

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

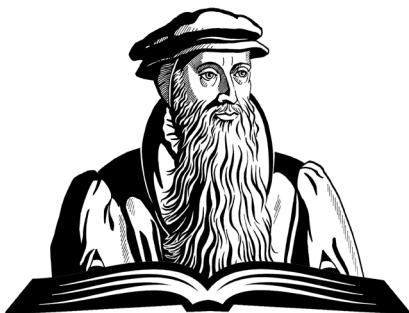
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 3:

ANTHROPOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

Lecture 9

THE DOCTRINE OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE



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Module 3 ~ Lecture 9

The Doctrine of the Covenant of Grace

Marriage is a divine institution, instituted by God at the beginning, and practiced all over the world throughout all of human history. At the heart of marriage is a covenant relationship. Malachi 2, verse 14 speaks of “the wife of thy covenant.” A man and a woman enter into a covenantal relationship with the exchange of vows, pledging themselves to each other, and they are thereby united to one another. Two become one, reflected in the consummation of the marriage, as we see in Genesis 2, verse 24. So it begins with a man making a marriage proposal to a woman, asking her to become his wife. It ends with the wife assuming the name of the husband, having a title to all that he is and all that he has. The man belongs to the woman, and the woman belongs to the man. Well, this marriage relationship provides an earthly reflection of a heavenly relationship between God and his people. We see this all through the Old Testament, in the Psalms and prophets, for example. We see it in the New Testament, notably, in places like Ephesians 5, but all the way to the end, in Revelation 21. After the fall, God established a covenant relationship with his people, which we call the covenant of grace.

This series of lectures in this third module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the Doctrine of Man. In the last lecture, we considered the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works established with Adam before the fall, a covenant which Adam broke with tragic consequences. In this lecture, we turn our attention to the covenant of grace. Shorter Catechism, question 20 says, “God, having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.”

So first of all, we’ll begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the Doctrine of the Covenant of Grace. In Genesis 3, verse 15, we read, “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” In the last lecture on the covenant of works, we saw the human race cast into the deplorable condition of sin, with the consequences of death. The question comes, Does any hope remain? Well, perhaps you’ve seen the sun go down—darkness descends, it becomes darker and darker, and then a lone star appears in the sky, shining against the background of the black sky. This is what happens in Genesis 3:15, where we see the very the very first gospel promise after the fall—a promise fulfilled in Christ. Here is Christ again, in Genesis 3, this time as the Savior. The Puritan, John Owen, noted that Genesis 3:15 provides “in embryo, the whole Doctrine of Salvation for sinners.” It is the first light on the new horizon of God’s grace. We’ve noted that Adam broke the first covenant, the covenant of works. We also noted that, due to the distance between God and man, the Lord must condescend to relate to man by way of a covenant. Now, a

new covenant is necessary, a covenant that addresses the new context of man's fall into an estate of sin. Theologians call this the covenant of grace, through which God provides the salvation of his people. And we find the first seed of this covenant in Genesis 3:15. Notice that God takes the initiative in establishing the covenant on his end. We see God seeking out Adam, then we hear, "I will put enmity," and so on.

For the remainder of the Bible, we will watch this seed take root and grow. God will unfold and expand his revelation of the covenant of grace through the remainder of the history of redemption. Our understanding of the one, that is, the single covenant of grace, will become clearer and clearer through God's covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, until it comes to its fullest expression in the new covenant. There is a dominant continuity traced from Genesis 3:15, all the way through to Revelation 22, revealing God's plan of redemption through his covenant of grace. We only see a glimmer of light here in Genesis 3:15, but God will build on this in all that follows.

We see that Christ will crush the head of the serpent. In the words of Colossians 2:15, "Having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it." But in the process, Christ's heel would be bruised—that's a reference to his work on the cross. Christ would be made curse—Christ would endure the curse, death, judgment, and wrath of God. Well, this original curse in the Garden provides the background for God's coming salvation of his people through Christ. Galatians 3, verse 13, says that "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." So in Genesis 3:15, the first gospel promise provides us with many things. It also provides with a charter for the church.

Notice three contrasts. You have the serpent and the woman—that ends the alliance that led to man's fall. The serpent and the woman had come together in their move toward rebellion against the Lord. But now that's broken. There's restored fellowship with God that brings enmity with sin and Satan. Secondly, you have represented Christ and Satan. Christ is the woman's seed who would crush the serpent's head, while the serpent would bruise his heel. But thirdly, you see the church, the woman's seed, and the world, Satan's seed. So there's a great division. The rest of Genesis really draws lines of distinction between the woman's faithful seed, and the serpent's rebellious seed, separating the lines of Seth and Cain, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and so on. The seed of the woman would ultimately lead to Christ. This also sets the context of enmity and war between the church under Christ, and the world under Satan's dominion, traced all the way through the history of redemption. Fellowship with God requires separation from fellowship with sin, the world, and the devil.

