

Breaking the Covenant of Works

Adam. If you knew some Hebrew, you'd read it, you'd say Adam. Oh, wait a minute, is that what I, yes, that's Adam.

Of the earth, where did Adam come from? His body was formed out of the dust of the ground. And so, I believe it should be Adam. A number of commentators of old believe it should be Adam.

And of course, New King James Version disagrees with me and uses man, but they're kind of hedging their bet with that footnote, aren't they? Footnote. Or like Adam. Adam.

I'm going to give you a reason. I'm going to give you a simple reason why it should be translated like that. So our text involves here, as I pointed out already, a little Hebrew.

And so, I have a given translation here. I'm using the Young's translation from the early 1900s that highlights this. It's Young's literal translation.

It just uses the word Adam there. The simple fact that describing the unfaithfulness of the Jews of Hosea's day as though they were men who transgressed some covenant, if you think about it, has no moral punch. You men, you, who's he saying? But like men transgressed.

They who? The Jews. You Jews. Like man have transgressed.

What? You men, like a, I mean, that's basically, what's the significance of saying that? The significance makes sense when you can, it's like a comparison to, not just, yeah, you guys are a bunch of men who break covenants like other men. What? No, you're like Adam. You have violated, and a most high the rebuke and and the covenant connection.

The opening chapters of Hosea is what? Marrying another woman and being covenant with her as a parallel or an example to the people of Israel, like this marriage that's now broken because she's been unfaithful, you are unfaithful to me in the covenant of Moses. So this is a strong theme in the book of Hosea, thus I think it makes sense that it's Adam. Persistent public transgressions of the Lord's black eye commands by the church of old, the Old Testament, is likened to an unfaithful wife there in the opening chapters.

And here, again, with respect to Adam, and before, in chapter four, as legal charge, he talks about breaking a covenant and bringing charges against you, a legal accusation. And so such comparisons demand the reader to understand, therefore, what is this covenant with Adam? If they've broken it like Adam, what does that mean, what did Adam do? And so I think it makes sense from here to give a topical sermon on what we call, as most of us know, covenant theology, right? Covenant theology, which we approach the Bible, the Bible text, through the lenses of a covenant. Two covenants, in particular, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.

Or, which you hear sometimes as law and gospel. But not exactly, right? We obviously still have to follow the 10 commandments. Not to save our soul, that's the covenant of works.

And whenever the Pharisees and the Old Testament Jews ran around saying, look how good I am, look how much I've obeyed God, look how much I've worshiped him, I've sacrificed and had all these burnt offerings. Isn't this wonderful, God, don't you love me, shouldn't I be brought to heaven? Every time they did that, instead of what? Trusting and believing and relying upon the promised Messiah God is basically saying, you're in a covenant of works, they are in a covenant of works, they are in a broken covenant of works, they are trying to save themselves. It's them going back to the old way of Adam.

That's the difference. God's covenants, God's covenants in general, the first point. What is a covenant, right, what does that mean? An agreement between two or more persons.

God's Covenants

It's a very simple definition. An agreement between two or more persons. Now I break it down this way, both informal and formal.

So if you think about it, adults have many implicit agreements, friendships kind of like that. We don't formally sit there and say, I'm a friend now, and we have this agreement, and if you violate these certain requirements of this friendship, you're out of here, buddy. It's implied, it's unspoken, it's informal or unofficial, as it were.

Until, of course, you break those, usually gross sins of some sort, then you've broken the friendship. What we mean, of course, in the Bible is formal covenants. Explicit, particular, when God is involved in these covenants.

And there are three constituent elements of said covenants. Covenant must have parties. One party or another party, gotta have two or more people.

It has to have stipulations or something to be agreed upon. A friendship, for example, is an agreement of things that we have in common. We like certain things, we do certain things together, and this is what our friendship is, what we say is based upon.

And so a covenant is based upon stipulations or requirements. The covenant of works would be what? Obey the Ten Commandments, in particular, don't eat of that tree. The knowledge of good and evil.

That's a stipulation, period. It's a requirement. And then thirdly, the consequences of either fulfilling the stipulations, eternal life in the case of Adam, or breaking the stipulation.

And we saw that with Adam, clearly, he died. His body started dying, and he eventually did die. And his soul was separated from the Lord.

There was a spiritual death as well. There was a consequence. And of course, there's gonna have to be a consequence with formalized agreements.

What would be the point of having a formalized public agreement or covenant? Between people, between nations, for example. And so that gives me two examples of everyday

examples of covenants. Types already intimated towards when I said informal or formal or public or private.

The national covenants, we talk about, if you recall in school, maybe. I don't remember how much school they do today about these things. But you have what they call bilateral or unilateral agreements, right? Unilateral is two parties, but the one party's stronger than the other in making the other party agree to that agreement, whether they like it or not.

