenants	Made between the Father and the Son	Made between God and elect sinners
OTHERS SAY	One and the same covenant	Made with Christ as the second Adam, and in Him all those He represented	

The first application is *our security in Christ*. The fact is, our salvation isn't ultimately contingent on us at all. It's contingent on a promise the Father made to the Son. The Father has promised His Son a people in the Covenant of Redemption—and if God's Word to man is certain because God cannot lie—how much more certain is the promise of God the Father to God the Son?<sup>37</sup> Another application of the Covenant of Redemption is *God's love for us in Christ*. The truth is, God loved you, not just at

with all those whom He represented. This second view is expressed in the Westminster Larger Catechism #31: “*With whom was the covenant of grace made?*” The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.” Charles Hodge sets forth the statement of the question in this way: “At first view there appears to be some confusion in the statements of the Scriptures as to the parties [of the Covenant of Grace]. Sometimes Christ is presented as one of the parties; at others He is represented not as a party, but as the mediator and surety of the covenant; while the parties are represented to be God and his people. As the old covenant was made between God and the Hebrews, and Moses acted as mediator, so the new covenant is commonly represented in the Bible as formed between God and his people, Christ acting as mediator. He is, therefore, called the mediator of a better covenant founded on better promises. Some theologians propose to reconcile these modes of representation by saying that as *the covenant of works* was formed with Adam as the representative of his race, and therefore in him with all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation; so *the covenant of grace* was formed with Christ as the head and representative of his people, and in Him with all those given to Him by the Father. This simplifies the matter, and agrees with the parallel which the Apostle traces between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21, and 1 Corinthians 15:21-22,47-49.” This is the essence of the second view, represented in the Larger Catechism. Hodge, however, opts for the first view, which he describes in this way: “There are in fact two covenants relating to the salvation of fallen man, the one between God and Christ [IE, the Covenant of Redemption], the other between God and his people [IE, the Covenant of Grace].” Many reformed theologians (including Witsius, Vos, Bavinck, and Berkhof) adopt this same view, arguing for a distinct Covenant of Redemption (made between the Father and the Son), which functions as something separate from the Covenant of Grace (made between God and elect sinners). Both views are held by reformed theologians, but Thomas Boston argues convincingly for the position of the view expressed in the Larger Catechism, in his *View of the Covenant of Grace*. We mentioned that one of Hodge's hangups with this view was the fact that Scripture sets forth Christ as mediator of the Covenant of Grace, and, as he says, in the old covenant where Moses was the mediator, the covenant was made directly with the people. But if Hodge had read Boston, he might have had the answer to his question, for Boston speaks to this very thing when he says: “Jesus Christ. . .fisted himself Mediator between an offended just God, and offending men guilty before him. . .And so the covenant of grace, which could not be made immediately with sinners, was made with Christ the last Adam, their head and representative, mediating between God and them; therefore called Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, to whom we come by believing (Hebrews 12:22-24). The term Mediator is not, to my observation, applied in the holy Scripture to any other, except Moses (Galatians 3:19). . .And of him, a typical mediator, it is worth observing, that he was not only an inter-messenger between God and Israel; but, in God's renewing his covenant, in a way of reconciliation, after the breaking of the tables, the covenant was made with him, as their head and representative: 'And the Lord said unto Moses, Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel.' (Exodus 34:27).” (pp13-14). In other words, Boston draws out that Moses wasn't just the mediator of the old covenant, but at the same time also its head and representative. The most compelling argument for the view expressed in the Larger Catechism is the parallel that Scripture sets forth between Adam and Christ as the two covenant heads and representatives. Boston draws this out helpfully in his volume: “Christ is. . .the second federal head, or the representative in the second covenant; as Adam was the first federal head, or the representative in the first covenant. . .Wherefore, as the first covenant was made with Adam, as the head and representative of his natural seed; so the second covenant was made with Christ, as the head and representative of his spiritual seed.” (pp15-16). And again: “The covenant of works having been made with Adam as a representative of his natural seed, upon the breaking thereof, sin and death are communicate to them all from him as a deadly head. This being so, it was not agreeable to the method of divine procedure with men, to treat with those predestined unto salvation severally [IE, individually] as principal parties, each contracting for himself in the new covenant of life; but to treat for them all with one public person, who, through his fulfilling of the covenant, should be a quickening head to them, from whence life might be derived to them, in as compendious a way, as death was from the first Adam.” (p21). And, “As in the covenant of works, God promised life to Adam's natural seed, upon condition of his perfect obedience, which is evident from death's coming on them by his disobedience; so in the covenant of grace, he has promised life to Christ's spiritual seed, upon condition of his obedience; for as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22). But that promise of life for Adam's natural seed was primarily made to Adam himself, while as yet none of them were in being; and they were to partake of it only through him, to whom it was made as their representative. Therefore the promise of life to Christ's spiritual seed, was made chiefly to him.” (p105). Thus, “The covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, are not two distinct covenants, but one and the same covenant. . .So the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace are but two names of one and the same second covenant, under different considerations. By a covenant of redemption, is meant a bargain of buying and selling; and such a covenant it was to Christ only; forasmuch as he alone engaged to pay the price of our redemption (1 Peter 1:18-19). By a covenant of grace, is meant a bargain whereby all is to be had freely; and such a covenant it is to us only, to whom the whole of it is of free grace.” (p22).