And so you must understand the theology provided in Genesis 3, to make sense of the rest of the Bible. We see that the promise of Christ, in Genesis 3:15, extends to the triumph of Christ's people over the devil. Paul says, in Romans 16, verse 20, "And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen." All of this introduces us to God's covenant of grace. Understanding this doctrine is very important. Hermann Witsius, a seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, wrote, "Whoever therefore loves his own salvation, whoever longs to delight himself in the contemplation of the divine perfections, he must come hither, and deeply engage in holy meditations on the covenant of grace."

Well, secondly, let's consider some of the doctrinal details regarding the covenant of grace. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 7, paragraph 3, states the following: "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 life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.” So there’s a summary. We see that God has established a covenant, and it’s a covenant between God and his people. We see that it includes rich promises of life and salvation. It also requires something—it requires faith to believe and receive those promises offered unto the fallen sons of Adam. That faith is a gracious gift of God supplied by the Holy Spirit to his elect people.

The heart of the covenant of grace, in Biblical terminology, is this: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people.” In fact, that language, and language similar to it, you will find traced through the whole Bible. Indeed, it would be a good exercise for you. Look in Genesis, starting with Noah, but places like Genesis 17, verse 7. You can go through Leviticus and great swaths of the Old Testament, the prophets repeat this language, into the New Testament, places like Hebrews, all the way to Revelation 21, verse 7. The heart of the covenant of grace is that God will be a God to his people, and that they will be his people.

Well, in this lecture, we want to focus our attention on the unfolding scope of the covenant of grace in the history of the Bible. This introduces a very important doctrinal point. The covenant of grace provides continuity to the Scriptures. It begins, as we saw, in Genesis 3:15, and it runs all the way through the Bible, and reaches its culmination in Revelation 21 and 22. So the Biblical covenants—the covenant with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David—and the new covenant carry the same message, in ever-increasing clarity, with each successive covenant. Each new covenant brought more light and understanding to God’s redemptive plan. This reached its full climax in the new covenant, which superseded and fulfilled all other administrations of the covenant of grace. This continuity is seen, in that there is one God, there is one people of God, there is one gospel in the covenant of grace, under both Old and New Testaments.

So let’s look at these covenants. Having considered Genesis 3:15, we turn to Noah. After the flood, God blessed Noah, and reasserted his gospel promise in the covenant of grace. You see this in Genesis 9. Now, the pronouncement of God’s blessing on his people becomes an important feature through the Bible, right down to the very last verse of Scripture, Revelation 22, verse 21. As we saw before, God is the One who initiates his covenant. So in Genesis 9:9, it says, “And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you.” So God is the author of the covenant with Noah. In the Noahic covenant, you’ll notice the reference to creation, demonstrating the coexistence of creation and redemption. God’s purposes in creation are upheld, in order that redemption may proceed and unfold. Think of other passages in the prophets, like Hosea 2:18. God’s works of creation and providence serve God’s gracious purposes in advancing his plan of redemption in history. We also know that the covenant blessings culminate at the renewal of the ordered existence of creation, in the new heavens and new earth. These fresh covenant promises with Noah are accompanied by multiple sacrifices. You can see that in Genesis 8 and 9. While most of the creatures came into the ark two-by-two, the animals that God designated as “clean” came by sevens. This was a provision for both sacrifice and food. We have the first mention of an altar, in chapter 8, verse 20. The covenant of grace is established with sacrifice and bloodshed, drilling into our minds early the expectation of Christ, who would later say, “This cup is the new testament”—or covenant—“in my blood, which is shed for you”—Luke 22:20. God provides, as well, a perpetual sign of this covenant of grace in the rainbow. Chapter 9, verse 12, “I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth.” In addition, we’re introduced to this household principle, so the expansion of the covenant promise to include the family of believers. Noah was a man of faith—he believed God’s Word, as Hebrews 11:7 tells us.

