

The Covenant of Grace

Adam’s violation of the Covenant of Works led to a system of altar and sacrifice to atone for sin. Through the blood of a sacrifice, the debt incurred by sin was forgiven, and communion with God was re-established. We call this provision for atonement the Covenant of Grace. You will find neither the Covenant of Works nor the Covenant of Grace mentioned in the Bible under those titles. They are theological constructs. Theology, generally, is an organized summary of the Bible’s teachings about particular subjects. These two titles concern the Bible’s teachings about our covenantal relationship to God. The Covenant of *Works* concerns our duties under God’s Law, and the Covenant of *Grace* concerns God’s provisions under the Gospel.

Just because these descriptions of covenant are constructed theologically, it doesn’t mean they are artificial or false. What it means is that human attempts to explain the eternal workings of God have limitations. On the positive side, it means we can describe those workings in a number of ways, as long as we do not violate the integrity and unity of Scripture. The Bible itself uses various ways to describe our covenantal relationship with God. And so we find references to the first Adam and last Adam,¹ the flesh and the spirit,² law and grace,³ works and grace,⁴ an old testament and a new covenant,⁵ the first covenant⁶ and second or “better” covenant.⁷ What gets confusing is that some of these headings refer to different periods in biblical history, moving from the time of Adam, to the time of the Law under Moses, and then to the time of Christ. It’s a bit of a jumble. Theology attempts to sift these ideas, and group them together under logically related headings. Different schools of theology group them differently. Naturally, each group prefers its own grouping, and tends to fault the other schools for their “non-sense.”

A cursory reading of the Bible might lead one to believe that the Covenant of Works was replaced by the Covenant of Grace, which in turn was replaced by a better or *New Covenant* in Christ’s blood. Because the Bible is roughly split in three parts, from Adam to Moses, Moses to Christ, and Christ onward, one would be inclined to associate each of these covenants with a corresponding period. The traditional view of the church is that one covenant covered Adam prior to the Fall, and the second covenant covered all three of the periods mentioned.⁸ That view has its own problems. It suggests that Adam caught God off-guard by his sin, or that God made

¹ 1Cor. 15:45

² Gal. 5:17

³ Rom. 6:14

⁴ Rom. 11:6

⁵ 2Cor. 3:6,14

⁶ Heb 9:15 He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. Heb 9:18-19 This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. NIV

⁷ Heb 8:6-7 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. A New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34) For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.

⁸ *Westminster Confession* Chap. 7, Sections 2-3: 2. The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works. In it life was promised to Adam and through him to his posterity, on condition of perfect and personal obedience. 3. Since man, by his fall, made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second covenant, commonly called the covenant of grace. In it God freely offers sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ.

up two covenants in advance, hoping the second wouldn't be necessary. Saying that there is a "better" or "new" covenant likewise suggests that the Covenant of Grace was somehow inadequate – and it begs the question, "Is this last covenant merely *better*, or is it entirely *new*?" Is there an even better one to come? The problem I have with separating the Covenant of Works from Grace, descriptively, is that it belies the sovereignty and omniscience of God. It implies that we have no obligations under the Covenant of Works, because it has been done away with. That would remove the very reason for Christ coming, which was to fulfill that covenant. So I'll go out on a limb and suggest a slightly different way to look at it.

A Single Covenant Theory

Instead of describing a series of independent covenants (first, second, better, etc.), it might be useful to describe a single Covenant. That covenant would have a list of duties and promises for each party. These exist under a works-based *Performance Clause*. We promise to obey the Law (in whatever form it is given to us), and in return, God promises to provide for us and make himself eternally known to us. This covenant would also have a *Penalty Clause* laying out the consequences should we violate the performance clause.⁹ And it provides an *Indemnity Clause* to protect us should we default on our obligations under that covenant. This is the clause under which God provided grace and mercy to Adam and Eve. The initial "grace period" under this Indemnity Clause uses a system of altar and sacrifice. It applies temporary immunity until a specified surety fulfills the Performance Clause on our behalf.¹⁰ A surety is someone who has contracted to be responsible for another. He assumes their responsibilities or debts in the event of a default on their contracts. Christ is our surety, our indemnifier, insuring us against punishment by taking that punishment in our place. Furthermore, Christ fulfills all our obligations under the Performance Clause. Is this a reasonable description of what God has provided in Christ? I believe it is.

