

**“The ABC’s of the Christian Life: (10) Following Jesus Christ Rightly –
#6: Understanding Law and Grace**

Introduction:

In recent weeks we have sought to show how the Christian might follow Jesus Christ rightly, that is, how we may live as Christians so as to please God and be blessed by Him. Understanding our subject this morning is critically important if we are to fulfil our desire and design to live rightly before Him. The Christian must understand the biblical teaching regarding God’s law and God’s grace and how the Christian relates to God with respect to these two great principles.

To address this important matter, let us consider the Apostle Paul’s instruction to the churches of Galatia. These churches had failed to understand, believe, and practice as Christians under God’s grace. Although Paul had initially proclaimed and taught them the grace of God in the gospel, they had departed from his teaching regarding God’s grace. Through the influence of false teachers, they had sought to live before God based upon the law of God as a covenant. They were to be blamed, rebuked, and corrected. Let us read **Galatians 4:21-5:10**.

²¹Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. ²³But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, ²⁴which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— ²⁵for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children— ²⁶but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. ²⁷For it is written:

“Rejoice, O barren,
You who do not bear!
Break forth and shout,
You who are not in labor!
For the desolate has many more children
Than she who has a husband.”

²⁸Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. ²⁹But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. ³⁰Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” ³¹So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. ²Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. ³And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. ⁴You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. ⁵For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

⁷You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you. ⁹A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will have no other mind; but he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is.

Paul was writing churches which the Lord had begun through his ministry. But after Paul had left the region, false teachers came into those churches and promoted errant teaching respecting the nature of salvation and the Christian life. Paul had proclaimed to them the gospel of God's grace, that sinners are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ apart from the merit of any works that fallen man does. But these false teachers said that Paul had taught them error, that God actually bestows His salvation upon those, yes, who believed on Jesus Christ, but those who also kept God's law in order to merit and obtain God's forgiveness of sins and to become righteous before Him. Essentially, where Paul had taught them that a saving relationship with God was through *a covenant of grace*, based on what Jesus Christ did, the false teachers, or Judaizers, taught that a saving relationship with God was attained through what they did, that is, according to *a covenant of works*. Paul taught salvation by grace; the false teachers taught salvation by the merit of keeping God's law.

In order to illustrate to them their error, Paul called upon a familiar Old Testament account to illustrate these two covenants, these two ways that the Galatians had been taught on how to obtain salvation. Paul called upon the two wives of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, and each of their sons, Isaac and Ishmael, who were born to Abraham their father. Sarah's son, Isaac, was born through God's grace; his birth was the fulfillment of God's promise. But Ishmael was born as a result of Abraham's lapse of faith, when Abraham depended upon his own ability and flesh in order to have a son through Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden. Ishmael was not a son born due to God's promise, as Isaac had been born.

Paul declared that these two sons were illustrative of the two covenants, the covenant of grace and the covenant of works. **Verse 24ff** read,

For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—²⁵for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—²⁶but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.

Paul wrote of two Jerusalems. The first was the earthly Jerusalem, which continued to be governed by Jewish leaders who proclaimed that they related to God based upon the Old Testament Mosaic covenant (which they had turned into a covenant of works). He likens the earthly Jerusalem, the seat of Judaism, with Mount Sinai, where God entered into covenant with the nation of Israel based upon His law, the Ten Commandments. But Paul also referenced a second "Jerusalem", which is the true, spiritual, city of God, the dwelling place of all those who have salvation and are true members of God's people—spiritual Israel. Paul then quoted **Isaiah 54:1** in order to substantiate his teaching, which reads:

²⁷For it is written:

“Rejoice, O barren,
You who do not bear!
Break forth and shout,
You who are not in labor!
For the desolate has many more children
Than she who has a husband.”

This was God's promise of the Kingdom of the Messiah, of the Jerusalem of above, that she would be like Sarah, although for a time barren, God would see to it that she would bring forth many children. Paul was applying this prophecy to the growth and expansion of the Kingdom of God over which King Jesus reigns. At the same time, he was showing the diminishment of Judaism, who is likened unto Hagar, who was cast off from the true people of God.

