

# The Covenant with Creation

*Adam and the Covenant of Works*

<sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

<sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden,

<sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Genesis 2:15-17

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## No Order, Broken Law, Violated Covenant

WE LIVE IN A DAY OF MORAL anarchy, rebellion, chaos, and disorder. The moral fabric of our world today is without form and void. It is much worse than they thought it was during the '60s, when [hippies](#) grew their hair long, refused to shower, and smoked weed as a sign of rebellion against institutions. OK, I know it was worse than that. But those kids [knew right from wrong](#). They were taught it. They deliberately rebelled against it, which is bad enough. Today, the very idea of right and wrong, or moral absolutes, of transcendent laws are laughed at and ridiculed. Kids in school are taught that there is no such thing, and if you say there is, you are judgmental, intolerant, bigoted, narrow-minded, prejudiced ... the enemy of the state. If you say something

like morality is transcendent and crosses over cultural boundaries, especially sexual morality, but more and more even just “love your neighbor as yourself,” the best you will get is a blank, zombie-like stare, and the worst you will get is what comes after the stare when the zombie realizes you aren’t one of them.

This is what happens when a culture gives up God. We think it is “cool,” the highest mark of an enlightened age. In reality, it is the most foolish thing anyone could do. Let’s use “God” generically for a moment. You see, all ancient peoples believed in a high God. Some (Greeks) called him **Chaos**, others (Babylonians) called him **Water** (Apsu), others (Hindus) called him **Seed** (Brahma, from the Lotus flower or seed that became the golden egg). He is often a personification of nature, unknowable, impersonal. He gave birth to the gods, and particular gods end up becoming the law-giver of particular nations. So, a given nation’s laws came from its god. That’s what they believed. Listen to Plato:

In the days of old the gods had the whole earth distributed among them by allotment [cf. **Deut 32:8**] ... They all of them by just apportionment obtained what they wanted, and peopled their own districts; and when they had peopled them they tended us, their nurselings and possessions, as shepherds tend their flocks, excepting only that they did not use blows

or bodily force, as shepherds do, but governed us like pilots from the stern of the vessel, which is an easy way of guiding animals, holding our souls by the rudder of persuasion according to their own pleasure;-thus did they guide all mortal creatures.

Now different gods had their allotments in different places which they set in order. **Hephaestus** and **Athene**, who were brother and sister, and sprang from the same father, having a common nature, and being united also in the love of philosophy and art, both obtained as their common portion this land [Greece], which was naturally adapted for wisdom and virtue; and there they implanted brave children of the soil, and put into their minds the order of government; their names are preserved, but their actions have disappeared by reason of the destruction (the Flood) of those who received the tradition, and the lapse of ages ...

When the divine portion began to fade away, [they] became diluted ... they [became] full of avarice and unrighteous power [cf. **Psalm 82:1-5**] ... **Zeus**, the god of gods, who rules according to law, and is able to see into such things, perceiving that an honourable race was in a woeful plight ... (Plato, *Critias*).

And it breaks off, unfinished. We could do this just about anywhere in the ancient world. They saw that the gods came

and gave them laws which men, supposedly, followed. It was the Golden Age.

There is something true here, and something false; something profoundly important to remember, and something vital to remember correctly. Scripture repeats the story that God put over the nations these created beings, and that they were to rule well. But they did not. Psalm 82 is explicit, “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: ‘How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? ... Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken” (Psalm 82:1-5).

This passage is ground zero for the divine council that we looked at last week, and that will play such an important part of the Genesis 3 story of the fall. But it is also related to our passage today. Here, what I want you to notice is how the Psalm says that **these gods do not have knowledge or understanding**. This knowledge is related to **making judgments**, judicial decrees for the peoples. Their laws are evil. They are full of partiality and special treatment. They tolerate and even encourage moral perversion. They refuse to

punish wickedness. They do not care for the downtrodden and helpless. This is one of the main reasons why many centuries later, God killed the Canaanites and let Israel inherit the land.

