



Week 16 - How God Deals With Man?

What principles determine the way God relates to us?

Since the creation of the world, God's relationship to man has been defined by specific requirements and promises.

God tells people how he wants them to act and also makes promises about how he will act toward them in various circumstances.

The Bible contains several summaries of the provisions that define the different relationships between God and man that occur in Scripture, and it often calls these summaries "covenants."

A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship.

Although this definition includes the word agreement in order to show that there are two parties, God and man, who must enter into the provisions of the relationship, the phrase "divinely imposed" is also included to show that man can never negotiate with God or change the terms of the covenant: he can only accept the covenant obligations or reject them.

The New Testament authors, did not use the ordinary Greek word for contracts or agreements in which both parties were equal (*synthēkē*), but rather chose a less common word, *diathēkē*, which emphasized that the provisions of the covenant were laid down by one of the parties only. (In fact, the word *diathēkē* was often used to refer to a "testament" or "will" that a person would leave to assign the distribution of his or her goods after death.)

This definition also notes that covenants are "unchangeable." They may be superseded or replaced by a different covenant, but they may not be changed once they are established .

Although there have been many additional details specified in the covenants God has made with man throughout the history of Scripture, the essential element at the heart of all of them is the promise, " I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31: 33; 2 Cor. 6: 16; et al.).

The covenant relationship between God and man occurs in various forms throughout Scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

The Covenant of Works

Some have questioned whether it is appropriate to speak of a covenant of works that God had with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The actual word covenant is not used in Genesis in relation to Adam and Eve.

However, the essential parts of the covenant are all there:

- A clear definition of the parties involved
- A legally binding set of provisions that stipulates the conditions of their relationship
- The promise of blessings for obedience, and the condition for obtaining those blessings.

And,

Hosea 6:7 But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.

This passage views Adam as existing in a covenant relationship that he then transgressed in the Garden of Eden.

Romans 5: 12– 21 Paul sees both Adam and Christ as heads of a people whom they represent, something that would be entirely consistent with the idea of Adam being in a covenant before the fall.

In the Garden of Eden, it seems quite clear that there was a legally binding set of provisions that defined the conditions of the relationship between God and man.

The two parties are evident as God speaks to Adam and gives commands to him. The requirements of the relationship are clearly defined in the commands that God gave to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1: 28– 30; 2: 15)

And in the direct command to Adam

Genesis 2:16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

In this statement to Adam about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil there is a promise of punishment for disobedience— death, most fully understood to mean death in an extensive sense , physical, spiritual, and eternal death and separation from God.

In the promise of punishment for disobedience there is implicit a promise of blessing for obedience. This blessing would consist of not receiving death, and the implication is that the blessing would be the opposite of “death.” It would involve physical life that would not end and spiritual life in terms of a relationship with God that would go on forever.

The presence of the “tree of life . . . in the midst of the garden” (Gen. 2: 9) also signified the promise of eternal life with God if Adam and Eve had met the conditions of a covenant relationship by obeying God completely until he decided that their time of testing was finished.

After the fall, God removed Adam and Eve from the garden, partly so that they would not be able to take from the tree of life “and eat, and live for ever” (Gen. 3: 22).

Other covenants in Scripture generally have an outward “sign” associated with them (such as circumcision, or baptism and the Lord’s Supper).

No “sign” for the covenant of works is clearly designated as such in Genesis, but if we were to name one, it would probably be the tree of life in the midst of the garden.

By partaking of that tree Adam and Eve would be partaking of the promise of eternal life that God would give.

The fruit itself did not have magical properties but would be a sign by which God outwardly guaranteed that the inward reality would occur.

Why is this important?

Why is it important to speak of the relationship between God and man in the garden as a covenant relationship?

To do so reminds us of the fact that this relationship, including the commands of obedience and promise of blessing for obedience, was not something that automatically occurred in the relationship between Creator and creature.

God did not make any such covenant with the animals that he created.

Nor did the nature of man as God created him demand that God have any fellowship with man or that God make any promises concerning his relationship with men or give man any clear directions concerning what he should do.

All this was an expression of God’s fatherly love for the man and woman he had created.

Moreover, when we specify this relationship as a “covenant,” it helps us to see the clear parallels between this and the subsequent covenant relationships that God had with his people.

