

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANTHROPOLOGY

The Doctrine of Humanity

Created, Fallen, and Redeemable — What It Means to Be Human Before God

UNIT 5

The Original State and the Covenant of Works

Lesson 15

The Covenant of Works

The Adamic Arrangement

“God’s Covenant with Adam Before the Fall”

Key Texts: Genesis 2:15–17; Hosea 6:7; Romans 5:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45–49; Romans 10:5

“For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.”

Romans 5:19, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Lesson 14 established that Adam was created in genuine original righteousness, with a will inclined toward God, affections rightly ordered, and a mind unclouded by sin. Lesson 15 asks a further and more precise question about the structure of Adam's pre-fall relationship to God: was that relationship governed by a covenant? And if so, what were the terms of that covenant, what was its promise, what was its sanction, and what was its representative scope? The answer the Reformed tradition gives to these questions is the doctrine of the covenant of works: the pre-fall arrangement by which God offered Adam and all his posterity confirmed eternal life on the condition of perfect and personal obedience, and threatened death as the sanction for disobedience. This doctrine is not a peripheral curiosity; it is the structural foundation upon which the entire edifice of Reformed soteriology rests. Without the covenant of works, the imputation of Adam's guilt to his posterity has no adequate structural grounding; the necessity of Christ's active obedience to the law has no clear theological rationale; and the parallel between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45–49 has no coherent framework of interpretation.

The doctrine of the covenant of works is, simultaneously, one of the most theologically important and one of the most exegetically contested doctrines in the Reformed tradition. It is theologically important because of its structural role in the framework of covenant theology: as the first of two governing covenants (covenant of works and covenant of grace), it provides the framework within which the entire history of redemption is interpreted, and without which the relationship between law and gospel, between Moses and Christ, between the first Adam and the Last Adam, cannot be adequately understood. It is exegetically contested because the word "covenant" (*berith*, בְּרִית in Hebrew) does not appear in the Genesis 2 account of God's arrangement with Adam, which has led some interpreters, including some within the Reformed tradition itself, to question whether the category of covenant is the appropriate one for the pre-fall Adamic relationship.

This lesson engages both dimensions of the doctrine with the intellectual honesty they deserve. We begin with the covenant of works defined and its five classic elements identified from Genesis 2. We then examine the biblical evidence for describing the pre-fall arrangement as a covenant, including the crucial Hosea 6:7 text. The third section examines the representative principle, the federal headship of Adam, which is the mechanism by which the covenant of works connects Adam's obedience or disobedience to the destiny of his entire posterity. The fourth section examines the sacramental signs of the covenant, with particular attention to the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The fifth section traces the connections between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, showing how the failure of the first Adam in the covenant of works is the condition that the covenant of grace addresses through the Last Adam. We close with the doxological conclusion that the whole doctrine produces: the God who condescended to enter a covenant with the creature He had made is the God who, when the creature failed the covenant, sent His Son to fulfill it in the creature's place.

A note on the progressive covenantal approach of this series: Faithful to the Word Ministries operates within the framework of Progressive Covenantal Biblical Theology, which traces the development of the biblical covenants from the Adamic arrangement through the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants to the new covenant in Christ. The covenant of works is the first and foundational covenant in this framework, the arrangement whose failure sets in motion the entire history of covenantal redemption that the subsequent covenants progressively unfold. Every subsequent covenant in the biblical canon is either a development toward or a fulfillment of the redemptive purpose that the covenant of works' failure made necessary and the covenant of grace progressively provides.

I. The Covenant of Works Defined: The Five Elements

What Genesis 2 Establishes as the Structure of the Pre-Fall Adamic Arrangement

A. *The Definition and the Classic Elements*

The covenant of works is defined in the Westminster Confession of Faith (chapter 7.2) with characteristic precision: “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” This definition encapsulates several theologically essential elements: a promise (life), a recipient (Adam and his posterity), a condition (perfect and personal obedience), and the implied sanction (death for disobedience, which Genesis 2:17 makes explicit). The Larger Catechism (Q&A 20) adds the specific content of the arrangement: “The covenant of works was made with Adam as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity; and so in him was broken by our first parents, whereby all his descendants are in their original state rendered guilty before God, and corrupt in their natures.” Together, these confessional formulations establish the covenant of works as a representative, conditional, and eschatologically consequential arrangement between the Creator and the creature.

The classic theological analysis of the covenant of works identifies five formal elements that the biblical covenant concept requires and that Genesis 2:15–17 provides: (1) a sovereign Lord (the LORD God who gives the command in Genesis 2:16); (2) a covenant servant (Adam, the specifically designated recipient of the command in vv. 15–17); (3) a stipulation (the prohibition of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, v. 17a); (4) a sanction or penalty (death in the day of eating, v. 17b: “you will surely die”); and (5) an implied promise or reward (confirmed life for sustained obedience, implied by the presence of the tree of life in the garden and by the logic of the arrangement itself, if disobedience brings death, obedience implies the confirmation of life). These five elements constitute the formal structure of a covenant in the biblical sense, and their presence in the Genesis 2 account is the primary reason the Reformed tradition identifies the pre-fall arrangement as a covenant even in the absence of the specific word *berith*.

The condition of the covenant, “perfect and personal obedience” (Westminster Confession 7.2), deserves specific attention because it establishes the standard that the covenant of works sets for the attainment of the promised life. The obedience required is not majority compliance, not sincere effort with allowance for failure, and not the obedience of a person who means well and generally succeeds. It is the perfect, undeviating, comprehensive obedience to the divine command that the covenant’s logic requires: since the sanction for even a single act of disobedience is death (“in the day that you eat from it you will surely die,” Genesis 2:17, NASB 1995), the obedience that earns the reward must be the obedience that never triggers the sanction, which is perfect obedience. This is the principle that Paul cites in Romans 10:5, “Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness” (NASB 1995), and that underlies the Pauline argument that no human being can be justified by the works of the law (Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16), because no fallen human being can meet the standard of perfect and personal obedience that the covenant of works established.

B. *The Hosea 6:7 Question: Is the Word ‘Covenant’ Applied to Adam?*

The most exegetically significant text for the identification of the pre-fall Adamic arrangement as a covenant is Hosea 6:7: “But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; there they have dealt treacherously against Me” (NASB 1995). The verse appears in the context of God’s indictment of Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness, and the comparison it draws between Israel’s transgression and Adam’s transgression specifically invokes the category of covenant (*berith*) in connection with Adam’s act. If the text is correctly translated as a reference to Adam’s transgression of a covenant, it provides the most direct scriptural evidence that the pre-fall arrangement between God and Adam is properly described as a covenant.

