

Covenant Theology

Week 2: The Covenant of Works

The Covenant of Works is the original covenant that God made with Adam in the garden. In this covenant, God promised eternal life upon perfect obedience and threatened death upon disobedience. As the appointed covenant representative, Adam's obedience or disobedience was on behalf of the entire human race.

A. The Contents of the Covenant of Works

The Covenant Context. After God created Adam, he placed him in the garden, making it the context of the covenant. The garden was the original temple of God and the kingdom of God, where his image bearers were to rule and reign as His representatives. Adam and his descendants, as God's priests and kings, were to spread the temple-garden throughout all of creation.

- God placed Adam in the garden *after* he was created (Genesis 2:8, 15)
- The Garden was a Temple
 - The Presence of God (Genesis 3:8; Leviticus 26:11)
 - A holy mountaintop (Genesis 2:10-14; cf. Ex 19:23; Gen 22:2-14; Ps 43:3; Deut 12:2; Rev 21:10)
 - A river flowing from its midst (Gen 2:10; Ezekiel 47:3-12)
 - Garden imagery in the Temple/tabernacle (1 Kings 6:18, 29; 7:18-20)
 - Precious stones (Genesis 2:11-12; 2 Chronicles 3:6)
 - The priestly task was to "work" and "keep" (Gen 2:15; cf. Num 3:6-8; 1 Chr 9:19-27)

Adam and his offspring's task as priests in the garden was to guard and protect the purity of God's earthly temple.

- The Garden was a Kingdom
 - Man (male and female) is "the image of God" — i.e. a royal representative (Genesis 1:27)
 - He was to "rule over" creation (Genesis 1:26)
 - His rule was to extend throughout the whole earth (Genesis 1:28)

Adam and his offspring's task in the garden as kings was to rule and subdue the entire earth as God's righteous representatives.

The Covenant Head. Adam was appointed by God to be the "federal" (i.e. "covenant") head for all his descendants. In other words, Adam represented the entire human race and his fate would be their fate.

- "Federal" = Covenant (Latin *foedus* = covenant)
- Adam as federal head of the Covenant of Works is a "type" of Christ as head of the New Covenant (Romans 5:14, 19; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

The Covenant Command. In addition to the natural law of God written on his heart, Adam was also given a "positive" command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

- Natural Law: what we owe to God by nature (i.e. complete obedience to the moral law)
- Positive Law: an additional command given by God that would otherwise not be known to us
- The command not to eat of the tree was a positive command unique to the Covenant of Works, given to test Adam's complete submission and obedience to His Creator

The Covenant Threat (or “Sanction”). If Adam failed to obey the entirety of God’s law, including the positive command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he would “surely die.”

- Perfect obedience was required to avoid death; i.e. no forgiveness is offered in this covenant (Gen 3:17)
- The nature of the death threatened:
 - Spiritual (Eph 2:1)
 - Physical (Gen 5:5ff)
 - Eternal (Rev 14:11)

The Covenant Promise. If Adam fulfilled all righteousness through obedience, then at some point God would have confirmed him in his holy condition and given him eternal life.

- Adam did not possess eternal life in the garden (he was not *immortal* and he had the *ability to sin*)
- Had Adam been perfectly obedient, he would have gained eternal life for himself and his offspring
 - Perfect righteousness leads to eternal life (Matthew 19:17)
 - Since Christ gained eternal life through obedience, by implication Adam would have also (Rom 5:12ff)
 - Christ brings us to the glory to which Adam failed to bring us (Romans 3:23; Hebrews 2:10)
 - The tree of life symbolized the promise of eternal life (Genesis 3:22; cf. Rev 2:7; 22:14)

B. The Covenant of Works in the Story of Redemption

Adam Was Created Upright and Just and Placed in the Garden as King and Priest

- His task as king and priest was to rule the world and extend the temple garden throughout creation
- As covenant head, he was to obtain eternal and sinless life for all of his offspring through his obedience

Adam Failed the Test of Righteousness, and Life in the Garden Was Lost

- Adam and Eve were banished from God’s temple (Genesis 3:24)
- The kingdom was handed over to Satan (2 Cor 4:3-4; Luke 4:5-7; Col 1:13; John 12:31)
- Death now reigns over all of Adam’s descendants (Genesis 5, Romans 5:12ff)