<sup>37</sup> John Flavel writes: “God's single promise is security enough to our faith, his covenant of grace adds. . .further security; but

your conversion, and not just from your mother's womb, but before the foundation of the world. This means that God loved you not just long before you loved Him, but long before you ever even existed; long before *anything* existed. It also means that He loved you knowing full well all the sins you would ever commit.<sup>38</sup> And the last application in thinking through the Covenant of Redemption is *the Great Commission*. Jesus said to His disciples in John 20:21: “as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” God's rescue mission is happening even as we speak, and Jesus is calling us to be a part of it. And we can go with great confidence, because the Father has promised to give a people to the Son. We don't announce the gospel hoping that some *might* come—we do so knowing that Christ's sheep *will* come.

## V. An Introduction to the Covenant of Grace

### 1. The STAGES of the Covenant of Grace:

*A) The Inauguration of the Covenant of Grace (Genesis 3:15):* This is the first promise we're given in Scripture of a redeemer who would come into the world to save God's people from the sin and death into which they were plunged in Adam. All the successive divine covenants are built on this promise.

*B) The Noahic Covenant (Genesis 6,9):* In God's covenant with Noah, we have both a continuation and enlargement of the same gospel mercies that God had announced to Adam in Genesis 3:15. In this covenant with Noah, we come to learn even more about this redeemer and the salvation that He would accomplish for God's people. In the Noahic Covenant, we're pointed to Christ and the gospel primarily through pictures, as both Noah himself and his ark are meant to teach us truths about Jesus.

*C) The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12,15,17):* In God's covenant with Abraham, we're once again given a continuation and enlargement of the same gospel mercies which God had promised to Adam and confirmed to Noah. But whereas God's covenant with Noah sets forth Christ primarily through pictures, here with Abraham we're pointed to Jesus and the gospel primarily through promises; for the promises that the Lord makes to him of a *land*, a *seed*, and *blessing* are ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

*D) The Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 20-24):* In God's covenant with Israel under Moses, we have once again a continuation and enlargement of the same gospel mercies which God promised to Adam and confirmed to Noah and to Abraham. Through the Law that God gives at Sinai, we come face to face with the righteous character of our Creator; but there's also more, for in the person of Moses himself, as well as in God's redeeming His people from Egypt, and in the manna, the rock, the sacrifices, and the tabernacle, we're also pointed ahead once again to the person and work of the coming Redeemer.

*E) The Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89):* In God's covenant with David, we have once again both a continuation and enlargement of the same gospel mercies that have gone before. Here in this covenant with David, God comes to him, promising to raise up for him one of his descendants, who would sit on his throne, and who would build for the Lord a house, and whose kingdom would never

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both these viewed as the effects and fruits of this covenant of redemption, make all fast and sure. In the covenant of grace, we question not the performance on God's part, but we are often stumbled at the grand defects on our parts. But when we look to the covenant of redemption there is nothing to stagger our faith, both the federates being infinitely able and faithful to perform their parts; so that there is no possibility of a failure there. Happy were it, if puzzled and perplexed Christians would turn their eyes from the defects that are in their obedience, to the fullness and completeness of Christ's obedience; and see themselves complete in him, when most lame and defective in themselves.” (*The Fountain of Life*). And Ligon Duncan says: “What is happening [in Psalm 2:7-9]? God the Father is giving to the Son the nations as His inheritance and is appointing the Son in that phrase, 'Thou art My Son, this day I have begotten Thee.' That doesn't mean that Christ is coming into being that day. That is the language of the royal enthronement. . . It is as if the king of Israel has just ascended the throne now. And the Father is saying, 'I have appointed you now as the monarch over all your inheritance, all the chosen people.' And so the Son takes the role of Mediator and of head. You see it in Psalm 89:3 and again it is picked up in Hebrews 10:5-7 and elsewhere, applied to Christ. . . [T]he Covenant of Redemption tells you that when Christ dies for you, it makes your salvation absolutely certain. Why? Because the Father promised the Son, 'If you will take that man's place, I will give him to You.' The whole point is that the Father cannot renege. He has promised the Son in the Covenant.” (From lesson on the *History of Covenant Theology*).

<sup>38</sup> We have some friends living in Asia who adopted a little girl from another country. And the girl that they adopted was mentally handicapped. But it didn't come as a surprise to them. In fact, they sought after this little girl and brought her home to them, knowing full well about her condition from the very beginning. And this is exactly how God has loved us: Our sin doesn't take Him by surprise! Our failings and weaknesses aren't alarming to Him. When He predestined us to adoption as sons from all eternity, He knew all about our imperfections. But He chose us anyway, because He loved us in spite of them all.

end; and though it seems at first glance all these promises find their fruition in David's son Solomon, we come to learn that these promises of David's seed and throne are ultimately fulfilled only in Jesus.