The exegetical debate about Hosea 6:7 centers on the translation of the Hebrew phrase *ke-Adam* (כְּאָדָם). Three major translations are offered: (1) “like Adam” (as in the NASB 1995 and ESV), referring to the first man Adam and his transgression of a covenant with God; (2) “like men” (as in some older translations, taking Adam as a reference to humanity in general rather than the individual Adam); and (3) “at Adam” (as in some translations that take Adam as a place name, the city of Adam at the Jordan River mentioned in Joshua 3:16). The translation “like Adam” is supported by several considerations: the specific use of the definite article construction in the Hebrew text makes the common noun “man” less natural, the place-name “Adam” is without other covenant associations, and the contextual parallel between Israel’s covenant-breaking and the paradigmatic act of covenant-breaking in human history is most coherent if the reference is to the first man’s transgression. The defenders of the covenant of works, including Turretin, Hodge, Berkhof, and the Westminster Assembly, have consistently argued that the “like Adam” translation is the most natural and most contextually appropriate reading, and that the verse therefore provides explicit scriptural evidence for the covenant character of the pre-fall Adamic arrangement.

The broader consideration that reinforces the exegetical case for the covenant of works is the consistent covenantal structure of God’s dealings with humanity throughout Scripture. Every major post-fall relationship between God and human beings in the biblical canon is explicitly covenantal: the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the new covenant in Christ are all explicitly identified as covenants by the biblical text and are all structured around the classic covenantal elements of parties, stipulations, promises, and sanctions. Given the consistent covenantal character of God’s subsequent dealings with humanity, the identification of the pre-fall Adamic arrangement as a covenant is not an imposition of a foreign category on Genesis 2 but the consistent application of the biblical category that governs the entire framework of God’s redemptive dealings with the creature He has made. The absence of the word *berith* from Genesis 2 is a significant exegetical observation, but it is not a decisive objection to the covenantal interpretation, since the presence of all five classic covenantal elements is more theologically significant than the presence or absence of a single technical term.

“From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

Genesis 2:17, NASB 1995

II. The Biblical Basis: Genesis 2:15–17 and the Structure of the Arrangement

Reading the Pre-Fall Command as a Formal Covenantal Structure

A. The Command, the Promise, and the Sanction

The primary biblical text for the covenant of works is Genesis 2:15–17: “Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. The Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘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 will surely die.’” (NASB 1995) The theological content of this passage is far richer than its brevity suggests, and a careful reading of its specific elements illuminates the full covenantal structure that the passage embodies.

The context of verse 15, God placing Adam in the garden to cultivate and keep it, establishes the setting of the covenant. Adam is placed in the garden as its vice-regent and steward, already exercising the dominion mandate of the image of God in the specific domain of the garden. The garden is a place of abundance, provision, and direct divine fellowship: the rivers, the trees, the gold and the onyx and the precious stones, and, most significantly, the tree of life at its center. This is the context in which the covenant command is given: not in a barren wilderness

but in a garden of plenty, where every good thing has been provided and only one restriction is imposed. The abundance of the permission, “from any tree of the garden you may eat freely”, frames the single prohibition: the generosity of the Creator is the context in which the creature’s obedience is tested. One restriction in a garden of abundance is the measure of the test’s simplicity and the creature’s culpability in failing it.

The sanction of the covenant, “in the day that you eat from it you will surely die”, is stated with the emphatic infinitive absolute construction of the Hebrew (*mot tamut*, מוֹת תָּמוּת: dying you shall die), which functions as the strongest possible assertion of the certainty of the threatened consequence. The death threatened is not merely physical death (the separation of the soul from the body that the fall eventually produces) but the full scope of the death that sin introduces: spiritual death (the immediate rupture of the creature’s fellowship with God, expressed in the hiding of Genesis 3:8), physical death (the mortality that the fall introduces into a creation that did not originally include it), and eternal death (the ultimate consequence of the fall’s spiritual death, the permanent separation from God that the final judgment confirms). The comprehensiveness of the death sanction reflects the comprehensiveness of what the covenant of works put at stake: not merely the creature’s physical existence but the creature’s covenantal standing before God in every dimension of its existence.

B. *The Implied Promise: Life for Obedience*

The promise of the covenant of works is not stated as explicitly as the sanction, but it is theologically necessary and is implied by the logic of the arrangement. If disobedience brings death, obedience brings life, not merely the continuation of the present life in the garden, but the confirmed, eschatological, permanent life that the tree of life represents. The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q&A 20) identifies the promise as “life” without specifying its nature, but the theological tradition has consistently developed the promise in terms of what the faithful completion of the covenant would have achieved: the non *posse peccare* of the glorified state, the permanent and eschatologically confirmed righteousness that the probationary period was designed to lead toward, and the fullness of the creaturely fellowship with God that the garden’s direct communion only partially expressed.

The implied promise has a specific eschatological character that distinguishes the covenant of works from the static maintenance of the present condition. Adam in the garden was not in the final eschatological state; he was in the probationary state, the state of *posse non peccare et posse peccare* in which the genuinely free obedience of the genuinely righteous creature could move him and his posterity toward or away from the eschatological confirmation. The covenant of works was designed to be a transitional state, not a permanent one: the faithfully obedient Adam who passed through the probationary test successfully would have been confirmed in a righteousness that transcended the probationary integrity of the garden state and attained the eschatological permanence of the non *posse peccare*. This is what the Last Adam, who passed the probationary test where the first Adam failed, achieved for His people: not the restoration of the garden state but the attainment of the eschatological state that the garden’s probation was always designed to achieve.

Romans 10:5 provides the Pauline grounding for the implied promise: “Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness” (NASB 1995). Paul is citing Leviticus 18:5 (“the man who performs them shall live by them”), and his citation establishes the principle that the righteousness of the covenant of works, the life that the law-keeper earns by keeping the law, is a real and genuine possibility, at least in the abstract. The reason Paul immediately contrasts this righteousness-by-law with the righteousness-of-faith is that the fall has rendered the abstract possibility practically impossible: no fallen human being can practice the law-based righteousness that earns the life the law promises, because no fallen human being can sustain the perfect and personal obedience that the covenant of works requires. But the principle remains: the law promises life for obedience, establishing the standard that the Last Adam fulfills and the imputation of whose fulfillment constitutes the righteousness-of-faith that the new covenant provides.