Plato was right that something had gone very wrong. But he believed the Greeks and their gods had recaptured it, and for a time, they did shine the laws of nature better than others. But what percent of darkness do you need to still have darkness? Is it only dark when you go into the middle of a deep cave and turn out the lights? Or do little flickers of light bouncing off the cave walls still mean you will hit your head on low ceiling in that cave? Does not the Apostle says, “**And He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26-27 NAS)? These are the Greeks he is speaking to, and they grope because they are in darkness. Indeed, without the gospel, we are all in darkness.**

Today, I want to tell you the truth about the original state of mankind, the God who made us, the laws he gave, the reason for it, and why we must understand and recapture this truth in our day, if any hope of civilization is to remain outside the church, and any light of the gospel is to shine

inside of it. Time is urgent. The need is great to know and tell others this truth. For the prophet Isaiah foretells, “The earth staggers like a drunken man; it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again. On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth” (Isa 24:20-21). “Behold, the LORD will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants ... The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defied under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant” (24:1, 4-5).

## The Covenant with Creation

Today we are looking at three foundational verses of the Bible: **Genesis 2:15-17**. They can be outlined in a very simple form. First, you have a very brief **preamble**, “The LORD God took...” (15a). This identifies the Lordship of the Great King, and stresses his dominance and sovereignty.

Second, you have a quick **historical prologue** “...God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden” (15b). This recounts the Great King’s previous relationship to his vassal-king servant.

Third, you have **ethical stipulations**. These enumerate the vassal’s obligations to the Great King. They tell how he will

maintain the relationship. This is the most complicated part, but it is still not very long. The first are not in the verbal form of commands (imperatives), but they are verbs (infinitives), and it is quite clear that Adam was supposed to perform these duties. They are usually translated as something like “work” and “keep” the garden (15c). Next come the imperatives. The first comes as a positive, simple command, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden” (16). The second ends negatively, and is just as simple, “But the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (17a).

Finally, it gives sanctions in the form of curses and blessings. The sanctions are that “on the day you eat of it, you shall surely die” (17b). This is the curse for disobedience. The blessing, while not mentioned in these verses, is mentioned later where it says that if he would “reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat” he would “live forever” (Gen 3:22).<sup>1</sup> Together, these form an ancient covenant treaty.

Genesis		The First Covenant Treaty
<b>Preamble:</b> Identifies the Lordship of the Great King	2:15a	“The LORD God took...”

<sup>1</sup> Taking the outline more broadly to include Genesis 1-3 are John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, A theology of lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 12-13; Michael Horton, *God of Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 90; Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 13-14.

<b>Historical Prologue:</b> Recounts a previous relationship	2:15b	"...God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden."
<b>Ethical Stipulations:</b> Enumerate the vassal's obligations	2:15c	"...to work and keep it."
	2:16	"You may surely eat of every tree of the garden."
	2:17a	"But the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat."
<b>Sanctions:</b> blessings for obedience, curses for disobedience	2:17b	"...on the day you eat of it, you shall surely die."
	3:22	"Reach out [your] hand and take also of the tree of life and eat" and "live forever."

These four things (Preamble, Prologue, Stipulations, Sanctions) form the basic elements of what are called ancient near eastern treaties or **covenants**. What exactly is a covenant? Do you remember in high school or college when you were dating and your friends asked you if you've had "the talk?" The conversation went something like this, "So, where is this going? Anywhere? What are 'we' exactly? Do you love me?" A friend of mind calls this the **D.T.R.—Define The Relationship**. Until his friends had had the D.T.R., he told them not to bother him with the trivial matters of dating.

You will find a plethora of definitions of covenant in the literature, but at its essence, this is what a covenant is. *A covenant is a formal definition of relationship between two parties.* **Fred Malone** puts gives this basic idea a little more formality. It is, "A solemn promise or oath of God to man, each covenant's content being determined by revelation concerning that covenant."<sup>2</sup>

This formal definition comes when the **one party approaches another party** and swears an oath. The party

<sup>2</sup> Fred Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus Paedobaptism* (Cape Coral, Fl.: Founders Press, 2003), p. 62.



approaching is usually a greater party, like a High King, He is called a Suzerain. The party being approached is a lower king. He is called a vassal-prince. The two know one another. The lesser serves the greater.

The covenant is a **decree** that is agreed upon between the two parties by an **oath**, and this oath creates a **bond**. Decree-Oath-Bond. And so we find the idea of a decree closely related to a covenant (**Dan 9:26-27**). Covenants are sometimes called “**swearing an oath**” (**Heb 6:13-18**). And there is the “**bond of the covenant**” (**Ezek 20:37**). God’s word (spoken or written) is the highest form of covenant making. It binds, it swears, it decrees, it promises, it threatens, it carries through, it prevails.