Paul then declared that Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile believers in Jesus Christ, are as Isaac was—they are children of promise.” And just as Ishmael had long ago troubled Isaac when they were growing up together in Abraham's tent, so these Ishmaelites, who are Jews who believe that they are right with God through the works of the Mosaic Law, were troubling the churches of Jesus Christ with their false doctrine.

Paul then exhorted the churches to resist and reject any and all teaching that would lead them to trust in their works for their salvation. He warned them that the errant teaching to which they were giving themselves would take away their liberty of conscience. It would bind their consciences, resulting in no power to resist temptation, defeat sin, or even to obtain salvation. Paul affirmed that it is through faith that the Lord saves and empowers His people to live before Him. Again, we read in Galatians 5:1-6:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. ²Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. ³And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. ⁴You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. ⁵For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

Now in order for us to better understand this important Christian teaching, I wish to rehearse before us the essence and nature of covenant theology that is taught in the Holy Scriptures, the teaching of the Apostle Paul that is reflected in the passage we read. First, understand that...

I. God created the human race in covenant relationship with Him and one another.

In order for mankind to have a relationship with God, he must enter into covenant with God, a covenant that God Himself prescribes, initiates, and maintains. The reason that God ordained that He would relate to us by means of a covenant relationship is due to the vast difference and distance between infinite God, who is our Creator, and human beings, His creatures. If we were to know God and have fellowship with God, it would have to occur through the means of a covenant relationship, one which is defined and delivered to us by God Himself.

Our **Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689** states this fact clearly in **article 7, paragraph 1**, which reads:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience to him as their Creator, yet they could never have attained the reward of life but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

Notice that this statement says nothing of the distance between God as holy and human beings as sinful, although that necessitates a certain kind of covenant, if we are to have eternal life and dwell with our God forever. The point of this confessional statement is that because of the very holy and infinite nature of God and because we are finite mortals, even the matter of sin not yet considered, we are in need of God to bring us into relationship with Himself by means of a covenant.

What, then, is a covenant? There are various definitions that have been offered. It has been said that a covenant is "a union based on an oath" or "a relationship under sanctions."¹ When we say that God relates to us based on a covenant, we are saying that

Because God is so vastly different in essence and glory from His finite creatures, He must come to us of His own will and He must reveal Himself to us and set the terms or grounds by which we may approach Him, know Him, and relate to Him.

A. God created us as covenantal creatures.

What does this mean? Now Americans tend to be quite individualistic in our perception of ourselves. We do not see ourselves, as many people view themselves in some other cultures, in a collective sense, as a people who have life in common with one another. Because we are human, and much more so because we are

¹ The first of these definitions was formulated by Dennis McCarthy, the second by Meredith Kline. In Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith; A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Zondervan, 2010), p. 44.

sinful humans, we view ourselves in isolation as individuals. But God, although He loves and saves us individually, has regard for us collectively. He regards us collectively as His people or church--those who are redeemed by Christ--or as nations, or as families. God created us as covenantal creatures. We are bound together as a collective people, and God views us and relates to us as members of a single entity.

B. God has described a number of covenants in Scripture by which He has related to people.

We read of a covenant that God made with **Noah** and the entire human race (Gen. 9:8ff). God covenanted with **Abraham** (Gen. 15:18ff; 17:2ff), with the nation of **Israel** through Moses (Exod. 19:5ff), and with **King David** (2 Sam. 7). In the prophets we read of God's promise of a **new covenant** (Ezek. 36; Jer. 31). We read of the realization of this promised new covenant when our Lord Jesus instituted this covenant with His disciples. The night He was betrayed He said to them of the cup, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the *covenant*, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:27f).

C. God has made two kinds of covenants with members of the human race-- a covenant of works and a covenant of grace.

Now there have been different attempts to describe the nature of these covenants that God has set forth in Scripture. In Reformed theology, that is, historic Protestant theology, also known as covenant theology, there are two kinds of covenants under which all of the biblical covenants may be classified. They are referred to as *the covenant of works* and *the covenant of grace*. The covenant of works is the covenant that God made with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, a covenant to which the entire human race is bound. But after the fall of Adam into sin, God made known His promise of another covenant, which is the covenant of grace that He planned and purposed in eternity, through which God calls sinners to receive salvation by His grace.