III. The Representative Principle: Adam as Federal Head

How the Covenant of Works Connects Adam's Obedience to the Destiny of His Entire Posterity

A. Federal Headship Defined and Grounded

The most theologically significant and the most practically consequential feature of the covenant of works is the representative principle, the doctrine that Adam acted not merely as a private individual whose obedience or disobedience affected only himself, but as the federal head of the entire human race, whose covenant standing before God would determine the covenant standing of all his natural posterity. The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q&A 20) expresses this with clarity: the covenant of works was “made with Adam as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity.” Adam’s status as a public or federal person, a representative whose acts had binding consequences for all who were represented in him, is the structural mechanism by which the fall’s consequences extend to every member of the human race without exception.

The biblical grounding for the federal headship of Adam is the Pauline argument of Romans 5:12–21, which is the most sustained and the most theologically precise New Testament treatment of the relationship between Adam’s act and its consequences for all his posterity. The passage establishes the Adamic representative principle through a series of parallel statements: “through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned” (v. 12); “by the transgression of the one the many died” (v. 15); “the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation” (v. 16); “by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one” (v. 17); “through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men” (v. 18); “through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners” (v. 19), all NASB 1995. The repetition of “one man” across the entire passage is not incidental; it is the structural backbone of Paul’s argument. The one man’s transgression brought condemnation and death to all; the one Man’s obedience brings justification and life to all who are in Him. The parallel only works if the first Adam’s one act had genuine representative consequences for all who were in him, just as the Last Adam’s one act has genuine representative consequences for all who are in Him by faith.

The representative principle has a specific logical structure that is worth making explicit: the one represents the many; the act of the one determines the standing of the many; the standing of the many is therefore determined not by each individual’s own act but by the representative’s act on behalf of each individual. This structure is not unique to Adam’s relationship to the human race; it is the same structure that governs the believer’s relationship to Christ. The believer’s justification is not grounded in her own perfect obedience, which she has never performed and could never perform, but in the perfect obedience of the One who represented her before God in the covenant of works and who, by that perfect obedience, secured the righteousness that is imputed to the believer through faith. The federal headship of Adam is the structural template for the federal headship of Christ, and without the first, the second cannot be properly understood. Every Christian who benefits from the imputed righteousness of Christ is benefiting from the same representative principle that made Adam’s disobedience her problem; the covenant of works is the structure within which both judgments, the condemnation in Adam and the justification in Christ, make theological sense.

B. Adam and Christ: The Two Adams in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15

The Pauline parallel between Adam and Christ is the New Testament’s most explicit and most theologically concentrated engagement with the covenant of works and its fulfillment in the covenant of grace. In Romans 5:14–21, Paul develops the parallel in terms of the representative consequences of each man’s definitive act: Adam’s one act of transgression brings condemnation and death to the many; Christ’s one act of obedience brings justification and life to the many. In 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul compresses the parallel to its most essential form: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive” (NASB 1995). And in 1 Corinthians 15:45–49, Paul develops the contrast between the first man (from the earth, earthy, a living soul) and the second man (from heaven, a life-giving spirit), establishing that the two Adams represent two different kinds of humanity: the humanity of the fallen creation, derived from Adam, and the humanity of the new creation, derived from Christ.

The theological significance of the two-Adams parallel for the doctrine of the covenant of works is that it establishes Christ's saving work as the fulfillment of what the covenant of works required. The covenant of works promised life for perfect obedience; Adam failed to provide that obedience; Christ provides it in Adam's stead. The active obedience of Christ, His perfect, lifelong, comprehensive fulfillment of the law's demands throughout His earthly ministry, is the fulfillment of the covenant of works' requirement of perfect and personal obedience. This is the theological foundation for the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer: the righteousness that is imputed is not a generic divine quality but the specific, covenant-fulfilling, legally perfect obedience that the covenant of works required and that Christ alone provided. The covenant of works established the standard; Christ met the standard; and the believer receives the benefit of Christ's meeting of the standard through the imputation of His covenant-fulfilling righteousness through faith.

Romans 5:19's specific statement, "through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous" (NASB 1995), is the key verse for the connection between the covenant of works and the active obedience of Christ. The "obedience of the One" is not merely the obedience of the cross, not merely the passive obedience of Christ in suffering the penalty of the covenant of works that Adam's disobedience incurred. It is the whole obedience of Christ's earthly life: the active obedience by which He fulfilled the covenant's requirement of perfect and personal compliance with the divine will, and the passive obedience by which He bore the covenant's penalty of death on behalf of His people. Both dimensions of Christ's obedience are necessary for the full benefit of the covenant of grace: the passive obedience removes the condemnation that Adam's disobedience incurred; the active obedience provides the positive righteousness that the covenant of works promised for perfect obedience and that the believer receives through the imputation of Christ's righteousness through faith. The covenant of works is not abolished in the gospel; it is fulfilled in Christ and imputed to the believer.

"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive."

1 Corinthians 15:22, NASB 1995

IV. The Sacramental Signs of the Covenant: The Two Trees

The Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as Covenant Ordinances

A. The Tree of Life: Sign of the Covenant's Promise

The presence of the two trees at the center of the garden of Eden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:9), is not a coincidental feature of the creation narrative; it is the sacramental dimension of the covenant of works, providing the creature with a visible, tangible, physical embodiment of the covenant's promise and the covenant's test. In the biblical pattern, covenants are consistently accompanied by signs and seals: the rainbow for the Noahic covenant, circumcision for the Abrahamic covenant, the Passover and the sacrificial system for the Mosaic covenant, the Lord's Supper and baptism for the new covenant. The two trees of the garden function as the sacramental signs of the covenant of works, embodying its promise and its probation in visible, accessible, tangible form.

The tree of life is the sacramental sign of the covenant's promise: the confirmed, eschatologically permanent life that faithful obedience to the covenant's terms would have achieved. In its pre-fall function, the tree of life was not merely a source of physical immortality; it was the visible embodiment of the fullness of the creaturely life lived in fellowship with God, the sacramental representation of the eschatological state that the covenant of works was designed to achieve. Adam's access to the tree of life was not guaranteed; it was available as long as he remained in the covenant's good standing, and it pointed forward to the eschatological confirmation that sustained obedience would have brought. The connection between the tree of life and the eschatological state of the redeemed is confirmed by Revelation 2:7 and 22:2, 14, 19, where the tree of life appears in the new Jerusalem

as the eschatological sign of the redeemed's participation in the eternal life of God, the same life that the garden's tree sacramentally represented in the covenant of works, now fully realized in the new covenant's eschatological fruition.