When God is involved in a covenant, he is dispensing his kindness, goodness, and wisdom.<sup>3</sup> In other words, God does not have to enter into any covenants with us, but he did so because he wished to display his love and nature to his creation. It doesn’t matter what kind of a covenant we are talking about, be it a pure gracious grant or one like we have here; God is still showing his benevolence and his other

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Dr. Richard Barcellos for this insight. It is similar to that of Nehemiah Coxe, one of the prominent Reformed Baptists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He writes that a covenant is “a declaration of [God’s] sovereign pleasure concerning the benefits he will bestow on [man], the communion they will have with him, and the way and means by which this will be enjoyed by them.” Nehemiah Coxe, “A Discourse of the Covenants,” in *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005), 36.

attributes, and when we forget that, we are the ones that end up in ruin, not him.

The loving-kindness of the Suzerain combined with the oath and sworn blessings and curses forms the bond. This bond makes breaking a covenant so reprehensible and difficult to bear (much like a marriage when the vows are broken and divorce occurs, in fact, the marriage covenant occurs later in this chapter as a type of the greater covenant being made here). It can have both emotional and very practical repercussions. It is why they need to be taken very seriously.

There are two basic kinds of covenants found in the Ancient Near East. Scholars have referred to these covenants as **royal grants** and **suzerainty treaties**. The latter occurs when, after a great victory, the great king approaches the lesser king with a covenant treaty. Here, the lesser king pledges entire loyalty whereby if he fails to keep the stipulations imposed by the agreement, he will fall under its sanctions or curses. If he keeps his word and fulfills his obligations, he will receive great blessings which are also guaranteed in the treaty. As someone has said, this is a “do or die” type of covenant.<sup>4</sup> This is the kind of covenant that we are looking at in our passage today.

*A Real Covenant?*

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 537.

But some people do not see a covenant in our passage. Some do so for **exegetical reasons**. They will say that the word “covenant” is not here, therefore, there is no covenant here. It is true that the word “covenant” is not here, but that no more proves the thing that it does to say that there is no Trinity in the Bible because the word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible. It is not a bare word that we are after, but the idea behind the word that matters. If the idea is here, then there is a covenant here.

Some have called it the “**covenant with Adam**,”<sup>5</sup> This is an important term, because it reflects **Hosea 6:7** which says “**like Adam they transgressed the covenant.**” You would think this verse would prove that there is a covenant here, but it has been debated for centuries what it actually refers to, since the word ‘*adam*’ can mean the first man, a man generically, or even a city named Adam. I believe it does refer to Adam, in fact to the very passage we are looking at this morning.

Some have called it the “**everlasting covenant.**”<sup>6</sup> This is also an important term, because it seems to be what Isaiah is calling it. We read it earlier. He says that the whole world is in upheaval, awaiting the great day of doom, when God will

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<sup>5</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing, 1966), 214-226.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 259-265.

punish both man and angels, for they have “transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant.” This covenant somehow binds all humanity to it, so it can’t be referring to any of the covenants with Israel. It is a covenant that can be broken, so it is difficult to see how it could refer to God’s unconditional covenant after the flood. Curiously, it binds both men *and angels*, which is something not often thought about, but which fits the context of “the generations of the heavens and the earth” of **Genesis 2:4ff** perfectly.

Still others have called it the “covenant of nature,”<sup>7</sup> or the “covenant of creation.”<sup>8</sup> This reflects **Jeremiah 33:20, 25** which talks about the “covenant with the day and the night.” Again, it could be possible to see this as referring to the Flood, but it is better to see this as going back to Genesis 1, for the original creation is itself covenantal in nature. Jeremiah refers, in my opinion, both to **natural laws** like physics (planets must orbit the sun, they are bound to this law) and to the personal world of men and angels (angels and men and even animals must do what God commands them to do). The laws of

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<sup>7</sup> Francis Turretin (1623-1687) seems to have preferred this designation, though he also refers to it as a “legal,” or a covenant “of works.” *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), 1:575; see also Cocceius, *Summa doctrinae de Foedere et Testamento Dei*, II, 22, cited by Heppe, 284.

<sup>8</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 67-87; Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 14-137; Michael D. Williams, *Far As the Curse Is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005), 41-62

nature are there to teach you about the moral laws of God, how they are good, how they are to be kept. One is a schoolmaster to teach you of the other.