These two kinds of covenants upon which God relates to human beings are very different in nature from one another. The covenant of works is a relationship with God based upon what we do; the covenant of grace is a relationship with God based upon what He has done on our behalf through Jesus Christ.

1. A Covenant of works

God established a covenant of works with the entire human race after He had first created Adam and Eve and placed them in paradise, the Garden of Eden. God established this covenant with the entire human race through its *federal head*, or representative, Adam, who is the common father of mankind. When God made this covenant with Adam, God bound the entire human race through all of history to this covenant. Every one born into this world comes into the world relating to God based on a covenant of works that God made with the human race. Our confession of faith states it this way:

God gave to Adam a law of universal obedience written in his heart, and a particular precept of not eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.²

What is the nature of this covenant and what are the terms of the covenant? God established His covenant relationship with Adam and his descendants *conditioned on Adam keeping God's law*. When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden He had said to them,

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷but of the tree

² *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, Article 19, paragraph 1. The verses cited to support this statement include: Gen. 1:17; Ecc. 7:29; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:10, 12.

of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen. 2:15-17)

God created Adam to be His friend with whom they would have fellowship and to be His servant to work in His garden paradise on behalf of God. God had made Adam his mediator between himself and his creation. God had made Adam a *prophet, priest, and king* within his creation. Adam was to govern God’s creation, for God had given him dominion over all that He had made; this is the function of a king. Adam would speak with God concerning His creation when they spoke with one another in the cool of the day; this is the function of a priest. Adam was to care for His garden according to the Word that God communicated with Him; Adam was God’s spokesman to His creation; this is the function of a prophet.

The requirement God placed on Adam in his covenant was *obedience*. The failure to keep this covenant, that is, to disobey or transgress God’s law, would result in death. Adam’s obedience to God’s law gained access to life from God and before God. God required complete obedience. The least infraction of God’s law would result in death. It is commonly believed, I am in agreement with this position, that by his obedience, Adam would *earn* or *merit* God’s favor toward him. And because Adam represented all people, his securing God’s favor through his obedience would have been extended to them also. This is what distinguishes the idea of a covenant of works. By Adam’s obedience, he would have earned everlasting life by keeping works before God. **Arthur Pink** described it this way:

Since paradise (which was the description of the Garden of Eden) is one of the names of heaven, we may conclude that the earthly one in which Adam was placed was a pledge of celestial blessedness. Had he survived his probation and preserved his integrity, he would have enjoyed “heaven” on earth.”³

This covenant of works that God made with the human race was a reflection of the *goodness* of God. God’s law is good (cf. Rom. 7:16; 1 Tim. 1:18). God’s law is a manifestation of His holy nature. For people to dwell in the presence of God, they must be holy for He is holy.

Moreover, it was good and right that God bound His creatures in this covenant of works. God had given to mankind free access to all that he needed to be happy and content. God had said to him,

⁹And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food... ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden.” (Gen 2:9, 16)

It was right for God to place a prohibition before Adam and Eve. By Adam’s obedience, he would continually show and confess that God was God and that he had a responsibility to obey His Creator. By his obedience, Adam would show his love and his satisfaction with God’s provision. Adam would be confessing God’s right to rule over him. **Arthur Pink** described it this way:

In forbidding Adam to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil his Maker asserted His dominion and enforced His authority. That it was proper for Him to do so cannot be lawfully questioned, and as the sole Proprietor of the garden it was fitting that He should emphasize His rights by this restriction. Moreover, since Adam was created a rational creature and endowed with freedom of the will, he was a fit subject for command, and accordingly was placed under the law. Thereby Adam’s loyalty and subjection to his Creator and Lord were put to the test. Trial of his obedience was made to discover whether the will of God was sacred to him. It was both fit and just that man should remain in the state of holiness in which God had made him, if he would continue to enjoy his favor. Thus he was placed on probation, made the subject of divine government. Adam was not an independent creature, for he did not create himself. Being made by God, he owed a debt to Him; he was a moral being, and therefore responsible to serve and please God. The commandment given to him was no arbitrary infliction, but a necessary injunction for evidencing and enforcing man’s relationship to God.

³ Arthur Pink, *Gleanings in the Scriptures* (Moody Press, 1969), p. 20.

