

SEVEN

The Covenant of Works and the Fall of Mankind

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Introduction

As biblical history unfolds, mankind’s innocence in the Garden does not last long. By the third chapter of our Bibles, it is lost. Whether this means our innocence lasted a matter of hours or days (possibly) or years (unlikely) we cannot discern. Since Eve has no child by this point, it does not seem our original righteousness lasted long at all. Certainly, that is the impression given by Moses’s historical narrative in Genesis 1–3. By the end of Genesis 3, sin and death become permanently attached to man’s nature, the devil gains a foothold, the Garden of Eden is no longer our home, and the need for a radical and divine redemption is felt profoundly. In this chapter we will explore the fall of mankind, and in the next chapter we will consider God’s radical redemption.

To understand the fall of mankind, we need to consider what is called “the covenant of works.” That takes us into the realm of covenant theology and how all the covenants of the Bible fit together. I will start there, with an exploration of covenants, and then move to Adam’s fall within “the covenant of works.” A

significant part of covenant theology includes what are called “the covenant of grace” and “the covenant of redemption.” In our next chapter we will examine those covenants.

What is a “Covenant” in the Bible?

Almost all Bibles are published as a singular work called, “The Holy Bible,” or something similar. And then when you open to the table of contents you see two large divisions called “The Old Testament” and “The New Testament.” We take this for granted and are surprised whenever any of these labels are altered. The more typical labels present a basic covenant theology and tell us there is a “Testament” that is “Old” and a “Testament” that is “New.” Yet, “testament” here is from the Latin *testamentum*, which means “covenant.” These titles are not perfect, since not everything in the Old Testament relates to the old covenant (namely, Genesis), and Jesus’ ministry prior to his crucifixion actually occurs under the era of the old covenant (Luke 22:20). But there is a helpful overall logic to thinking of our Bibles this way.

Herman Bavinck explores the history of seeing our one Bible as having two testaments. He writes that it was a response of the church to Gnosticism on the one side and Judaism on the other.¹ Christians needed to establish the unity of the Bible against the Gnostics and a distinction between “the two Testaments” against the Jews. Paul’s doctrine of seeing the Mosaic covenant as “the old covenant” (e.g., 2 Cor 3) served this purpose.² He then walks through the relationship between the old and new testaments and makes several important points. He says, “The two are one in origin and content. God, or the Logos, is the author of both, and in both we are presented one faith, one covenant, one way of salvation. There is a difference between the two only in the form, and this had

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 3:207.

² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, 3:207.

to be so.” This “one covenant” is “the covenant of grace,” as we will explore in the next chapter. God’s revelation was given progressively, so that as revelation was given we see “his grace in ever richer and fuller ways.” Further, “The church fathers, accordingly, repeatedly said that though law and gospel can be distinguished, they cannot be separated from each other.”³ Therefore,

The New is concealed in the Old Testament, and the Old is revealed in the New Testament. The Old Testament anticipates and interprets the New. The Old Testament is the concealment of the New and the New the revelation of the Old.

Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*⁴

“Covenant” is a pervasive word and concept in the Bible, the Hebrew (*berit*, בְּרִית) and Greek (*diathēkē*, διαθήκη) found hundreds of times in the OT (287 times in the BHS, 345 times in the LXX) and dozens of times in the NT (33 times in NA28). “Covenants” are made between men and men (Gen 21:27) and by men toward God (Ezra 10:3). Because of the way covenants are the result of sworn commitments and promises, covenants are sometimes referred to simply by the use of “swear” (שָׁבַע), as in Exodus 33:1 where Canaan is called “the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Gen 50:24; Exod 6:8; Num 32:11; cf. Luke 1:73). The land was “sworn” in the Abrahamic covenant. The Decalogue (Ten Commandments) is actually given in the *form* of an ancient covenant and is then seen as representative of the covenant with Moses (Deut 4:13).⁵ The “ark” in the tabernacle is often referred to as “the ark of the covenant” (Deut 31:9, 25–26; Josh 3:3–17; 1 Sam 4:3–5; 1 Chr 15:26–29), because it contains the Decalogue—the Decalogue being “the words of the covenant, the

³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, 3:207.

⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, 3:207–8.

⁵ Meredith G. Kline, “Two Tables of the Covenant,” *WTJ* 22.2 (1960): 133–46.

Ten Words” (Exod 34:28), “the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant” (Deut 9:11; see 9:15), and “the covenant of the LORD” (1 Kgs 8:21). The Decalogue is thus seen as a summary of the Mosaic covenant. The whole book of Deuteronomy is even cast in the form of an ancient suzerain-vassal covenant, containing as it does a Preamble (1:1–5), Historical Prologue (1:6–4:49), Stipulations (5–26), Curses and Blessings (27–28), the Covenant Ratification (29–30), Final Arrangements for Succession and Covenant Continuity (31–34).⁶ The covenant concept is thus pervasive in our Bible.

Further, there are important concentrations of “covenant” terminology when God initiates a covenant at key moments of salvation history. This is a way of telling us that a set of covenants have tremendous importance in God’s plan of redemption. We see this in the covenants with Noah (Gen 6:18; 9:9–17); Abraham (Gen 15:18; 17:2–21; Exod 2:24; 6:4–5; Deut 4:31; 2 Kgs 13:23; Neh 9:8; 1 Chr 16:15–18); Moses (Exod 19:5; 23:32; 24:7–8; 34:27–28; Lev 26:9, 15, 25, 42–45; Deut 4:13, 23; 5:2–3; 1 Kgs 19:14; 2 Kgs 17:15; 18:12; Isa 56:4, 6; 59:21; 61:8; Jer 11:1–10; 34:13, 18; Ezek 16:8, 59; Hos 8:1; Mal 2:10; Ps 44:17; 78:10; its renewal in Deut 29:1, 9, 12, 14, 21, 25); David (Ps 89:3, 28, 34, 39); and Christ/new covenant (Jer 31:31–34; 32:40; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:23–26; Heb 8; see also Isa 54:10; 55:3; Ezek 16:60, 62; 34:25; 37:26).