A breach of this covenant of creation meant releasing the forces of nature which could destroy creation. This is what the story of the Flood is all about.<sup>9</sup> In Job, salvation through the chaos of nature was thus seen as God's covenant faithfulness (**Job 38:1-33**, esp. **vv. 8-10**). With regard to the heavenly beings, in the Bible and the ancient world outside of it, angels were intimately linked to creation as beings that have control over it. God made a covenant with the angels, a covenant which some of them<sup>10</sup> transgressed.<sup>11</sup> Jews prior to the NT certainly saw this covenant with creation as also relating directly to the angels and used language reminiscent of Job 38 to tease it out.<sup>12</sup> More generally, angels are also closely related to covenants as those that help put them into effect, as they did at Sinai.<sup>13</sup> All of this is the reason why God will punish the host of heaven. He made a covenant with

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<sup>9</sup> **Gen 9:9-17** (cf. **Gen 1:26** and the creation of the sea monster Leviathan along with God's subduing the sea monster Rahab in **Ps 89:10** and the close association of God's covenant in **vv. 3; 28; 34; 39**; also **Job 26:12-13**. This all becomes imagery used for God's covenant faithfulness to Israel in the Exodus; cf. **Isa 51:9-10**).

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps all of them, which is why it may talk about "elect angels" (do you need to be elected if sin is not an issue?; cf. **1 Tim 5:21**) and says that even the heavens are not pure and God's holy ones and angels are charged with error (**Job 4:18; 15:15; 25:5**). But this is speculative.

<sup>11</sup> **Gen 3:1ff; Isa 14:12-13; Ezek 28:13-15; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; Rev 12:4**.

<sup>12</sup> For the explicit Jewish idea see **1 Enoch 5:2-4; 69:13-25; Prayer of Manasseh 1:1-4**.

<sup>13</sup> **Jdg 2:1; Mal 3:1; Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19**.

them just like he did with us, and it seems that our passage is the expression of this covenant to man.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *GOING DEEPER*. Here are three reasons why scholars see a covenant in our passage that we will not have time for today. The first involves the idea that covenants are usually made after a **great battle**. If you will recall the ANE backdrop in their creation stories, creation is almost always viewed as a great war that the creator god wins. He is then enthroned in his Sabbath rest as king over his creation. True, Genesis 1 does not have the language of a war. But other creation stories in the Bible do reflect this. For example, **Psalm 89:9-11**, in a passage that is both covenantal (in this case, the Davidic covenant), and full of the divine council, it says, “**You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them.**” Rahab is the sea monster, just like Leviathan, who shows up in creation imagery even in Isaiah (see **Isa 27:1**). In the Hebrew mind, the deliverances stories of the Flood, the Red Sea, the victories of Judges, the Exile, they are all related theologically to creation. What is true theologically for one, is true for all. So if we are going to understand the depth of **Genesis 2:15-17**, we have to let all of Scripture inform what is going on here. When we do that, we understand how profoundly covenantal the whole thing is.

The second point involves **water**. Water is everywhere in our story. Here is Cyril of Jerusalem, ““**The water was the beginning of the world, and Jordan the beginning of the Gospel tidings: for Israel deliverance from Pharaoh was through the sea, and for the world deliverance from sins by the washing of water with the word of God. Where a covenant is made with any, there is water also. After the flood, a covenant was made with Noah: a covenant for Israel from Mount Sinai, but *with water, and scarlet wool, and hyssop*. Elias is taken up, but not apart from water: for first he crosses the Jordan, then in a chariot mounts the heaven. The high-priest is first washed, then offers incense; for Aaron first washed, then was made high-priest: for how could one who had not yet been purified by water pray for the rest? Also as a symbol of Baptism there was a laver set apart within the Tabernacle.” **Cyril of Jerusalem**, *The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. R. W. Church and Edwin Hamilton Gifford, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Volume VII: S. Cyril of Jerusalem, S. Gregory Nazianzen* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1894), 15.**

The third thing involves the **Holy Spirit** as covenant witness. Meredith Kline writes, “As I have written elsewhere: ‘In the interpretive light of such redemptive reproductions of the **Genesis 1:2** scene, we see that the Spirit at the beginning overarched creation as a divine witness to the Covenant of Creation, as a sign that creation existed under the aegis of his covenant lordship. Here is the background for the later use of the Two Adams, Two Covenants of Works rainbow as a sign of God’s covenant with the earth (**Gen 9:12ff.**). And this appointment of the rainbow as covenant sign in turn corroborates the interpretation of