...Since He had been pleased to give Adam dominion over all the creatures here below, it was surely fitting that he should require some peculiar instance of homage and fidelity to Him as a token of Adam's dependence and an acknowledgment of his subjection to His Maker--to whom he owed absolute submission and obedience. And what mark of subjection could be more proper than being prohibited from eating one of the fruits of paradise? Full liberty was granted him to eat all the rest. The single abstention was well suited to teach our first parents the salutary lesson of self-denial and of implicit resignation to the good pleasure of the Most High.⁴

Of course we read that Adam failed his test when he sinned. And when Adam sinned, because he was our federal head, we all sinned in his sin. ***"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned"*** (Rom 5:12). His sin brought the sentence of death upon the entire human race. "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23a).

But Adam's sin also resulted in Adam and Eve losing their righteousness. They became sinners by nature. And all the human race that was born to them thereafter was born into this world sinners by nature, at heart alienated and in rebellion to their God. All the world, therefore, is guilty before God on a multiple of fronts.

(1) Every human being is guilty before God for Adam's sin, which is counted as everyman's sin.

(2) Every human being is guilty before God because he is born with a sinful nature, a propensity and preference for sin against God.

(3) Every human being is guilty for every act of sin that he commits throughout his life, for transgressing God's prohibitions in His law.

(4) Every human being is guilty for failing to do all that God positively commanded.

But when Adam sinned and he incurred the curse of God upon himself for breaking God's law, it did not disannul or abrogate that covenant of works. God had established that covenant of works with Adam and all the human race in Adam. And even though Adam broke that covenant and therefore no one can be saved by the covenant of works; nevertheless, when we are born into this world as human beings, we were still under that covenant of works. We are bound to perpetual and perfect obedience. And when we pass from this life and we stand before God, we will be judged by that law that God has given.

In order for mankind to be saved from his sin, the guilt of Adam's transgression and all the transgressions against God's laws that have ever been committed by those who will be saved, needed to be compensated. The debt to God's justice must be paid; God's holy justice must be satisfied. But it is clear no fallen human being would ever be able to achieve this requirement. After Adam transgressed God's law, and incurred the law's penalty, no works of the law performed by a sinner could satisfy God's holy justice. And so, God promised that He would grant salvation through...

2. A covenant of grace

Beside a covenant of works, the other form or kind of covenant that God makes with human beings has been called ***a covenant of grace***. Whereas the covenant of works was grounded in God's ***goodness***, as reflected by His law, this covenant is grounded in God's ***grace***. In the covenant of grace God does for man that which man could not do for himself; ***God Himself brings His salvation to His people***. This covenant of grace was formulated, if we can use that term, in "the covenant of redemption" having been devised and committed to before creation by the three persons of the Holy Trinity,

In that covenant of redemption, God made provision to save guilty sinners. Each of the persons of the Trinity was committed to work out this covenant of grace. We have spoken of this before. Let us consider the details of the terms ***the everlasting covenant of grace***, or ***the covenant of redemption***. They may be understood from the standpoint of each of the persons of the Blessed Holy Trinity. Here is a fictional conversation of the Trinity with respect to the planning of the covenant of grace.

⁴ Arthur Pink, *Gleanings in the Scriptures* (Moody Press, 1969), pp. 23f.

(a) The terms of God the Father

Although it is not explicitly stated in Scripture, **Charles Spurgeon** very aptly depicted the teaching of Scripture in the following way. With regard to God the Father, it was as if He declared:

“I, the Most High Jehovah, do promise to give to You, my dear Son, a people, countless in number, drawn from every nation on earth. I will, on account of You, cease my warfare with them, and become to them a God of Peace, for I will pardon and wash them from their sin, deliver them from the power of sin and thereby the wrath which is upon them due to their sin. I will give them unto you, and will deliver each and every one of them into your kingdom which I will cause you to establish. I covenant by oath, and swear by Myself, that I will do this thing. This people Whom I have chosen will be given to you, every one of them; not one will be lost. Them I will forgive through the merit of your life and the payment of your blood on their behalf. But I too, do swear, that upon your death on their behalf, due to your righteousness, that I will raise you from death to reign forevermore, giving you a name above every name. And all of these whom I have given You, will be with You and Me, for I will give eternal life so that they will ever be with You and Myself, dwelling and reigning with us through eternity.”