The covenants with Noah (Gen 9:1–17), Abraham (Gen 12:1–3; 15; 17:1–17; 22:18), Moses (Exod 19–24), David (2 Sam 7; Ps 89) and Christ/the new covenant (Jer 31:31–34; Luke 22:20) are important ones to consider, and they help us to define what a biblical covenant is. I will refer to these as “divine covenants.” What is it that these five divine covenants have in common? There are five things we can identify.

First, in the divine covenants *God initiates*. When we think of Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus (new covenant), it is clear these are places where God steps into history

⁶ Meredith G. Kline, “Dynastic Covenant,” *WTJ* 23.1 (1960): 1–15.

emphatically. He *initiates* something new, and there is nothing subtle about it. With Noah that initiative brought a global flood and a new covenant with Noah (Gen 6:8–9:17). God called Abraham while he was still a childless idol-worshipper in Ur of the Chaldeans and made him the father of a new people to live in the land of Canaan and experience his blessings (Gen 11:27–12:3; Acts 7:2–3). The calling and then covenant with Moses started dramatically also, with God appearing “to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush” (Exod 3:2). God spoke audibly and comprehensively to Moses in this moment atop Mt. Sinai (Exod 3), an event that would be followed by numerous miracles and then God speaking to Moses the covenant with Israel—atop the very same Mt. Sinai (Exod 19–24). With David the Lord initiated by Samuel’s anointing him with oil and then the Lord anointing David with “the Spirit of the LORD” (1 Sam 16:13). God would orchestrate numerous events with the result that David became king over all Israel. And then God spoke his covenant to David (2 Sam 7). God’s initiative through Jesus is the greatest of all of God’s interventions in history. God prophesied of a new covenant to come (Jer 31:31–34), and then God came to live among us in the man Jesus. He is the Immanuel (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23). Yet, a distinctive aspect of his work among us was inaugurating the new covenant, which he did through his crucifixion (Luke 22:20).

Second, in the divine covenants *God speaks*. God spoke solemn and consequential words to each of these men. To Noah he spoke of the flood (Gen 6:11–21), new commandments binding on all people (9:1, 4–7), but also promises (9:11–17). To Abraham Yahweh spoke promises (Gen 12:1–3; 15:1–5;), commandments (17:1–14), and also solemnly took on himself the curse of death if he were to break his own covenant (Gen 15:7–20). To Moses he would speak abundantly, detailing moral, civil, and ceremonial laws that Israel was to keep (e.g., Exod 19–24). To David he spoke of a coming son who would reign forever (2 Sam 7:12–14; cf. Matt 1:1) but also of discipline God would bring on the promised “offspring” if he walked in iniquity (2 Sam 7:14). Finally, the new covenant was

first prophesied centuries before its fulfillment (Jer 31:31–34), but it was also spoken *through* Christ at the Last Supper (Luke 22:20). The new covenant people would be those who possessed transformed hearts leading to heart-motivated obedience: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jer 31:33).

Third, in the divine covenants *God promises*. Of all the solemn and consequential words God speaks, it is worth highlighting the essential dimension of “promise” in all these covenants. There is above all a promise of God’s blessing on his people in these covenants. To Noah is promised that humanity would endure and never again be wiped out with a flood (Gen 9:11). To Abraham God promised a land, a people, and a blessing (Gen 12:1–3). To Moses God promised the land and life to those who keep his covenant (Exod 6:8; 19:5–6). To David God promises a son to reign forever (2 Sam 7:12–14), a son who will be revealed as the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 1:1; Rom 1:3). Further, in several of these covenants is also what is sometimes called “the Covenant Formula,” the promise, “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”⁷ This promise is the most consistently repeated element in the various covenants, found in the Abrahamic (Gen 17:7), the Mosaic (Exod 6:7; Lev 22:33; 26:12; Deut 29:10, 12–13; cf. Deut 26:16–19), the Davidic (2 Sam 7:24; 1 Chr 17:22; cf. 1 Sam 12:22), and the new covenant (Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10; see also 1 Kgs 6:13; Ps 50:7; 95:7; 100:3; 144:15; Isa 40:1; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 13:11; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23, 27; 34:30–31; Zech 8:8; 13:9; Hos 1:9–10; Rom 9:25–26; 2 Cor 6:16; Rev 21:3,

⁷ E.g., Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), ix; Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 167; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 307–8.

7).⁸ The frequency and prominence of the covenant formula is remarkable.

Fourth, in the divine covenants *God acts through a representative head.* Another distinctive of the divine covenants is that in each one of them, God is dealing with an individual who represents a much larger people. This is sometimes called “federal headship,” where one person (the federal head) represents the many in God’s dealings with him. Thus, God deals with Noah, but the covenant with Noah includes “you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you” (Gen 9:9–10). Then God deals directly with Abraham, but his covenant results in Abraham becoming “a great nation” and “all the families of the earth” being “blessed” (Gen 12:2, 3). Again we see in the Abrahamic the mention of “you and your offspring after you throughout their generations” (Gen 17:7). God speaks directly to Moses most often in the Mosaic covenant, even speaking to him “face to face” (Exod 33:11), though the covenant is with “the people of Israel” (Exod 19:6). The Mosaic covenant, too, has future offspring in view throughout: “Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live” (Deut 30:19). God likewise speaks deals with David individually, but since the promise is for a son-king and God establishing “the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:12–13), clearly a people is involved. It is a people, though, that will be perpetual. In Psalm 89, which highlights the Davidic covenant, there is a refrain that, “I will establish your offspring forever” (Ps 89:4, 29, 36), but it is ambiguous whether this refers to a single offspring (Christ) or a multitude (God’s people). The truth is, it is both. Finally, the new covenant also has a federal head, Jesus Christ. The new covenant is made with and through Christ (Luke 22:20), but the result is a people: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer

⁸ On the phrase see Ingvar Floysvik, “A Look at the Formula ‘I Will Be Your God, You Will Be My People’ in the Old Testament,” *Taiwan Journal of Theology* 24 (2002): 77–95.

31:33; Heb 8:10). This idea of God working through a representative head will be very important when we look at Adam in the Garden.