*F) The New Covenant (Jeremiah 31 and Luke 22:20, etc):* In the new covenant, we have the ultimate fulfillment of everything that has gone before. All the manifestations of the Covenant of Grace in the Old Testament pointed us forward to Jesus. Now, with the coming of Christ, the pictures have finally become a reality; the shadows have truly taken on their substance; and the promises have at last found their fulfillment. Jesus came into the world as the seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham, and the seed of David, in order to reverse the work of the snake and accomplish redemption for His people.

## 2. The UNITY of the Covenant of Grace:

So, to be sure, there are various stages or manifestations, but all these manifestations are part of one single, over-arching covenant—the *Covenant of Grace*. These various manifestations aren't separated or isolated from each other; and they don't replace or nullify each other, but they're unified and build upon one another. So, the Covenant of Grace isn't to be understood as a series of isolated or separate covenants, but rather as a single, unified covenant that contains various stages and manifestations. We can see the unity of the Covenant of Grace being set forth in Scripture in at least a few different ways:

*A) Scripture ties together the manifestations of the Covenant of Grace LINGUISTICALLY:* Psalm 25:14 says this: “The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His *covenant*.” (notice the singular tense). We read again in Psalm 74:20: “Consider the *covenant*” (notice again it's in the singular). And in the same way, Psalm 111 says, “He has given food to those who fear Him; He will remember His *covenant* forever”; and, “He has sent redemption to His people; He has ordained His *covenant* forever.” (vv5,9). Which covenant is it that all these Scriptures are speaking of? It's the Covenant of Grace. Because though it's true there are many distinct manifestations of the Covenant of Grace, Scripture speaks of the Covenant of Grace as one single over-arching covenant.<sup>39</sup>

It's also significant that the same phrase, “My covenant,” is used to describe each and every successive stage in the Covenant of Grace. In Scripture, God uses these words, “My covenant,” to describe His covenant with *Noah* (in both Genesis 6:18 and 9:9ff), His covenant with *Abraham* (Genesis 17:2-21), His covenant at *Sinai* (Exodus 19:5), and His covenant with *David* (Psalm 89:28,34). I have a favorite coffee mug hanging adjacent to our kitchen. It's always the mug that I use to drink my morning coffee and afternoon tea. If I asked my wife to bring “a mug”, she'd bring any of the other ones we have, but if I ask her about “my mug”, she knows exactly which one I'm talking about. And it's similar with how God speaks in Scripture, when He calls this Covenant of Grace, with which He enters into with man, “My covenant.” This isn't just one covenant among many; it's one-of-a-kind. After Adam violated the Covenant of Works, there's just one covenant to speak of. The covenant which God makes with His people is *His covenant*—it's His very own, one-of-a-kind, personal and exclusive, *Covenant of Grace*.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> John Gill explains Psalm 25:14 in this way: “and he will show them his covenant: *the covenant of grace*, which was made with Christ for them from eternity, [and] is made known to them in time, when they are called by the grace of God, and made partakers of the grace of the covenant; then the Lord reveals himself as their covenant God and Father; shows them that his Son is their surety, Mediator, Redeemer, and Savior; puts his Spirit into them to implant covenant grace in them, to seal up the blessings of it to them, and bear witness to their interest in them, as pardon, justification, and adoption; and to apply the exceeding great and precious promises of it to them.” And again, Gill clarifies Psalm 74:20 in this way: “not the covenant of works, which being broken, no good thing was to be expected from it, not liberty, life, nor eternal salvation, but all the reverse; but *the covenant of grace*, made with Christ before the world was, and made manifest to Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to David, and others. This God has a respect unto, and does look unto it; he looks to the surety and Mediator of it, which is Christ, for the fulfillment of all conditions in it; to the promises of it, that they may be made good; to the blessings of it, that they be bestowed upon the persons to whom they belong; to the blood of it, for the delivering of the church's prisoners, and the salvation of them from wrath to come; and to the persons interested in it, that they be all called and brought safe to glory; and particularly to the things in it, respecting the glory of the church in the latter day, and increase of its members, and of its light, which seem chiefly designed here.” And Charles Spurgeon says of Psalm 111:5,9: “*He will ever be mindful of his covenant*. No promise of the Lord shall fall to the ground, nor will any part of the great compact of eternal love be revoked or allowed to sink into oblivion. *The covenant of grace* is the plan of the great work which the Lord works out for his people, and it will never be departed from: the Lord has set his hand and seal to it, his glory and honor are involved in it, yea, his very name hangs upon it, and he will not even in the least jot or tittle cease to be mindful of it. . .” (from *The Treasury of David*).