After the fall, God's expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden and His placing of the cherubim to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22–24) is a profoundly significant act within the covenantal framework. The expulsion from the tree of life is not primarily a punitive act but a protective one: God prevents the fallen creature from eating of the tree of life and living forever in the state of sin and death that the fall has produced. The tree of life, in the fallen world, would have perpetuated the fallen condition rather than providing the eschatological life it was designed to represent, because the eschatological life cannot be attained by a fallen creature on the basis of the fallen creature's own standing before God. The tree of life is therefore sealed off until Christ's fulfillment of the covenant of works restores the conditions under which the covenant's promise can be rightly received. The cherubim guarding the way to the tree of life are not the enemies of the creature but the guardians of the hope that the tree represents, a hope that will be fully realized only in the new Jerusalem where the tree of life stands available to all who have been redeemed by the Last Adam's covenant-fulfilling obedience.

B. *The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: Sign of the Covenant's Test*

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the sacramental sign of the covenant's probationary test, the visible, tangible embodiment of the divine command that the creature's obedience is called to honor. The nature of the tree is a matter of theological debate: is the knowledge of good and evil that the tree's name references a moral knowledge that Adam did not yet possess (so that eating the fruit would grant him a new kind of moral awareness), or is it an experiential knowledge of good and evil gained through the act of transgression itself (so that Adam, who knew good by obedience, would come to know evil by disobedience)? The Reformed tradition has generally favored the experiential interpretation: Adam in the original state already possessed the true knowledge of good (through his unclouded relationship with God) and the theoretical knowledge of evil (through the divine prohibition that defined it), but had not yet experienced evil through transgression. The eating of the tree would give him an experiential knowledge of evil that he gained through the act of choosing against God's will, knowledge that came at the cost of the innocence and the fellowship with God that the original state had.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not evil in itself; it was not a trap, a trick, or a test designed for failure. It was the divinely appointed occasion for the free expression of covenant loyalty, the one restriction in the garden of abundance that gave the creature's obedience its character as genuine covenant faithfulness rather than mere instinctive compliance. The creature who refrained from eating the tree would have been refraining as an act of free, trusting, loving obedience to the Creator who had given her everything else and asked only for the acknowledgment of His sovereign authority over this one tree. The creature who ate the tree would have been eating as an act of free, distrusting, rebellious self-assertion against the Creator who had given her everything, reaching for an autonomy that was not hers to take, declaring independence from the One in whose image she was made and under whose authority her existence was placed. Lesson 16 will examine the probationary test in detail; this lesson simply establishes the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as the sacramental sign of the test, the visible and tangible embodiment of the covenant's probationary dimension.

The two trees together constitute the sacramental structure of the covenant of works: the tree of life representing the promise of the covenant (confirmed eschatological life for sustained obedience) and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil representing the test of the covenant (the freely chosen, genuinely consequential obedience or disobedience that the probationary period required). In the framework of progressive covenantal biblical theology, the garden's sacramental structure is the first expression of the covenant sign pattern that runs through the entire biblical canon: every covenant has its signs and seals, its visible embodiments of the covenant's promises and stipulations, its tangible points of engagement between the divine covenant-maker and the human covenant-servant. The two trees of Eden are the first covenant signs in that pattern, and their theological function is continuous with the covenant signs that follow them, each embodying, in its specific historical and redemptive

context, the same fundamental covenantal realities of promise, obligation, and the eschatological life that faithful covenant-keeping achieves.

V. The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace

How the Failure of the First Covenant Creates the Necessity and the Framework of the Second

A. *The Covenant of Grace as the Response to the Covenant of Works' Failure*

The covenant of works and the covenant of grace are not two independent covenants that happen to follow one another in the history of redemption; they are structurally related in a way that makes the second the direct response to the failure of the first. The covenant of grace is the divine provision for the situation that the covenant of works' failure created: the situation of a fallen human race that cannot meet the standard of perfect and personal obedience that the covenant of works requires, that stands under the condemnation and the death that the covenant of works' sanction imposed, and that has no internal resources adequate to remedy its own situation. The covenant of grace is the gospel's covenantal framework: the arrangement by which God, without abandoning the justice that the covenant of works' sanction demands, provides a way for fallen sinners to receive the life that the covenant of works promised, not by their own perfect obedience, which they cannot provide, but through the perfect obedience of the one Mediator who could and did provide it.

The relationship between law and gospel in the biblical canon is best understood within the framework of the two covenants. The law, the principle of works-based righteousness that Paul contrasts with the righteousness of faith in Romans and Galatians, is the principle of the covenant of works: the principle that life is the reward for perfect and personal obedience, and that death is the sanction for disobedience. The gospel, the righteousness of faith that the covenant of grace provides through the imputation of Christ's covenant-fulfilling obedience, is not the abolition of the law's principle but its fulfillment in Christ and its application to the believer through faith. The law is not set aside in the gospel; the law's demand for perfect and personal obedience is fully honored in the gospel, but it is honored by the Last Adam on behalf of His people, not by the people themselves. The covenant of grace does not lower the standard of the covenant of works; it provides the Mediator who meets that standard and whose covenant-meeting righteousness is imputed to those who trust in Him.

The Westminster Confession of Faith's treatment of the covenant of grace (7.3) makes this structural relationship explicit: "Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe." The key phrase is "man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant": the covenant of grace is the divine response to the creature's incapacity, an incapacity that the fall created and that no creaturely resource can overcome. The covenant of grace does not emerge from a divine plan that was always independent of the covenant of works; it emerges from the divine response to the specific situation that the covenant of works' failure created, providing through the Last Adam what the first Adam failed to provide.

B. *The Active Obedience of Christ and the Covenant of Works' Fulfillment*

The doctrine of the active obedience of Christ, the teaching that Christ's entire earthly life of perfect obedience to the law constitutes the positive righteousness that is imputed to the believer through faith, alongside and distinct from the passive obedience by which He bore the penalty of the law on behalf of His people, is the most direct soteriological expression of the covenant of works' continuing relevance in the framework of the covenant of grace. If the covenant of works required perfect and personal obedience as the condition for the promised life, then the life that the covenant of grace provides must be grounded in the perfect and personal obedience of the Mediator who fulfills the covenant's conditions on behalf of His people. The active obedience of Christ is the fulfillment of the covenant of works' condition; the passive obedience of Christ is the satisfaction of the covenant

of works' sanction; and together they constitute the complete and comprehensive covenant-fulfillment that the believer receives through union with Christ and imputation of His righteousness through faith.