Consider that God unilaterally created Adam and Eve, and promised life to them. God unilaterally imposed the obligation on Adam not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. God also unilaterally declared that the penalty for violating this condition would be death. Nothing in this covenant was negotiated by Adam. Is it unreasonable to conclude that God also provided in the covenant a way to cover Adam and Eve should the penalty clause be triggered? Or would it be unreasonable to conclude that the godhead had an external covenant, between themselves, in which the son agreed to be our surety under such an indemnity clause?¹¹

This indemnity clause is the one out of which the system of altar and sacrifice arose. With each sin, and each sacrifice offered up for that sin, came an application of God's grace and forgiveness. Adam and his seed were going to be insured or indemnified against damage, loss, and death by this sacrificial system. The building of the altars, the prayers of supplication, the offering of blood sacrifices, may have been works in a sense, but what they obtained was grace, forbearance, and forgiveness of their debt. This grace has always been the basis of the covenantal relationship between God and Man – from the moment Adam was created, it was by grace that

⁹ The Bible describes these two clauses as *Blessings and Curses* in Deuteronomy Chapter 28.

¹⁰ Heb 7:22 Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant.

¹¹ John 17:4 I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.

he walked with God. It is God who graciously creates us, calls us to himself, and allows us to draw near. We cannot demand or earn an audience with him. God owes us nothing for our goodness.¹² Job realized this as he pleaded for his day in court.¹³ It is all of grace.

The Law and the Gospel

Now, what is the danger in advocating a single-covenant theory? There is always a danger when we try to make *explicit* what the Bible treats as *implicit*. We tend to go beyond what is written. There is danger in suggesting that Bible doesn't mean what it says when it uses the words "second", "new", and "better." Why should these be treated as descriptive terms instead of literal terms?¹⁴ Even with separate covenants, we would encounter another danger: works and grace may be confused if they are not kept apart. We confuse our work with God's work. We confuse the role of the creature with the role of the Creator (which is what Adam and Eve did). We conveniently forget that we are corrupt, and because of our corruption, we are unable to perfectly fulfill the Law under the performance clause. We taint the altar with our unclean hands and lips.¹⁵ We think too highly of our capabilities. On the other hand, we also have a tendency to ignore the Law, as if it were never written. We think too highly of our freedom.¹⁶ Many think we are relieved of our duties under the Law, hoping easy grace will cover their wanton behavior.¹⁷ James recognized that, and spoke out against it; but he did not speak out against Paul, or against grace, as some would have us believe. There isn't a competition between works and grace. It isn't either/or. It is both. But we must not forget that God's grace precedes our works. Works do not lead to grace. Grace leads to works.

Here we find the great tension of the Christian life: *we are neither freed of the Law, nor are we able to fulfill it.* This tension is what forces our dependence on Christ. In Christ, who fulfilled the Law, we are freed from the *condemnation* of the Law; but we are also empowered to serve and obey acceptably.¹⁸ However, we do so in *his* strength rather than our own.¹⁹

¹² Job 35:6-8 If you sin, what do you accomplish against Him? Or, if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to Him? If you are righteous, what do you give Him? Or what does He receive from your hand? Your wickedness *only* affects a man such as you, And your righteousness *only* affects a son of man.

¹³ Job 9:32-35 "For He is not a man, as I am, That I may answer Him, And that we should go to court together. Nor is there any mediator between us, Who may lay his hand on us both. Let Him take His rod away from me, And do not let dread of Him terrify me. Then I would speak and not fear Him, But it is not so with me.

¹⁴ This is a hermeneutical determination. It seems to me that we *cannot* know them to be literally true. Thus, treating them as descriptive terms is not clearly erroneous, and it is definitely helpful. It makes things more, not less, understandable. And it doesn't generate inconsistencies.

¹⁵ Ps 24:3-4 Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, Nor sworn deceitfully. Isa 6:5 "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; Isa 52:11 Touch no unclean thing; Go out from the midst of her, Be clean, You who bear the vessels of the LORD.

¹⁶ Gal 5:13 You "have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."

¹⁷ Rom 6:1-2 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

¹⁸ Matt 26:41 "The spirit indeed is willing; only the flesh is weak." Rom 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. 1 Peter 2:5 you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

¹⁹ 1 Tim 1:12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry... 2 Cor 12:9 "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Eph 3:16,19 to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ... 19 that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

James explained the relationship between grace and works by emphasizing works as the necessary evidence of our faith.²⁰ Works are not meritorious to gain salvation, but they are indispensable proofs of our faith and our love for one another.