<sup>40</sup> This is also true for the other names and titles Scripture uses for the Covenant of Grace. Aside from simply calling it, “My covenant”, we'll show later that the Lord also refers to the Covenant of Grace as His “covenant of peace” and “the everlasting

*B) Scripture ties together the manifestations of the Covenant of Grace HISTORICALLY:* There's a fundamental unity between the stages of the Covenant of Grace in their historical outworking; and we can see it, first of all, in the unity between *the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants*. For one thing, the whole reason God sent Moses to deliver His people from Egypt [IE, the Mosaic Covenant] was that He “remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exodus 2:24). So then, the Mosaic Covenant didn't nullify the Abrahamic Covenant at all; rather, God's covenant at Sinai was established in order to bring fulfillment to the promises He had spoken to Abraham. Further, when the people of Israel rebel against the Lord by making a golden calf, and God threatens to destroy them, the way Moses delivers them is by reminding the Lord of the promises He had established in the Abrahamic covenant: “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever'” (Exodus 32:13).

And we see the same unity between *the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants*, for when God establishes His covenant with David, He identifies himself as the God who had “brought up the sons of Israel from Egypt” (2 Samuel 7:6); and David also, having just received the promises God had made to him in the Davidic Covenant, responds by glorying in the promises God was continuing to uphold to His people Israel in the Mosaic Covenant, saying, “For You have established for Yourself Your people Israel as Your own people forever, and You, O Lord, have become their God.” (vv23-24). And later, as David lay on his death-bed, the charge which he gives to his son Solomon has everything to do with the Law that God had given under the Mosaic Covenant; for he says: “Keep the charge of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His ordinances, and His testimonies, according to what is written in the Law of Moses, that you may succeed in all that you do. . .” (1 Kings 2:3). So again, the Davidic Covenant in no way nullified the covenant God had established at Sinai.

We even see a fundamental unity between *the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants*, for Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, binds these two covenants together at the beginning of the gospel of Luke, and sees the coming of the Christ as the fulfillment of both of them, as he sings: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us *in the house of David* His servant. . .to show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant, the oath *which He swore to Abraham* our father. . .” (Luke 1:68-73).

And indeed, as Zacharias understood, *all the Old Testament manifestations* of the Covenant of Grace are unified together as they find their fulfillment in Christ. We see this most clearly in Ezekiel 37:24-28, where the prophet weaves together all the Old Testament manifestations, looking forward to their ultimate fulfillment in the new covenant. He says: “My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd [*the Davidic Covenant*]; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them [*the Mosaic Covenant*]. They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons and their sons' sons, forever [*the Abrahamic Covenant*]; and David My servant will be their prince forever [*the Davidic Covenant*]. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them.” So again, the successive manifestations of the Covenant of Grace don't nullify or replace one another, but they're bound together and brought to fulfillment with the coming of the new covenant in Christ.<sup>41</sup>

*C) Scripture ties together the manifestations of the Covenant of Grace THEMATICALLY:* Not only are the various manifestations of the Covenant of Grace bound together linguistically and historically; they're also woven together with a single phrase that truly embodies what God's covenant relationship

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covenant”; and both of these names are used to refer to various distinctive manifestations of the Covenant of Grace: 1) The name “covenant of peace” refers to *the new covenant* in Ezekiel 34:25 and 37:26; but in Isaiah 54:9-10, Scripture emphatically links together God's *covenant of peace* with the Noahic Covenant. Likewise, “the everlasting covenant,” another title for the Covenant of Grace, is used to describe the Noahic Covenant (Genesis 9:16); as well as God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 17:7ff; Psalm 105:10); His covenant with David (Isaiah 55:3); and the new covenant (Isaiah 55:3; Jeremiah 32:40; Ezekiel 16:60; 37:26). And actually, in the last reference (Ezekiel 37:26), the “everlasting covenant” is linked together with God's “covenant of peace” in describing the coming of the new covenant as the fulfillment of the Covenant of Grace.

<sup>41</sup> Many of the insights from this section are gratefully gleaned from Robertson's, *Christ of the Covenants* (pp28-45). Robertson concludes his section in this way: “The covenant structure of Scripture manifests a marvelous unity. God, in binding a people to himself, never changes. For this reason, the covenants of God relate organically to one another. From Adam to Christ, a unity of covenantal administration characterizes the history of God's dealing with His people.” (*Christ of the Covenants*, p45).

with His people is all about: “I will be their God, and they will be My people.” This is the essence of the Covenant of Grace, and we see it throughout God's covenantal dealings with His people. We see this same phrase in God's covenant with *Abraham* (Genesis 17:7), in His covenant with *Israel at Sinai* (Exodus 6:6-7; 19:5); and in His covenant with *David* in the context of speaking of *the new covenant in Christ* (Ezekiel 34:23-24). This is the essence and goal of God's covenant; for Him to be our God, and us to be His people. Indeed, “the heart of the covenant is the declaration that God is with us.”<sup>42</sup>