The theological tradition has consistently grounded the active obedience of Christ in the covenant of works precisely because the covenant of works provides the framework within which the active obedience's soteriological significance can be properly understood. If Christ had merely died for His people's sins, if His work had consisted entirely of bearing the penalty of the covenant of works' sanction without fulfilling the covenant of works' condition of perfect obedience, then His people would be in the situation of persons whose sin-debt had been canceled but who had not yet secured the positive righteousness that the covenant promised. They would be back at Adam's starting point, forgiven, but not yet in possession of the eschatological life that the covenant promised for perfect obedience. The active obedience of Christ provides what mere forgiveness cannot: the positive, perfect, covenant-fulfilling righteousness that secures the life the covenant promised and that is imputed to the believer as the ground of her complete acceptance before God.

The practical pastoral import of the covenant of works' connection to the active obedience of Christ is the import of the full assurance of the believer's standing before God. The believer who understands the covenant of works understands that the righteousness on which her standing before God rests is not her own partial and imperfect obedience but the complete and perfect obedience of the One who fulfilled the covenant of works on her behalf. This is not the ground for complacency about personal obedience; it is the ground for the freedom from the anxiety of self-justification that the gospel produces. The believer does not need to be perfectly obedient to be accepted by God, because the perfect obedience required by the covenant of works has been provided by the Last Adam and is imputed to her through faith. She obeys because she is accepted, not to be accepted; she pursues holiness as the gratitude of the justified, not as the condition of the justification. The covenant of works, fulfilled in Christ and imputed to the believer, is the theological foundation of the gospel's liberating grace.

VI. The Doxological Conclusion: The God Who Condescended to Covenant

The Covenant of Works as a Display of the Creator's Gracious Condescension

The covenant of works is not, at its deepest level, a legal arrangement designed to test the creature with the possibility of failure. It is, at its deepest level, a display of the Creator's extraordinary gracious condescension. The Westminster Confession (7.1) prefaces its treatment of the covenant framework with an observation that sets the entire covenantal structure in its proper theological context: "The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant." The covenant of works is not a legal trap; it is an act of divine condescension. The infinite Creator, who owes nothing to the creature and who would be perfectly just if He required the creature's obedience without any promise of reward, voluntarily binds Himself to the creature in a covenantal arrangement that promises the creature's blessedness as the reward for the creature's faithfulness.

This dimension of gracious condescension in the covenant of works means that the fall is not merely the failure of a legal test; it is the betrayal of a generous relationship. The God who made the creature very good, placed it in a garden of abundance, gave it a meaningful vocation, provided it with a companion, entered into direct personal fellowship with it, and condescended to offer it the confirmed eschatological blessedness as the reward for the simple act of trusting His word about the tree, this God was met with the creature's distrust, its grasping after autonomy, its preference for the serpent's word over the Creator's word. The fall is not the neutral creature's freedom expressing itself negatively; it is the betrayal of a gracious covenant by the creature who had been given everything and trusted with one simple test of that gift's integrity.

The covenant of grace that follows the covenant of works' failure is therefore even more extraordinary than the covenant of works itself. If the covenant of works was an act of divine condescension, the infinite Creator binding Himself to promise blessedness to the faithful creature, then the covenant of grace is an act of divine condescension of an altogether greater order: the infinite Creator, whose just response to the covenant of works' betrayal would be the unmitigated execution of the sanction of death, instead enters a new covenantal arrangement in which He provides, in the person of His own Son, the perfect obedience that the original covenant required and that the creature failed to provide. The covenant of grace is more remarkable than the covenant of works precisely because it responds to the creature's betrayal with redemption rather than condemnation, and it does so not by setting aside the justice of the covenant of works but by satisfying it in the person of the Last Adam who bears its penalty and fulfills its condition. This is the gospel in its covenantal structure: the covenant-breaking creature receives the covenant-fulfilling obedience of the Son as her own, not because she earned it, not because she deserved it, but because the God who condescended to covenant with the creature in the garden of Eden condescended again, in the fullness of time, to send His Son to do what the creature could not do and to give the creature what the creature could not earn. Soli Deo Gloria.

“For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.”

Romans 5:19, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Covenant of Works	The arrangement established by God with Adam before the fall, in which confirmed eternal life was promised to Adam and his posterity upon the condition of perfect and personal obedience, with death as the sanction for disobedience. Defined in the Westminster Confession 7.2 as “a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” The five classic elements of the covenant of works are: (1) the sovereign Lord (God), (2) the covenant servant (Adam), (3) the stipulation (Genesis 2:17a: do not eat from the tree), (4) the sanction (Genesis 2:17b: you will surely die), and (5) the implied promise (confirmed, eternal life for sustained obedience).
Federal Headship (Covenant of Works)	The representative principle by which Adam functioned not merely as a private individual but as the federal (covenant) head of the entire human race, so that his obedience or disobedience in the covenant of works would determine the covenant standing of all his natural posterity before God. Federal headship is the structural mechanism by which the consequences of Adam’s transgression extend to all humanity (Romans 5:12–21) and by which, by structural analogy, the consequences of Christ’s obedience extend to all who are in Him by faith. Without the federal headship of Adam, the Pauline parallel between Adam and Christ (Romans 5:19; 1 Corinthians 15:22) lacks its covenantal coherence.
Hosea 6:7	The prophetic text most directly cited in support of the covenant of works: “But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; there they have dealt treacherously against Me.” The translation “like Adam” (ke-Adam, כְּאָדָם) is defended by the Westminster tradition against alternative translations (“like men” or “at Adam” the city) as the most natural reading of the Hebrew construction and the most contextually coherent reference. If the translation “like Adam” is correct, the verse provides the only explicit scriptural use of the word “covenant” (berith) in connection with Adam’s pre-fall relationship to God.
Covenant of Grace	The redemptive arrangement established by God in response to the failure of the covenant of works, whereby God freely offers sinners life and salvation through Jesus Christ, the Last Adam, upon the condition of faith in Him. Defined in Westminster Confession 7.3. The covenant of grace does not lower the standard of the covenant of works; it provides the Mediator (Christ) who fulfills that standard in His active and passive obedience on behalf of His people, imputing His covenant-fulfilling righteousness to them through faith. The covenant of grace is the covenantal framework of the gospel across all periods of redemptive history, progressively unfolding from the protoevangelion of Genesis 3:15 through the subsequent biblical covenants to its full realization in the new covenant in Christ.
Active Obedience of Christ	Christ’s perfect, lifelong, comprehensive fulfillment of the law’s demands throughout His earthly ministry, constituting the positive righteousness that is imputed to the believer through faith alongside the passive obedience (His bearing of the penalty of sin on the cross). The active obedience is the fulfillment of the covenant of works’ condition of perfect and personal obedience, providing what Adam failed to provide and what the believer cannot provide for herself. Without the active obedience, the believer’s justification would remove