If all the elements of a covenant are present (clear stipulation of the parties involved, statement of the conditions of the covenant, and a promise of blessing for obedience and punishment for disobedience), then there seems no reason why we should not refer to it as a covenant, for that is indeed what it was.

Although the covenant that existed before the fall has been referred to by various terms (such as the Adamic Covenant, or the Covenant of Nature), the most helpful designation seems to be “**covenant of works**,” since participation in the blessings of the covenant clearly depended on obedience or “works” on the part of Adam and Eve.

As in all covenants that God makes with man, there is here no negotiating over the provisions.

God sovereignly imposes this covenant on Adam and Eve, and they have no opportunity to change the details— their only choice is to keep it or to break it.

Is the covenant of works still in force?

In several important senses it is.

First of all, Paul implies that perfect obedience to God’s laws, if it were possible, would lead to life (see Rom. 7: 10; 10: 5; Gal. 3: 12).

We should also notice that the punishment for this covenant is still in effect, for “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6: 23).

This implies that the covenant of works is still in force for every human being apart from Christ, even though no sinful human being can fulfill its provisions and gain blessing by it.

Finally, we should note that Christ perfectly obeyed the covenant of works for us since he committed no sin (1 Peter 2: 22) but completely obeyed God on our behalf (Rom. 5: 18– 19).

On the other hand, in certain senses, the covenant of works does not remain in force:

- We no longer are faced with the specific command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
- Since we all have a sinful nature (both Christians and non-Christians), we are not able to fulfill the provisions of the covenant of works on our own and receive its benefits—as this covenant applies to people directly, it only brings punishments.
- For Christians, Christ has fulfilled the provisions of this covenant successfully once for all, and we gain the benefits of it not by actual obedience on our part but by trusting in the merits of Christ’s work.

In fact, for Christians today to think of themselves as obligated to try to earn God's favor by obedience would be to cut themselves off from the hope of salvation. "All who rely on works of the law are under a curse. . . . Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law (Gal. 3: 10– 11).

Christians have been freed from the covenant of works by virtue of Christ's work and their inclusion in the new covenant, the covenant of grace (see below).

The Covenant of Redemption

Theologians speak of another kind of covenant, a covenant that is not between God and man, but is among the members of the Trinity.

This covenant they call the "covenant of redemption."

It is an agreement among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in which the Son agreed to become a man, be our representative, obey the demands of the covenant of works on our behalf, and pay the penalty for sin, which we deserved.

Does Scripture teach its existence?

Yes, for it speaks about a specific plan and purpose of God that was agreed upon by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in order to gain our redemption.

On the part of the Father, this "covenant of redemption" included:

- An agreement to give to the Son a people whom he would redeem for his own possession (John 17: 2, 6).
- To send the Son to be their representative (John 3: 16; Rom. 5: 18– 19)
- To prepare a body for the Son to dwell in as a man (Col. 2: 9; Heb. 10: 5)
- To accept him as representative of his people whom he had redeemed (Heb. 9: 24)
- And to give him all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28: 18), including the authority to pour out the Holy Spirit in power to apply redemption to his people (Acts 1: 4; 2: 33).

On the part of the Son, there was:

- An agreement that he would come into the world as a man
- And live as a man under the Mosaic law (Gal. 4: 4; Heb. 2: 14– 18)
- And that he would be perfectly obedient to all the commands of the Father (Heb. 10: 7– 9),
- Becoming obedient unto death , even death on a cross (Phil. 2: 8).
- The Son also agreed that he would gather for himself a people in order that none whom the Father had given him would be lost (John 17: 12).

The part of the Holy Spirit in the covenant of redemption is sometimes overlooked in discussions of this subject, but certainly it was a unique and essential one.

- He agreed to do the will of the Father and fill and empower Christ to carry out his ministry on earth (Matt. 3: 16; Luke 4: 1, 14, 18; John 3: 34)
- and to apply the benefits of Christ's redemptive work to his people after Christ returned to heaven (John 14: 16– 17, 26; Acts 1: 8; 2: 17– 18, 33).

To refer to the agreement among the members of the Trinity as a “covenant,” reminds us that it was something voluntarily undertaken by God, not something that he had to enter into by virtue of his nature.