Fifth and finally, in the divine covenants *God inaugurates a new epoch of salvation history.* The final element we want to see is that a new era of human history begins when each of the five covenants is made. Human history does not continue in an uninterrupted, changeless fashion from the Garden of Eden to the new heaven and new earth. Instead, there are moments along the way where God steps into history and changes his relationship with his people significantly. These covenants emphatically and distinctly mark those turning points of history. With Noah, the era is more subtle, but with him begins an era in which God will never again bring a cataclysmic flood like he did in Genesis 6–8. Humanity endures because God does not wipe them out, and this is because of the promise he made in Genesis 9 at the Noahic covenant. Without this covenant, God would again wipe out humanity, because of the pervasiveness and darkness of our wickedness. Also with Noah we get three commandments meant to be binding on all humanity for all of human history: not “to eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (Gen 9:4); not to murder (9:5–6); and a restating of the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” (9:7).

With Abraham, God’s purposes become focused on a specific people (Israel) and a specific place (Canaan). He selects his special people from all the peoples of the earth. The Israelites are “the descendants of Abraham [Yahweh’s] friend” (2 Chr 20:7), but even Christians are identified as “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:29). Through faith Christians are united to Christ and share in the blessings promised to Abraham (Gal 3:14). What changes with Abraham is the clarity of the nature of our walk with God. We are to walk by a faith in God’s promises (Gen 15:6) that leads to obedience to his voice (Gen 17:1) and specific commandments (Gen 17:10). “Righteousness” is explicitly by faith (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3–8), but that faith will always include obedience (Gen 22:15–16; James 2:18–24). Further, with Abraham

we are given a sign that Israelites are to “keep” throughout all generations—that is, until God replaces the sign with the sign of baptism (Gen 17:11; Col 2:11–12).

With Moses, the era of a *written* law begins, an era that will begin formally in Exodus 19–24 but then conclude with the crucifixion of Jesus when the new covenant is inaugurated (Luke 22:20). For this span of about 1,500 years from Moses to Christ, Israel is to keep the ceremonial and civil laws contained in the law of Moses. Moral laws (love God, love your neighbor, etc.) are given here as well, but these are to be kept forever (Matt 22:37–40; Rom 13:8–10).

The covenant with David marks a new era of *the kingdom of God*. Though God himself is and always was Israel’s true king (Deut 33:5; Num 23:21; Ps 23:7–10), the monarchy in Israel was a significant new era. It began with the failed reign of Saul, but it continued for centuries through the line of David. Only with the Babylonian captivity would the kingly line get interrupted—to be picked up and continued forever by Jesus Christ the “Son of David” (Matt 1:1). He is the fulfillment of the promise of a King who reigns forever (1 Tim 6:15; Rev 17:14; 19:16).

The era of the new covenant begins with Christ (Luke 22:20) at the crucifixion. The way that our hearts are transformed by the Spirit regenerating our hearts is a central part of the new covenant, and it is this heart-change that Jesus is talking about in John 3: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). What begins with the new covenant is that the people of God are no longer a mixed people of the regenerate and unregenerate, as was true of the Israelites. Instead, God’s people include only those who are truly his people—the born-again (John 1:12–13). Of course, where God knows precisely who are truly born-again and thus truly his people, our knowledge is imperfect until we are glorified. Yet, this does not change *who* God’s people are, only our ability to identify them exactly. God can absolutely separate “the sheep from the goats” (Matt 25:32), but the best we can do is use the adage, “you will recognize them by their

fruits” (Matt 7:16, 20). By the “fruits” of a person’s life we can *typically* identify a Christian from a non-Christian (which means either someone who rejects Christ or someone who claims to be a Christian but is not).

When you stand back and see all these covenants progress step-by-step, you get a sense of God’s unfolding history of salvation. Salvation history does not continue in a changeless line but these covenants mark chapters that define how God’s people are to relate to him. We will consider these chapters of God’s story more in our next chapter. Now we want to go back to the covenant with Adam and understand it using these five divine covenants.

Making Sense of the Covenant with Adam

With the above in mind, we can now turn to the covenant God made with Adam in the Garden. Reformed theology has understood this relationship between God and Adam in terms of a *covenant*. Some prefer to think of the “Adamic administration,”⁹ but a majority of Reformed scholars prefer the language of the Westminster Standards. In these documents, God is said to make “a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience” (*WCF* 7.2; cf. *1689* 20.1; *TCOF* 8.2). The language of a “covenant” is connected to Adam in Hosea 6:7, “But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.” Some argue that “Adam” here is referring to a place, but the better view is that it does refer to the person Adam.¹⁰ Given the obscurity of the city of Adam and the prominence and consequence of the sin of Adam in

⁹ John Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray: Select Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 48, 54.

¹⁰ For Adam as the place see Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 55–56. For Adam as the person see Thomas McComiskey, “Hosea,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary Vol 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 95; Currid, *Genesis Vol 1*, 17; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 20–21.

the Garden, it makes better sense of Hosea's message to see him referring to Adam's sin here. To see a covenant of works in the Garden it is not necessary to see Adam being mentioned in Hosea 6:7, but the passage does strengthen the argument for it.

The five aspects of the five divine covenants we looked at above provide a framework to help us understand the covenant God made with Adam. First, *God initiates*. God's initiative is everywhere and comprehensive in the creation account. There is nothing—no thing, quite literally—until “God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). And there are no *things* until God fills his created universe with the whole array of planets, plants, and creatures of all shapes and sizes. Man and woman are created by special acts of his very engaged and active power. God reveals himself to Adam and speaks to Adam the moment this first person is made. Not for a single moment is Adam expected to discern God's unspoken will or to live in a self-defining manner. God explicitly directs his behavior and in so doing he establishes himself as Adam's God, King, and Lord. Life and death are immediately in the balance (Gen 2:16–17) and will depend on Adam's willingness to comply with God's preceptive will (God's will expressed by the “precepts” he gives to us). Further, sin and righteousness are to be understood *with respect to God*. These are not arbitrary or philosophical concepts but are revealed in the context of a relationship with God that includes specific commandments. We are righteous to the extent that we live according to God's design, and we are sinful to the extent that we reject that design. Clearly, God's initiative is on display.