### 3. The PROGRESSION of the Covenant of Grace:

So then, there's a fundamental unity between each of the successive manifestations of the Covenant of Grace. But there's also *a progression* in each successive stage. The manifestations of the Covenant of Grace (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Sinai, David) aren't just bound together; but they also build on each other. In each successive covenant in the Covenant of Grace, we come to learn more and more about the redemption God would accomplish for His people. *A few examples* might be helpful for us here:

*A) A seed growing into a tree:* We might say the story of redemption began in “seed form” with the promise to Adam in Genesis 3:15. And with each successive manifestation of the Covenant of Grace, that seed begins to grow more and more; we come to better understand God's plan of redemption as it progressively unfolds through the Scriptures. The new covenant is the full grown tree—the tree in its fullest and final form. But now, as we look back on that tree as it was a sapling, a sprout, and merely a seed, we understand it was always the same tree from the very beginning, but it was moving through progressive stages of visible growth. The truth is, the gospel that is so clear in its full form in the new covenant is equally present in the Old Testament manifestations of the Covenant of Grace (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Sinai, David), but it is so in *seed* (or sprout or sapling!) form. With each successive manifestation, we learn more about Christ and the redemption He would accomplish for His people.

*B) A musical symphony:* Each successive covenant in the Covenant of Grace is like another track in the masterpiece of redemption. It starts with the bass; then you add the synthesizer, then the strings, then the percussion, then you throw in the vocals—and it's absolutely breathtaking. Each layer of an orchestra unifies, complements, and builds upon the whole. So too, each successive manifestation of the Covenant of Grace unifies, complements, and builds upon the whole of the story of redemption.<sup>43</sup>

### 4. The DYNAMICS of the Covenant of Grace:

So, again, the Covenant of Grace is about the gospel. It's about Jesus and the redemption He would provide for His people. The Old Testament stages of the Covenant of Grace—God's covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David—all point us forward to the Savior. But if that's so, why is it

<sup>42</sup> The quote is from Robertson's *Christ of the Covenants* (p46). Robertson devotes a lot of time to this subject of the thematic unity of the covenants. He says: “The divine covenants of Scripture are bound together not only by a structural unity. They manifest also a thematic unity. This unity of theme is the heart of the covenant as it relates God to his people. Throughout the biblical record of God's administration of the covenant, a single phrase recurs as the summation of the covenant relationship: 'I shall be your God, and you shall be my people.' The constant repetition of this phrase or its equivalent indicates the unity of God's covenant. This phrase may be designated as the 'Immanuel principle' of the covenant. The heart of the covenant is the declaration that 'God is with us.'” (Robertson, pp45-46). Robertson goes on to note of the Immanuel principle: “Several aspects of this unifying theme of God's covenant may be noted: 1) First of all, this theme appears explicitly in connection with the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the new covenant [cf. Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:6-7; Ezekiel 34:24; Hebrews 8:10 and 2 Corinthians 6:16]. . . 2) Secondly, the theme 'I shall be your God and you shall be my people' is developed particularly in association with God's actually dwelling in the midst of His people [IE, through the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple of Solomon, which served to fore-picture the reality of Ezekiel 37:26-28, which, in turn, is ultimately realized in Revelation 21:3]. . . 3) Finally, the theme 'I shall be your God and you shall be my people' reaches its climax through its embodiment in a single person [IE, the Lord Jesus, who came to 'tabernacle' among us; cf. John 1:14].” (pp45-52).

<sup>43</sup> As Roberts puts it: “In her infancy He gives her the A B C of the covenant, teaching her to spell His grace, in the promised seed of the woman; and in saving a remnant in the ark by water from perishing with the world of the wicked. In her youth and non-age he trains her up under a more rigid and severe discipline of Mosaical administrations, as under tutors and governors, yet in hopes of after-freedom. In her full age He invests her with new covenant liberties and enjoyments in Christ revealed, delivering her from all her former bondage.” (pp8-9). And again: “Every dispensation of the Covenant of Faith since the fall, preached Christ and the gospel in Him; but the later dispensations do this still much more clearly and fully than the former, and [the] last most fully and clearly of all.” (p1101). And: “The substance of the Covenant of Faith is still the same, but yet it still more and more excels itself in gradual perfections, till it attain[s] to the most perfect of all dispensations, the new covenant . . . Every covenant tends to improve and advance in some regard or other, the further revelation of Christ.” (pp1216-17).

so hard to see Him? Because they do so softly; in whispers; through pictures and types. They're like *shadows* of Jesus' figure, or *reflections* of Him on the water. He's there, but if we don't look carefully, we might miss Him; and this is because each successive manifestation of the Covenant of Grace in the Old Testament contains the *temporal* as well as the *eternal*. Think about a kernel of rice. It has an outward shell, the husk; and the husk is there to protect the kernel of grain on the inside as it grows. Well, from the outside, you *only* see the husk. But inside lies the grain. And at the right time—when the rice is ready—the husk is opened up. Then the grain is taken—and the husk is no longer needed.