Other terms for this covenant help us understand its theology a bit better. Some have called it a “[covenant of life](#),”<sup>15</sup> because life is held out as a promise. Others have called it a “[covenant of friendship](#).”<sup>16</sup> I like this one because it impress upon us that God is man’s friend, he comes to us as a friend (it is not meant to suggest that this friendship is conditional, however). The most controversial term is what you are probably most familiar with: the [covenant of works](#).<sup>17</sup>

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the corresponding supernatural light-and-clouds phenomenon of the Glory (the rainbow character of which is explicit in some instances) as a sign of the Covenant of Creation.” (*Images of the Spirit*, pp. 19f.) The effect of the Genesis 1:2 portrayal of the Creator in oath-stance is to reinforce powerfully the commitment character of his ensuing words of creative fiat recorded in [Genesis 1:3ff](#). See Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 14-21.

<sup>15</sup> The Westminster Larger Catechism (1647), Q 20; Morton Smith, 1:277.

<sup>16</sup> John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1839), 446.

<sup>17</sup> See The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647-1648), 7.2; Johannus Cocceius (1603-1669), *Summa Theologica*, XXII, 1, cited in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 281; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 2:117-129; Robert Lewis Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1871; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 292-305; James Henley Thornwell, “The Covenant of Works,” in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (1875; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 264-299; William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888), 2:148-167; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), 211-218; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1948), 23; J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), 91-93; 128, 215, 219; Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology* (Greenville, S.C.: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994), 1:275-290; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 516-518; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 430-440; Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock

My old pastor who has done so much good for Christianity in our day, **John Piper**, is among many who do not like the covenant of works idea at all. He asks, “**Has God ever commanded anyone to obey with a view to earning or meriting life? Would God command a person to do a thing that he uniformly condemns as arrogant?**”<sup>18</sup> Piper clearly thinks that the idea of a covenant of works is the supreme height of hubris. “God? Wants us? To Merit Life? Ridiculous! Life is a gift of grace alone. How dare anyone think they could merit life from him!” Some will argue even further that God is our Father and we are his children. How could he ever make us *earn his love* like that? These are the kinds of objections that are raised by the doctrine of the covenant of works. I don’t question the zeal; I do question the logic and the hermeneutics.

### *Preamble*

These objections completely miss the point. The covenant of works is not about earning a Father’s love, which is unconditional as image bearers. Even in his wrath against sinners this very moment, God still loves them with a love of benevolence. He wishes us all good-will and does not delight in the death of the wicked. The rain falls on the just and the

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Publishers, 2006), 107-117; Marguerite Shuster, *The Fall and Sin: What We Have Become As Sinners* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 6-29.

<sup>18</sup> John Piper, *A Godward Life: Savoring the Supremacy of God in All Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1997), 171.



unjust, because of God's love, Jesus says. The covenant of works has nothing to do with earning love, but with earning a prize, getting a reward.

But someone will say that's all well and good, but who punishes someone just because they don't come in first place? God punishes the man for not winning the prize. Just here, we must also remember that though there is a Father-son relationship by virtue of the image, this relationship is **not one of equals** or just some slightly less number on a scale of being. God is infinitely greater than us, and our sonship is by virtue of creation and adoption. This is exactly the point of the preamble (which we can really look at the entirety of the story up to this point to see).

The **preamble** tells us who God is. He is the "**LORD God who took.**" God is the creator and sustainer of all. He is the giver of life and its taker. He is the Master, the Sovereign, the LORD God. He is before all things, the eternal "I AM." This is not just any god; it is the Creator of all else. The king-vassal relationship helps us see this better. The High King rules all. The entire first chapter established that God is the King of his creation and has taken his throne above all others. What the preamble does in our passage is helps to frame this covenant frames for us in these terms. It contextualizes who we are and who he is. God took the man. God has the rights over the man. Man is God's creation. He is the potter; we are

the clay. He is unmade; we are made from dust. He can put us where he likes and gives us whatever rules he wants to. We are not his equal. We are, by his kindness, his vassal.