(b) The terms of God the Holy Spirit

“I, the Holy Spirit, will in time ensure that these given to You of the Father will come to You. I will make them alive, give them a heart to seek you, put faith in their minds and hearts to believe You. I will work in them every grace, sanctifying them, preserving them, unto Your kingdom.”

This was one side of the covenant, the contractual agreement. The Son concurred, and committed Himself to certain terms:

(c) The terms of God the Son

“My Father I will become one of them. I will take upon myself the form and nature of the fallen race. I will live in their wretched world, and for my people will I keep Your Law perfectly. I will be obedient to You, even to death, as I work out a spotless righteousness, which shall be acceptable to the demands of thy just and holy law. And when that time comes I will suffer and die on behalf of these you have given me. On behalf of My sheep, I will be the Good Shepherd and lay down My Life.”

Based on this eternal covenant of grace, God decreed creation and has ordered all the events of history. The Father has been true to His Word, the Holy Spirit has been true to His Word, and the Lord Jesus has been true to His Word. And if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, trusting in the merits of His life and death, if you are numbered among His sheep, hearing His voice and following Him, then this God, is a God of peace to you, through the blood of the eternal covenant, which is a covenant of god’s grace.

II. The history of the Bible is a record of God’s dealings with mankind; God relating to man based on these two covenants--the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.

We already stated that when Adam was serving God in the garden of God, he was on probation, for he related with God according to a covenant of works. Had Adam been successful in obeying God, his work of obedience would have earned for him and his posterity eternal life with his God. He was laboring to enter into what might be described as “rest”, which was portrayed by God Himself having rested after His 6 days of work in creation. The Sabbath rest becomes a symbol or the goal of mankind. God’s rest is an emblem of eternal life, an eternal Sabbath rest with God. This is reflected in Hebrews 4.

Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His *rest*, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. ²For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. ³For we who have believed do enter that *rest*, as He has said:

“So I swore in My wrath,
‘They shall not enter My *rest*,’”

although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all His works”; ⁵and again in this place: “They shall not enter My *rest*.”

⁶Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, ⁷again He designates a certain day, saying in David, “Today,” after such a long time, as it has been said:

“Today, if you will hear His voice,
Do not harden your hearts.”

⁸For if Joshua had given them *rest*, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. ⁹There remains therefore a *rest* for the people of God. ¹⁰For he who has entered His *rest* has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. ¹¹Let us therefore be diligent to enter that *rest*, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. (Heb 4:1-11)

After Adam had sinned, and the curse of God came upon him and his posterity, God graciously announced His promise of His intention to deliver a people for Himself from their sin. God Himself gave the first mention of the gospel in **Genesis 3:15**. God said to the woman:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

God declared that He would destroy what the devil had succeeded in doing, deceiving Eve and enticing Adam to sin. God would see to it that He would have a people that He would save for and to Himself, who would be separate from all others who continue in their lost and damned condition. But then the day would arrive, however, when God Himself would strip the devil of his power and deliver His people from their damned condition.

Now the history of the world has been described as *a dramatic stage* on which the drama of God bringing redemption to His people is played throughout history.⁵ It has been said, that if the world is a theater or stage, then the story being played out is *a courtroom drama*. There is a divine witness in this courtroom setting, who testifies of God’s goodness and faithfulness, and the rightness of all His dealings with man. This faithful witness is the **Holy Spirit**. But there is also a false witness, who is the **devil**. He advocates lies against God and promotes idolatry as a substitute for the true God. The story of the Bible is that of God making a covenant with man his servant in His garden, the covenant that he broke, but then it tells of the redemption that God brings to save His people from the fate they deservedly brought upon themselves.

The plot is repeated in the story of the Bible on both a small scale and a larger scale also. *“In every subplot of the Bible we discover echoes of this trial of the covenant servant in the cosmic courtroom.”*⁶ In fact the entire history of Israel can be regarded as a duplication of what unfolded in the garden.

⁵ This metaphor is commonly used, but I have borrowed the terminology directly from Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 408f.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 410.

