

## COVENANTS

*“And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” Genesis 1:28*

According to Jonty Rhodes, “Covenant is the word God uses to describe His relationship with His people.”<sup>1</sup> From the first words God speaks to the first man, Adam, in the Garden of Eden, (Gen. 1:28) God establishes a covenant with him.

At every point in the Bible, from the creation of Adam forward, God relates to His people through covenant. This is how He relates to us even now. So, it behooves us, as we seek to know our great God and King, to understand His design for our relationship with Him.

What is a covenant? “A covenant is a binding agreement between God and human beings, where God promises blessings if the conditions are kept and threatens curses if the conditions are broken.”<sup>2</sup>

As I already mentioned, God’s first words to Adam were words of covenant. But it may surprise you to know that God’s covenant with His people was designed by Him before He created man. Even before He created the foundations of the earth. Before the first man existed, before sin existed, God had a plan to bring us back into a proper relationship with Him and that plan was designed as a covenant.

### **Before Time**

#### **Ephesians 1:1-14**

[1] Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

[2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4] even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love [5] he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, [6] to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. [7] In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, [8] which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight [9] making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ [10] as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

[11] In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, [12] so that we who were the first to

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<sup>1</sup> Rhodes, Jonty, “Covenants Made Simple: Understanding God’s Unfolding Promises to His People”, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014) 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 18.

hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. [13] In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, [14] who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (ESV)

Take five minutes with the ladies at your table to look closely at this passage and identify the specific ways each member of the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, participate.

(Take 5)

In this passage we see the Triune God working in perfect unity.

Actions carried out by God the Father in this passage are:

- He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (verse 3)
- He chose us in him before the foundation of the world (v. 4)
- He chose us to be holy. That we should be holy and blameless before him (4)
- He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ (5)
- He has blessed us in the Beloved. (6)
- He lavished grace upon us, in all wisdom and insight (8)
- He made known to us the mystery of His will (9)
- He did this in love (4), according to the purpose of His will (5), and to the praise of His glorious grace (6)

Actions carried out by God the Son are:

- In Him we have redemption through his blood (7)
- In Him we have the forgiveness of our trespasses (7)
- In Him all things are united, things in heaven and things on earth. (10)
- In Him we have an inheritance
- In Him we are to the praise of the Father's glory (12)

Actions carried out by God the Spirit are:

- He seals us. (13)
- He is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it. (14)

Before the foundation of the world, the triune God worked together to plan our salvation. Each member of the Trinity was in perfect agreement with the others, and each did their part.

God the Father designed the plan. He ordained/decreed it to be.

*"He is the one who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not based on our works but on His own purpose and grace, granted to us in Christ Jesus before time began" 2 Tim. 1:9*

God the Son accomplished the plan. He came to earth as a man, lived a perfect life and died for our sins.

God the Spirit applied the plan. He sealed us and guaranteed our inheritance. “All the Spirit does for God’s people was planned before the foundation of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

This plan that God the Father designed, God the Son accomplished, and God the Spirit applied is called the Covenant of Redemption because it is God’s plan and action to redeem us for Himself.

Please see that this plan was established before God created the earth. Before there was the earth and before there was even one person, God had established the plan for our salvation.

“Redemption was God’s plan before the creation of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Think about your sin. Have you ever committed a sin that you thought was too bad for God to forgive? If we think our sin is more powerful than God’s plan of redemption, then we are believing that God makes weak plans, and we are more powerful than God.

Remember this promise from God:

“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one will snatch them from my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them from my Father’s hand.” John 10:28-29

### **In Time**

Let’s move into the time of creation and look at the plans the triune God had when making human beings.

#### **Genesis 1:26-27**

26 “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth.’ 27 God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.” (The NET Bible)

God created humankind in His image. We were made to resemble God. We know from other places in Scripture that God is Spirit (John 4:24) so the resemblance is not physical. It shows itself in other ways. Genesis 2:7 says that “the LORD God...breathed into his [Adam’s] nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” (ESV) This means that man was uniquely made by God to possess an everlasting spirit such as God has. No other creature was given this. We were uniquely made to be in fellowship with God, to have the ability to reason like God and to enjoy God forever. Let’s look closer at what this means.

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<sup>3</sup> Frame, John, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2013), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 191.

Humans are like God mentally. We are rational and volitional. Your being here today making the effort to learn about God and to understand His ways demonstrates this characteristic that sets us apart from the animals and makes us like God. You will never get a room full of dogs and cats to study theology. Fish do not go to seminary. We chose to be here, and we are able to struggle with the big topics being discussed. This reflects God's intellect and freedom.

We are like God morally in that we have a conscience. God is holy. Our morality is only a vestige of the holiness enjoyed by Adam and Eve before the Fall, but we do still reflect the attribute of God's holiness. When we are repulsed by evil, when we celebrate justice and when we feel shame over a sin we've committed, we are acting as moral beings.