Christ (the Second Adam) Fulfilled the Covenant of Works

- In Genesis 3:15, God makes the initial promise of the Second Adam (i.e. Jesus Christ)
- He *satisfied the curse* of the Covenant of Works through His suffering
- He *obtained for us the eternal life* promised in the Covenant of Works through His righteousness (Rom 5:18-20)

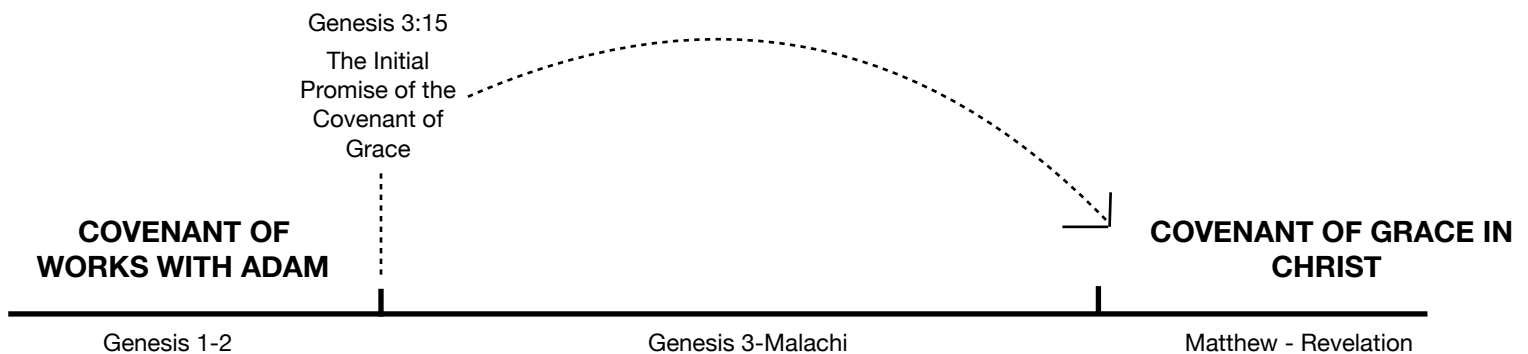
Christ Will One Day Fully Restore and Consummate His Global Temple-Kingdom

- The whole earth will become His temple-garden (Revelation 22:1-2)
- He has made us a to be a new kingdom of priests (Revelation 1:6; 1 Peter 2:9)
- He has subdued the serpent and will one day cast him out forever (Revelation 12:9; 20:10)

C. The Importance of the Covenant of Works

- It Shows Us Why the World is the Way it Is
- It Prevents Confusion Between Law and Grace
- It Reveals Our Need for Imputed Righteousness
- It Leads Us to Worship

1. The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace



2. The Task of the Priest: “Work” and “Keep”

Genesis 2:15 (ESV)

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to **work (avad)** it and keep **keep (shamar)** it.

Numbers 3:6-8 (ESV)

“Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. 7 They shall **keep (shamar)** guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they **minister (avad)** at the tabernacle. 8 They shall **guard (shamar)** all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep **guard (shamar)** over the people of Israel as they **minister (avad)** at the tabernacle. 9 And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are wholly given to him from among the people of Israel. 10 And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall **guard (shamar)** their priesthood. But if **any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death.**”

Numbers 18:5-7 (NASB)

“And you shall **keep (shamar)** guard over the sanctuary and over the altar, that there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel. 6 And behold, I have taken your brothers the Levites from among the people of Israel. They are a gift to you, given to the LORD, to do the **service (from: avad)** of the tent of meeting. 7 And you and your sons with you shall **guard (shamar)** your priesthood for all that concerns the altar and that is within the veil; and you shall **serve (avad)**. I give your priesthood as a gift, and **any outsider who comes near shall be put to death.**”

At the heart of this question of justification and imputation is the rejection of what is called the covenant of works... In this work of fulfilling the covenant for us in our stead, theology speaks of the 'active obedience' of Christ... Without Christ's active obedience to the covenant of works, there is no reason for imputation, there is no ground for justification. If we take away the covenant of works, we take away the active obedience of Jesus. If we take away the active obedience of Jesus, we take away the imputation of His righteousness to us. If we take away the imputation of His righteousness to us, we take away justification by faith alone. If we take away justification by faith alone, we take away the gospel, and we are left in our sins.

- R.C. Sproul