

D. Covenant and Sacred Space

In the shalomic perfection of the original creation, man enjoyed the unique status of image-son. God had created Adam and Eve in His own image and likeness, and He had done so in order that mankind would be capable of fulfilling its ordained role in the created order. Man bears the divine image because of God's determination that he would rule over the creation in His name and authority as His regal son. Thus, as it pertained to Adam and Eve, shalom was expressed in their dominion in the context of perfect communion with their Father-Lord.

Given their created nature and intended function as creatures, Adam and Eve's relationship with God may properly be understood in covenantal terms. This is because all covenants are contracts, and all contracts are *relational* instruments; whatever their form or matter, they define and establish some form of relationship between two or more parties. Thus covenants (contracts) identify the covenanting parties, define the nature of the relationship being established, enumerate the criteria for the successful performance of that relationship, and specify rewards for compliance and penalties for violation of the contract. Business and government contracts, international treaties, and even marriage are all examples of covenants.

As to the matter of a creational covenant, Reformed Theology has traditionally held to a "covenant of works" between Adam and God. That covenant is said to have established Adam's obligation of perfect obedience to God, with the reward for compliance being everlasting continuance in his created perfection, and the penalty for non-compliance being death. This covenant is recognized to be an implied "theological" covenant rather than an expressly biblical one. The primary basis for the idea of a covenant of works comes from the commands God gave to Adam, particularly as they pertained to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Reformed Theology regards this tree as forming the heart of a "probation," with the outcome of Adam's "test" determining his future and, by federal representation, the future of the entire human race. If Adam passed his probation, he would be sealed in his perfect righteousness forever. If he failed, he would bring death upon himself and all his descendants. Though a full treatment of this position falls outside the scope of this study, a couple of summary observations are in order:

- 1) The first was noted above, which is that the so-called covenant of works is not an explicit covenant in the biblical text. In general terms, Reformed Theology *infers* this covenant between Adam and God on the basis of God's command to him and what it implies.
- 2) The notion of a probationary test is also inferred and not directly stated. It reflects the premise that, had Adam successfully obeyed with respect to the forbidden tree, he would have been rewarded with free access to the tree of life (ref. Genesis 2:15-17, 3:22). Having passed the test, he would have then been allowed to eat from the second tree and thereby continue forever in "life." The most obvious problem with the idea of a probation is the Scripture's teaching regarding God's purpose and the way it would be accomplished. Nowhere does the Bible even suggest that God's ultimate design for the creation included anything other than His *redemptive* work in Christ. How could there be such a thing as a legitimate probation for Adam when Paul insists that the grace of salvation in Christ was given us from all eternity (2 Timothy 1:8-9)? All that can be postulated is a *hypothetical* probation, and a hypothetical probation is no probation at all.

The second problem is not so obvious, but is just as significant: The notion of a probation through which Adam could have been permanently sealed in his righteousness – thereby sealing perfection for the human race – assumes that Adam’s humanity was *ultimate*. But the Scripture is clear that Adam’s perfection was the starting point in God’s purposes, not the end point (potential or otherwise). Adam couldn’t be the end point because true humanity was not bound up in him; it is resident in the Second Adam, and so also in all who are joined to Him in the new creation. True man is the “man of the spirit” and this consummate humanness would not enter the world until Jesus’ Incarnation (cf. John 1:19-34, 3:22-34; 1 Corinthians 15:12ff, esp. vv. 35-58; also Romans 8:1-17).

While the text doesn’t identity a formal covenant between God and Adam, and the so-called probation at the heart of that presumed covenant is also inferred and problematic on several fronts, this doesn’t mean that the relationship between God and man in the first creation wasn’t covenantal. The very nature of man – especially when considered in terms of his relational purpose – implies the idea of covenant. God needn’t have ratified a formal, explicit covenant with Adam for their relationship to be objective, determined, and binding. The mere fact that God is God and man is His image-son shows that their relationship must be ordered a certain way for it to be “right” and, therefore, “shalomic.” Simply the reality of man’s creation – given all it encompasses and implies – points to a covenantal relation between him and God. Man was created for relationship, and relationship is covenantal.

If, as has been seen, sacred space refers to the realm of divine-human encounter, it follows from the preceding discussion that sacred space itself has a covenantal aspect. Sacred space is where God and man come together, and the divine-human encounter – because it is objective, definitive, and grounded in man’s identity as image-son – is covenantal. So it is that the first manifestation of sacred space in the Garden of Eden is set in a covenantal framework as expressed by the presence of two trees. In the words of Henri Blocher, these two trees represent the “two clauses of the creation covenant” (Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle, pg. 49). Indeed, as the whole of Scripture has its core concern in the divine-human encounter and its implication for the created order (i.e., the concept of *sacred space*), so these two sacred symbols provide the foundation for understanding that encounter and what both its success and its failure mean for man and the creation under his lordship.