### *Historical Prologue*

The second part of the covenant places us firmly in the realm of history. God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden. The **historical prologue** serves the purpose in a covenant treaty of reminding and recalling the relationship that existed between the two parties prior to the covenant. Most people think that God created Adam in the garden, but that is not what it says. Both **Gen 2:8** and **2:15** say that God put them man in the garden, meaning that he was **created outside of the garden**. Someone says, “Who cares?” There is a very good reason to care.

Since the garden of Eden is the prototypical sanctuary of the Bible (along with the earth itself), this placement by God of Adam is to be viewed as a theological and religious thing. To be “put” (*sim*, **vs. 8**) into the tabernacle is to have a **ceremonial appointing** in the Law. “I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which you shattered, and you shall put them in the ark” (**Deut 10:2** NAS). “Solomon brought in the things dedicated by his father David, the silver and the gold and the utensils, *and* he put them in the treasuries of the house of the LORD” (**1Kgs 7:51** NAS).

The same kind of thing is going on with Adam. Jubilees (dubbed “the little Genesis”) is a book written before the time of Christ, containing probably 80% of Genesis with some expansions. It gives one ancient tradition this way, “**And after forty days were completed for Adam in the land where he was created, we brought him into the garden of Eden so that he might work it and guard it**” (Jub 3:9). To prove what it is thinking, it goes on to say that Eve was brought in 8 days later and then immediately talks about how, if she has a son, she will be unclean for seven days and for thirty-three days because of the blood, she shall not touch anything in the sanctuary (vs. 10). It clearly reads our passage the way we are talking about now.

You also read the same thing in targum Pseuso-Jonathan, which I discovered this week says this for our verse, “**And the Lord God took the man from the mountain of worship, where he had been created, and made him dwell in the garden of Eden.**” Then it tells us what Adam was created to do. This begins the stipulations of the covenant...

### *Stipulations*

The targum reads, “...to do service in the law, and to keep its commandments.” In fact, two targums say this very same thing (also the Jerusalem Targum). These begin the stipulations of the covenant. These are the things the man must do. But what is he being told to do? Again, the targum

here, like Jubilees, is using the religious/cultic language of the temple.

There are two words here: *'abad* and *shamar*. They are usually translated as something like “work” and “keep” in English. One targum reads, “to culture it and keep it.” Some English translations say something like “cultivate and keep” (NAS) or “dress and keep” (JPS) or “tend and till” (TNK) or “care for and maintain” (NET). The problem is that the Hebrew words really convey two meanings simultaneously.

The image of a garden certainly conjures ideas of tending or cultivating or caring for. This goes back to the dominion mandate in Genesis 1 where we are commanded to subdue the earth. We are given rulership (as little kings/vassals), but we are to rule well and wisely, taking care of God’s creation as a nurse might take care of a newborn for the mother, tending for it as a shepherd for his sheep. We were to expand the Garden to the rest of the world, clearing out the waste and void through our good hard work and service to the High King. This gives man authority over the creation and the right to do all kinds of things, so long as he does so with wisdom and knowledge and righteousness and holiness. Indeed, these things strike at the very heart of our passage this morning.

But the targums are not wrong to translate the idea religiously. These words appear often together in the law and

without exception they describe “serving” and “guarding” the sanctuary or serving and “obeying” God’s word (cf. Num 3:7-8; 8:25-26; 18:5-6; 1 Chron 23:32; Ezek 44:14). So the double meaning is that they can refer to our kingly or our priestly duty. In this sense, they refer to the Levitical priesthood. The job of the Levitical priests was to **take care of the tabernacle**: to set it up, take it down, keep it neat, keep it clean, keep it holy, keep it pure. They were to protect it, like Phinehas does when people come near to defile it with false gods or with profane actions. Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, were burnt to a crisp because they failed to serve and guard the tabernacle. One of these words is actually used in our story of the angels who “guard” the way to the tree of life at the entrance to the sanctuary garden of Eden. When you understand that God did not merely command Adam to be a good gardener, but that he was also giving him the high priestly task of guarding the very holy of holies from that which is sinful and evil and profane, suddenly, the story of Genesis 3 and the fall comes into much sharper focus. Adam was negligent in his God ordained duty given here.

In these two ways then, the words reflect our kingly and priestly duties that were given to us by God in a holy covenant in a perfect garden prior to the fall. Does it not make sense that if Adam would have obeyed God here, that he would have cast the temptation away when it came to

him? Does it not make sense that he would have never realized that he was naked? Does it not make sense that in obeying, he would have passed the test and been granted eternal life? How is this an arrogant thing for someone to believe?