We are like God in that we are social. We are created to be in relationship with God, with His people and with others. We get together with friends. We marry. We worship God together. This social aspect reflects God's triune nature and His love. It is a beautiful thing, giving meaning and richness to our lives. Most importantly, we are made to be in a relationship with God!

Another way we image God is in what He commanded us to do. God created the earth and its creatures in six days. Humans were the final part and the pinnacle of His creation. His first words to them are to bless them and entrust great responsibility to them.

"God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply! Fill the earth and subdue it! Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that moves on the ground.'" (Gen. 1:28)

"God had just formed and filled a whole universe. Now, in their own small way, Adam and Eve were to do likewise."<sup>5</sup>

God's command to His image bearers was the first part of His covenant with them. They are to move beyond Eden by multiplying - having children - and filling the earth with God's image bearers. They are to rule over all the other living things on earth. They are kings over God's creation. God is their king, but He has entrusted humans with ruling over fish, birds and animals.

The covenant ordinance continues in Genesis 2.

15 "The Lord God took the man and placed him in the orchard in Eden to care for it and to maintain it. 16 Then the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat fruit from every tree of the orchard, 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will surely die.'" (Gen. 2:15-17) (The NET Bible)

In this passage we see the curse that would be incurred if God's command was broken. In this case the curse is death.

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<sup>5</sup> Rhodes, 20.

This is often called the Covenant of Works because Adam and Eve had to work for the blessings of the covenant.

Let's review what a covenant is. "A covenant is a binding agreement between God and human beings, where God promises blessings if the conditions are kept and threatens curses if the conditions are broken."<sup>6</sup>

So, for this covenant the conditions are that Adam, Eve and their descendants are to fill the earth with people, take care of the earth and rule over its creatures. They can break the covenant by not doing these things. They can also break the covenant by eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.

We know that if they break the covenant by eating the fruit, they will die. If they obey God's covenant rules, they will enjoy God's presence and it is implied that they will not die.

### **The Fall**

At some time after God made this covenant with Adam and Eve, Satan appears to Adam and Eve in the form of a serpent and engages Eve in a conversation that is recorded for us in Genesis 3:1-7.

"Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" 2 And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, 3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths." (Gen. 3:1-7)

Notice how the serpent starts his question to Eve. "Did God actually say...". The serpent is leading Eve to question God's word. God's Word is our authority. Satan attacks God by attacking His Word. We must remember that God's Word is our authority. Satan will come at us with deceptive tricks, but we must cling to God's Word to guide us. God's Word is completely true and always for our good.

The serpent's next words to Eve contradict God's word and accuse Him of withholding good. "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." The serpent lies to Eve, telling her there is no penalty for sin, and casts doubts on God's integrity.

God did not want Adam and Eve to experience evil. He was protecting them by commanding them not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; but Satan twisted God's intentions to make Him look like He was insecure and stingy, withholding something desirable from Adam and Eve.

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<sup>6</sup> Rhodes, 18.

Satan is telling Eve that God wants to keep the really good things for Himself; that God is protecting His divine domain by keeping this secret knowledge to Himself; and that if Eve eats the fruit, she will get this secret knowledge and be like God.

Satan craftily leads Eve to change her reference point from God to herself. He leads her to doubt God's goodness. Even though she was specially created to be like God and was given authority over all the creatures of the earth, Eve disregards God's goodness and believes He has withheld something from her that would make her more equal to God. Eve stopped looking at all the good things God had given her and looked at what she could not have. She doubted God's word and His goodness to her. She decided to believe the serpent's words over God's and seek her own glory instead of God's by seeking knowledge that God had forbidden her to have. She took the forbidden fruit, ate it and gave some to Adam who also ate it.

Adam and Eve broke the covenant. Their state of integrity was destroyed. They were no longer holy, and they knew it. They felt shame and tried to hide themselves from God. They were the first covenant breakers, but they wouldn't be the last.

To seek wisdom is a good thing, but Adam and Eve sought it through a means that God had forbidden them to have. No one gains wisdom by disobeying God.

Proverbs 9:10–11

10 "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. [11] For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life." (ESV)

Because of Adam's sin, God put a curse on all people, animals, plants and the ground. The whole earth was cursed because of Adam and Eve's sin.

Genesis 3:14–19

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 contrary to your husband, but 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." (ESV)

This episode in human history is called The Fall because Adam's disobedience to God's command brought a curse on all people. His act of disobedience changed the way the world worked. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Their sin means they were no longer able to live in God's presence.

As part of the curse, God puts enmity between the woman and the serpent and between the offspring of each (v. 15). But look at the kindness of God. Within this curse is also a blessing because it allows people to recognize their enemy, making them less susceptible to being deceived.