1. The Two Trees

And so, no sooner does the text find Adam in God’s garden-sanctuary than it has him confronted with the presence of the two trees. Each represents an alternative course and outcome for man in his existence in sacred space (Genesis 2:8-17).

a. The Tree of Life

The first of these two trees is the “tree of life.” It is presented as standing in the midst of the garden, and this imagery suggests that the tree is somehow central to sacred space and the divine-human relationship. *It seems to imply that man’s intimacy with God - and therefore his own self-fulfillment as God’s image-son – is inseparable from the principle introduced here under the concept of “life.”*

Man was created a “living being,” and the text explains the meaning of this phrase by noting that God breathed His own life into him (2:7). Because this is said of no other creature, it follows that this “breath of life” has to do with man’s unique identity as image-bearer. While all plants and animals are living in the sense that they are animate creatures, none shares in the principle of life as introduced here and employed in the balance of Scripture. Furthermore, the text establishes the close connection between man’s “life” and the tree of life by juxtaposing them in the narrative. Man, the unique possessor of life, is immediately introduced into God’s garden-sanctuary having its central feature in the tree of life – a tree from which he is told that he may freely eat.

This suggests that “life” is to be associated with man’s existence according to his true nature and function. Life is shalomic existence, and for man, shalomic existence is grounded in communion with God. At this point in the text this understanding is only suggested, but it becomes more evident in the outcome of man’s encounter with the second tree. There the meaning of the concept of “life” is revealed by the way its counterpart *death* arises and manifests itself.

When considered in relation to the second tree (and beyond that in the developing biblical storyline), the tree of life is shown to represent *eschatological* life. That is, it symbolizes life in its true and ultimate form: life as it preeminently characterizes God Himself (John 1:1-4, 5:26), and so also His image-bearers when they exist in the perfection of their own created nature and purpose. Stated simply, the tree of life represents shalomic life in the context of sacred space. This is the reason the symbolism of the tree of life recurs in the Scripture in connection with the sanctuary theme and man’s knowledge of and communion with God (ref. Proverbs 2:1-6, 3:13-18; Revelation 2:7; 22:1-5, 14-19; cf. also Ezekiel 47:1-12).

b. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

Parallel to the tree of life is the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (2:9b). Its presentation, together with the warning concerning it, introduces a sense of foreboding that the perfection of a creation that was “very good” was soon to be shattered. Most importantly, its symbolic relevance, God’s command regarding it, and Adam and Eve’s interaction with it provide the crucial textual material for understanding the nature of sin and death and their implications for sacred space.

In examining this tree and its significance in the fall of man several observations are crucial to make:

- 1) The first and most obvious is that the tree is set out as the point of man’s continuance in his shalomic condition. The obligation set before Adam was simple and straightforward: “*From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die*” (2:16-17).

- 2) Life speaks first to man's nature as divine image-bearer, and secondly to his existence in conformity to his nature – that is, to his fulfillment of his ordained function. As a being, man shares in *God's* life, and his *own* life consists in carrying out his dominion mandate in perfect communion with His Creator-Father as His image-son. This is what it meant for Adam to fulfill his covenantal (creational) obligation; this conformity to his nature and purpose was Adam's *righteousness*.

Thus the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represented a challenge to Adam's righteousness, but not primarily in the sense of presenting him with a legal obligation demanding his compliance. God's charge wasn't an arbitrary test of Adam's obedience, but a warning about the disastrous consequence of man departing from his created design. The threat of the loss of righteousness wasn't principally the threat of incurred guilt for disobedience, but the threat of the loss of *life*. The outcome that awaited Adam should he fail to heed God's warning was much more than legal guilt; it was the cosmic cataclysm that is the destruction of shalom and the desolation of sacred space; in the end, it was the end of man as truly man.

- 3) This is commonly missed by those who make the prohibition regarding the tree nothing more than the instrument of a probationary test. In that instance it is reduced to bare commandment: When all that matters is whether or not Adam would do what he was told, the issues embodied in the commandment become irrelevant. God could just as well have prohibited Adam from eating from the tree of life. In the end, any directive would have served the same purpose of testing Adam's obedience.

The outcome of this conception of God's prohibition is that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has no significance in itself; it was merely a selected venue for the entrance of sin. A further result is that sin loses its biblical meaning as presented in Genesis 3 (and developed in the rest of the Bible) because it becomes nothing more than disobedience to arbitrary directive. *But the truth is that the particular issue involved in God's prohibition is **preeminently** important*; the narrative's intent isn't to demonstrate the mere fact of sin, but the nature and meaning of sin. By doing so, it also provides further insight into human righteousness.

- 4) The text accomplishes these ends by means of the symbolism attached to the second tree and the consequence of partaking of its fruit (cf. Genesis 2:15-17 with 3:1-24). God warned that eating of the tree would bring the knowledge of good and evil, *and the implication is that Adam and Eve neither possessed this knowledge, nor did God intend for them to obtain it*. Taking into account the whole narrative to this point, it follows that this particular knowledge – whatever it is – was contrary to the perfection of man as image-bearer, and therefore, would somehow negatively affect his communion with God and the shalomic condition of the creation.