However, this covenant is also different from the covenants between God and man because the parties enter into it as equals, whereas in covenants with man God is the sovereign Creator who imposes the provisions of the covenant by his own decree.

On the other hand, it is like the covenants God makes with man in that it has the elements (specifying the parties, conditions, and promised blessings) that make up a covenant.

The Covenant of Grace

When man failed to obtain the blessing offered in the covenant of works, it was necessary for God to establish another means, one by which man could be saved.

The rest of Scripture after the story of the fall in Genesis 3 is the story of God working out in history the amazing plan of redemption whereby sinful people could come into fellowship with himself.

Once again, God clearly defines the provisions of a covenant that would specify the relationship between himself and those whom he would redeem.

In these specifications we find some variation in detail throughout the Old and New Testaments, but the essential elements of a covenant are all there, and the nature of those essential elements remains the same throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The parties to this covenant of grace are God and the people whom he will redeem.

But in this case Christ fulfills a special role as “mediator” (Heb. 8: 6; 9: 15; 12: 24) in which he fulfills the conditions of the covenant for us and thereby reconciles us to God. (There was no mediator between God and man in the covenant of works.)

The condition (or requirement) of participation in the covenant is faith in the work of Christ the redeemer (Rom. 1: 17; 5: 1; et al.).

This requirement of faith in the redemptive work of the Messiah was also the condition of obtaining the blessings of the covenant in the Old Testament, as Paul clearly demonstrates through the examples of Abraham and David (Rom. 4: 1– 15).

They, like other Old Testament believers, were saved by looking forward to the work of the Messiah who was to come and putting faith in him.

But while the condition of beginning the covenant of grace is always faith in Christ’s work alone, the condition of continuing in that covenant is said to be obedience to God’s commands.

Though this obedience did not in the Old Testament and does not in the New Testament earn us any merit with God, nonetheless, if our faith in Christ is genuine, it will produce obedience (see James 2: 17), and obedience to Christ is in the New Testament seen as necessary evidence that we are truly believers and members of the new covenant (see 1 John 2: 4– 6).

The promise of blessings in the covenant was a promise of eternal life with God.

This promise was repeated frequently throughout the Old and the New Testaments.

God promised that he would be their God and that they would be his people:

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen. 17: 7).

“I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. 31: 33).

“And they shall be my people, and I will be their God . . . I will make with them an everlasting covenant” (Jer. 32: 38 –40; cf. Ezek. 34: 30– 31 ; 36: 28; 37: 26– 27).

That theme is picked up in the New Testament as well: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Cor. 6: 16; cf. a similar theme in vv. 17– 18; also 1 Peter 2: 9– 10).

In speaking of the new covenant, the author of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Heb. 8: 10).

This blessing finds fulfillment in the church, which is the people of God, but it finds its greatest fulfillment in the new heaven and new earth, as John sees in his vision of the age to come: “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” (Rev. 21: 3).

The sign of this covenant (the outward, physical symbol of inclusion in the covenant) varies between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

In the Old Testament the outward sign of beginning the covenant relationship was circumcision.

The sign of continuing the covenant relationship was continuing to observe all the festivals and ceremonial laws that God gave the people at various times.

In the new covenant, the sign of beginning a covenant relationship is baptism, while the sign of continuing in that relationship is participation in the Lord’s Supper.

The reason this covenant is called a “covenant of grace” is that it is entirely based on God’s “grace” or unmerited favor toward those whom he redeems.

Various Forms of the Covenant

Although the essential elements of the covenant of grace remain the same throughout the history of God’s people, the specific provisions of the covenant vary from time to time.

At the time of Adam and Eve, there was only the bare hint of the possibility of a relationship with God found in the promise about the seed of the woman in Genesis 3: 15 and in God’s gracious provision of clothing for Adam and Eve (Gen . 3: 21).

The covenant that God made with Noah after the flood (Gen. 9: 8– 17) was not a covenant that promised all the blessings of eternal life or spiritual fellowship with God, but simply one in which God promised all mankind and the animal creation that the earth would no longer be destroyed by a flood.