	condemnation (through the passive obedience) but would not secure the positive covenant-fulfilling righteousness that the covenant of works promised for perfect obedience. Romans 5:19's "obedience of the One" grounds both the active and the passive obedience.
Passive Obedience of Christ	Christ's willing bearing of the penalty of the covenant of works, death, condemnation, the curse of the law, on behalf of His people in His suffering and crucifixion. The passive obedience satisfies the sanction of the covenant of works ("you will surely die") that Adam's transgression incurred and that the entire fallen human race deserves. Paired with the active obedience, the passive obedience constitutes the complete covenant-fulfillment through which the believer's justification is accomplished: the penalty is removed (passive obedience) and the positive righteousness is provided (active obedience), both imputed to the believer through faith in Christ.
Tree of Life	One of the two trees at the center of the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9), functioning as the sacramental sign of the covenant of works' promise: the confirmed, eschatologically permanent life that faithful covenant obedience would have achieved. In its pre-fall function, the tree of life pointed forward to the eschatological state of the non posse peccare that sustained obedience to the covenant of works would have attained. After the fall, access to the tree is sealed off (Genesis 3:22–24) until Christ's covenant-fulfilling obedience restores the conditions for the promise's reception. The tree of life reappears in the new Jerusalem (Revelation 22:2, 14) as the eschatological sign of the redeemed's participation in the eternal life secured by the Last Adam.
Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil	The second of the two trees at the center of the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9), functioning as the sacramental sign of the covenant of works' probationary test. The prohibition of eating from this tree (Genesis 2:17) was the specific stipulation of the covenant of works, the one restriction in the garden of abundance that gave the creature's obedience its character as genuine covenant faithfulness rather than mere instinctive compliance. The Reformed tradition has generally understood the "knowledge of good and evil" as experiential rather than cognitive: Adam knew good through unclouded fellowship with God; eating the tree would give him the experiential knowledge of evil through the act of transgression itself.
Mot Tamut (מות תמות)	Hebrew: "dying you shall die," the emphatic infinitive absolute construction of the death sanction in Genesis 2:17: "for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die." The construction is the strongest possible assertion of the certainty of the threatened consequence. The death threatened encompasses physical death (separation of soul and body), spiritual death (rupture of fellowship with God), and eternal death (permanent separation from God's presence, the ultimate consequence of the fall's spiritual death). The comprehensiveness of the mot tamut establishes the comprehensiveness of what the covenant of works put at stake in Adam's obedience.
Protoevangelion	Greek: "first gospel." The term applied to Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" (NASB 1995), as the first proclamation of the covenant of grace after the fall. The protoevangelion announces the coming of the Last Adam (the seed of the woman) who will crush

	the serpent's head, initiating the entire history of covenantal redemption that the subsequent biblical covenants progressively unfold toward its fulfillment in Christ.
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Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the covenant of works is not a peripheral Reformed peculiarity but a structural necessity for the coherent understanding of the Pauline doctrine of justification. The imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer through faith, the very heart of the Reformation's recovery of the gospel, requires a framework within which the righteousness being imputed is understood as the fulfillment of a specific covenantal obligation. The covenant of works provides that framework: it establishes the standard (perfect and personal obedience), identifies the One who met the standard (the Last Adam), and gives theological coherence to the imputation (the standard-meeting righteousness of the One is credited to the account of those who failed to meet the standard themselves). Without the covenant of works, the active obedience of Christ is without its proper covenantal context, and the imputation of righteousness is a doctrinal assertion without its necessary structural grounding.

We must also believe that the fall is the betrayal of a genuine covenant of generous condescension, not merely the failure of a mechanical legal test. The God who condescended to covenant with Adam was the God who had given Adam everything, the garden, the vocation, the companion, the very good creation, and the promise of eschatological blessedness for faithfulness. The gravity of the fall is measured by the generosity of the arrangement that was betrayed; and the grace of the covenant of grace is measured by the willingness of the betrayed Creator to provide, in the person of His own Son, what the betrayer could not provide for himself. Holding the covenant of works with this pastoral and doxological depth transforms it from a technical Reformed doctrine into the theological context within which the gospel's grace appears in its full, astonishing magnitude.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the covenant of works produce in you a renewed sense of the astonishing grace of the gospel. The God who made men upright (Ecclesiastes 7:29), who entered a covenant with the creature He had made, who promised eschatological blessedness as the reward for a single act of trusting obedience, and who had His generous arrangement betrayed by the creature He had loved and equipped, this God chose not to execute the sanction in isolation from redemption. Instead, "when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law" (Galatians 4:4–5, NASB 1995). The covenant of works frames the gospel's grace by establishing how much was betrayed and how graciously it was answered. The believer who holds the covenant of works will feel the gospel's grace more deeply than the believer who does not, because she will understand what it means that the Last Adam did what the first Adam failed to do, and what it means for the imputed righteousness of that fulfillment to be credited to her account through faith alone.

Desire the freedom from self-justification that the covenant of works' fulfillment in Christ produces. The anxiety of the creature who believes, at some level, that her standing before God depends on the quality of her own obedience is the anxiety of someone who has not understood that the covenant of works' condition of perfect and personal obedience has already been met, by the Last Adam, on her behalf, and imputed to her through faith. The liberty of the gospel is precisely the liberty from the pressure of self-justification that comes from knowing that the work is done, the standard is met, the righteousness is secured, not by her, but for her, and credited to her as surely as Adam's transgression was credited against her. Receive this freedom not as license for indolence but as the ground of a grateful, joyful obedience that is no longer the anxious labor of justification but the free expression of the justified.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Romans 5:12–21 slowly and in full, attending to the structural parallel between Adam and Christ. Count the occurrences of "one man," "the one," and their equivalents. Identify the specific consequences

attributed to each one's definitive act: what does Adam's disobedience produce for the many, and what does Christ's obedience produce for the many? Then ask: what does the parallel require about the nature of Adam's representative status (federal headship) and the nature of Christ's representative status? And how does the covenant of works provide the structural framework within which this parallel makes coherent sense?