Paul explained the same relationship between grace and works by emphasizing grace to the exclusion of works.²¹ He saw the Law only as a source of condemnation, not restoration. Therefore he says we should not take on the yoke of slavery again by returning to the law.²²

Some who read Paul’s letters denounce works of any kind. They are “antinomian,” meaning “against the law.” Those who favor James denounce the idea of “grace alone” as a license to continue wrong-doing. They are “legalists.” In his own time, Paul had to defend his position on grace and explain that what he was saying was not inconsistent with James.²³ John the Baptist, as Paul and James would later do, cautioned his listeners to be obedient as a display of their sincerity in turning from sin: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!”²⁴ *This tension between grace and works is the engine of our Christian walk.* The Law, it seems, is a two-sided coin, bringing both death and life. We can’t discard one side of the coin without losing the other.

The Law of Sin and Death

On the first side of the “coin of Law” is death. Paul tells us in the NT that the Law brings death,²⁵ and that apart from the law we would not have known what sin was.²⁶ Righteousness does not come from the law, but from God.²⁷ Yet the law is God’s provision for his people and his glory.²⁸ We may be under grace, but the law has not been removed. “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.” Rom 3:31 “Therefore the law was our guardian to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.”²⁹ Gal 3:24-25 Even so, we are not relieved of our duties. “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?” James 2:21-22

²⁰ James 2:18 show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

²¹ Rom 11:6 And if by grace, then it is no longer of works ; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works , it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.

²² Gal 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

²³ Rom. 6:1

²⁴ Matt. 3:8

²⁵ Rom 7:10 And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death .

²⁶ Rom 7:7 What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law.

²⁷ Phil 3:9 not having my own righteousness, which is from the law , but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; Rom 4:6 David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works...

²⁸ Deut 4:1, 6-7 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you... Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' "For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him?"

²⁹ NT:3807 paidagogos, or pedagogue in English. One who accompanies a child to school and back and supervises his conduct generally.

The Law of Life and Liberty

On the other side of the coin is life. **“Do this and live.”**³⁰ The Law is summarized in Matt. 22:37-40: "You shall **love** the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall **love** your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." "A new commandment I give to you, that you **love** one another; **as I have loved you**, so you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" John 13:34-35. This is sometimes called the Law of Love. If we love one another, we have fulfilled the law.³¹ "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does." James 1:25.

What then is the purpose of the law? Does it bring death, or life? Bondage, or liberty? Has it been done away with, or does it remain? And if it remains, which part of it remains? The Law of Love, the Law written on our hearts, the Ten Commandments, or the entire Pentateuch? Believe it or not, there is little agreement in the Church with regard to this issue.

The Continuity of the Covenant

All covenants subsequent to the Fall exist under the umbrella Covenant of Grace. This includes the New Covenant in Christ's blood. Neither the Law given to Moses, nor the New Covenant in Christ's blood, wiped out the covenant that God established with Abraham.³²

What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. Gal 3:17-18 NIV³³

In that covenant, God promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan. He promised that nations would arise from him, and that his seed would number as the sand on the shore.³⁴ In his covenant with Isaac, God promised him what he swore to his father Abraham.³⁵ In his covenant

³⁰ Luke 10:27-28 – Love the Lord your God with all your soul, strength, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself... Do this and live.

³¹ Rom 13:8 Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. Rom 13:10 Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law .

³² Luke 1:69-75 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us - to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, **the oath he swore to our father Abraham**: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. NIV

³³ It is worth noting that the tension between Law and Grace pre-existed Moses. Gen 6:8-9, "Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD... Gen 7:1 Noah , "Come into the ark, you and all your household, because I have seen that you are righteous before Me in this generation. In Gen 26:5 we read, "Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws."

³⁴ Gen. 17:4-8; 22:17

³⁵ Gen. 26:3-5

with Jacob, God promised what he swore to Abraham and Isaac.³⁶ In his New Covenant of Christ's blood, God fulfilled what he promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.³⁷ What Christ ushered in was not a different covenant, but the same covenant of grace that covered all prior generations, differently administered.³⁸ In fact, the three periods mentioned earlier, are the ones that are differently administered: first, from Adam to Moses, which was *prior* to the Ceremonial Law;³⁹ second, from Moses to Christ, which was *under* the Ceremonial Law;⁴⁰ third, from Christ until his second coming, which is under the Law of the Spirit.⁴¹ In all three periods, salvation is through faith;⁴² faith is accounted as righteousness;⁴³ what ensues is forgiveness by God's grace.⁴⁴ This is the whole of Romans chapter 4, and Hebrews chapter 11.

