

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 13: Covenant Theology

Common questions when reading the Old Testament

1. Why did the people of God in the OT go to war? Should Christians take up arms and fight holy wars?
2. Doesn't the OT promise material health and wealth according to our obedience? Should we expect material blessing based on our faithfulness?
3. Should we claim the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14? Is failing to do this what is wrong with our country?

2 Chron. 7:14 *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

What is a covenant?

A covenant is a formal relationship God establishes with humanity. It is based on terms that must be satisfied.

WCF 7.1 *The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.*

Covenants are not exclusive to the Bible. They exist today and were common in the Ancient Near East. The form of covenants we find in the Bible are similar to covenants found in the civilizations of that period. We have learned a lot about how God uses covenants by studying the ancient Near Eastern (Hittite) Treaty examples.

Suzerains were kings or lords. Their subjects were called **vassals**. The relationship between suzerains and vassals was established by treaties or covenants.

Two Types of covenants

- **Conditional covenants**: In these covenants, suzerains imposed obligations on vassals.
 - A suzerain would grant protection and blessing on the condition of the vassal's loyalty (taxes, military service, etc.)
- **Unconditional covenants**: Suzerains promised to bless without obligation
 - An outright gift by a king to the subject

The Bible uses both types of these covenants.

Does it surprise you that God offers uses conditional covenants? Does it raise any questions for you?

1. Covenant of Works (pre-redemptive):

7.2 The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

Genesis 2:16–17 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.”

How does this passage function as a covenant of works?

2. Covenant of Grace (redemptive):

WCF 7.3 *Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.*

Genesis 3:15 *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”*

When does the Covenant of Grace begin? Why was it needed?

Aside from the first two chapters of Genesis, the entire Bible describes salvation by grace alone. Every Old Testament saint was saved by grace through faith in Christ.

This raises lots of questions that we must answer: Was grace God’s plan B? If the grace begins with Adam, why does it seem like the OT is full of obligations for Israel to obey? How do the OT and NT relate?

We have to resist the urge to view these two covenants as occurring consecutively.
Covenant of Works ----->Covenant of Grace----->

The Old Testament can only be understood correctly when we see that the covenants overlap for most of Israel’s history. Grace and Works appear concurrently in God’s relationship with his people.

Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, for example, explicitly state that blessings or curses would come upon Israel depending on their obedience or disobedience.

- *Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day” (Dt. 11:26-28).*

WCF 19.1,2

1. 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, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.

2. This law, 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: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.

When does WCF 19 say the Covenant of Works ended?

Romans 10:5 *“For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.”*

By what principle, on Judgment Day, is anyone condemned?

WCF 7.5 *This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament.*

For the majority of the OT, God related to his people on two levels.

Upper Level (Spiritual, Eternal)	God’s people are eternally saved by grace. They go to heaven by faith in Christ represented in promises, prophecies, sacrifices, etc.
Lower Level (Earthly, Material)	God’s people experience material blessings or curses based on their obedience to the Law. They enjoyed military victory and a fruitful land when they obeyed. They suffered exile, loss, famine and drought when they disobeyed.

To better understand this two-level relationship and why God operated like this, let’s explore the covenant with Moses.

Characteristics of the Covenant with Moses

Paul’s **letter to the Galatians** provides a very helpful clarification to all of these questions in light of Christ.

1. The Law of Moses was Temporary:

From Moses to Christ or from Exodus to Malachi (All OT books after Genesis)

- Started with Moses: **Galatians 3:17** *“The Law came 430 years after the promise”*
- It always had an endpoint in mind: **Galatians 3:19** *“The Law was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come.”*

- It ended when Christ came: **Galatians 4:4** *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son.”*

2. Earthly Nature of the Kingdom of God

For this temporary time God defined his people in visible, physical terms

- Land:
 - They had a specific land or nation
 - They had to have an army fight to get that land and to defend it
- Government:
 - They had civil rulers (judges/kings) not just pastors/elders.
 - They had civil laws governing how people should live
- Ethnicity:
 - They defined themselves based in part on physically being Abraham’s sons and daughters.

3. Typological blessings and curses

Deuteronomy 11:13–17

[13] “And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, [14] he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. [15] And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full. [16] Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them; [17] then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the land will yield no fruit, and you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you.

These were physical types that represented the spiritual.

Hebrews 11:14–16

[14] For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. [15] If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. [16] But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

4. Not a replacement of Covenant of Grace: Israelites still saved by grace through faith

Galatians 3:17–18 *This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. [18] For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.*

The OT saints were saved by Christ

- Luke 24:27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

- 1 Corinthians 10:2-4 “and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, [3] and all ate the same spiritual food, [4] and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.”

Conclusion: Two covenants going on in Israel under Moses

1. Covenant of Grace: all true believers are saved by grace alone through faith alone
2. Works: blessings and curses had temporal (this world) effect on Israel based on their obedience or disobedience (even this was graded on a curve...It took centuries of God’s patience to bring the major curses).

Why Did God give the Mosaic Covenant?