In this sense the covenant with Noah, although it certainly does depend on God’s grace or unmerited favor, appears to be quite different in the parties involved (God and all mankind, not just the redeemed), the condition named (no faith or obedience is required of man), and the blessing that is promised (that the earth will not be destroyed again by flood, certainly a different promise from that of eternal life).

But beginning with **the covenant with Abraham** (Gen. 15: 1– 21; 17: 1– 27), the essential elements of the covenant of grace are all there.

In fact, Paul can say that “the scripture . . . preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham” (Gal. 3: 8).

Moreover, Luke tells us that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesied that the coming of John the Baptist to prepare the way for Christ was the beginning of God’s working to fulfill the ancient covenant promises to Abraham (“ to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to our father Abraham,” Luke 1: 72–73).

So the covenant promises to Abraham remained in force even as they found fulfillment in Christ (see Rom. 4: 1– 25; Gal. 3: 6– 18, 29; Heb. 2: 16; 6: 13– 20).

What then is the “old covenant ” in contrast with the “new covenant” in Christ?

It is not the whole of the Old Testament, because the covenants with Abraham and David are never called “old” in the New Testament.

Rather, only the covenant under Moses, the covenant made at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19– 24) is called the “old covenant” (2 Cor. 3: 14; cf. Heb. 8: 6, 13), to be replaced by the “new covenant” in Christ (Luke 22: 20; 1 Cor. 11: 25; 2 Cor. 3: 6; Heb. 8: 8, 13; 9: 15; 12: 24).

The Mosaic covenant was an administration of detailed written laws given for a time to restrain the sins of the people and to be a custodian to point people to Christ.

Paul says, “Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made” (Gal. 3: 19), and, “The law was our custodian until Christ came” (Gal. 3: 24).

We should not assume that there was no grace available to people from Moses until Christ, because the promise of salvation by faith that God had made to Abraham remained in force:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring . . . the law, which came four hundred and thirty years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance is by the law, it is no longer by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. (Gal. 3: 16– 18)

Moreover, although the sacrificial system of the Mosaic covenant did not really take away sins (Heb. 10: 1– 4), it foreshadowed the bearing of sin by Christ, the perfect high priest who was also the perfect sacrifice (Heb. 9: 11– 28).

Nevertheless, the Mosaic covenant itself, with all its detailed laws, could not save people.

It is not that the laws were wrong in themselves, for they were given by a holy God, but they had no power to give people new life, and the people were not able to obey them perfectly: “Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law” (Gal. 3: 21).

Paul realizes that the Holy Spirit working within us can empower us to obey God in a way that the Mosaic law never could, for he says that God “has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3: 6).

The new covenant in Christ, then, is far better because it fulfills the promises made in Jeremiah 31: 31– 34, as quoted in Hebrews 8:

Hebrews 8: 6– 13 But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says: “The days will come, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I paid no heed to them, says the Lord. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach everyone his fellow or everyone his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.” In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

In this new covenant, there are far greater blessings,

- for Jesus the Messiah has come;
- he has lived, died, and risen among us, atoning once for all for our sins (Heb. 9: 24–28);
- he has revealed God most fully to us (John 1: 14; Heb . 1: 1– 3);
- he has poured out the Holy Spirit on all his people in new covenant power (Acts 1: 8; 1 Cor. 12: 13; 2 Cor. 3: 4– 18);
- he has written his laws on our hearts (Heb. 8: 10).

This new covenant is the “eternal covenant” (Heb. 13: 20) in Christ, through which we shall forever have fellowship with God, and he shall be our God, and we shall be his people.

Things to Mull

1. Before reading this chapter, had you thought of your relationship to God in terms of a “covenant”?
2. Does it give you any added degree of certainty or sense of security in your relationship to God to know that he governs that relationship by a set of promises that he will never change?
3. If you were to think of the relationship between God and yourself personally in terms of a covenant, whereby you and God are the only two parties involved, then what would be the conditions of this covenant between you and God?
4. Are you now fulfilling those conditions?
5. What role does Christ play in the covenant relationship between you and God?
6. What are the blessings God promises to you if you fulfill those conditions?
7. What are the signs of participation in this covenant?
8. Does this understanding of the covenant increase your appreciation of baptism and the Lord’s Supper?

Bibliography

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