- 5) At this point it is important to note that the basis of this negative result cannot be simply the obtainment of the knowledge of good and evil, as some have proposed. For if the knowledge of good and evil *as such* is contrary to shalomic harmony, then God is alienated from Himself, for He expressly states that *He* knows good and evil (3:22). Indeed, the fact that God possesses this knowledge is the very heart of the temptation: Adam and Eve were enticed to eat of the tree by the promise that, by so doing, they would become more like God (3:5). Therefore, the issue is not the knowledge of good and evil *per se*, *but what it represents for man and how it is that he obtained it.*

The knowledge of good and evil first and foremost pertains to the matter of authority and prerogative. That is, the possession of this knowledge implies the right to make *independent* moral and ethical judgments concerning good and evil and act accordingly. This prerogative properly belongs only to God Himself for two obvious reasons:

- The first has to do with man's creaturely nature. God alone is infinite, and so only He possesses the knowledge necessary to think, judge, and act independently without error. Because man is finite, his limited knowledge and insight demand that he look to something beyond himself if he is to make sound judgments.
- The second has to do with man's function rather than his nature. Human beings were created in the divine image for the sake of relationship with God. Man is God's image-son, and, among other things, this means that he depends upon his divine Father for his sense of himself and the world around him. As such, autonomous independence represents a perversion of man's created design.

Being a personal and rational being, man possesses the *innate capacity* to make judgments on his own, but his own judgment concerning good and evil – in order to be consistent with himself as image-bearer – must necessarily be God's judgment concerning them. *Man's* mind is to be *God's* mind. He does not have the prerogative to judge and act independently of God; to do so is to violate his own identity and created purpose and thereby forfeit his authentic humanity.

The second thing that is important to note is that, because man is a time-space creature, his knowledge is experiential. This means that his obtainment of the knowledge of good and evil comes only through the *experience* of evil. God knows evil as One who is, in every way, untouched by it; man is not omniscient, with the result that he learns of evil only by personally experiencing it. Therefore, starting from himself, man can never know good and evil in the same way God does. Knowing as God knows is the result of intimacy with Him, not independence.

Thus the tree and its accessible presence in the Garden symbolize the capacity and opportunity for man as image-bearer to take to himself moral/ethical authority and prerogative and thereby establish his autonomy from God. The temptation was not an invitation to break a rule, arbitrary or otherwise; it was the offer to experience greater enlightenment in the obtainment of knowledge peculiar to God.

But in their eagerness for self-realization, Adam and Eve didn't realize that the serpent's temptation was designed to "liberate" them from themselves as much as from God. The great irony of it is that what appeared to be the vehicle to make them more God-like actually accomplished the opposite end: The knowledge they believed would enhance them in their status as image-bearers served to pervert the divine likeness in which they had been made, and plunged man into ruination.

2. Life and Death

Understanding the symbolism of the two trees gives definition to their corresponding motifs of *life* and *death*: Eating of the one tree promotes and sustains life; eating of the other brings death.

- a. The tree of life is the central feature of the garden and partaking of it represents continuance in life *within the context of sacred space*. This is made more evident by the broader biblical use of this imagery (ref. again Proverbs 2-3 and Ezekiel 47:1-12 in relation to Revelation 2:7, 22:1ff). Man's "life" is to know himself and be fully conformed to his created purpose. It is to realize his own shalomic perfection as image-son in relation to God, himself, and the created order. This was man's condition in the beginning, and thus he entered the sacred space of the garden as a "living being" and was granted unqualified access to the tree of life.
- b. But shalom would be short-lived; before he had even tasted of the fruit, Adam had already compromised God's shalomic order by yielding his dominion to the serpent. The serpent was a "beast of the field" (Genesis 3:1) and was therefore to be subject to Adam's lordship. The shalomic hierarchy of authority was God, Adam, and then the serpent, but Adam effectively reversed the order. This vandalism of shalom signaled the end of life; death was at hand. And succumbing to the temptation of autonomy, Adam and Even introduced the principle of estrangement into the creation and, with it, the end of communion. Thus eating of the second tree brought *death* – the end of man as truly man.

Because he is "image-son," man's alienation from God ends his self-knowledge and his capacity to fulfill his role. But estrangement further implies the destruction of sacred space since it severs the divine-human relationship. *Given his created purpose, the end of man as man means the end of sacred space*, and the Genesis narrative punctuates this truth by Adam and Eve's expulsion from God's garden-sanctuary and separation from the tree of life. From that point forward, if sacred space were to be recovered and man was to again "live" to himself and to God – if shalom were to be restored, God would have to act, and His promise to do so becomes the foundation for the rest of salvation history.