

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 10—The Covenant of Works, Q. 12

- I. Did God make a covenant with Adam in the Garden of Eden?
- A. People have a lot of different ideas about *how* each of us is related to Adam and his probation in the Garden, *what part*, if any, we played in his disobedience, *what impact* his penalty had on us, *and in what condition or estate* each of us stands before God. Moreover, there are a lot of different ideas about how to understand the parallels Paul draws between Adam and Christ, the last Adam, in such passages as Rom 5.15-19; 1Cor 15.42-49
- B. The question arises, then: *Did God make a covenant with Adam?*
1. The word *covenant* isn't found in the first three chapters of Genesis. But if we find the essential parts which make up a covenant, then we must answer that question in the affirmative.
 2. The parts of the covenant are: 1) parties, 2) conditions, 3) a penalty, and 4) a promise; and as will be shown below, these are all found in Genesis 2.
 3. Added to that, Hos 6.7 affirms that Adam's transgression was *the transgression of the covenant* and Rom 5.14 says Adam's sin was unique and not repeated by his posterity, though it was *in some way* like the obedience of his antitype, viz. Christ.
- C. This leaves us with only one conclusion, as our Catechism declares: *God made a covenant with Adam upon his creation.*
1. This covenant has been called *the covenant of nature* because it was the covenant of man in his natural estate; *a legal covenant* because its condition is perfect conformity to the law of God; *the covenant of works* because the work of obedience was required in it; and *a covenant of life* because the promise attached to obedience was life.
 2. It was also essentially a gracious covenant because although every creature is bound to obey God, God can't be bound or put under obligation to render His creatures *anything* in return for their obedience, Lk 17.10. *To offer Adam *anything* in return for his obedience was a purely gracious act on the part of God, while the *condition* of it being fulfilled was the perfect obedience of Adam.
- II. Why was this a special act of providence?
- A. Because Adam had many other providential blessings given to him. WLC 20: he was placed in a paradise, given charge to work the ground and enjoy its yield, had the freedom to eat of every tree in the Garden save one, had all the creatures under his dominion, had a wife as a helper, communion with God, a Sabbath rest every week, and was made in the image of God with knowledge of His will, righteousness of life, and holiness of heart, and the blessing of God upon his marriage bed.
- B. A covenantal arrangement to rise above his current condition and enjoy *not only* the permanence of his blessings *but even more* above and beyond it in the life and fellowship with God offered by it, was indeed *a special act of God's providence.*
- III. Who were the parties in the covenant?
- A. The covenant was made between *God*, the moral Governor of the universe, and *Adam* the free moral agent created by Him. *As God*, He could rightly demand perfect moral conformity to His Law, *and as creature*, Adam was under an inalienable obligation to obey.
- B. Moreover, as will become clear in Q.16, Adam was a party in the covenant, not only for himself, but for all his human posterity. This is clear when comparing Gen 2.17 with Rom 5.12-14
1. Thus, we are *ALL personally invested* in what happened in Gen 2-3 between Adam and God. This is not something we can ignore. So that what happened here affected *each and every one of us* directly and has a determinative affect on our standing before God!!
- IV. What was the condition of the covenant?