That's what a unilateral is. And that's more closer to what the God's covenant is for us, isn't it? We're not equal terms with God Almighty at all. And so even, we may even say gracious on his part.

So it's not a uniquely biblical thing, right? As though we can never understand covenants without going to a Bible text and trying to find some definition somewhere. We live this way. God took the idea of covenant.

Of course, he gave it to us in his providence. But we all live it and do these things. And used it and gave us what we know as the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.

One of the well-known covenants that we're all familiar with, believers and unbelievers alike, is one in which helps establish a society and propagate the human race. Right, marriage. Marriage is a public covenant.

It's two parties. There's stipulations. I love you to my dying days.

I'll be faithful to you as well. Not just emotions, but faithfulness to my dying days. And there's a consequence to that.

The consequence, of course, is wedding bliss or divorce, if you break that under God's terms. That's a covenant that has all three constituent parts. And another one, of course, is the U.S. Constitution.

We don't think of it that way, but that's just a political covenant. It's what we call a constitution or a political contract. Contract's another word at times.

So, what do we see about this constitution, or even marriage covenants and the like? One other element that's a little unique to compare, for example, to friendship or business contracts that just go away after a few years, and once the product is finished or accomplished, you're done. These kind of covenants, the U.S. Constitution covenant, the marriage covenant, are what? Generational. That's part of the stipulation.

It goes from generation to generation, doesn't it? And so does the covenant of works, because we were born in sin, because Adam fell, its generational effects, and the covenant of grace and God's mercy upon us. Now, the covenants in particular, God's covenant with men, as I hinted at before, are never bilateral. It's not two equal parties coming together and saying, hey, okay, God, let's strike a deal here.

God's Covenant of Works in Particular

It's not what Adam did. God created Adam in the garden. He created him upright and good and gave him everything he needed, but also gave him another additional stipulation, which tells us there's a covenant going on there.

Don't eat of that tree. Follow me, of course, and I will bless you, the implication is, and you'll have everlasting life. But rather, it's unilateral.

It's a superior to an inferior, and that should humble us, because that itself tells us God does not have to make a covenant with us. He didn't have to do that with Adam. Coulda just made Adam and said, you just gotta obey me, it's all there is to it.

I didn't have to pick a tree. I didn't have to do any of this, but he did it anyways, for his own glory, of course. Now, the important part of God's covenants is this.

In our confession on Westminster Confession of Faith, the chapter on the covenants gives us this paragraph description, which I think is very helpful for us. I'm not gonna go much into the details, but I will highlight a few things. We read there, the distance between God and the creature is so great that although reasonable creatures, that's us, do owe obedience unto him as their creator, Adam being created, he had to obey, and all his posterity, us included, would have to obey, just by virtue of being existing, being created by God.

Yet they could never, when as we could never, have any fruition of him, any good effects, as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension, he comes down to our level, as a father comes down to a kid, on God's part, which he has been pleased to express by way of covenants. It's a lot of words, basically saying, God didn't have to do it, and you still had to obey God, but he went one step further and said, I'm gonna give you additional blessings, I'm gonna make this covenant, I'm gonna give you this eternal life and blessedness with me, although you didn't have to have that, Adam could have just been on Earth for the rest of his life, and just kept working and tilling, and that would be his calling. And that's what angels do, what do they do? They come back and forth and do God's bidding all the time.

They have specific jobs, it looks like, we read in the Bible, and that's it. That could have been Adam, if God raised him up higher in the covenant of works. He voluntarily, didn't have to, condescended, came down to our level, and gave us more than we deserve, gave through Adam.

So, this is the background and understanding of what a covenant is and the importance of a covenant. So before creation of the covenant of works, I wanna remind us, that man still had to obey, Adam had to obey the Ten Commandments. The covenant is added on top of those Ten Commandments and has that specific part to it.

Don't eat of that tree, that's not part of the Ten Commandments. If the tree's gone, we don't have to worry about that. It's a special rule, in other words.

Now, the three covenants there, there are three covenants, I'm not gonna go into the first one into detail. We call it the covenant of redemption, which is between the members of the Trinity, and from that, we get the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The covenant of works is between God and sinless mankind with Adam as the head.

He represents us, like our president represents us to the world, or our representative. I mean, we have what we call a house of representatives. They represent us, they vote in our stead, as it were.

But this is more organic and more real, this representation of Adam. Because they can make a terrible vote and it may or may not affect me, depending on what that rule is, whatever policy they pass, right? But what Adam did does affect us, every single person born in the human race, directly and seriously. So it's Adam and all his posterity is the covenant of works between God and Adam, still binding insofar as we're under the curse because the covenant has been broken.

We know this, Adam fell. And Adam's father, we sinned all, is the old Puritan saying. And here, they like Adam, they transgressed the covenant.