Second, *God speaks*. Very little time passes before God speaks to Adam. The first recorded words we have and likely the first words ever spoken by God to men are in Genesis 2:16–17,

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. (Gen 2:16–17)

There are many trees in the Garden, in fact, “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:9). Yet, two trees are highlighted, “the tree of life” and “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9). It is the latter of these two trees that Adam is forbidden to eat. Yet, while the command is obviously restrictive, it is important to see that it is a restriction in the context of a lavish and abundant generosity. Adam is not placed in a desert and told not to eat the single tree growing. He is placed in an oasis of abundance and delight and told to restrain from one single tree amidst a cornucopia.

As the narrative unfolds, we will read the sad tale of Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden tree and experiencing the cataclysmic consequences of this act. “You shall surely die” will occur emphatically, though it will not occur in the way we might expect with the original wording. Clearly, *God speaks* in a solemn and consequential way in the Garden.

Third, *God promises*. This aspect is more subtle in the covenant with Adam, but it is nonetheless present. Here we note the significance of “the tree of life” (Gen 2:9). “The tree of life” was not forbidden to Adam, only “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:17). “The tree of life” is only forbidden *after* the fall, since a fallen person eating of that tree would experience hell on earth, not heaven. To live forever in a fallen state would be horrific. To prevent such a tragedy from happening, God cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden and then “placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen 3:24). This is not the last time we will hear of “the tree of life,” however. In Revelation God says, “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (2:7); and then the tree of life is said to be “on either side of the river...with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month” (22:2). Eating of “the tree of life” is the exclusive privilege of those “blessed” to “enter the city by the gates” (22:14).

It appears, therefore, that “the tree of life” is at least “a sign” of the covenant with Adam that indicates “the promised reward for

obedience.”¹¹ John Murray adds similarly, that “the tree of life...must have been symbolic of life” and “represented everlasting life.”¹² Murray sees Romans 5:12–19 as pointing to a promise of life for Adam’s obedience, since Adam’s *disobedience* bringing death is such a strong aspect of Paul’s argument and the way Christ’s obedience led “to justification and life” (Rom 5:18).¹³ Christ fulfilled the essential arrangement of the Garden where Adam failed. That essential arrangement was a promise of life as a consequence of obedience. So, while the promise of life for obedience is an implied promise, the centrality of “the tree of life” in the Garden, the inseparability between death and disobedience, and the framework of Romans 5:12–19 do seem to indicate this implied promise is a feature of the covenant with Adam.

Fourth, God *acts through a representative head*. We have already mentioned Romans 5:12–19. That passage makes it very clear that Adam’s sin and actions impacted far more than himself, for in it Paul tells us, “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (v. 12). Adam is even described as “a type of the one who was to come” (v. 14), namely, Christ. That is important, for it means that in the same way that Christ is a representative/federal head of the new covenant, so Adam is a representative/federal head of a covenant.

If we struggle with this idea that one man’s actions can be accounted to us, we need to remember that this is also how salvation works. Christ’s righteousness is accounted to us. His obedience is accounted to us. Adam is “a type of the one who was to come” (Rom 5:14) in the way that his actions and their consequences were counted to others. As Paul says later in Romans 5, “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one

¹¹ Richard P. Belcher Jr., “The Covenant of Works in the Old Testament,” in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 66.

¹² Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” 48, 54.

¹³ Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” 54.

man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (5:19). This is why Paul can conclude this great reflection on our loss in Adam and our gain in Christ by saying, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5:20). This superabounding grace is not true of everyone, but it is true for those who are in Christ.

Fifth, God *inaugurates a new epoch of salvation history*. A final aspect of the Adamic covenant is to see that it changes God's dealings with humanity. A relational framework is set up between Adam and God that defines for all human history what God's relationship to humanity will be. This sounds odd to say, since God's word to Adam is so early in human history. And yet, the dominos that fall with Adam's choice to eat continue falling with every person in every place in every generation until the return of Christ. Another way to say it is that Adam's faithfulness or unfaithfulness to his covenant determines what kind of epoch human history will be. Will it be an epoch of life and righteousness or one of death and unrighteousness?

The conclusion of these five aspects is that we are on solid ground to speak of the covenant with Adam being a "covenant." But if it is a covenant, why call it a "covenant *of works*"? Of the possible names to give it, why is calling it a "covenant of works" an appropriate title? We call the "covenant of works" a covenant "of works," because its blessings and curses were given as the consequence of Adam's "works" and not his faith. This is not to say the covenant was not a gracious covenant on the part of God, since any relationship we have with God or any promise of blessing from God is entirely gracious on his part. But in contrast to the Abrahamic covenant where Abraham's faith-response was central to the covenant (Gen 15:6), it was Adam's obedience that is central to the covenant of works in the Garden. His decision to eat or not eat is what would determine whether he would "surely die" or live (Gen 2:17). This might seem arbitrary, but this single commandment is really representative of an entire orientation of humanity toward God. It instantly tests and therefore reveals whether our orientation is to live according to God's revealed will

or to reject that will and be our own masters. Only one command is required to bring this out, and as human history unfolds, it is clear that it was certainly all that was required.

With this in mind we are now ready to look at the sin of Adam and Eve and the impact it had on us—and the creation itself.

The First Sin and the Fall of Man

The sin of humanity is described in a matter-of-fact manner, the same kind of matter-of-fact style that marks all biblical narrative, no matter how miraculous and supernatural it is. The questions we might have—*Where did the serpent come from? How did the serpent fall? How could such a serpent talk?*—are not answered, but we are told what we need to know to love and obey God.

In the historical progression of sin in the Garden, sin clearly begins with Satan. Somewhere between the “it was very good” of Genesis 1:31 and “now the serpent was more crafty” of Genesis 3:1, Satan himself fell. In his opposition to God, he is not content to be an isolated rebel but desires to win others to his evil. In the avalanche of sin, it is Satan who speaks and acts first.

Satan’s first question is a double-edged sword, first a direct attack on God’s Word, “Did God *actually* say...?” The temptation centers on what God “actually” said, and Satan is questioning God’s very word. But then there is the attack of his character, “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?” God said almost the exact opposite: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden” (Gen 2:16) with but one single exception, “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Satan is speaking as if God was stingy and withholding, when in truth he was abundantly generous.