- Work through the five elements of the covenant of works, sovereign Lord, covenant servant, stipulation, sanction, implied promise, against the text of Genesis 2:15–17, identifying precisely where each element appears in the text or is implied by it. Then ask: does the presence of all five elements in Genesis 2:15–17 adequately establish the covenantal character of the pre-fall Adamic arrangement, even in the absence of the specific word *berith*? What weight should the absence of the technical covenantal term carry in the exegetical argument, and how does the Reformed tradition's response to this objection satisfy you?
- **Read O. Palmer Robertson's *The Christ of the Covenants* (1980), chapters 4–5.** Robertson's treatment of the covenant of works is the most exegetically careful and theologically nuanced available in the contemporary Reformed tradition. He engages both the case for the covenantal interpretation of the Adamic arrangement and the objections to it (including the absence of *berith* from Genesis 2) with the kind of careful exegetical attention that the doctrine demands. For the classic scholastic treatment, Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Eighth Topic, Questions 3–6 provides the most thorough and the most carefully argued defense of the covenant of works in the Reformed tradition.
- Explain the connection between the covenant of works and the active obedience of Christ to someone in your congregation who is unfamiliar with the doctrine. The explanation should cover: what the covenant of works required (perfect and personal obedience), why no fallen human being can meet that requirement, what the active obedience of Christ accomplishes (the fulfillment of the covenant's condition on behalf of His people), and what the believer receives through the imputation of Christ's covenant-fulfilling righteousness (the positive, eschatological life that the covenant promised for perfect obedience). After giving the explanation, identify the specific point in the explanation that was most difficult to communicate clearly, and commit to developing a more accessible account of that point.
- Meditate on Galatians 4:4–5 in the light of the covenant of works: "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." What does it mean that the Son was "born under the Law"? What law is in view, and what does it mean for the Son to have been born into subjection to it? How does the phrase "that He might redeem those who were under the Law" describe the relationship between the Last Adam's covenant obedience and the benefit that His obedience secures for those who were under the law's condemnation? Let the covenantal framework illuminate the specific theological content of each phrase, and let the illumination produce the doxological response that the passage invites.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before working through this lesson, were you familiar with the doctrine of the covenant of works? If so, from what theological tradition or resource did you first encounter it? Did you find the doctrine helpful or problematic, and why? Has the lesson changed your evaluation of the doctrine's biblical basis, theological significance, or practical importance? Identify the single consideration that has most significantly advanced or challenged your understanding of the covenant of works.

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Genesis 2:15–17 carefully. Identify each of the five covenantal elements, sovereign Lord, covenant servant, stipulation, sanction, and implied promise, in the text. For each element, note the specific words or phrases that establish it. Then assess: how explicit is each element in the text? Which element has the strongest direct textual support, and which is most reliant on theological inference? Does the presence of all five elements in the text constitute adequate evidence for describing the arrangement as a covenant, even without the specific word *berith*?
- Read Hosea 6:4–7 in its broader context. What is God's primary indictment of Ephraim and Judah in this passage? What specific sins does He identify? And in verse 7, what comparison does He draw between Israel's behavior and someone or something identified as *ke-Adam*? What is the force of the comparison in the context of God's indictment of covenant-breaking? Does the context favor the translation "like Adam" (the first man), "like men" (humanity in general), or "at Adam" (the city)? Which translation best serves the rhetorical and theological purpose of the comparison?
- Read Romans 5:12–21 in full. What is the specific logical structure of Paul's argument about Adam and Christ? How does the argument in verses 15–19 develop the parallel introduced in verse 12? What does the phrase "by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (v. 19) contribute to the understanding of both Adam's representative role in the covenant of works and Christ's representative role in the covenant of grace? What is the relationship between the "obedience" of verse 19 and the "lifting" of condemnation in verse 18?
- Read 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 and 45–49. How does Paul's account of the "first man Adam" and the "last Adam" in verses 45–49 relate to the resurrection argument of verses 20–28? What is the significance of describing Adam as "from the earth, earthy" and Christ as "from heaven" for the doctrine of the two Adams' representative roles? How does the contrast between the psychical/natural (*psychikon*) and the spiritual (*pneumatikon*) in verse 44 bear on the distinction between the two Adams' respective representative heads?
- Read Galatians 3:10–13 alongside Romans 10:5. What principle does Paul cite from the law in Galatians 3:10 ("cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them", citing Deuteronomy 27:26), and how does it relate to the covenant of works' requirement of perfect and personal obedience? What does Paul say Christ has done with respect to this curse (Galatians 3:13), and how does His doing so relate to the passive obedience's satisfaction of the covenant of works' sanction?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- Some interpreters within and outside the Reformed tradition have argued that the term "covenant of works" is misleading, that it implies a works-based meritocracy that misrepresents the character of God's relationship with Adam, who received everything by grace. The Westminster Confession itself (7.1) acknowledges that God's condescension to covenant with the creature was itself an act of grace. Does the covenant of works framework misrepresent the pre-fall relationship between God and Adam by framing it in terms of works and merit? Or does the framework accurately capture the conditional character of the arrangement while also being consistent with the gracious character of God's condescension to enter it?

How would you explain the relationship between grace and law in the covenant of works to someone who raised this objection?

- The lesson argues that the covenant of works is a structural necessity for the coherent understanding of the active obedience of Christ and the imputation of His righteousness. Do you find this argument persuasive? Could the imputation of Christ's righteousness be theologically grounded without the framework of the covenant of works? What would be lost from the doctrine of justification if the covenant of works were removed from the framework? And conversely, what does the covenant of works add to the understanding of justification that other frameworks cannot provide?
- The lesson identifies the tree of life as the sacramental sign of the covenant's promise and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as the sacramental sign of the covenant's test. Do you find this sacramental interpretation of the two trees exegetically warranted? What is the relationship between the sacramental function of the trees in the covenant of works and the sacramental function of baptism and the Lord's Supper in the new covenant? Does the progressive covenantal pattern of covenant signs support or challenge the sacramental interpretation of the garden's trees?
- The Westminster Confession (7.1) argues that God's voluntary condescension to covenant with the creature is necessary for the creature's fruition of God as its blessedness and reward, because "the distance between God and the creature is so great" that no creature can attain the blessedness of fellowship with God simply by virtue of its natural constitution. Is this argument from divine transcendence and creaturely incapacity persuasive? Does it adequately explain why God chose to structure the pre-fall relationship covenantally rather than in some other way? What does the argument add to the understanding of the covenant of works as an act of divine condescension rather than a legal trap?
- The lesson closes with the doxological observation that the covenant of grace is more extraordinary than the covenant of works because it responds to the creature's betrayal of a generous covenant with redemption rather than condemnation. How does the covenant of works' generosity (one restriction in a garden of abundance, confirmed eschatological blessedness as the reward for faithfulness) frame the covenant of grace's generosity (the covenant-fulfilling obedience of the Son provided to those who betrayed the original covenant)? What specifically does the covenant of works add to your appreciation of the grace of the covenant of grace?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the active obedience of Christ is the fulfillment of the covenant of works' condition of perfect and personal obedience, and that this fulfillment is the positive righteousness imputed to the believer through faith. How clearly does the preaching of the congregation you serve communicate the active obedience of Christ and its role in the believer's justification? Is the gospel preached in a way that makes clear that the believer's standing before God is grounded in Christ's covenant-fulfilling obedience, not merely in the forgiveness of sins? What specific adjustments in the content or the emphasis of the congregation's gospel proclamation would most fully honor the active obedience's place in the doctrine of justification?
- The lesson identifies the freedom from self-justification as one of the practical fruits of the covenant of works' fulfillment in Christ. Evaluate your own experience of this freedom: do you experience your standing before God as resting on Christ's covenant-fulfilling obedience, or do you experience it as contingent on the quality of your own obedience? What specific patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior in your own life most clearly reveal the presence or the absence of this freedom? And what specific disciplines of mind and heart, what specific engagements with the Scriptures, with prayer, with the sacraments, would most effectively deepen your experience of the freedom that the covenant of grace provides?
- The covenant of works establishes Adam's representative role as the federal head of the human race, the one whose act determines the standing of all his posterity. In the experience of pastoral ministry, what is the most effective way of communicating this representative principle to people who are unfamiliar with