But notice God extends his covenant blessings to Noah, as a believer, and to his children. Again, in chapter 9, verse 9, “And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you.” This household principle runs through the Old and New Testaments. When Peter preaches the gospel, in Acts 2, verse 39, he says the same thing, “For the promise is unto you, and to your children.” Inheriting covenant promises in covenant families was not synonymous, however, with true conversion and saving faith. That is, not all receive the promise by faith. The seed of the serpent rose again from within the family of the seed of the woman, through Ham’s rebellion and covenant-breaking, and he was cut off from the assembly of God’s people, as you see at the end of Genesis 9.

Next, we need to go on to the Abrahamic covenant. God’s revelation regarding the salvation of his people in Christ expands more and more with each new step in Biblical history. The Abrahamic covenant provides the groundwork, language, and focus of God’s dealing with his people in the history of redemption. What we find here carries over into the periods that follow. God initiates his covenant, in Genesis 12, verse 1 and following, he explains the saving content, in chapter 15, he confirms it sacramentally with signs and seals, in chapter 17, and concludes it, in chapter 22, verses 15 to 19. We only have time to touch on a few highlights regarding this covenant, which is a part of the covenant of grace. But notice a few things.

We see that the core of the covenant promises is found in the words of chapter 17, verse 7, “I will establish my covenant”—and it goes on a bit later—“to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” So he will be their God, and they will be his people. Imprint those words on your mind—you’re going to see this language over and over throughout the Bible, ultimately, all the way to Revelation 21, verse 3. It’s a covenant also ratified by blood. In Genesis 15, we have an elaborate vision, in which God appeared in smoke and fire, and passed between the pieces of slain animals, taking upon himself solemn oaths and imprecations that he would fulfill his Word. We see again that the gospel promise in the covenant of grace includes the household principle. The promise to Abraham extends to his children, as you saw in verse 7, of chapter 17. This element of the covenant of grace continues here. Since the promise of the covenant is to his children, the sign and seal of the promise—which was circumcision at that time—is also given to his children. In chapter 17, verse 11, “And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you,” and he commands that he give it to his sons. In Romans 4, verse 11, Paul calls circumcision a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith. But again, the sign of the promise does not presume regeneration. Both Ishmael and Isaac receive it, though Isaac is the one who has faith. Nevertheless, the command to give the sign to his children was absolutely necessary. Genesis 17, verse 14 makes that clear. This becomes important as we continue to study the Bible.

God’s promise of blessing to Abraham extended through him to the whole world, as God had promised in Genesis 12, verse 3, “and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” This promise would only be fulfilled through the coming Redeemer, Jesus Christ, who is called “the son of Abraham,” in the first verse of the New Testament. In Galatians 3:14, we read, “That the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” In verse 29, “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” And so we see Genesis 3:15 leading us to Abraham’s seed, ultimately to the Lord Jesus Christ, and through Christ, to the Gentile believers and children. As you can see, the promise was never intended to be restricted to the Jews, but extended to all those with sound and saving faith in the gospel of Christ. Romans 4, verse 13, “For the promise, that he should be the

heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.” Therefore, Gentile believers are true children of Abraham, and heirs of the promise. Note Galatians 3, verse 7 and verse 9.

That brings us to Moses and the Mosaic covenant. You may recall that while Moses was serving as a shepherd in the land of Midian, he encountered the Lord in the burning bush. God promised Moses that he would be with him, and instructed him to bring his people, once delivered from Egypt, back to this mountain, which was Horeb, or Sinai, to serve, or worship, God upon this mountain—Exodus 3, verse 12. God’s command to go get his people, and to bring them to worship him at Sinai, brings us to consider the significance of what transpired at this important place—at Mount Sinai—later. The continuity we have observed so far in the unfolding of God’s covenant of grace continues, the Mosaic covenant being one more development in the history of redemption. We’re going to consider this at greater length under the polemical section of this lecture.

The climax of the unfolding of the covenant of grace, in the Old Testament, comes in God’s covenant with David, the Davidic covenant. God’s purpose to redeem his people finds expression in the way he institutes his rule over them. The seed of the woman will be a kingly seed. The rest of the Old Testament will continue to appeal to the Davidic covenant, exemplifying the development of the covenant of grace, and setting before Israel God’s promises, and calling them to faith, repentance, and renewed obedience. But the key verse in the Davidic covenant is found in the reference to David’s seed, in 2 Samuel 7, verse 14, “I will be his father, and he shall be my son.” He is a man that will be God’s own Son! Well, this is quoted in reference to Christ, in Hebrews 1, verse 5. David’s promised son will ultimately be God’s own Son, a theme that is developed in the New Testament.