- A. *Note*: The *conditions* of a covenant made between two parties are usually *mutually* imposed and *mutually* binding. But in the case of a sovereign constitution, imposed by the Creator upon the creature, the *conditions* of the covenant are better expressed as 1) *promises* on the part of the Creator, suspended upon 2) *conditions* to be fulfilled by the creature, together with 3) an *alternative penalty* to be inflicted in case the condition fails.
- B. The condition of the covenant was Adam's *perfect and personal obedience* (in head, heart, and hand—i.e. his whole person and soul) to the special and particular law given in Gen 2.17
1. The command to abstain from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was in itself an “arbitrary” command of God. There was no reason for it other than that *it was the will of God*.
 - a) But *this is what made it the perfect test*. It was a clear and naked test of man's submission to God's absolute will for no other reason but that *it was God's will*.
 - b) *This special probation was designed to teach Adam self-restraint, self-conquest, and unquestioning obedience to the Divine Will.
 2. Henry: “Now it was very proper to make trial of his obedience by such a command as this, because the reason of it is fetched purely from the will of the Lawmaker. Adam had in his nature an aversion to that which was *evil in itself*, and therefore he is tried in a thing that was *evil only because it was forbidden*; and being in a small thing, it was the more fit to prove his obedience by.”
- C. The tree of knowledge had no special virtue in itself (neither did the tree of life), but was sovereignly appointed by God as *a tree of trial*. Adam's probation for good or evil was suspended upon it. All Adam's blessedness, and even his life itself, was suspended upon this test of his submission to the will of God.
1. The *tree of knowledge* is so named because through the disobedience of eating it, mankind came to *the learned experience* of how precious good was! and how evil sin is! “Knowledge is here taken disparagingly, in a bad sense, for *that wretched experience* which man began to acquire for himself” (Calvin).
- V. What was the penalty of the covenant?
- A. The penalty was *death*, and it includes *all the grave and penal consequences of sin against God*.
 1. Natural death, Ecc 12.7; Heb 9.27
 2. Moral and spiritual death, Mt 8.22; Eph 2.1-3; 1Tim 5.6
 3. Eternal death, Mt 25.46; Lk 13.28; Rev 14.11; 20.6-14
 - B. It's the intervening grace of God that suspends the full effect of the penalty upon mankind in the present life. His mercy gives us space to repent and come to Him, Rom 2.4
 - C. We see the effects of transgressing the covenant in our first parents: the immediate impact of their actions on their view of themselves, their view of each other, and their view of God, i.e. shame of nakedness, fear, alienation from God, unbelief, and, in time, the death of the body.
 - D. The penalty of this broken covenant is what is being carried out in the lives of all men in their: being born in sin, totally depraved and corrupted by sin's dominion over them, slaves to Satan and lovers of darkness, mortality of body, all the miseries of this life, and, without saving grace, eternal damnation.
- VI. What was the implied promise of the covenant?
- A. A covenant is a *conditional promise*, a promise conditioned upon the fulfillment of the requirements of the covenant.
 - B. The *promise of life* is necessarily implied in the *penalty of death*. If disobedience is linked to death, then life is necessarily linked to obedience, Rom 10.5; Gal 3.12
 - C. The life promised to Adam was *not simply the continuation* of what he already had, but *an advance* from mutability to immutability, from probation to fixation, from having the ability to sin to being unable to ever sin, from the status of a servant in covenant with God to the status of a noble in fellowship with God.

- D. The life promised must correspond to the death threatened, and that involved eternal separation from God and irretrievable destruction, Mt 22.13; Mk 9.43; Rev 14.11
- VII. What was the seal or sacrament of the covenant of works?
- A. A seal/sacrament of a covenant is an outward visible sign appointed by God as a visible pledge of His faithfulness to the covenant and as an earnest of the blessings promised in the covenant.
1. In the covenant with Noah, it was the rainbow, Gen 9.12-13.
 2. In the covenant with Abraham, it was circumcision in the OT, Gen 17.9-11, and baptism in the New, Col 2.11-12; Gal 3.26-27, and it was the Passover in the OT, Ex 12, and the Lord's Supper in the New, Mt 26.28
- B. The *tree of life* was the seal and sacrament of that life which was promised in the covenant made with Adam. When Adam transgressed the covenant he was forbidden to partake of *the seal* of it because he'd forfeited *the life* it promised (Gen 3.22). But by the grace of God, in the covenant of grace immediately instituted (Gen 3.15, 20-21), God provided a new way for man to partake of the life he'd forfeited by sin, and that is, by faith in His Son, Jn 3.16; 14.6; Rev 22.1-2; Rom 5.20

Questions:

1. Is the covenant of works still in force today? If so, then in what sense?
 - 1.1. The probation of Adam was the probation of the human race once and for all and the trial resulted in our loss. There's *no way* to be tried again because the trial presupposes a sinless and obedient party.
 - 1.2. We don't stand before God alone, as on probation in this life; but we stand in Adam as already tried, already fallen, already under His wrath, already judged, in need of rescue.
2. When we evangelize the lost, we often begin by telling them of Christ's coming to save sinners like them and if they will believe on Christ, God will save them, Jn 3.16. Have you ever had anyone say to you in response, "But I'm a good person. Why do I need saving? My good works will outweigh my bad when I stand before God"? Are we missing something by starting in that way? What's a better place to start with people?
3. Was it *just* for God to suspend *all* Adam's blessings and *life* itself on one act of obedience or disobedience? Does one sin really deserve eternal death and damnation?
 - 3.1. These questions reveal how true it is that *we've forgotten that sin is lawlessness*. It is *treason* (to use our God-given life and faculties for holiness to sin against Him, to stab Him in the heart!) and it is *an act and declaration of war* (it's as much as saying "I will be God, and not you. The right to determine good and evil is my right. The right to govern my life is my right. The right to be served is mine."). Sin is an infinite evil against an infinite God deserving of infinite punishment.
4. Praise God for the covenant of grace, Eph 2.4
5. Memorize WSC 10 along with Gen 2.16-17; Js 2.10; 1Jn 3.4