

The Covenant of Works

Q. What did God’s providence specifically do for man whom He created?

A. After the creation God made a covenant with man to give him life, if he perfectly obeyed; God told him not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil or he would die.

(Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A #12)

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 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.”

(Genesis 2:16-17)

In today’s catechism question, we encounter a word that isn’t used very much in our everyday vernacular, and that is the word “*covenant*”. In Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A #12 we read that, “*After the creation God made a covenant with man to give him life, if he perfectly obeyed*”. If you’ve ever attempted to read through the entire Bible from cover to cover you probably noticed that the word “*covenant*” kept popping up over and over again. In fact, that word “*covenant*” is used a whopping 313 times in the Old and New Testaments. For example, in Genesis chapter six we find God saying to Noah, “*...I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall go into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you*” (Genesis 6:18). Later in Genesis 15 we see God entering into another “*covenant*” with the patriarch Abraham when we read, “*On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram...*” (Genesis 15:18). Again and again we find the Lord entering into *covenants* with various people such as Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 19:5) and the great king David (2 Samuel 7). In the book of Jeremiah, we find the promise of a “*new covenant*” that God will make with His people (Jeremiah 31:31) that is ultimately fulfilled by Jesus Christ during the last supper (Luke 22:20). Needless to say, the idea of “*covenant*” is very important in regards to our understanding of the Bible!

But what is a *covenant* and what does it have to do with you and I as believers? A *covenant* is a promise or an oath that is made between two or more parties. Marriage would be a common day example of a human *covenant*. In the human covenant of marriage, a man and a woman make certain promises to each other and exchange certain oaths and vows that are binding on both individuals, “*till death do us part*”. If you were to boil down the word “*covenant*” to its simplest definition, you could say

that humanly speaking, a “*covenant*” is a promise made between two or more people. There is an important distinction however between a *human* covenant and a *divine* covenant. Whereas a human covenant is a promise made between equals (*i.e. a man and a woman in marriage*), a divine covenant is one in which the almighty God of the universe condescends to enter into a covenant with human beings. A divine covenant (*or promise*) isn’t initiated by man, a divine covenant is initiated by God. In a divine covenant, God is the one who gets to set the terms of the oath or the agreement. And whereas human beings have the ability to break their covenants (*promises*), God cannot and will not ever break covenant with His people. Our oaths can be broken; God’s oaths can always be trusted.

In today’s catechism question, we are introduced to the first divine covenant that God entered into with human beings. Theologians refer to this as the “*Covenant of Works*”. This first covenant was initiated by God with Adam, the first human being ever created. And what were the terms of this covenant? In Genesis 2:16-17 we read, “*Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 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.*” The Covenant of Works was black and white. It was a clear as could be. If Adam obeyed the command given to him by God, he and his descendants would live forever. If Adam disobeyed God, he and his descendants would surely die. Simple right? Unfortunately, as most of us already know, while God is always a covenant keeper, we’ll see in tomorrow’s devotional that Adam (*and all his descendants after him*) are covenant breakers.

Dig Even Deeper into God’s Word!

Deuteronomy 7:9

Hosea 6:7

Romans 5:12-21