Lastly, we come to the new covenant. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, the minor prophets—they all provide several key texts on the new covenant. The difference between the old covenant and new covenant is not one of substance, but one of administration. You can read about this in Westminster Confession, chapter 7. We can only consider a few themes here. One important text is Jeremiah 31, verses 31 to 34, quoted in Hebrews 8. You’ll note the continuity with former covenants. “I . . . will be their God, and they shall be my people.” But it will be new blessings that God, once again, initiates. He will apply his law internally in their hearts in the new covenant. He will provide increased knowledge of himself. He’ll grant definitive, full forgiveness of sins, no longer in Old Testament symbols. Paul, writing in 2 Corinthians 3, shows the comparatively greater glory of the new covenant will surpass the glory of the old. Hebrews 8, 9, and 10 grounds this in the superiority of Christ’s ministry as a Mediator. Christ ratifies the new covenant in blood for the full remission of sins. Likewise, Ezekiel 36:25 to 27 promises cleansing, a new heart, and God’s Spirit put within his people, enabling them to walk in his statutes.

Lastly, and briefly, it may be helpful to summarize some of the points that we’ve learned about the continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. Now, they must be held together. You cannot rightly understand the New Testament without a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament, upon which the New Testament is built. Likewise, you must interpret the Old in light of the fulfillment in the New. In terms of continuity, both Old and New Testaments reveal the same God who is unchanging. To draw a contrast between the God of the Old Testament and the New Testament would be a destructive error, which heretics of the past have taught. Both Old and New Testaments reveal the same Savior. The Old Testament points forward to Christ, through types and shadows, and ceremonies, and the New Testament unveils his person and work in the full glory of his coming. The Old and New Testaments also set forth the same gospel of grace, and the

same covenant of grace. Contemporary Gentile believers are saved by faith in Christ, just as Abraham was redeemed. God does not have multiple plans for salvation throughout Biblical history. He unfolds one single, grand plan for redeeming his people after the fall, in the covenant of grace. So the Old Testament is full of gospel. The Old and New Testaments represent one people of God, one church under two administrations. In the New Testament, that church is greatly expanded, of course, through the influx of Gentile believers, as had been promised all through the Old Testament. So all of this reinforces that the whole Bible is the Christian Scriptures, and we must study and understand this whole Bible in terms of the continuity of the covenant of grace.

There are, however, clearly differences between the Old and New Testaments, and between the administration of the covenant of grace in the Old and in the New. The Old foretells, the New fulfills. So there are points of discontinuity that include the removal of the Old Testament ceremonial laws, institutions and regulations. The New Testament sets aside ceremonial worship, sacrifices, alters, priests, and so on, with rituals of purification, ceremonies of clean and unclean prohibitions. We have also Paul, who is warning us that we must not return to the shadows, when we stand in the presence of the person that they picture. To do so would be an affront to Christ, and would undermine his finished work.

Another difference includes the important place of kingdom expansion. The Old Testament did not exclude Gentiles altogether—think of Rahab, Ruth, Uriah, and others—but proportionately few Gentiles were enfolded in the covenant under the Old Testament church. The Old Testament was primarily a “come and see” model. God set Canaan, and Jerusalem in particular, as a light to the nations, and there were those attracted to learn about Jehovah and his salvation. But the New Testament issues a commission to “go and tell”—the gospel is taken to the nations. Beginning at Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the uttermost parts of the earth. And so the mission focuses on the expanding of Christ’s kingdom universally. Gentile nations are to be disciplined and added to Christ’s inheritance. Now, this was predicted in the Old Testament, in the earliest chapters of Genesis, but it comes to fruition in the New Testament.

One last category of discontinuity relates to the greater degrees of blessings in the New Testament, derived from the finished work of Christ. There’s a greater measure of the fulness of the Spirit given at Pentecost. We have more direct and immediate communion with God, without the aid of earthly priests. We have an increased assurance and heightened power in sanctification, and so on. So we see this covenant of grace grounded in the Bible and the continuity that carries all the way through.

Next, we must consider some errors related to the covenant of grace. And we will limit our focus to one dominant error. Some Christians have wrongly set the covenant with Moses, and the new covenant, in opposition to one another. The covenant of grace is portrayed as gracious, and the covenant with Moses as harsh, based on human merit. This is not what the Bible teaches, as I intend to prove. This is an important point in understanding the relationship of the Old and New Testaments, the relationship of law and gospel, and the work of Christ, and the place of the law in the life of the contemporary Christian.