it? What analogies, what illustrations, what pastoral contexts provide the most accessible entry point into the doctrine of federal headship for those who have not encountered it before? And what specific misunderstandings of the doctrine are most common among the people in your pastoral care, and how does the lesson's treatment of federal headship most effectively address them?

- Genesis 3:15's protoevangelion, the first announcement of the covenant of grace in the immediate aftermath of the covenant of works' failure, establishes a pattern of divine grace responding to human failure that runs through the entire biblical canon. Trace this pattern briefly across three or four subsequent covenant moments in the Old Testament (Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic) and identify in each case how the covenant of grace's response to human failure develops progressively toward its fulfillment in Christ. What does this exercise in progressive covenantal biblical theology add to your understanding of the unity and the coherence of the biblical narrative?
- The covenant of works' condescension dimension, the recognition that God was under no obligation to covenant with the creature but chose to do so as an act of gracious self-binding, is a dimension of the doctrine that has profound implications for the Christian's posture in worship, in prayer, and in the daily exercise of the covenant relationship with God. Does the awareness of God's condescension in covenanting with the creature produce in you the specific quality of reverent gratitude that the doctrine calls for? What specific acts of worship, what specific patterns of prayer, what specific expressions of covenant faithfulness in the daily Christian life most directly reflect the grateful reception of the divine condescension that the covenant relationship represents?

Prayer Focus

Open this fifteenth lesson of the Anthropology series with a reading of Galatians 4:1–7, Paul’s concentrated account of the transition from the covenant of works’ era of law to the covenant of grace’s era of adoption: “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God” (Galatians 4:4–7, NASB 1995). Read this passage slowly in the light of everything this lesson has established about the covenant of works: God sent His Son “born under the Law”, that is, born into the covenantal obligation that the covenant of works established and that fallen human beings cannot fulfill, “so that He might redeem those who were under the Law.” The redemption from the law’s covenant-of-works obligation is accomplished by the One who fulfilled that obligation perfectly in His active obedience and bore its penalty completely in His passive obedience. And the fruit of that redemption is not merely forgiveness but adoption: “that we might receive the adoption as sons.” The covenant-breaking creature becomes, through the covenant-fulfilling obedience of the Son, not merely a pardoned criminal but an adopted heir. Read the passage with the full theological weight of the covenant of works behind it, and let the grace of the covenant of grace appear in the full magnitude that the covenant framework reveals.

Spend time in Trinitarian adoration, allowing the doctrine of the covenant of works to deepen your worship of each person of the Trinity in His specific role in the covenantal drama of creation, fall, and redemption. Begin with the Father, who condescended to enter a covenant with the creature He had made, who was under no obligation to offer the creature the blessedness of confirmed eschatological life as the reward for faithfulness, but who graciously bound Himself to do so in the covenant of works, and who, when the creature broke the covenant, responded not with the unmitigated execution of the sanction but with the redemptive purpose that the covenant of grace announces. Adore the Father who, in the fullness of time, sent His Son to fulfill what the first Adam failed to fulfill, providing in the covenant of grace the righteousness that the covenant of works required and that the fallen creature could not provide. Move to the Son, who was born under the law, who actively obeyed every covenant demand from His birth to His death, who bore the covenant sanction of death in His passive obedience, and who by the completeness of His covenant-fulfillment secured for His people the eschatological life that the covenant of works promised and that the covenant of grace provides through the imputation of His righteousness through faith. Adore the Last Adam who did what the first Adam failed to do, in every generation and on behalf of every member of the covenant people who trusts in Him. Conclude with the Spirit, who applies the redemption accomplished by the Son to the covenant people, who produces in the redeemed the faith through which the covenant-fulfilling righteousness of Christ is received, who is Himself the eschatological gift, “the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, Abba! Father!”, that the covenant of grace provides as the first installment of the adoption and the inheritance that the Last Adam’s fulfillment of the covenant of works secured.

Pray together for the congregation and for the specific work of Unit 5 in three directions. First, for a theologically grounded and pastorally warm engagement with the covenantal framework: that the covenant of works would function in the congregation not as an intimidating scholastic technical detail but as the indispensable structural context within which the grace of the gospel appears in its full magnitude, the grace of the God who condescended to covenant, who responded to the creature’s covenant-breaking with covenant-fulfilling redemption, and who provides to fallen image-bearers the adopted sonship and the inheritance of the Last Adam’s covenant obedience. Second, for the freedom from self-justification that the covenant of grace provides: pray that every member of the community would experience, in the specific circumstances of their own moral struggle and their own awareness of failure, the specific freedom of those who know that the covenant’s condition has been met by the Last Adam and imputed to them through faith, and who therefore stand before God not on the basis of their own covenant-keeping but on the basis of Christ’s. Third, for the urgency of covenant faithfulness in gratitude: pray that the knowledge of the covenant’s grace would produce not the presumption of those who take the grace for granted but the grateful, joyful, covenant faithfulness of those who know that they have been redeemed from the

curse of the covenant of works by the One who bore that curse in their place, and who therefore live in the freedom and the gratitude of those who have been adopted as sons and heirs of God through Jesus Christ.

“God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

Galatians 4:4–5, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Genesis 2:9, 15–17; 3:15, 22–24; Hosea 6:7; Romans 5:12–21; 10:5; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45–49; Galatians 3:10–13; 4:4–5*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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