

Blueprints for Belief

Laying the Theological Foundations for Constructing Your Faith

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1. The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

- God doesn't owe us anything. If we were left on our own, the best we could hope for would be to obey God perfectly and hope He rewarded us, but because of our sin we can't do that. So instead, God chose to relate to us through a *covenant*—a binding promise.
- "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" – Luke 17:10
- "If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?" – 1 Samuel 2:25

2. The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

- The very first covenant God made with humanity was with Adam in the Garden of Eden. It's called the covenant of works. God promised Adam (and all his descendants through him) life and blessing if he perfectly obeyed His commands. But this covenant required flawless, personal obedience—something Adam failed to keep, bringing sin and death into the world.
- "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 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 2:16-17
- "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse..." Galatians 3:10

3. 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 offereth 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.

- When Adam broke the covenant of works, humanity lost any chance of gaining life by our own obedience. But God didn't leave us without hope. He made a second covenant, called the covenant of grace. In this covenant, God freely offers forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life through Jesus Christ. The only condition is faith in Christ. And because sinners cannot even believe on their own, God gives His Holy Spirit to those He has chosen for eternal life, making them both willing and able to trust in Jesus.
- "...by works of the law no human being will be justified... But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." Romans 3:20-22
- "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you... And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes..." Ezekiel 36:26-27
- "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." – John 6:44
- "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." – Acts 16:14

4. This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed. Because of the corruption we inherit from Adam, we are naturally bent away from good and toward evil. This inward sinfulness is the source from which all our actual sins (the things we think, say, and do against God's law) come.

- The Bible often describes the covenant of grace using the word "testament" (like a will). Why? Because it points us to Jesus Christ, whose death puts the covenant into effect. Just like a will goes into force when the one who made it dies, so the blessings of eternal life and inheritance are guaranteed to us through the death of Christ. In Him, believers receive every spiritual blessing and the promise of everlasting life.
- "Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance... For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established." – Hebrews 9:15-17
- "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." – Luke 22:20

5. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.

- The covenant of grace (salvation in Christ) was revealed in different ways throughout history. In the Old Testament times, God gave His people signs and ceremonies — promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the Passover lamb, and many other practices. These all pointed forward to Christ and taught the people to look ahead to Him. These were not empty rituals. The Holy Spirit used them to strengthen the faith of God's chosen people, keeping their eyes on the coming Messiah. Believers in the Old Testament were truly forgiven and saved by Christ, just as we are today — though they looked forward to His coming, while we look back.
- "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never... make perfect those who draw near." – Hebrews 10:1
- "He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith..." Romans 4:11

6. Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.

- Now that Christ has come (under the New Testament), the covenant of grace is revealed with greater clarity and power. The covenant is now administered through preaching and two sacraments. These ordinances may look "less impressive" than the ceremonies of the Old Testament, but they are more powerful and clearer because they point directly to Christ crucified and risen. The covenant of grace is for all nations, Jew and Gentile alike.
- "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you..." Matthew 28:19-20
- "This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant." Hebrews 7:22

Objections

“The covenant of works isn’t in the Bible.”

- The phrase is not, but the concept is. “like Adam, they transgressed the covenant...” Hosea 6:7

“Every covenant involves grace.”

- This is somewhat true. God showed grace by creating Adam and placing Him in the garden, but life depended on his obedience.

“Isn’t faith itself a work?”

- No. Faith is the instrument of our salvation, but it earns us no merit. Even faith is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8). Repentance and obedience are the fruits of faith, but not the basis of our acceptance.

“Old Testament saints were saved by keeping the law.”

- The New Testament clearly teaches this is false.

Discussion Questions

- 1) In what ways do you still live as though you’re under a “covenant of works” — trying to earn God’s love through obedience, performance, or good works?
- 2) The covenant of grace is God’s commitment to love His people despite their failures. How can reflecting on this help you be more patient and forgiving with your spouse, children, or coworkers?
- 3) How does the doctrine of covenant help you answer doubts about whether God is truly for you and with you?