The clearest example of this is with the entire history of *the nation of Israel*. It began with God's gracious call of **Abraham**, who would become the father of the nation of Israel. God called Abraham and gave him many great promises, all promises of grace, things that God committed that He would do for him and his descendants. When God brought Israel from Egypt, God established His covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. This was a manifestation of God's *covenant of grace* in that God had graciously saved Israel out of bondage in Egypt. God gave His law to His people as the standard by which they were to order their life after entering the Promised Land that God gave them by way of His promise to their Fathers.

But there was also an aspect of the covenant of works in the giving of God's law at Sinai. This is a difficult matter to sort through, but it is important. This aspect of God giving His law to Israel at Sinai has been sometimes called a republication of the covenant of works.

The Westminster divines (those who wrote the Westminster confession and catechism) also believed that the Mosaic covenant looked back to Adam's state in the garden. The divines explain, "God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience" (West. Confession, 19.1). They go on to say in the next paragraph, "This law" referring to the law that was given to Adam, "after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness, and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables" (West. Conf., 19.2). In this regard, the divines saw that the law given to Adam was of a piece with what that given to Israel at Sinai. In other words, in some sense, the covenant of works was republished at Sinai. It was not republished, however, as the covenant of works per se, but as a part of the covenant of grace, which pointed to the person and work of Christ.⁷

In other words, even though God had given His law, His Ten Commandments, at Mount Sinai to His people as a manifestation of His grace toward them, they were to order their national life in faith and love by keeping God's commandments, at the same time that law served to show them their need for a Savior. It did so in several ways.

1. That God by all means might stir up men to perform obedience.
2. That every mouth might be stopped, and all the world might be made subject to the condemnation of God for not performing perfect obedience (Rom. 3:19).
3. That he (God) might manifest man's sin, and naughtiness (Rom. 3:19-20; 7:7-11).
4. That he (God) might thrust us forward to seek to be restored in the covenant of grace (Gal. 3:22; 5:23).⁸

Now again, as we read the biblical record, we see the same event of what happened in the garden played out repeatedly in redemptive history. What occurred in the garden is replayed over and over again as history moves toward its destination determined by God. Israel repeats the experience of the trial that Adam had undergone, and Israel failed just as Adam had failed. God held forth to Israel the hope of dwelling in a place of security and blessing in the Promised Land, the place of *rest*, which is likened to paradise, the garden of God, just as God had held forth everlasting life in his garden paradise had he remained obedient to God. Just as God had made a covenant with Adam, so God made a covenant Israel. And as Adam, Israel would go through a trial or probationary period, which took place in the wilderness from Mount Sinai as they traveled to the Promised Land. And just as Adam was to be God's steward as prophet, priest, and king to the world in which God placed him, Israel, too, was to be God's prophet, priest, and king to the entire world, modeling before the world what life lived out in righteousness before God to the glory of God should look like. But just as Adam "the son of God" (Luke 3:38) failed, so, Israel, the son of God failed also (Numb. 24:18).

And then of course, we see later in the biblical record in the New Testament, a reduplication of both Adam and Israel's trials in the person of the Lord Jesus. In the presence of Israel's failure to keep God's covenant, just as Adam had failed to keep God's covenant, God had promised a new covenant through His *prophets*. ***But the new covenant that God promised would come through His Messiah, His Son, would be a***

⁷ Bryan Estelle, J. W. Fesko, and David Van Drunen, *The Law is Not of Faith* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), pp. 10f.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 11.

replacement of the former covenant that had failed to deliver Israel from its sin. It would be a fulfillment of God's initial promise to Adam and Eve. It would be realized through her promised seed, who was the Lord Jesus Christ. We read of the promise of the new covenant in **Jeremiah 31:31ff.**

³¹Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah-- ³²not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (Jer. 31:31-34)

The coming Messiah Himself would be the ground of this new covenant. **Isaiah 42:6ff** declares,

"Behold! My Servant whom I uphold,
My Elect One in whom My soul delights!
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.
²He will not cry out, nor raise His voice,
Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street.
³A bruised reed He will not break,
And smoking flax He will not quench;
He will bring forth justice for truth.
⁴He will not fail nor be discouraged,
Till He has established justice in the earth;
And the coastlands shall wait for His law."

