

Genesis 3:16–19

“The Common Curse and Common Grace”

April 19, 2020

¹⁴ The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. ¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." ¹⁶ To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." ¹⁷ And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

God made a covenant of works with Adam, which included sanctions: life and death. The blessing sanction was life in the ultimate sense of the term—glorified, eternal life in heaven. The curse sanction was death in the ultimate sense of the term—eternal perdition in hell.

After testing man's obedience in a probation event, God's plan was bring Adam and Eve before his judgment seat for final judgment and render to them according to their works. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, God appeared in the garden of Eden to judge them. If God had judged them according to strict justice, he would have consigned them then and there to eternal perdition in hell, but that's not what they received from God.

God cursed the serpent, and that curse would ultimately result in his damnation, but God did not immediately execute his final judgment against him. God delayed the execution of his final judgment against Satan and against fallen man because God had another plan. God said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (3:15).

God reveals his plan to bring redemption to sinners through a Redeemer, who will execute the final judgment on Satan. God did not cast Adam and Eve into the lake of fire because he had a plan to redeem them and to redeem some of their children. God did not plan to redeem all humanity but to redeem some of them—the elect. Humanity is divided into two groups: the elect and the non-elect. The elect will be redeemed by God through the champion seed of the

woman who will crush the head of the serpent, but the non-elect will not be redeemed but will be consigned to perdition with Satan and his angels at the end of the world.

In the parable that Jesus told in Matt 25, the elect and the non-elect are represented by the sheep and the goats respectively. At the last day, the sheep and the goats will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Christ will say to the sheep, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt 25:34). The sheep are the elect who are redeemed by Christ, and they, therefore, receive the blessing sanction of the covenant of works—eternal glorification in heaven. But to the goats, Christ will say, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41). The goats are the non-elect who are not redeemed by Christ, and they receive the curse sanction of the covenant of works—eternal perdition in hell. On judgment day, God will execute the two sanctions of the covenant of works: life and death.

God postpones that final judgment in order to make room in history for the accomplishment of his plan of redemption. God delayed the destruction of the wicked in order to accomplish in history the redemption of his elect people through a Redeemer. God endures “with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,” says Paul, “in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory” (Rom 9:22–23). God postpones his final judgment in order to carry out his plan of redemption in history.

The entire history of the human race from the fall of Adam and Eve until the final judgment is a time of divine restraint and patience and forbearance in which God does not display the full measure of his wrath against sin. God suspends the full revelation of his wrath until “the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (Rom 2:5). By his common grace, God exercises restraint and forbearance until “the judgment of the great day” when that restraint will be removed (Jude 6). The great day of God’s wrath will come at the end of the world, and all human beings will stand before his judgment seat either condemned in Adam or justified in Christ.

That will happen at the end of human history. At the present time, however, we are living under a different state of affairs. All people, elect or non-elect, are living under a common curse and under common grace. All people enjoy certain blessings in common and suffer certain curses in common. They share in the common curse that God pronounced on humanity, which curse is tempered by God’s common grace.

To the woman, God said, in Gen 3:16, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” “You shall bring forth children.” That’s a blessing. “Children are a heritage from the LORD” (Psalm 127:3). Childbearing is a divine gift (a divine blessing). “You shall bring forth children in pain because I will multiply your pain in

childbearing.” That’s a curse. Suffering pain in childbearing is a divine curse. Both childbearing, a divine blessing, and suffering pain in childbearing, a divine curse, are common to all people.

In Gen 3:16–19, God pronounces curses that are common to all people regardless of which group they belong to: the elect or the non-elect. These are *common* curses, not the curse sanctions of the covenant of works but only temporary curses that belong to this age only and not to the age to come. These curses are experienced by all people in common—whether believers or unbelievers. That’s the state of affairs that began in Gen 3 and will continue until the final judgment at the end of the world when the sheep and the goats are separated and the two sanctions of the covenant of works are administered.

Along with these common curses comes common blessings, which are enjoyed by all people without discriminating between the elect and the non-elect. Bearing children is a divine blessing, and both the elect and the non-elect can and do have children. That’s one example of a common blessing that comes as a result of common grace. Another example is that of marriage, which is also mentioned in v. 16, “To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” The elect and the non-elect share in common the blessing of children and the curse of pain in childbearing, but they also share in common the blessing of marriage and the curse of conflict in marriage.

“Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” That refers to a power struggle within the family such that the natural order of the husband being the head of the wife becomes a source of conflict in the home. The wife will not willingly submit to her husband, nor will he lovingly exercise headship over her. Rather, he will “rule over” her, which phrase is used here in a negative sense to mean something like he will impose his dominion over her.

In Gen 3:17–19. God turns his attention to Adam and pronounces more common curses tempered by common grace.¹⁷ And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

God curses the ground in such a way that for man to get food from the earth, he must exert painful toil. The earth will not only yield its precious fruit but also thorns and thistles, and the only way that man can eat bread is by the sweat of his face. People will still eat the plants of the field; they will still eat bread. That’s a common blessing. But they will only do so by painful toil; that’s a common curse.

The pronouncement of these common curses reaches a climactic point in verse 19 where God curses all human beings with physical death.¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return. God formed man's body from the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7), and now, as a result of the fall, God imposes the common curse of physical death in which man's soul will be separated from his body, and his body will return to the dust. This physical death must be distinguished from the second death, which is eternal perdition in hell. The curse of death in v. 19 is not the kind of death that was threatened in the covenant of works. But this death is, nevertheless, a result of Adam's sin. It's not the *ultimate* penalty for sin, but it is, in fact, a penalty for sin. Physical death is not natural to humanity; it came only as a result of the fall.

This death is only temporary. At the end of the world, the dead will rise and stand before the judgment seat of God. "An hour is coming," said Jesus, "when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28–29; cf. Rev. 20:11–15). Those are the two sanctions of the covenant of works: the consummate blessing of life and the consummate curse of death. On judgment day, the seed of the woman will be raised to "the resurrection of life," glorified, eternal life in heaven. But the seed of the serpent will be raised "to the resurrection of judgment." That's the final state of affairs, which will bring a permanent end to the current state of affairs in which the elect and the non-elect live under a common curse and under common grace.