The commands continue. God gives two specific commands in the form of **imperatives**. The first shows God's extraordinary goodness. **"You may eat from any tree in the garden."** Nothing is withheld. He is allowed every delight that his eye can see. This includes the Tree of Life, doesn't it? If God does not forbid the Tree of Life, and if he is allowed to eat from every tree that is not forbidden, then he has the right to eat of the Tree of Life. In fact, after the fall, God intimates that Adam refused to eat from it, but adds that now he must not be allowed to or else he would live forever in such a condition.

Imagine having everything you could ever want. Nothing is withheld. All the delights, all the fruits, all the goodness of God's creation stands before you, a paradise that extends as far as you want to make it. But one little thing is withheld. It is a small thing, really. Not much to look at. Just a single leaf in a forest of trees. One tree. In the middle of the Garden. Open. Not fenced. Beautiful, but forbidden. **"But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat."**

The words of **Boromir** to **Frodo** as he is caught up in the throes of the uncontrollable shivering temptation or the ring are haunting.. “It is a strange fate that we should suffer so much fear and doubt over so small a thing ... such a little thing.” He is transfixed; he can’t get it out of his mind.

Our youngest got out of her crib this week. She never had a single problem taking a nap, not in 2 ½ years. *Until* we took the crib down and told her she has to stay in her new bed, a bed without a fence, a bed she can easily get out of, in the corner of a room she can now leave. We never had to tell her to take a nap before. We just set her in her crib and she was quiet as a church mouse and most days she even slept. What a great child, and obedient child. But now that we tell her she has to stay in her room and take a nap, what do you suppose is the one thing she absolutely will not do? She works herself up into a frenzy over it. She can’t stop. The law is too much for her now that she sees her freedom. This is the power of the law, the power of that which is forbidden, the power of the temptation to have what does not belong to you, that which is not yours, that which someone over you says you must not have. **Once I was alive apart from the law. But when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.** These were the stipulations, the terms, the rules, the laws of the covenant.

*Sanctions*

But why would God do such a thing? Why would he give everything to Adam except the one little tree? And by the way, what is this one little tree anyway? What is this tree of the knowledge of good and evil? What does it mean? What does it represent? In one word, it represents **autonomy**, **freewill**, the right to not be ruled by anyone, to be masters of our own destiny, to be the captains of our own ship.

To put it another way, it represents the desire to be High King, to make the rules ourselves. Indeed, the language of the knowledge of good and evil is used, deliberately, of kings in the OT. “He removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him” (Dan 2:21-22). Notice how Daniel acknowledges where wisdom and knowledge come from. This is the opposite of our parents.

“And your servant thought, 'The word of my lord the king will set me at rest,' for my lord the king is like the angel of God to discern (lit. to hear) good and evil. The LORD your God be with you!” (2Sa 14:17). Given that it is the Angel of God that puts Adam in the Garden, it seems this verse is a direct reflection on our own. “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern (lit. “understanding in the middle”) between



good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?" (1Ki 3:9).<sup>19</sup>

What is going on here is not that somehow Adam and Eve do not know what is right and what is wrong. Is that what you have always thought? No, the law is imprinted upon their consciences just as much as our own. Rather, what is going on is will they heed God's law, his discernment, his wisdom, his understanding and remain loyal vassals in the face of temptation. Will they let him be the Judge? Or will they rebel and make their own judgment on things, as autonomous members of the divine council, going against the will of the High King. Will they decide what is right and what is wrong or will He? Again I ask, how is it arrogant to believe that God would do this for his image bearer? I do not understand.

But again, why would God do such a thing? Why would he give everything to Adam except this one thing? I was struck by what it says at the end of our passage many years ago, when I first started wrestling with predestination. Predestination is like it sounds, pre-determined. It is not fate, for fate is unknowing, unforgiving, impersonal. Rather, predestination is a decreed end that comes from an all-wise, all-good, all-holy, all-just, all-sovereign God. Look at how the sanction reads, "For in the day that you eat of it you shall

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<sup>19</sup> A good article on this is William N. Wilder, "Illuminatio And Investiture: The Royal Significance Of The Tree Of Wisdom in Genesis 3," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 1 (2006): 50-69.

surely die” (Gen 2:17). Is there any sound here of “maybe” or “chance” or “I don’t know what will happen, but?” There is no “if” here, “If you eat, then you will die.” It doesn’t say that.