The New Covenant in Christ's blood did not do away with the Covenant of Works,⁴⁵ nor did it replace the Covenant of Grace.⁴⁶ Rather, it fulfilled the first, and informed the second. In Christ, God fulfilled his promise to Eve that her seed would crush the head of the serpent.⁴⁷ The Covenant of Grace is built upon a system of altar and sacrifice. That system was designed to point to the coming Christ. The Ceremonial Law given by Moses, pointed to the coming Christ. The blood of animals spilled on the altar in the Jerusalem temple saved no one. Those sacrifices were a *type* for the final atoning sacrifice that Christ would make on the cross; they were *shadows* of what was to come.⁴⁸ The same grace that flows from Christ's sacrifice, flowed from those shadows. They were statements of our reliance on the grace of God to forgive our sin by following his provisions under the Ceremonial Law. What those who lived under that system could not have fully realized at the time, was that the entire sacrificial system was dependent

³⁶ Gen. 35:11-12

³⁷ Rom 9:6-7 For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called." (Gen. 21:12)

³⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith – Chapter 7, Section 8.

³⁹ Rom 5:14 Nevertheless 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.

⁴⁰ Rom 2:17-20 Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law.

⁴¹ Rom 8:2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.

⁴² Eph 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, 2 Tim 3:15 from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 1 Peter 1:4-5 an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation.

⁴³ Rom 3:21-22 But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. Rom 4:3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Rom 4:5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

⁴⁴ Eph 1:7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace

⁴⁵ Matt 5:17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. Rom 3:31 I Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.

⁴⁶ Heb 8:6 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.

⁴⁷ Luke 10:18-19 "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.

⁴⁸ Heb 10:1 For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect.

upon Christ for those offerings to be effective.⁴⁹ When the promised Christ came in reality, the shadows were no longer needed.⁵⁰ The entire debt they represented was nailed to the cross.⁵¹

Works remain in the covenant under the *performance* clause: Do this and live.⁵² It is still in effect; it was never waived.⁵³ But *Christ* is the one who fulfills it perfectly. We have his perfect obedience imputed to us by faith alone. We are *declared* righteous, as if his righteousness were our own. We are not inherently righteous.⁵⁴ His righteousness is not “infused” in us, as the Roman Catholics teach. Nor is our obedience mixed with his as some Arminians teach.⁵⁵ It is not that we do as much as we can, and then rely on Christ to make up the difference. It is *all* of Christ, all of grace. Our obedience is not meritorious in any way with regard to our salvation and redemption; although, at the Judgment our works will be used to determine our rewards.⁵⁶ Our obedience is a *sign* of the covenant of grace that exists between us and God. It is how we acknowledge and exercise the covenant relationship that we have with him. In demonstrating our faith, we display the gracious covering that we have in Christ. Obedience is a sign of our identification with Christ, that we are in him, and covered by him, as Adam and Eve were covered by the animal skins. Baptism is the initial sign of repentance in Christ. Obedience is the ongoing visible manifestation that we abide in Christ, and that he abides in us.⁵⁷

The Inadequacy of Altar and Sacrifice

If an indemnity clause has provided for a system of altar and sacrifice, why was there any need for Christ to go to the cross? Why was the sacrificial system inadequate? Why couldn't it be permanent? It was inadequate because any sacrifice men might make would be inadequate to cover the debt they owed to God. With each sacrifice, God waived the remainder due pending a final payment, almost like a balloon payment that is due on a mortgage. What remainder?

Heb 10:1-4 For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have

⁴⁹ Heb 10:4 For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.

⁵⁰ Rom 8:24 For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?

⁵¹ Col 2:13-15 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. ESV

⁵² Lk. 10:28

⁵³ Matt 5:17-19 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. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. NIV

⁵⁴ Rom 4:5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. NIV

⁵⁵ Some Arminians teach that obedience is necessary to persevere in salvation: we are not finally saved by Christ, but only potentially saved.

⁵⁶ Matt 16:27 For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. 1Cor 3:8-15 Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor... If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. 2 John 8 Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward .

⁵⁷ Jn 15:4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. John 15:10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.

Anselm said that a sin against an infinite God creates an infinite debt. Man is a finite being. He cannot repay it.⁵⁸ That is why Christ, an infinite being, was needed to pay that debt on our behalf. The system of altar and sacrifice was a temporary solution, a portrait of things to come.⁵⁹ It was sufficient to forbear the remainder of the debt until the time was ripe, and the promise of the Messiah was to be fulfilled in Christ.⁶⁰ It covered the period of God's preparation, and then ended – one atonement for all.⁶¹ God planned it all from the start. He was not surprised at all by Adam's choice. He had already made provision for it, as he does for us. We could say that our coverage under the Covenant of Grace is "comprehensive."