This is what it's like with the Old Testament manifestations of the Covenant of Grace. We see Jesus, but through shadows and reflections. The gospel is there, but it's wrapped with an outer husk. *God's covenant with Noah* is meant to teach us about Jesus and His redemption, but it does so through the outward husk of a world-wide flood. *God's covenant with Abraham* is meant to teach us about Jesus and His redemption, but it does so through outward-husk promises about a land, a seed, and blessing. *God's covenant with Israel through Moses* is meant to teach us about Jesus and His redemption, but it does so through the outward husk of the Passover, the tabernacle with its sacrifices, the feasts, and God's Law. And *God's Covenant with David* is meant to teach us about Jesus and His redemption, but it does so through the outward husk of temporal promises about David's kingdom and the house of the Lord. All of these point us to Christ—but we have to look past the husk to get to the kernel.<sup>44</sup>

##### 5. The ESSENCE of the Covenant of Grace:

The covenants are wrapped with an outward husk, *but the inner kernel is the gospel*. And as we saw earlier, the essence of the gospel promise is summarized throughout the Old Testament stages of the Covenant of Grace in this way: “I shall be your God, and you shall be My people.” The heartbeat of the Covenant of Grace is that God would come to accomplish redemption on behalf of a sinful and helpless human race. He would redeem a people for himself. He would do it by sending Christ into the world to shed His blood for guilty sinners. He would save them *by grace alone* (not their merit). He would save them *through faith alone* (not their good works). And He would save them *in Christ alone*. Salvation would come as a person. In Adam, humanity was ruined. But in Christ, God would redeem a people from Adam's fallen race. And we would be His people; and He would be our God.

It's important to see that God's provision of salvation has been the same from the very beginning. Old Testament believers weren't saved any other way than we are today. They were saved by God's grace through faith in Christ, the same way that we are. It's just that they *looked forward* to Him; while we *look backward*. Up until the coming of Jesus and the inauguration of the new covenant, salvation was *promised*; now in the new covenant, salvation has been *performed*. But God's provision of salvation has always been the same. It was no different for Old Testament believers. Whether Old Testament or New, we enter into God's covenant mercies *by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone*.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> As the Westminster Larger Catechism #34 puts it: “The covenant of grace was administered under the Old Testament by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the passover, and other types and ordinances, which did all fore-signify Christ then to come, and were for that time sufficient to build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they then had full remission of sin, and eternal salvation.” And Robertson notes: “some distinction must be made between the abiding kernel of Old Testament realities and the temporary husk which surrounded them.” (p74). Pink says: “Each covenant that God made with men shadowed forth some element of the everlasting covenant which He entered into with Christ before the foundation of the world on behalf of His elect. The covenants which God made with Noah, Abraham, and David as truly exhibited different aspects of the compact of grace as did the several vessels in the tabernacle typify certain characteristics of the person and work of Christ. Yet, just as those vessels also had an immediate and local use, so the covenants respected what was earthly and carnal, as well as what was spiritual and heavenly.” (*Divine Covenants*). And Vos also: “The covenant. . .had a double side, one that had in view *temporal* benefits—like the promise of the land of Canaan, numerous descendants, protection against earthly enemies—and one that had in view *spiritual* benefits. Nevertheless, this is to be so understood that the earthly and temporal were not for their own sake, but rather so that they would provide a type of the spiritual and heavenly.” (V2, p128).

<sup>45</sup> Herman Hoeksema helpfully draws out the essence of the covenant as he defines the Covenant of Grace in this way: “this covenant is not conceived as a means to an end, as a way unto salvation, but as the very end itself, as the very highest that can ever be reached by the creature: not as a way to life, but as the highest form of life itself; not as a condition, but as the very essence of religion; not as a means unto salvation, but as the highest bliss itself. . .as the proper essence of religion and salvation. . .If the essence of the covenant in God is the communion of friendship, this must also be the essence of the covenant between God and man. . .Then the covenant is the very essence of religion. . .The covenant is the relation of the most intimate communion of friendship, in which God reflects his own covenant life in his relation to the creature, gives to that creature life, and causes him to taste and acknowledge the highest good and the overflowing fountain of all good. . .the

## 6. The REQUIREMENTS of the Covenant of Grace:

There's one question in particular that arises here: Does the gospel have any conditions? Does grace mean that there's nothing I must do to enter into God's peace and blessing? The Covenant of Grace makes wonderful promises—but does it also contain certain requirements? Theologians would ask it this way: Is the Covenant of Grace *conditional* or *unconditional*? Does God's grace have conditions?