This passage also implies that life will go on. Yes, people will die (v. 19), but it will not happen immediately. Adam and Eve will live long enough to have children and continue the human race. They will fulfill God's command for them to be fruitful and multiple.

The best part of verse 15 is the promise that one day Eve's offspring would crush the serpent's head, destroying him. This points to Jesus Christ, the offspring of Eve, destroying Satan, the serpent. Although the serpent strikes Christ's heel when He is crucified, Christ rises triumphantly three days later having paid the penalty for man's sin and freeing us from Satan's dominion.

As God announces the curse that results from Adam's sin, He also ushers in the Covenant of Grace. The disobedience of Adam and Eve was nothing less than treason against God. God had every right to destroy them immediately. But God pours out His grace upon human beings. They will still die, but they will not be destroyed. And one day they would be saved from the curse they have brought on themselves.

Genesis 3:20–24

[20] The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. [21] And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them. [22] Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" [23] therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. [24] He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (ESV)

Adam believed God's words this time. He believed that he and Eve would live to have children and their children would have children, etc. It is not until after the curse that Adam names his wife Eve.

Earlier, Adam and Eve had sewed fig leaves together to hide their nakedness, but these were insufficient, so God made clothes for them out of skins. An animal had to give its life – be sacrificed – to cover Adam and Eve. This was the first death in God's creation and it points forward to both the sacrificial system established in the time of Moses and ultimately to Jesus's death as a the last sacrifice for all of our sins. Because the Covenant of Works included the penalty of death if the conditions were not kept and because no one has kept the conditions of that covenant, death had to occur to cover those sins. Because Jesus lived a perfect life by keeping all the requirements of God's covenant, He was able to die in our place for our sins paying the penalty for them.

After God clothed Adam and Eve with the animal skin, He put them out of the Garden of Eden to prevent them from eating from the Tree of Life and living forever in their fallen state. This was an act of protection by God.

While Eden seemed perfect, later in Scripture we learn that there is a much better garden coming for God's people where we will live with Him forever. There will not only be no sin, but there will also be no chance of sin. God will be our God; we will be His people and He will dwell with us forever. His presence is our most precious promise.

### **Abraham**

So far, we have looked at the covenant that God designed with the Trinity before the foundation of the earth. Then we looked at the Covenant of Works that He made with Adam and Eve when He formed them and the Covenant of Grace when God sustained mankind and promised the One who would break the curse by destroying our enemy, Satan.

Several times in Scripture God will make or "cut" covenants with His people. One of the most significant times is later in Genesis when God cuts a covenant with Abraham.

In biblical times, a covenant was cut between a stronger king and a weaker king. The stronger king would promise protection for the weaker king in exchange for things like food, labor and military support. The ceremony establishing the covenant involved cutting animals in two and both kings passing between the pieces. This is why we use the term "cut" when a covenant is established. Walking between the cut animals signified that if either party failed to keep his side of the covenant, he would have done to him what had been done to the animals. He would be put to death.

However, there was an important difference in the blood oath [covenant] that God made with Abraham in Genesis 15. When the evening came, God appeared in the form of a "smoking fire pot and flaming torch [that] passed between the pieces" (Genesis 15:17). But Abraham had fallen "into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him" (verse 12). Thus, God alone passed through the pieces of dead animals, and the covenant was sealed by God alone. Nothing depended on Abraham. Everything depended on God, who promised to be faithful to His covenant.<sup>7</sup>

God took all responsibility for meeting the requirements of the covenant. If either He or Abraham (or Abraham's descendants) failed to keep this covenant, God would pay the penalty. This should give us great security. If we belong to God, then we will not experience the penalty for failing to hold up our side of the covenant. God has promised to do everything to assure success.

God's covenant with Abraham set Abraham and his descendants apart as God's special people. They would be His people; He would be their God and he would give them a land to live in with Him.

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<sup>7</sup> *Got Questions* website, "What Was a Blood Covenant (Genesis 15:9-21)", <https://www.gotquestions.org/blood-covenant.html>, updated 1/12/23.



Notice the similarities with Eden where Adam and Eve were with God in the Garden of Eden which He had prepared for them. These three things are always present in God's covenants: 1. God will be their God. 2. The people will be God's people. 3. They will have a place where God will dwell with them.

Covenants continue throughout the Bible and beyond. There is much more to talk about than we have time for but know this: If you are God's daughter, then you are in covenant with Him. The same God who covered Adam and Eve when they sinned has covered you. The same God who passed alone between the animal pieces, has given His life for yours. The same God who promised a destroyer of Satan, has sent His Son Jesus as our Savior and He has carried out completely the work His Father gave Him to do. Our future is secure because the same God who purposed before Creation has accomplished and applied His purposes. To God be the glory. Amen.