Concluding Thoughts

In the Garden, there was a *Covenant of Works*. Outside the Garden was a *Covenant of Grace* in which the Law defined how grace would be applied. In the OT, under the Law, obedience was a means to apply God's grace, not just the sign of already-applied grace as it is in the NT. If a person failed to make the prescribed sacrifice to atone for his sin, it meant that grace would not be applied to him. With the coming of the Christ, this system of repetitive sacrifice was done away with. His sacrifice or offering was made once for all, a complete and eternal atonement for our sin. Offerings were no longer needed as a means of applying grace.

Some have said that despite Christ's coming I must continue, as in the OT, to apply God's grace through my obedience.⁶² They say that I may have been justified upon my declaration of faith, but it was only provisional. I must continue to obey not only to evidence my faith, but to appropriate God's grace. There is no good news in that. The Law under such a scheme would remain in effect. We would have done away with physical sacrifices, but we would then have a sacrifice of obedience. This is not the historic view of the reformed church. My salvation is always by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It is not partial, but complete at the moment I receive Christ. As soon as I say faith plus anything, or Christ plus anything, I step away from the historic faith.

The issue is always the same: how much do I contribute toward my own salvation? If I am given an initial gift, but I am obligated to maintain its effectiveness by obedience, then what is the difference between that and a covenant of works? If A=B (works equals faith) and B=C

⁵⁸ This is an extrapolation from the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matt. 18:21-35. The amount owed was 60 million times a day's wages. That's pretty much an infinite amount, an inconceivable figure.

⁵⁹ Heb 9:9-10 It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience — concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.

⁶⁰ Gal 4:4-5 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

⁶¹ Heb 9:12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.

⁶² For example, Dr. Norman Shepherd, formerly of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.

(faith equals salvation), then A=C (works equals salvation). However, “A” does not equal “B”. If my works contribute at all to my salvation, or to my justification, then I am still under works and not grace. If I must add even a single work to my faith, then I have contributed to my own salvation. Therefore, Christ alone would be insufficient to save me. If it were true that my justification was not complete at the moment of my conversion, and needed to be maintained or completed by my works, then Christ would be insufficient to save me. It would not be grace alone, faith alone, or Christ alone that saved me.

The Arminian would ask why we must confess our sin to have it forgiven if we were indeed completely forgiven at our conversion? “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and purify us from all unrighteousness.”⁶³ Is this not an ongoing process of applying grace? Isn’t our obedience in confessing our sin the means of its application? Aren’t we also to confess our sins one to another?⁶⁴ Isn’t this part of our required obedience?

The reformed theologian would respond that confession does not impact our justification. Instead, confession is part of our fellowship. We have already been forgiven of our sin, and we have been declared wholly righteous by God. We cannot add to that. We cannot be *more* saved by confession than we already are. By comparison, the Roman Catholic church, which holds much in common with Arminianism, considers confession to be part of its sacrament of reconciliation. In the Roman Catholic tradition, confession is considered to be efficacious in applying God’s grace to an individual. That is not what the reformed thinker means by confession at all. Confession, in the reformed view, is an acknowledgement that Christ has already atoned for that sin, a statement of thanksgiving for that fact, a recognition that God is good and his Law is just. It is penitent sorrow for failing to glorify God in that we sinned against him. It is a plea for strength through God’s Spirit to put away that sin. Confessing to one another is a way to call upon the community of Christ to support us in our struggle against sin, and to hold us accountable.

Here is the key: in the historic Christian faith, the Law is intended for our *good*. It is intended to identify sin, not to condemn us by it, for in Christ there is no more condemnation.⁶⁵ It is intended to restore us to God by identifying in us what is displeasing to God. In this way, we may put sin away from us. Putting it away is how we honor Christ for his sacrifice.⁶⁶ It is how we enjoy the Spirit in his companionship.⁶⁷ And it is how we glorify God who loved us while we were yet sinners.⁶⁸

⁶³ 1Jn. 1:9

⁶⁴ James 5:16

⁶⁵ Rom 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

⁶⁶ 1 Cor 6:20 For **you were bought at a price**; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

⁶⁷ Eph 4:30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

⁶⁸ Rom 5:8 God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Eph 4:31-32 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.