It is the same phrase that we have back in vs. 4, “In the day (*be-yom*).” In the day God created. In the day you eat. In other words, it is not like God didn’t know what Adam was actually going to do or exactly how things were going to turn out. He knew, and he did this for three reasons. The first is so that he might be glorified in what would happen next. The second and third explain the first. I take them from Zacharias Ursinus, author of the Heidelberg Catechism.

They are, so that God might furnish an exhibition of the weakness of the creature, when left to himself, and not preserved in original righteousness by his Creator.<sup>20</sup> In other words, God knew that Adam would not merit eternal life, so his grace was never at stake in this, as Piper seems to imply. In fact, the whole purpose of this law was to reveal to Adam how arrogant he really is apart from the right knowledge and trust in the creator. The purpose was to reveal that he is not the Creator. The covenant of works, for Adam, served the purpose of exposing to him that he is a creature. So Piper’s whole objection is actually about as ironic as it could be. Yes, God condemns it as arrogant to think that you can actually

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<sup>20</sup> Zacharias Ursinus and G. W. Williard, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Cincinnati, OH: Elm Street Printing Company, 1888), 35–36.

merit eternal life, and that was the whole purpose of tree, even for Adam. Yet, God is fair and he will give to each person according to what he has done. To all who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But, to those who are self-seeking, who reject the truth and follow evil, there will wrath and anger, trouble and distress for every human being who does evil (Rom 2:6-9).

But there is a second reason why God would do this. It was so that he might display his goodness, mercy, and grace, in saving, through Christ, all them that believe.<sup>21</sup> This is something Piper's argument fails to grasp, and I believe this is the logical entailment of rejecting the covenant of works (though many people, fortunately, do not follow their own logic to its conclusion)—it makes the active and passive obedience of Christ pointless. Yes, indeed God did command man to obey him and merit eternal life. And guess what? Jesus Christ, the second Adam, did that very thing. He was born under law. He was perfected as a high priest through his suffering and temptation and obedience. He was declared righteous at the resurrection, because he was without sin. He in fact earned eternal life from the Father as a man by obeying him in all things, and he did so as the Second Adam, after our

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<sup>21</sup> Ursinus, *ibid.*

first father failed in his task. He was saved by his works, and we are saved by His works.

This is the gospel. Friends this is what our world so desperately needs to hear. They need to hear the [preamble](#) of the covenant of works: There is one God and he is sovereign and he has a right to do whatever he wants with his creation. They need to hear the [historical prologue](#), that once upon a time, in our very dim but real past, God established mankind at the vice-gerents of his world to rule on God's behalf. He created us upright and we had fellowship and friendship with him.

But they also need to hear the [law, the stipulations, to recognize our place \*under\* God](#). We are supposed to be “one nation under God,” not over him. The church all the more so. We *all* need to hear the law—they, you, me. We need to know what he has commanded us to do. We need to know that he has given us all things, except the one thing which is what we want most badly—our autonomy from him. We need to see that supposed autonomy from God does not result in life, but in death, not in freedom, but in slavery, not in goodness, but in evil, not in restoration, but in ruin, not in salvation, but in damnation, not in heaven, but in hell. And we need to come once more under his authority by trusting through faith alone that his ways are higher than our ways, that he knows more than we do, that he wants what is best for

us, that his laws are actually good for us, that he knows what is best for us, that he knows how to and actually does give true freedom and abundant life.

As **Henri Blocher** says, “The Lord reserves for himself the royal prerogative to decide, the Creator God alone knows good and evil, he alone is autonomous. Relative to God, mankind must, in order to be happy, constantly approve his dependence as a vassal and renounce all conspiracy against his suzerain; relative to God, mankind must rejoice in his filial dependence and reject the mirage of a truant autonomy like that of the prodigal son.”<sup>22</sup>

If Arthur will not be your king, Camelot will not be your home. Adam and Eve and Satan too would find this out. But the way has been made so that the tree of life can be regained. So listen to and heed the Scripture. First the promise:

“And you, child (Jesus), will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (**Luke 1:76-79**).

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<sup>22</sup> Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 132-133. *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 4, no. 2 (2007): 30.

“God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2Co 4:6).

“As for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it” (Deut 1:39).

Then the command:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them” (Deut 30:19-20).