Eve’s response makes us immediately nervous, since she does not cite God’s Word accurately. She rightly says they can eat of any tree except “the tree that is in the midst of the garden” (Gen 3:3). But then she adds, “Neither shall you touch it, lest you die.” This is not what God said. Touching was not forbidden, eating was. It seems likely that Adam has passed along the extra condition with

perfectly good intentions. But adding to God’s Word is never wise or helpful and does not lead to less sin. It ironically leads to more, because it is a statement that God’s Word by itself is not adequate and needs a little human assistance. With God’s Word, any addition is a subtraction.

The serpent then speaks a bald-faced lie: “You will not surely die” (Gen 3:4). Disaster looms when we reject the consequences God promises. The serpent goes further still, though, this time taking his character assassination to a new low: “God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). Tim Keller says on their becoming “like God” that,

When Adam and Eve disobeyed this command [in 2:17], they did become “like God,” as the serpent (who deceived them into disobedience) said they would. That is, they put themselves in God’s place; they took upon themselves the right to decide how they should live and what was right and wrong for them to do. For them to become “like God” in this way was catastrophic.

Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*¹⁴

In Genesis 3:6 we see vividly the painful progression of sin. Sin does not begin with an action, but with a thought that leads to a desire that leads to a decision. Only then does the action take place. We see all of this in the description of the woman: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” (Gen 3:6). James 1:13–15 describes a similar kind of progression: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.”¹⁴ But each person is tempted when

¹⁴ Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work* (NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 77.

he is lured and enticed by his own desire.¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:13-15). Sin is always a heart issue before it overflows into an action of our bodies (Mark 7:18–23; Luke 6:43–45).

After Adam and Eve sin, the effects immediately become evident. There is shame and the desire to hide: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Gen 3:7). Notice they are not hiding from God but *from each other*. Where once they were “naked and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:25), now they are ashamed in their nakedness. Though they were husband and wife and no other person was even alive at this point, they hid from each other. Already it is clear that sin ruins relationships and brings division where none existed before.

But more diabolical is their attempt to hide from their Creator and their God. When “they heard the sound of the LORD God,” they “hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8). This is the most devastating impact of their sin, that they are now enemies of God, alienated from him, and in desperate need of redemption—and they do not even know it.

God will put them on trial through a series of questions, and then he will deliver his punishments. The serpent will be cursed and then the woman and finally the man, each according to his vocation and position and nature. Satan is “cursed...above all livestock and above all beasts of the field” and will crawl on his “belly” and eat “dust” (Gen 3:14). Crawling like this and eating dust is the action of a vanquished foe (Ps 72:9; Isa 49:23; Micah 7:17). His influence remains a part of the world, but it is the influence of a defeated foe whose end is sure (Rev 20:10).

The woman will have multiplied “pain in childbearing” and “desire...contrary to your husband,” who will “rule over you” (Gen 3:16). Her vocation as a mother and wife was to be a lavish pleasure and blessing. Instead, it shall be marked by pain and division. This

does not mean all blessings are removed from marriage and motherhood. Far from it! “Children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward” (Ps 127:3), and “he who finds a wife finds a good thing” (Prov 18:22). But marriage and motherhood will include significant sin and suffering, because of this curse in the Garden.

The man is specifically rebuked “because you have listened to the voice of your wife” and ate from the forbidden tree (Gen 3:17). Therefore, “cursed is the ground because of you,” and “in pain” he will eat with “thorns and thistles” and only “by the sweat of your face” (Gen 3:17–19). Finally, though originally destined to be a king and priest living forever, instead “to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). The cursing of the ground is a curse also connected to his vocation. He was originally placed in the Garden “to work it and keep it” (Gen 2:15), but now this work is a hardship filled with “thorns and thistles” (3:17). He is made from dust and filled with the very breath of God, but instead of being glorified, his body will return to “dust” (3:19). We, too, are sons and daughters of Adam in that we fight an uphill battle in our vocations, and we return to dust at the end of our days.

When it says, “cursed is the ground” (Gen 3:17), we should not miss the impact of God’s word. We take it for granted that in this world “moth and rust destroy” (Matt 6:19), but these are not “natural.” They are part of God’s judgment on the creation, all because of Adam’s sin. Yet, we must also remember Paul’s words in Romans 8. It will not always be this way, “for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19–21).

Amidst these curses, however, is a promise often called the *protoevangelium*, “the first gospel.” We read find it in a word spoken to the serpent. After God promises the serpent will be cursed and eat dust, he says, “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). We will go into much more detail about this gospel promise in the next chapter. Here we will simply say that it promises redemption and a final victory over the serpent for humanity. The sin of Adam will not have the last word. It is God’s redemption which will prevail. Hallelujah!

The Impact of the Fall of Man

Already we have seen some of the impact of what is called “the fall of man.” Here we want to explore further this sober doctrine. We saw above that Adam is called a representative head, because his actions impacted a whole people. That is why in Reformed theology *Adam’s* sin (and not Eve’s) is called “the fall of man.” Since Adam uniquely contained all humanity in himself, when he sinned, “all sinned” (Rom 5:12). And in Adam’s sin, we all died: “in Adam all die” (1 Cor 15:22). With “the fall” of humanity, our natures become sinful natures, our dispositions become sinful dispositions, our tendencies become sinful tendencies. Genesis bears this out.

Before chapter three in Genesis is over, we see a cascading alienation—between Adam and himself (he hides in shame behind fig leaves), Adam and Eve (he blames her for his sin), Adam and God (he hides from God), and Adam and the creation (instead of faithfully fulfilling his vocation in the Garden, he seeks self-satisfaction with the created things). Sin’s devastation is breaking out.