The Law given to Moses and Israel illustrated humanity’s need and God’s plan. It did the following:

- Separated out Israel from other nations (circumcision, purity laws, civil and ceremonial laws).
 - People could identify Israel because they kept the law.
- It demonstrated to the world (by separating out Israel) that God would redeem by a representative to stand for humanity and deal with sin
 - Israel was no better or worse than any other ethnic group
 - They “stood in” for all humanity
 - This became a placeholder for Israel’s representative king
 - Israel’s king stood for Israel which stood for humanity
 - That king (messiah) was Christ
- Israel’s inability to obey illustrated the depth of human sin: the law pointed out the “Adam-ness” of Israel
- The consequences of temporal “blessing” and “curses” showed the judgment nature of God’s relationship with humanity
- Pointed toward a sacrifice that Christ would provide both the spotless satisfaction of completing the law and the just penalty for breaking the law.

Galatians 3:21-22

21 Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.

22 But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

Romans 5:20

Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

Covenant of Grace is undergirded by Covenant of Works

Answering the question: Is grace God’s Plan B?

Romans 5:12-14

[12] 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—[13] for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. [14] Yet

death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

The “law” here means the Law given to Moses. His point was that there was a law that continued from Adam to Moses because death was still evident. In other words, the obligations of Covenant of Works never went away.

What does Romans 5:14 mean when it says that Adam was a type of Christ?

- [19] For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Christ's obedience was like Adam based on the perfect law

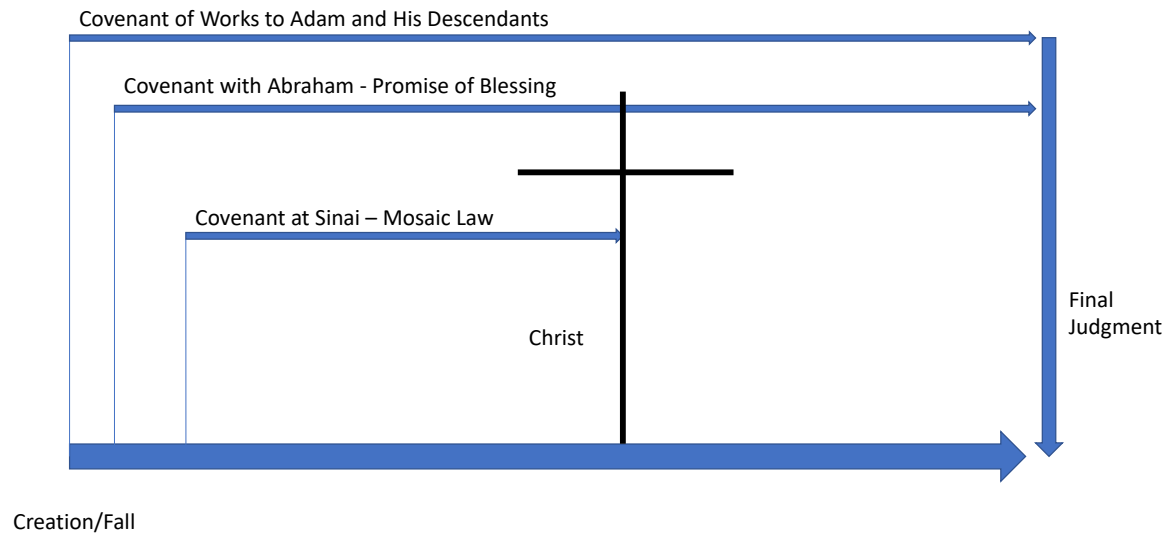
- [17] “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

Conclusion: Grace was NOT God's Plan B. The Covenant of Grace is built upon the Covenant of Works.

God can grant us salvation unconditionally because Christ obediently fulfilled the Covenant of Works and he also took upon himself the covenant curses that belong to us.

Galatians 3:13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us— for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—14 so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

Christ took the curse of the conditional covenant so that the blessing of the unconditional covenant (Abraham) might flow to us.



How Should We Now Read the OT?

1. Step One: Relate the text to the covenantal context

- What are the typological aspects of the covenantal context that need to be translated into covenant fulfillment in Christ?
- What patterns of a geo-political nature translate to a spiritual nature?
 - Cycles of faithlessness and renewal that were applied to nationalism are now applied to church
 - Holy War translates into spiritual warfare, Etc.
 - Sanctions/Curses/Blessings realized “in Christ” etc.
 - The curses are taken upon Christ
 - The blessings are ours
 - Are there any NT covenant curses?

2. Step Two: To understand the text in light of God's total story especially as ultimately revealed in the New Covenant.

- How does law lead to grace?
- How is Christ both the covenant guarantor and head of the church?

Common Questions with Christ-centered answers

1. Why did the people of God in the OT go to war? Should Christians obey these commands to take up arms and fight holy wars?

- *John 18:36 Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”*
- *2Cor. 10:4 For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.*

- *Eph. 6:12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.*

2. Doesn't the OT promise material health and wealth according to our obedience? Should we expect those blessings now? If we don't experience them, does that mean we are sinning?

- *2Cor. 4:16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.*
- *2Cor. 12:9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*
- *Romans 5:3-5 ... we exalt in hope of the glory of God, and not only this, but we also exalt in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*
- *Romans 8:18-25 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ... For in Hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.*
- *1 Peter 1:6-7: In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in the praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*
- *Hebrews 12:5-11ff: ... All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*
- *James 5:15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

3. Should we claim the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14? Is failing to do this what is wrong with our country?

[14] if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (ESV)

[See answer in #4]

4. Should we expect God to bless the Middle East nation of Israel? Are ethnic Jews still God's chosen people?

- *Rom. 9:6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,*
- *1Pet. 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*