So let me demonstrate the Mosaic covenant is part of the covenant of grace. First of all, God’s first words at Sinai convey a message of redemption and the covenant of grace, Exodus 19, verses 4 and 5: “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people.” God communicates the same emphasis of gospel redemption, in giving the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20, verse 2: “I am the

LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” He is their God—the God who saved and delivered them. There’s redemption from the bondage of Egypt that is foreshadowing the saving work of the coming of Christ.

But in addition, the law itself is full of the message of the gospel, and Christ as a Savior. The tabernacle, sacrifices, priesthood—all of these symbols convey wonderful theology about God’s provision of forgiveness, reconciliation, and fellowship with God. Yes, the law will constantly remind them of their inability to conform to God’s standards of holiness, and to love him comprehensively. And it is the law that teaches them to avail themselves of the sacrifices as they repent and cast themselves on God’s mercy. Remember the core of the covenant of grace? We see it repeated in the Mosaic covenant, for example, in Leviticus 26, verse 12, “And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people.” You’ll see it elsewhere, Exodus 29, verse 45, and so on. In Leviticus 26, and in Deuteronomy 27 and 28, we see a greater revelation of the blessings and curses of covenant. Covenant breaking through unbelief and disobedience results in disqualification from the blessings, and the certain reaping of the curses. But even here, if Israel repents and turns back to the Lord, then they will again know the blessings in the covenant, as Leviticus 26 makes clear. This is fundamental and essential for understanding the later prophets and the background from the New Testament.

But do not make the mistake of thinking that this element is absent from the New Testament. Remember Ananias and Sapphira? Do you remember the grave warnings in 1 Corinthians 11 about unworthy participation in the Lord’s Supper? Or the language of Hebrews 6, Hebrews 10, Hebrews 12? And the startling threats that Christ gave to the seven churches of Asia, in Revelation 2 and 3, to just mention a few examples. There’s continuity even here. Many, many more connections could be drawn. For example, Christ’s words at the institution of the Lord’s Supper, “For this is my blood of the new testament”—Matthew 26, verse 28. That’s language taken, not from the Passover, but from Sinai, in Exodus 24, verse 8. And so we’ve dealt polemically with this objection of drawing opposition between Moses and Christ in the new covenant. And we’ve seen what the Bible teaches.

We can now draw a few brief, practical applications for ourselves. You can see how this covenant of grace leads us to delight in Christ, in all of the Scriptures. We see that the gospel is set forth in the unfolding of the covenant of grace, all the way from Genesis 3 through the whole Old Testament. And so we should, therefore, study the Old Testament accordingly. We should be looking for Christ and savoring him. We should be rejoicing in the gospel that we see there. We should be learning and putting our roots down into the soil of the Bible, in understanding God’s glorious redemption in the covenant of grace.

You think also, what better promise than the promise given in the covenant of grace? “I will be a God to you, and you will be my people.” I mean, this is astounding to us!—that the God of glory, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Judge of all the earth, that he would condescend and take us to himself, that we can say he is our God; that we can appropriate the fact that we are, if we’re savingly brought to the Lord Jesus Christ, we are as his people, that he owns us, that he’s actually married to his believing people in the covenant of grace, so that all that is Christ’s becomes ours, and we become his.

The household principle is also seen, “I will be a God to you, and to your seed after you.” And so we’re taught to raise our children in the fear and admonition of the Lord, to point them to Christ, to set forth the gospel, to call them to faith and repentance, to teach them to pray that God would give them a new heart, and that he would take out the heart of stone; that he would give them faith, and that they would come to lay hold of Christ as he is offered to sinners in the gospel.

That reinforces for all of us, doesn't it, the call to receive those promises with faith. There is covenant keeping, and there is covenant breaking. And those who come, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to lay hold of Christ by faith stand in that covenant and reap all the blessings of it. But those who rebuff the gospel, and harden their hearts, break covenant with the Lord, and reap the curse as well. And so it reinforces the necessity of receiving promises with faith.

Lastly, we have the wonder of restoration of fellowship with God—that God invites his believing people into communion and fellowship with him. This is the life blood of living in the covenant of God's grace; to cultivate and to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever; to seek out those opportunities of nearness to him in his ordinances, and his promised presence, and to hold fellowship with him. The covenant of grace fuels all of these wonderful privileges.

Well, in this lecture, we've explored the Doctrine of the Covenant of Grace. When Adam broke the covenant of works, it left him and his posterity under the curse of death. God introduced the covenant of grace after the fall, as a provision of salvation for fallen sinners. This covenant stretches across the pages of Scripture, from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22; from immediately after the fall, into eternity. We have an enduring promise that he will be our God, and that we will be his people.