Further, we should not miss the sober reality of Genesis 5 with its genealogy. In a matter-of-fact manner we read this in 5:5, “Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died.” To us death is expected and natural, but we should not forget that death was not originally a part of the creation. God threatened death for disobedience (Gen 2:17), and though it would take 930 years for it to happen to Adam, it unstoppably did. Yet not all deaths are equal. For the believer, death is not a punishment but simply a pass-

through from this life to the next (John 11:25–26). For the unbeliever, death is a punishment for sin (Rom 6:23). The important thing to see here is that even the believer’s death is something unnatural, connected to fallenness, and something that will be gloriously un-made in the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:4).

Adam’s sin also had a disastrous impact on his immediate line. With only four people alive in the whole world, there is yet a murder as Adam’s firstborn Cain kills his second-born Abel (Gen 4:8). In the line of Cain is Lamech who revels in the murder he commits (Gen 4:23). Though there is some sign of hope with Seth when “people began to call upon the name of the LORD” (Gen 4:26), soon it is clear this is only a blip on the screen. For within a few generations is the sobering word about the sheer depravity of mankind: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen 6:5–6). Despite the new beginning with the flood of Noah, by the eleventh chapter is the tower of Babel—yet another sinister conspiracy by a depraved humanity.

In the primeval history of Genesis 1–11, sin’s reality, destructiveness, and spread is simply undeniable. As Francis Schaeffer writes, “Though some men do not like the teaching, the Bible continues like a sledgehammer, driving home the fact that evil has entered into the world of man, all men are now sinners, all men now sin.”¹⁵ We see dramatically that humanity left to itself will never drift into godliness and kindness, only rebellion and murder. The word of Paul about humanity apart from conversion to Christ is no exaggeration: “None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Rom 3:10–12).

¹⁵ Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time*, 87.

All of this is the result of Adam's sin being transmitted to the rest of humanity.

It is indeed remarkable how very seldom the OT refers to this history of the Fall....Nevertheless, the Fall is the silent hypothesis of the whole Biblical doctrine of sin and redemption; it does not rest only on a few vague passages, but forms an indispensable element in the revelation of salvation. The whole contemplation of man and humanity, of Nature and history, of ethical and physical evil, of redemption and the way in which to obtain it, is connected in Scripture with a Fall, such as Gen 3 relates to us.

Herman Bavinck, "The Fall"¹⁶

Original Sin

The way that Adam's sin affects each of us in our natures is called "original sin." "Original sin" sounds like it refers to the *first* (original) sin, yet the phrase refers to something different. It speaks of the "inherited corruption" we each possess as the offspring of Adam.¹⁷ Original sin is "the sinful state and condition in which men are born." As John Calvin summarizes, "all of us, who have descended from impure seed, are born infected with the contagion of sin."¹⁸ Louis Berkhof clarifies that it is called "original sin" "(1) because it is derived from the original root of the human race; (2) because it is present in the life of every individual from the time of his birth, and therefore cannot be regarded as the result of imitation; and (3) because it is the inward root of all the actual sins that defile the life of man."¹⁹

Original sin includes "original guilt" (Rom 5:12–19; Eph 2:3; 1 Cor 15:22) and "original pollution," which means "an

¹⁶ Herman Bavinck, "The Fall," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.1.5.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.1.5.

¹⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 244.

inherent positive disposition toward sin.”²⁰ “Original guilt” is the sober reality that we are guilty from conception. We do not start innocent and then become guilty. We start guilty and only through Christ can we become innocent. “Original pollution” includes both “total depravity” in how it impacts our whole being in such a pervasive manner (John 5:42; Rom 8:7; Eph 4:18; 2 Tim 3:2–4; Tit 1:15; Heb 3:12) and “total inability” in that we are not only unwilling but unable to do righteousness apart from conversion (Rom 3:10–18; Eph 2:1–5).²¹

Augustine thought of these ideas using three analogies. He said it is like a disease inevitably passed from parent to child. Sin is also like a power that holds us in its grip, such that we cannot break free ourselves. And sin is like guilt as when one is declared “guilty of all charges” in a court of law.²² We will see below that all these facets of sin’s destruction are answered by the redemption of Christ. Sin’s disease-like pollution is answered by the cross: “With his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:5). Sin’s vice-grip of power is broken through Christ’s death, where we die to sin and its power (Rom 6:1–7). And the penalty sin demands is paid by Christ’s righteous life and shed blood, a payment made “once for all” and so justification and forgiveness are given (Rom 3:24–26; Heb 10:4–18).

Original pollution is one of the most undeniable realities of Christianity. The signs of brokenness and sin and guilt are all around us. Everyone you know, every relationship you have, every newscast ever produced, every “Breaking News Update” interrupting a football game, every marriage, every classroom, every church, and every hour of our thinking and feeling proves over and over and over again that we are polluted at a very deep level. Cornelius Plantinga wrote powerfully about the reality of sin and his title speaks to the way our hearts and families and societies

²⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 245.

²¹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 246–248.

²² McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 74.

all demonstrate that all is *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*.²³ In his opening chapter he speaks of sin as “culpable shalom-breaking,” an intentional and personal assault we each make every day against God’s “shalom,” which means “the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight.”²⁴ Instead of taking what’s broken and fixing it, we take what’s fixed and break it. That is the painful reality of “original pollution.” When all of sin’s dark legacy is considered we understand why Bavinck would write that “it is not only that man thinks and acts sinfully: he *is* sinful from the time of his conception....The seeds of all iniquities, even of the most heinous, lie in the very heart which we all carry in our bosoms.”²⁵

Original sin is indeed a dark truth, but it does not mean that we are as evil as we could possibly be. Orderly societies exist, works of charity are done, acts of sacrifice take place. Murderers are never as murderous as they could possibly be. All these show that God by common grace provides some protection against ourselves. He provides motivations to do basic some good to others and not do all the evil we imagine. There is a limit here, though. We are *able* to do things which have some earthly benefit in them, but we are *unable* to do things which are purely good and motivated for the right reasons—love for God and love for our neighbor (Matt 22:37–40; 1 Cor 10:31). Apart from conversion, we can do no good worthy of salvation and not even a good work worthy of the slightest reward in the last judgment when all of our works are assessed (Matt 16:27; Rev 20:12–13).