⁵Thus says God the LORD,
Who created the heavens and stretched them out,
Who spread forth the earth and that which comes from it,
Who gives breath to the people on it,
And spirit to those who walk on it:
⁶"I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness,
And will hold Your hand;
I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people,
As a light to the Gentiles,
⁷To open blind eyes,
To bring out prisoners from the prison,
Those who sit in darkness from the prison house. (Isa. 42:1-6)

The coming Messiah Himself would be the one who secures this new covenant on behalf of God's people. He would be God's **Prophet, Priest, and King** to the God's creation, even His new creation that would one day come. As God's Mediator, Christ communicates God's will to the world, represents God to the world and the world to God, rules over God's world on behalf of God.

The New Testament sets forth Jesus Christ as the faithful Son, over against Israel, the unfaithful son.⁹ As God had called forth His "son" Israel out of Egypt, God had called His Son, Jesus, to come forth from Egypt. As God had sent Israel through a probationary trial in the wilderness, in which it failed miserably, so the Spirit of God drove Jesus into the wilderness to undergo His trial of the devil, but Christ, in contrast to

⁹ This is demonstrated particularly in Matthew's Gospel.

Israel (and Adam), came forth tried and tested and victorious. Just as God had given His law to Israel at Mount Sinai, so our Lord gave forth the new Torah to His disciples in His Sermon on the Mount. But Israel suffered under the weight of its own sin incurring the wrath of God for having broken its covenant, in contrast the Lord Jesus also suffered God's wrath, but He did so vicariously, not for His sin, but for the sins of His people that He might redeem them from sin, remove God's curse from them, and restore them to God.

But of course, Jesus Christ too is set forth as the *second Adam*, or better, the *last Adam*, who successfully accomplished what Adam failed to fulfill in the garden. But where Adam was God's federal head representing the human race in this present world, our Lord Jesus is the last Adam who is God's federal representative over all of God's people with view to the promised new creation.

¹²Therefore, just as through *one man* sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned-- ¹³(For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. ¹⁴Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of *Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come*. ¹⁵But the free gift is not like the offense. For if *by the one man's offense many died*, much more the grace of God and the gift by *the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ*, abounded to many. ¹⁶And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. ¹⁷For if by the *one man's offense* death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through *the One, Jesus Christ*.)

¹⁸Therefore, as through *one man's offense* judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through *one Man's righteous act* the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. ¹⁹For as by *one man's disobedience* many were made sinners, so also *by one Man's obedience* many will be made righteous. ²⁰Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, ²¹so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 5:12-21)

When the Lord Jesus sat with His disciples the night He was betrayed, He passed that cup to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins", He was urging His disciples to see that in His life, which was seen in His blood, was about to pour out upon the cross whereby He would bring to pass all of the promises and of God and all of the purposes of God in His creation. All of redemptive history centers here on the cross of Christ, in which He gave an atonement for sin.

One final word is in order. The entire Bible reveals to us that there is only One who could keep God's law as God had imposed upon His creation. Jesus Christ alone kept God's law fully without any infraction or failure. He, as God's Mediator, enables His people also to keep God's law, not perfectly, but for the most part faithfully, as He teaches them--Christ as our Prophet--, intercedes for them--Christ as our Priest--, and rules over them--Christ as our King. When the Lord Jesus established a new covenant with God on behalf of His people, He promised to confirm them in faith and obedience to God. He did not give a new law whereby we are now able to keep God's law. Rather, He gives His people the Holy Spirit, whereby His life can flow into them and He can live His life through them. We read in the Old Testament that this was God's provision.

²⁴"For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. ²⁵Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them." (Ezek. 36:24-27)

Again, Jesus Christ alone can keep God's law. You can only keep God's law to the degree that Christ dwells in your hearts through faith and He manifests His life through you by means of the Holy Spirit. Paul stated it this way:

²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. ¹²So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom 8:2-17)

So what are we to do? See in Christ alone not only our justification but also our sanctification. He is not only alone the one who can bring us forgiveness; He alone can enable us to live righteously. Trust Him to manifest His life to you and through you by means of the Holy Spirit. Pray and trust Christ to do in you that which you cannot do apart from Him.