They violated it and they broke it. So it's not binding anymore in that sense. You can't go back to the old ways and try to say, I'm gonna try to be another Adam, I'm gonna try to do it better than Adam.

You can't, you never will because you are fallen in sin. That's the consequences of the breaking of the covenant of works. And the third covenant, the covenant of grace, is between God and man in Christ.

Christ is the head, he's the new Adam. And those who trust in Jesus are now in the covenant of grace in which from beginning to end, they are redeemed, they are purified, they are justified, they are sanctified, they are adopted. And they don't have to try hard enough to get to heaven, although they want to follow God because they have a new heart.

So they are now free from the curse and the obligation of the covenant of works. And again, these are all generational as well in their own way. So let's look at the covenant of works in particular because this is what the comparison is here, I believe in verse seven.

The confession we read in chapter seven of the Westminster Confession of Faith, a nice summary again. It takes together, there's lots of proof texts in the footnotes there of all these Bible verses and whatnot and summarizes it here. The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works where in life was promised to Adam and in him to his posterity upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

God doesn't grade on a curve, although you might grade on a curve, on the job or at work. Make exceptions, give a little wiggle room. No, he's a holy God and demands absolute perpetual perfection and personal perfection as well.

And that's what was required of the first covenant, the covenant of works. The parts of the covenant of works there exists in the account in Genesis. You recall there in Genesis two and the like where God tells him not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

We know there's two parties already, right? The creator God as the covenant keeping Lord and the created man, Adam, as the image of the covenant keeping God. And Adam was formally told not to touch this and that God would bless him with this long life and blessedness in his presence if he obeyed and he didn't, of course. But those are the two parties.

Let's go to Genesis, there you go. Okay, obviously there's two parties. The stipulation is there as well, not just tending and keeping the garden, ruling over the animals, that's part of his job.

These are natural jobs and we talked about the natural law and the moral law being the same thing. One is more clear than the other, that is the Ten Commandments is more clear than what's written on the hearts, but still on the hearts. And this ruling and dominion over the world is part of his requirement.

So that's their general requirement, Adam's general stipulations of the covenant. But the specific and special requirement, we all know what that was, don't eat that fruit. Stay away from it.

It's what we call a positive law, a special application of the moral law of God. There is nothing in the Ten Commandments that says thou shall not eat of that tree. The tree itself is morally indifferent, just like the mountains and the grass and the bushes today.

So it was in the garden until God said, don't, and that's all it took. Parents do the same thing. Parents say, don't touch that bush.

So something wrong with the bush, is it evil to touch the bush? Is there inherently a moral activity in touching the bush? No, it's okay, you can play with it, you can find the animals, take pictures, but the fact that the parent says what? Don't touch it. That's all it takes to make it a moral matter now, doesn't it? Now it's a moral situation, will the kid obey the parent or not? That's what a positive law is. It's not something inherently wrong with that tree, but just that God said, don't do it on my command.

That's all you need to know. And you may stipulate, and people may start wondering, well, maybe it was poisonous. No, nothing poisonous, you can't eat poisonous tree, that's inherently wrong, obviously.

Nothing about that was inherently wrong. God and his command is what made right and wrong. That's the point.

And you can see how high-handed that kind of rebellion is, because not just him against, well, I think that tree might be evil or might be dangerous or poisonous, I don't wanna touch it. No, it's him versus God's will. My will versus God.

God said, don't touch it, that's sufficient. And he said, no, I don't wanna touch it. That's why it's such a high-handed rebellion, and the whole human race fell.

Parents set curfews, parents decide meals and what to eat. None of those are commandments in the word of God, other than you gotta preserve your kids, that's very broad. But specifically, they decide and say no.

And the kid says yes, now you got a conflict. We've all done it, we've all been kids at least once. And rebellion against our parents.

That's what's going on here, that's what we mean by positive commandment, or special application of the authority that God has, or by example, parents have with respect to their kids. So not to eat of the tree of good and evil, that was the special test. Would they, would Adam in particular obey just because God said so? That was the question.

And Adam said no, I don't think so. In fact, Adam's a little more sneaky apparently, he let his wife do it. And he's like, well, she gave it to me and I ate of a tree, you know, he blamed his wife.

And of course, there are consequences, party, stipulation, and thirdly, a covenant has to have some kind of consequences, either good consequences or bad consequences, but something to make it meaningful in having a covenant. And of course, the threat of death. For you shall surely die the day you eat of it.

And the implications were not just physical death, but spiritual death, because man was created what? A body and a soul, together, we call that a body-soul complex, they go together. It's unnatural for the division that we have now when we die. Spiritual death, verse seven, and the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, so he's got a body, but the body's what? Not alive yet.

When does he get the life? By the breathing of God Almighty, the Holy Spirit into them, the breath of life, and man became a living being. He had a body, it wasn't enough, he also had a soul. It went together, and when he died, the two would die together, it had to happen.

