

A Study of the Covenant of Grace

Lesson 1: Why Covenant?

Intro

It is tempting to think of the term “covenant” as an outdated one. When we think of covenants, we get the image of something people in the past did; of something that involved blood. Although the terminology might feel ancient, the concept is much more common than we think. Moreover, it is not simply an artificial label that our spiritual forefathers used. It is the very vehicle by which God chose to condescend and to cross the chasm between the Creator and his creatures. WCL 7.1: *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.*

Our goal: to grow in our understanding and experiential knowledge of God’s covenant with his people, to discover its benefits and to live them out in our lives.

I. The Definition of Covenant

A. Covenant – *a mutually binding agreement between two parties.*

1. *Mutually* – biblical covenant always constitutes a relationship. When we speak of God covenanting with his people, it is never a merely formal agreement. The very act of creation of God’s image-bearers was an act of grace and love on God’s part.
2. *Binding* – biblical covenants involve guarantees and obligations (or blessings and obligations). A covenant is also a commitment, a bond.

B. *Too broad of a definition?*

1. Varied opinions on the etymology¹ of the root word range from ‘to fetter,’ ‘to eat bread with,’ to ‘to decide.’
2. Frequent use of the word ‘covenant’ makes its context of greater importance than its etymology.
3. Keeps our minds open to further observance of some of the attendant actions and events occurring in conjunction with covenant ratification. This, in turn, allows us **to identify** a covenantal context even if the term ‘covenant’ is not used.
4. Relevance – while the word “covenant” is distant to our modern minds, the definition is very familiar. As people of our day and age we are accustomed to “covenanting” with each other.
5. Prevalence – defined this way (as obligations and guarantees), covenant is present in all areas of life. Examples:
 - a) As believers, we are commanded (obligated) to treat other believers a with love (Eph. 4:29-32; Jn. 15:12; 1 Jn 4:20-21).
 - b) The recognition (in different degrees) of sanctity of life.
 - c) Even your relationship, or absence thereof, with a random stranger on the street has covenantal undertones.
 - d) Biblical examples – Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 21:25-32), Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31:44-55)

¹ “Etymology simply refers to the history of a word and frequently in Hebrew involves linking the word to some foundational root which is often evidenced in another Semitic language besides Hebrew.” (Barrett, 111)

C. Covenant as relationship – covenants work only within relational context (E.g.: our attempts to “covenant” with nature). This explains why every personal relationship is “covenantal” and why every covenant must be relational.

II. The Covenant of Works vs. the Covenant of Grace

The need for contrast between the two: “As our self-righteous disposition inclines us in our intercourse with God frequently to confound or blend together these two covenants; and as it is of unspeakable importance to the holiness and comfort of true Christians that they be able clearly to distinguish between them”. (Colquhoun, 500)

1. They differ in their nature
 - a) Friendship vs. Reconciliation
 - b) Ontological distance vs. Relational distance
 - c) Friends vs. Enemies
2. They differ in contracting parties
3. They differ in their outcome
4. They differ in their properties
5. They differ in their conditions
6. They differ in their promises
7. They differ in substance
8. They differ in their administration
9. They differ in the role of obedience
10. They differ in their effects on mankind

III. The Reason for the Covenant of Grace

- A. From God’s perspective it was never necessary. He was in no way obligated to save mankind from its misery.² It is from our point of view that we *needed* a way out of our misery, lest we suffer eternal judgment under God’s just wrath.
- B. A straightforward explanation for the covenant of grace is our breaking of the covenant of works in Adam as our representative.
 - 1. **Question 1:** Was it not possible to restore the covenant of works?
 - 2. **Answer 1:** It was not for the following reasons:
 - a) The covenant of works was directly linked to the probationary test of obedience.
 - b) It was a matter of identity:
 - (1) The covenant of works was one of friendship, but they were enemies.
 - (2) One of innocence, but they were guilty sinners.
 - 3. **Question 2:** Could there have been an alternative covenant with humankind as the immediate party?
 - 4. **Answer 2:** There couldn’t have for the following reasons:
 - a) “Their ignominious character as transgressors rendered it dishonorable for Him to have any immediate intercourse with them.” (Colquhoun, xviii) Again, it is a matter of identity and God’s character
 - b) Legal inability
 - c) Moral inability
 - d) Our temporal view of sin vs. God’s atemporal record of sins.
- C. “It was necessary, therefore, that if any covenant was ever to be made for the salvation of sinners of mankind, it should be made primarily and immediately with a divine Person who, in the same nature that had sinned, could afford to pay their boundless debt, as stated according to the broken covenant of works.” (Colquhoun, xviii)

Applications

- A. Praise the Lord for his covenants
- B. Evaluate your covenant status
- C. Evaluate your covenant behavior
- D. Ask God for help
- E. Live your covenant out

² “[The covenant of grace] originated from the boundless grace or sovereign good pleasure of God, and everything settled in it is, and ever will be ‘to the praise of the glory of His grace’ (Eph. 1:6). In and by this covenant God has manifested the unfathomable depths of His manifold wisdom, the unsearchable riches of his glorious grace, and the transcendent greatness of His astonishing love far more clearly than if man himself had performed the condition and had been adjudged to eternal life, according to the tenor of the covenant of works.” (Colquhoun, xix)