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)

Excursus: Herman Bavinck on the Mosaic covenant

I had come across these words from **Herman Bavinck** (1854-1921) which reflects the understanding that the Mosaic Covenant was a manifestation of *the covenant of grace*, as The Westminster Confession asserts, and yet it is also in a manner a republication of *the covenant of works*, in that it set before Israel the need for keeping God's law perfectly, or else the need for sacrifice to prevent their own death. It was designed to lead Israel to look beyond themselves and their system to the Savior who would come and do for them that which they could not do for themselves. Bavinck's words:

This covenant (i.e. the covenant of grace) with the ancestors continues, even when later at Sinai it assumed another form... The covenant with Israel was essentially no other than that with Abraham. Just as God first freely and graciously gave himself as shield and reward to Abraham, apart from any merits of his, to be a God to him and his descendants after him, and on that basis called Abraham to a blameless walk before his face, so also it is God who chose the people of Israel, saved it out of Egypt, united himself with that people, and obligated it to be holy and his own people. The covenant of Mount Sinai is and remains a covenant of grace. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of

the house of slavery” (Exod. 20:2) is the opening statement and foundation of the law, the essence of the covenant of grace...

Just as Abraham, when God allied himself with him, was obligated to “walk before his face,” so Israel as a people was similarly admonished by God’s covenant to a new obedience. The entire law, which the covenant of grace at Mount Sinai took into its service, is intended to prompt Israel as a people to “walk” in the way of the covenant. It is but an explication of the one statement to Abraham: “Walk before me and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1), and therefore no more a cancelation of the covenant of grace and the foundation of a covenant of works than this word spoken to Abraham. The Law of Moses, accordingly, is not antithetical to grace but subservient to it and was also thus understood and praised in every age by pious men and women. But detached from the covenant of grace, it indeed became a letter that kills, a ministry of condemnation.¹⁰ Another reason why in the time of the Old Testament the covenant of grace took the law into its service was that it might arouse consciousness of sin, increase the felt need for salvation, and reinforce expectation of an even richer revelation of God’s grace. It is from that perspective that Paul views especially the Old Testament dispensation of the covenant of grace. He writes that Israel as a minor, placed under the care of the law, had to be led to Christ (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:23f; 4:1f) and that in connection sin would be increased and the uselessness of works for justification and the necessity of faith would be understood (Rom. 4:15; 5:20; 7:7f; 8:3; Gal. 3:19). On the one hand, therefore, the law was subservient to the covenant of grace; it was not a covenant of works in disguise and did not intend that humans would obtain justification by their own works. On the other hand, its purpose was to lay the groundwork for a higher and better dispensation of that same covenant of grace to come in the fullness of time. The impossibility of keeping the Sinaitic covenant and meeting the demands of the law made another and better dispensation of the covenant of grace necessary. The eternal covenant of grace was provoked to a higher revelation of itself by the imperfection of the temporary form it had assumed in Israel. Sin increased that grace might abound. Christ could not immediately become human after the fall, and grace could not immediately reveal itself in all its riches. There was a need of preparation and nurture. “It was not fitting for God to become incarnate at the beginning of the human race before sin. For medicine is only given to the sick. Nor was it fitting that God should become incarnate immediately after sin that man, having been humbled by sin, might see his own need of a deliverer. But what had been decreed from eternity occurred in the fullness of time.”¹¹

Bavinck speaks of the Mosaic Law once “detached from the covenant of grace”, in other words, *when Israel viewed the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of works rather than of grace, the law became a condemning letter to them*. Once Israel viewed the law, either in their very possession of it as their righteousness, or their keeping it as their righteousness (which Paul addressed in Romans 10:2-4), then it condemned them as a covenant of works.

¹⁰ This is what Israel had done. Rather than viewing the law as a manifestation of God’s grace, a standard by which the people were to order their faith and life as they anticipated the Savior who would come, they regarded the law of Sinai as a covenant of works, believing wrongly, that because they possessed the law God would give them “a pass” in His judgment, or they believed that by the law they could earn their own righteousness that would save their souls from damnation and earn eternal life. Thus the law, which was intended to be a way of life for them, became that which condemned them to death and damnation (cf. Rom. 7:9, 10).

¹¹Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pp. 220, 222.