

What Is The Covenant of Works?

Or... “What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created?”

Outline

- I. Show that God made a covenant with Adam, when he created him in a state of innocence and holiness
- II. Explain the nature of this covenant
- III. Show why God entered into this covenant with man
- IV. Make use of what we've learned

God Made A Covenant With Adam

- Consider the context of Gen. 2:16-17
 - The parties to the covenant: God & Man
 - The duty of the covenant: not to eat the forbidden fruit
 - A sanction for the breaking of the covenant: death
 - An implied promise in the case of keeping it: life
 - Man's acceptance is also implied in Gen. 3:3 where Eve explains its terms and Gen. 3:8 in which the man and woman had terrified consciences for breaking the covenant.
- By way of confirmation: Gal. 4:24; Hos. 6:7

The Nature of the Covenant

- The parties covenanting:
 - God on the one hand, in the persons of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost
 - Man on the other hand, in the person of Adam who represented all of mankind (Rom. 5:12).
- The condition of the covenant:
 - Perfect obedience on Adam's part
 - Gal. 3:10, 12
 - The tenor of the covenant was “do this and live.”

Perfect Obedience

- The law, which was to be the rule of that obedience; which is twofold:
 - The moral law, or the law summarized in the ten commandments
 - The positive law, or the prohibition from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil
- The obedience which God required was perfect, perpetual, and personal.

Perfect Obedience

- Perfect in respect to its principle. Not a mere external obedience, but loving the Lord with the whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.
- Perfect in respect to its parts. Not one thing could be left undone that God required and not one thing could be done that God forbade.

Perfect Obedience

- Perfect in respect to its continuance: it must be perpetual.
 - There is no mention of a termination of this trial in Scripture.
 - Most covenant theologians, however, following Hodge, Boston, and others have maintained that there would be a fulfillment of the terms of the covenant such that Adam could have partaken of life. Such a view is neither necessary nor strictly biblical.

The Nature of the Covenant

- Parties (God & Man)
- Condition (Perfect Obedience)
- The Promise was life. Thus the WSC refers to this covenant as the covenant of life rather than the covenant of works.
 - Certainly natural life was promised so long as Adam continued
 - Spiritual life is implied in that his death upon disobedience was spiritual prior to physical.

The Promise of Life

- Most covenant theologians believe that Adam was promised eternal life in heaven; such a view requires that Adam would have a probationary period which would come to an end at some date known to God and that Adam would then be “translated” in some way.
- However, it is also possible that the promise of life was strictly on the basis of “so long as you continue in my commandments, you will live spiritually and physically.” That would be eternal if Adam’s obedience was eternal.

The Penalty of the Covenant

- Death, which occurred first in the spiritual realm and subsequently (930 years later) in the physical realm.
- Adam's soul was divested of the image of God in the day that he sinned, such that he no longer had knowledge of God, true righteousness or true holiness. Also, the crown of immortality was removed so that his offspring would be dead spiritually and some would also die "the second death" which is eternal torment.

The Confirmation of the Covenant

- The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was given as a warning “sign” not to attempt the knowledge of evil by experiment, but only by the revelation of the Word of God.
- The tree of life did not convey life more than any other tree; rather it was a sign that life comes only by obedience to the will of God in the covenant of works.
- Though Adam may have imagined that he could obtain life by the tree of life, God recognized that to attempt it would be nothing more than a return to a covenant of works-righteousness for one who could not then obtain his own righteousness by works of the law.

Why God Entered Into A Covenant of Works

- Simply put, God has not given us a reason. So if we answer it, we must do so by way of implication from what God has said in his Word.
- Before the covenant was entered, man was already bound to obey God perfectly. But God was not bound to grant life to Adam for his obedience. That is to say, God was free to continue or discontinue Adam's life at his pleasure. But God then bound himself by a promise to give Adam life for obedience.

Why A Covenant of Works?

- For God's own glory:
 - To display his manifold wisdom (Eph. 3:10)
 - To display how his sovereignty is tempered by condescension to his creature, man
 - To display his boundless love toward his creature made in his image
 - To display his truth and faithfulness in keeping his covenant
 - To clear his resentment done to his honor by the sin of the man and woman

Why A Covenant of Works?

- For man's greater good:
 - To place a higher honor upon him. In the covenant man was not only the creature of God, but his friend as well.
 - To bind him closer to his duty of obedience. Though Adam was inclined to all holiness, yet his estate was a mutable one.
 - To increase the cheerfulness of his obedience and to give him an additional motive.

Making Use of the Doctrine

- Consider with much astonishment that God has always been quite willing to condescend to man to be his friend and ally.
- Consider how far man is fallen. When he had every advantage, including the daily fellowship of God, still he fell.
- Consider how just is every cross providence toward fallen men.

Making Use of the Doctrine

- Consider the deplorable condition of all humanity due to the fall.
- Be humbled in knowing that by nature we have lost all that is good and noble in our race.
- As we think about this covenant, let us also turn our eyes to that better covenant that God has for us in Christ.

Making Use of the Doctrine

- If you have not yet closed with Christ in your life, consider how miserable your existence really is. Do not think about good desires, motives, or hopes outside Christ. Do not think to get any life or happiness by your own efforts.
- Lay hold on Jesus Christ by faith. Accept his obedience which is perfect and lay hold of his covenant which is full of promise