This view of original sin has a long history, dating back to at least Augustine. But not everyone accepts it. The British monk Pelagius, writing in the late AD 300s and early 400s, rejected it and instead felt that man was born in a state of innocence and without this original sin. Pelagius said the sins we commit are due to free

²³ Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

²⁴ Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 14, 18.

²⁵ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 238, 247.

acts of our will as we imitate those around us. The North African bishop Augustine of Hippo (354–430) rejected this idea and argued against him ferociously. Augustine believed that our will is like a pair of scales with good and evil on it. Originally, the scale was balanced, and we were able to go in either direction. After the fall, however, the evil side was so weighted that even though the scale (our free will) is still operational, it is completely biased toward the evil.²⁶ Roman Catholics would eventually adopt what is called a “Semi-Pelagianism” which holds to an original taint in our nature and utter dependence on grace for any good works, but it rejects the absolute inability to obey and do good works (and choose Christ) and total depravity of Augustine and the Reformed.²⁷ The Reformed at this point and at many points would follow Augustine. Quotes and ideas from Augustine are everywhere in John Calvin’s famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

The Nature of Sin

We want to think a bit about the nature of sin, some of the dynamics and DNA of it, you might say. I will start by looking at some of the important words associated with “sin” in the Old and New Testaments.

“Sin” (חַטָּא, *chātā*): This term is used hundreds of times in the Old Testament, first in Genesis 4:7 where “sin is crouching at the door” of Cain’s heart. In Genesis 18:20 the LORD says to Abraham, “the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave.” In Isaiah 43:27 and 42:24 we are reminded that all sin is “against” the Lord and not simply a failure to “not live up to our own standards” (as some modern public confessions will say). In Isaiah 53:12 God’s Suffering Servant is exalted because “he bore the sin of many,” reminding us that atonement can only truly

²⁶ McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 72–73.

²⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 244–45; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, 3:42–43.

be accomplished by the Lord himself. Isaiah 6:7 uses the word when the angel says, “your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” The *TWOT* says, “the word occurs 580 times in the Old Testament and is thus its principal word for sin. The basic meaning of the root is to miss a mark or a way.”²⁸ This “mark” is a bullseye that God himself has established, no relative and human one we ourselves define.

“Iniquity” (יִצְרָ, *ōn*): A second term found abundantly in our Old Testament is “iniquity.” It is found in Genesis 15:6 when Yahweh speaks to Abraham of “the iniquity of the Amorites,” and in Exodus 20:5 where the LORD says he is “a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.” In Isaiah 53:5, 6, and 11, it speaks to our impurity and moral corruption. The *TWOT* says the “basic meaning of the verb” is to “bend, twist, distort,” and it “derives the sense ‘to distort, to make crooked, to pervert.’”²⁹ “Iniquity” takes what is straight, true, and proper and perverts, distorts, and twists it. This reminds us that Satan has no power to create, but he can tempt us to pervert radically what God has created. The word at times is also translated as “guilt,” as when the high priest is to “bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts” (Exod 28:38). It is also the word when the seraphim tell Isaiah, “Your guilt is taken away” (Isa 6:7).

“Transgression” (עֲשָׂ, *pesha'*): The third term, “transgression,” is used in Leviticus 16:16 and 16:21 of the “transgressions” dealt with on the Day of Atonement. In Numbers 14:18 Yahweh is said to be “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression (*pesha'*).” Isaiah 43:27 and 53:12 speak of the nature of sin to cross the good lines and boundaries set by Yahweh. The *TWOT* says the

²⁸ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:638.

²⁹ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:650.

fundamental idea is “a breach of relationships,” it “designates those who reject God’s authority,” and it is “rebellion against God’s law and covenant and thus the term is a collective which denotes the sum of misdeeds and a fractured relationship.”³⁰ “Transgression” is aware of a boundary but crosses it.

All three terms sometimes converge to communicate the full depravity of Israel or the people he is addressing: Exod 34:7; Lev 16:21; Pss 51:4–6; 103:10–12; Jer 33:8; Isa 1:2–4; 43:24–25; 53:11–12; Ezek 14:10–13; 18:20–22; 33:10–12. There is something synonymous about this triad of depravity, but they also reveal certain nuances of our sinfulness.

“Sin” (ἁμαρτία, *hamartia*): Turning to the New Testament, the noun “sin” and related words are used almost 300 times. It is used in 1 John 3:4 where the apostle writes that “sin is lawlessness.” In Luke 5:32 it is used when Jesus says, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” When Paul says, “all are under sin” (Rom 3:9) and “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), he uses this root. BDAG defines it as “a departure from either human or divine standards of uprightness.”³¹ L&N defines it as, “to act contrary to the will and law of God.”³² “Sin” sees what is required of us and then turns from it.

“Unclean” (ἄκαθαρτος, *akathartos*): The Old and New Testaments also use the word “unclean” to capture our state before God. Some “unclean” things are not necessarily related to sinfulness *per se*, like “unclean” foods (Lev 11:4). And yet, sin creates a moral “uncleanness” that must be washed “clean” by God’s atonement. Isaiah cried out to God, “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isa 6:6). His sin had “defiled” him, and he knew it. And yet, the LORD made atonement for him through “a burning coal” from “the altar” of God: “Behold, this has

³⁰ Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2:740–41.

³¹ ἁμαρτία, BDAG, 51.

³² Louw and Nida 88.289.

touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (6:7). It is the blood of Christ that ultimately cleanses God’s people (Titus 2:14; Heb 9:14, 22, 23) and brings about a true purity: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse (*katharizō*) us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Taken together, these terms paint a bleak picture. We know God’s standards but reject them. We take what is good and pervert it. We take what is clean and make it dirty. We see the boundary lines and deliberately cross them. Sin is corrosive, destructive, and exploitative.

Key to the nature of sin is failing to meet God’s standard, preserved for us in the law. Along these lines, the *Trinity Confession of Faith* defines sin as “any lack of conformity to, or transgression of, the law of God” (*TCOF* Q 23; cf. *WSC* Q 14). Note with this definition that sin is bigger than mere behavior, though it certainly includes behavior. Our motives, inclinations, and nature itself are all part of our “lack of conformity to, or transgression of, the law of God.” I need to repent of what *I am* and not just *what I do*. Sin as this “lawlessness” (1 John 3:4) is very clear in Genesis 3, since Adam and Eve are violating the very specific commandment not to eat from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:16–17). But even without a verbal or written knowledge of God’s law, God writes his moral law on our hearts (Rom 2:14–16) and in our consciences (Rom 14:23) so we can never claim ignorance of it (Rom 2:14–16).