In short, Scripture tells us the gospel has no conditions—but it does have *requirements*. For instance, our Savior warned that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, we will not enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20; cf. 13:43). So, *righteousness* is a requirement in the gospel. Likewise, Jesus said that unless a man is born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (John 3:3,5). So, the new birth—*regeneration*—is required in the Covenant of Grace. The Scriptures also make it clear that both *faith and repentance* are necessary for salvation, for Hebrews 11:6 tells us, “Without faith it is impossible to please [God]” and Jesus says, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3,5). So, there's no question that there are requirements in the Covenant of Grace.<sup>46</sup>

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covenant is not a way to a certain end, is not a means to the attainment of a certain purpose, and is not the manner wherein we are saved. . . Not a way, and not a means, but the final destination and the all-dominating purpose, is the covenant of God.” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, VI, pp454-60). It might provide some clarity here to distinguish the fact that as it's true the Covenant of Grace isn't itself the means whereby we are saved; yet, the appointed means of entering into the Covenant of Grace is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Roberts also notes: “The substance of God's covenants of Faith was but one, though the circumstances of the several discoveries were diverse. The several covenant discoveries of God's Covenant of Faith, were in several times, to several persons, in several places, upon several occasions, in several ways of manifestation, confirmation, and administration, according to the wise pleasure of the Lord for His peoples' best advantage. The circumstances were very various; but the essence and substance of them all was one and the same, [namely] the revealing and tendering of one and the same Messiah Jesus Christ to His people, as their only all-sufficient Savior through faith.” (*Mystery and Marrow*, p1222).

<sup>46</sup> The distinction between conditions and requirements is important. Conditions usually look to ourselves for fulfillment, but requirements can be met by God. Turretin highlights the massive range of meaning concerning the definition of a condition: a) “A condition can be regarded as something that has meriting power and by its own nature confers a right to the benefits of the covenant, but also as prerequisite and means, as an accompanying disposition in the member of the covenant.” And: b) “A condition can be regarded as to be fulfilled through natural capabilities, or to be fulfilled through supernatural grace.” (Quoted in Vos, V2, p112). We affirm: a) “The covenant of grace is *not* conditional in the sense that in it there would be any condition with meriting power.” And further: b) “The covenant of grace is *not* conditional in the sense that what is required of man would have to be accomplished in his own strength. . . [for] What is a condition for all is thus for them also a promise, a gift of the covenant. . . Everything that is required of us toward God is at the same time a gift from Christ to us. . .” (Vos, V2, p113, 116). To eliminate any confusion we have opted for the language of “requirements” over the language of “conditions.” God requires certain things of us (the new birth, faith, repentance, etc), but since these are also things He himself freely provides to His people, it's better to call them requirements. They're not conditions that God expects *us* to perform. They are indeed requirements—but those that God himself has promised to provide for His blood-bought people. Witsius says: “A condition of a covenant, properly so called, is that action, which, being performed, gives a man a right to the reward. But that such a condition cannot be required of us in the covenant of grace, is self-evident; because a right to life neither is, nor indeed can be founded on any action of ours, but on the righteousness of our Lord alone; who having perfectly fulfilled the righteousness of the law for us, nothing can, in justice, be required of us to perform, in order to acquire a right already fully purchased for us. And indeed, in this all the orthodox readily agree.” (V1, p284). And again: “Here [in the Covenant of Grace] conditions are offered to which eternal salvation is annexed; conditions, not to be performed again by us, which might throw the mind into despondency; but by him who would not part with his life before he had truly said, 'It is finished.'" (V1, pp164-65). John Gill says in his *Body of Divinity*: “Some, indeed, make it to be a conditional covenant, and faith and repentance to be the conditions of it. But these are not conditions, but blessings of the covenant, and are as absolutely promised in it, as anything else; the promise of a 'new heart', and of a 'new spirit', includes the gift of faith, and every other grace; and that of taking away the 'stony heart', and giving an 'heart of flesh', is fully expressive of the gift of the grace of repentance (Ezekiel 36:26). Besides, if these were conditions of the covenant, to be performed by men in their own strength, in order to be admitted into it, and receive the benefits of it; they would be as hard, and as difficult to be performed, as the condition of the covenant of works, perfect obedience; since faith requires, to the production of it, almighty power, even such as was put forth in raising Christ from the dead, (Ephesians 1:19,20); and though God may give men means, and time, and space of repentance, yet if he does not give them grace to repent, they never will. Christ's work, and the Spirit's grace, supersede all conditions in the covenant, respecting men; since they provide for everything that can be thought of, that is required or is wanting.” And Thomas Boston writes: “The covenant is described to us, by the Holy Ghost, as a cluster of free promises of grace and glory to poor sinners, in which no mention is made of any condition [Hebrews 8:10-12]. These promises with their condition, having been proposed to, and accepted by *Christ as second Adam*, and the condition performed by *him*; the covenant comes natively, in the gospel, to be set before us in them, to be by us received and embraced in and through Christ, by faith. . . And in this indeed, the covenant of grace is not conditional, but consists of absolute promises; that is, promises become absolute, through the condition thereof actually performed already; but being considered in its full altitude, and in respect of Christ, the covenant, and all the promises thereof, are properly and strictly conditional.” (Boston, *View of the Covenant of Grace*, pp99-100).