And Adam knew this. As a living being, one affects the other. So this is from the Genesis account.

If it walks like a duck, sounds like a duck, smells like a duck, walks like a duck, it is a duck. The logic here is if you have the three elements of a covenant in the text, then the covenant is there. And those three elements are clearly there, it's a covenant.

But we have other texts besides, obviously, Hosea 6, 7. First Corinthians 15, 45, first Corinthians 15, 45. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. And so it is written, the first man, Adam, became a living being, and the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

And so there's a contrast comparison here that Paul does in first Corinthians here, 15, as well as we get to our text in Romans 5. The contrast is one was alive naturally, a living being,

and the other was alive as a source of spiritual or supernatural life, a life-giving spirit, that is the Adam, Jesus Christ. And both were what? Covenant heads. The argument here in first Corinthians 15 and in Romans 5 we get to is hinged upon the fact that Christ came and what? Gave us a covenant.

He fulfilled the covenant, the covenant of grace. He says this is the blood of what? My covenant, and the Lord's Supper. The book of Hebrews tells us he came to fulfill the covenant.

It's the covenant of promises, the covenant of grace and mercy, that he lived and died for his people in the form of a covenant, of an agreement between him and his father that he would live and die for his people and that we could be saved if we believed in Jesus. That's the covenant of grace. And here the parallels don't make sense if Adam also didn't have a covenant.

First Adam and the last Adam, the text tells us, became a life-giving spirit. Now we know that last Adam was a covenant head, that is the leader of his people, and what he does affects them. And here what Adam does affects them as well.

Thus it's a covenant. Romans 5, 12 is a longer text, I'm not gonna read all of it. Romans chapter five has a lot about this.

Comparison and contrast between Adam and Christ, our Lord and Savior. Therefore, verse 12, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned. For until the last sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

Nevertheless, death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned, according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who was a type of him who was to come. And so here we see the effects of both Adams, first Adam himself in particular, that sin is there. Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, Adam sinned, and now we're all under sin, we all have the effects of sin, we're all in fact born in sin, and death through sin has come.

Death is unnatural. And thus death spread to all men. Why? Well, also because all sinned.

It came from Adam and it came from yourself. All in one text. You can't blame Adam, in other words, you're at fault as well for your sins.

Although you were born a sinner because of Adam, that's true. But you would have gladly done the same thing as Adam. You know it.

So it is just and it is fair. Our text here, Hosea 6, but like Adam, they transgressed the covenant. There they, that is Israel, the men of Israel, dealt treacherously with me.

In the promised land, they defiled it through their ongoing wickedness. Their persistent false worship, as we went over before, their hatred of their neighbors, the lack of mercy, are likened to the high-handed wickedness of Adam. I mean, how can you? I know we say this,

I've mentioned this before, we struggle with our own sins, to be sure, but there are some sins we're like, I don't understand.

And one of these, I think, for most of us is why would you hate your neighbor but think it's okay to go to worship to God? But it happens. As though that's sufficient. God's happy with you going to church on Sunday, but you hate your neighbor and you steal from him and you lie about him.

That's what was going on back then. It's a serious accusation to wake them up. You men, pay attention, you're just as bad as Adam.

Which is Your Covenant?

But what about us today? Which is your covenant? Are you in the covenant of works? Are you in the covenant of grace? If you've not repented of your sins, if you refuse to embrace Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, the one who delivered you from your just desserts of hell, if your indifference even to the sins and your transgressions and your guilty conscience, you ignore and try to assuage, if you trust perhaps in your baptism or your church attendance as your word for heaven, like the Jews did, look at my sacrifices, look at my hope and offerings and the slaughtering of the animals, isn't that good enough, God?

Then you're still under, yes, the broken, but still the effects of the covenant of works. You're trying to go about it the wrong way. But if it's the covenant of grace, if you've repented of your sins and trust in Jesus, you've been baptized, you're endeavoring to die to sin and to live by the Spirit, Romans 8, then you are under the covenant of grace, guilt-free and innocent in Christ.

For he has done it all and paid it all on the cross and has given you his Spirit so that you can start having the first fruits of obedience, although falling short all the time. The children fall short in obedience, but the parents lift them up and still care for them. That's the difference.

God is now our father, not our judge. That's a big difference. Which covenant are you in, brother, sister? Covenant of works or the covenant of grace? Let us pray.

I ask and implore your Spirit, God Almighty, to work on the hearts of those who are still in the covenant of works and for all of us, God, to be humble in your sights and to always cling to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, and to be encouraged and strengthened by this truth, Lord, that you are greater than all our sins, even high-handed sins, for even Adam, we believe, was saved. Our God and Savior, encourage us, strengthen us, and convict us as needed, each of us. In your providence we pray, amen.