Sin is also comprehensive, affecting every part of us. This is what the Reformed mean by the phrase, “total depravity.” It does *not* mean we are as evil as we can possibly be but that every part of us is impacted by sin’s cancer. Without God’s radical intervention, our minds are corrupt (Rom 1:21; 8:5; Eph 2:3), our hearts are corrupt (Gen 6:5; Jer 17:9; Mark 7:21–23), our speech is corrupt (James 4:11), our bodies are used as “instruments for unrighteousness” (Rom 6:13), our pursuits and ambitions are only for what is displeasing to the Lord (Rom 3:10–18), and nothing we are or do can be righteous in God’s sight. We are merely “storing

up wrath for...the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom 2:5). Sin and its devastation are unavoidable and unstoppable truth apart from the radical intervention of Christ.

The Punishment for Sin

The Bible makes it clear God is not at all indifferent to humanity's sin. It invites his active and personal and intentional punishment. His punishment comes in a variety of ways, he does not treat every individual in precisely the same way. The list below helps us see the possible consequences for sin against God.

Alienation from God: The most important punishment for sin is alienation from God,³³ going from being his people to being his enemies: "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear" (Isa 59:2; cf. Gen 3:8; Rom 5:10; James 4:4). When Adam and Eve were sent out of the Garden (Gen 3:22–24), this was not just being barred from a *place*. It was also, at least temporarily, being barred from a certain kind of *relationship* with the Godhead. Millennia will need to pass and a Messiah's work be fully accomplished before that relationship from the Garden will be fully restored.

Alienation from one another: Sin also alienates us from other people. Adam and Eve hiding from one another and blaming each other for their sin against God was a small taste of the relational alienation sin brings (Gen 3:7–13). Apart from Christ our relationships can accurately be described as "hated by others and hating one another" (Titus 3:3). The escalation of blame shifting between Adam and Eve to Cain murdering his brother shows us just how much sin ruins relationships.

Sin as its own punishment: In Romans 1:24–32 three times we read that "God gave them up" in response to the sins of

³³ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 17.

unrepentant sinners. The picture here is that when we turn away from the Lord and give ourselves to sin, he actually lets us do that even more. This is very different from a Christian who has the Holy Spirit and a profound internal pressure to do right (Gal 5:17). When we are given over to sin by the Lord, we experience more of a guilty conscience, more of a desperate life, more of the escalating consequences of ever more perverse sinfulness. A modern example might be a sinful one-time use of drugs that leads to an addiction that ultimately destroys a person's entire life. The sin becomes its own punishment, as many addicts will affirm.

Guilt: In the Old Testament sin brings with it “guilt” that must be atoned for. Leviticus makes provision for “the guilt offering” (Lev 5:1–19), which a person or people offers when he realizes his “guilt” (Lev 5:4). Even the Philistines know they should give a “guilt offering” to Yahweh when they steal the ark and then want to return it (1 Sam 6:8, 17). The Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53—Jesus Christ!—“makes an offering for guilt” of his very “soul” (v. 10). Guilt in these cases is an objective thing. But this objective guilt brings with it feelings of guilt also, subjective guilt. We can see this in Romans 2:15 where Paul speaks about our “conscience” accusing us. Instead of “a clear conscience” (1 Tim 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3), our conscience is convicted by true sins and accuses us. Christ is the only one who can “perfect the conscience” (Heb 9:9). “Shame” is another word we can add here (Ezra 9:6–7; Neh 1:3), that sense of guilt before God (see also “ashamed” in 2 Thess 3:14). Though a person can try to suppress the voice of conscience when he sins, it is a God-given punishment that cannot be removed except by the gospel. It is such guilt and shame that provoked Peter to weep after his denials (Luke 22:62) and David to write, “my sin is ever before me” (Ps 51:3), after his sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah.

Temporal physical/emotional punishments: At times there are temporal punishments people receive as punishment for their sins. Men are stricken blind (Gen 19:11; 2 Kgs 6:18) or sick (Gen 12:17). The Egyptian plagues (Exod 7–10), the flood of Noah (Gen 6–9), and the Babylonian captivity (Jer 20:1–6) were all temporal

judgments for the sins of people against the living God. The curses of the serpent, the woman, and the man in the Garden (Gen 3:14–19) are also a form of such temporal punishments.

Death: As Genesis 2:16–17 promised, death is indeed the result of Adam’s sin. Paul says emphatically that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). For the Christian, death is not a punishment but a release (John 11:25–26), but for the unbeliever death followed by judgment is the final result of their sinfulness.

Suffering during the intermediate state: Luke 16:19–31 speaks to the reality of the intermediate state, the time between our physical death and our future resurrection. For the unbeliever, this will be a time of suffering without relief.

Hell: The final punishment for sin is hell, a place of “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41), which is where God’s enemies will be. These are the ones to whom Christ will say, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt 7:23).

These punishments are categorically different from the discipline that the Lord brings to his people as a loving and conscientious Father (Prov 3:11–12; Heb 12:5–17). The Lord brings negative consequences and pressure on his children to help them put sin to death and turn from their sinful ways. Yet, he is not *punishing* them for these sins, only applying the same kind of negative pressure that parents put on children to help them grow and flourish. A Christian experiences *none* of the above list as punishment for sin, though he might experience many of them as loving *discipline* from a heavenly Father. Of course, the last two do not apply here: suffering in the intermediate state and hell are reserved for God’s enemies and not in any way part of the Christian’s experience after death.

Conclusion

Clearly, the reach of sin is massive, its impacts cataclysmic and diverse, and its power utterly unbreakable if we are left to ourselves.

But we are not left to ourselves. God has invaded our fallen world with grace that is even more powerful than sin. “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20). Now we turn to the covenant of grace to see God’s remedy to our greatest problem.