But the beautiful, freeing, wonderful thing about the Covenant of Grace is that everything which God requires of us *He also freely provides for us*. Indeed, every requirement in the Covenant of Grace is also freely promised as a gift to God's people. There are certain things God requires in His covenant, but since man is completely unable to fulfill those requirements, *God* has taken the work of fulfilling those requirements upon *himself*. That's why we call God's covenant with man *the covenant of grace*. God requires *a perfect righteousness*, and God's very own righteousness is given to us in justification (see Isaiah 46:13; 51:6; 59:16; Jeremiah 33:16; Romans 5:17; Philippians 3:8-9). God requires *a new heart*—a circumcised heart—and His Spirit does this work in us in regeneration (Deuteronomy 30:6; Ezekiel 36:26-27). God requires of us *faith and repentance*, and the Scriptures speak of both of these as gifts that God himself gives to His people (cf. Acts 5:31; 2 Timothy 2:25; Ephesians 2:8-9). Indeed, everything that God requires of us, He himself also freely provides for us in the Covenant of Grace.<sup>47</sup>

## 7. The NAMES of the Covenant of Grace:

The name “Covenant of Grace” is a helpful phrase to describe God's covenant with men because this is what God's covenant is all about—it's truly a covenant *of grace*. Under the Covenant of Works, God gave Adam what he deserved—but in the gospel, God deals with His people according to grace. So, the name is good. But you won't find this exact phrase in Scripture. Rather, when the Bible speaks of the Covenant of Grace, it usually uses these expressions, which also teach us more about its attributes:

*A) My covenant (Genesis 6:18; 9:9-15; 17:2-21; Exodus 19:5; Psalm 89:28,34):* As we noted earlier, God often refers to the Covenant of Grace as simply, “My covenant.” This phrase reminds us of the fact that *God* is the sole AUTHOR of the Covenant of Grace. It's not a covenant *we* make with God; it's a covenant, rather, that *God makes with us*. This will become crystal clear as we study through the divine covenants together. It's *God's* covenant—and *He* establishes it with those whom He chooses.

*B) My covenant of peace (Isaiah 54:10; Ezekiel 34:25; 37:26):* This phrase describes the NATURE of the Covenant of Grace. It's called a covenant *of peace* because it results in peace with God. God reconciles real sinners to himself; establishing peace through the blood of the new covenant: “For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in [Christ], and through Him to reconcile all things to himself, *having made peace through the blood of His cross*. . .” (Colossians 1:19-20).

*C) The everlasting covenant (Genesis 9:16; 17:7-19; Psalm 105:10; Isaiah 24:5; 55:3; Jeremiah 32:40; Ezekiel 16:60; 37:26):* This phrase highlights the DURATION of the Covenant of Grace. When the Lord enters into covenant relationship with someone, it's forever. This means that God's covenant is absolutely irrevocable; when God covenants with you, it's for all eternity. And it's for this reason that the Scriptures tell us: “Israel has been saved by the Lord with an *everlasting* salvation.” (Isaiah 45:17).

So, to summarize, you are *hand-chosen by God* in the Covenant of Grace. You are *wholly reconciled to God* in the Covenant of Grace. And you are *eternally secure in God* in the Covenant of Grace. I hope this is an encouragement, and I pray for God's blessing as we begin our study of the covenants.

<sup>47</sup> John Ball writes: “The covenant in Scripture does sometimes signify an absolute promise of God, without any stipulation at all. . . Of this kind is the covenant wherein God promises that He will give His elect faith and perseverance, to which promise no condition annexed can be conceived in mind, which is not comprehended in the promise itself (Hebrews 8:10).” (*Treatise*, p3). And Boston likewise: “According to the Scripture, the elect's believing, repenting, and sincere obedience, do belong to the promissory part of the covenant. If we consider them in their original situation, they are benefits promised in the covenant, by God, unto Christ the Surety, as a reward of his fulfilling the condition of the covenant.” (*View*, p58). Witsius notes: “Here conditions are offered to which eternal salvation is annexed; conditions, not to be performed again by us, which might throw the mind into despondency; but by him who would not part with his life before he had truly said, ‘It is finished.’” (V1, p165). And again, “For whatever can be conceived as a condition, is all included in the universality of the promises.” (V1, p286). Bavinck writes: “In the covenant of grace, that is, in the gospel, which is the proclamation of the covenant of grace, there are actually no demands and no conditions. For God supplies what he demands. Christ has accomplished everything, and though he did not accomplish rebirth, faith, and repentance in our place, he did acquire them for us, and the Holy Spirit therefore applies them.” (*Dogmatics*, V3, p230). And Berkhof concludes: “That which may be regarded as a condition in the covenant, is for those who are chosen unto everlasting life also a promise, and therefore a gift of God.” (*Systematic Theology*).