Section: Divine Covenants (Covenant Theology)

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**TEACHING NOTES**

**Q58. What is the Old Covenant?**

The Old Covenant was a temporary covenant made primarily with Israelites and was defined by the Abrahamic Covenant, conditioned by the Mosaic Covenant, and focused by the Davidic Covenant. This covenant offered temporary blessings but did not offer eternal life. Through promises, types, and shadows, it taught about the Messiah, who was to come to fulfill the law, establish the New Covenant, and redeem the elect.

**Genesis 17:1-2** When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.”

**Deuteronomy 11:26-28** “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.”

**James 2:10** For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

**Hebrews 10:1** (NASB) For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near

(Further study: Hebrews 8:4-5; Romans 4:2-3, 13, 16; Acts 4:12; Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18–21; 17:1-14; 22:16-18; Exodus 19-24; 2 Samuel 7)

* **Introduction**

Tonight, we continue to move forward in the Old Testament.

Let me tell you, we are only able to scratch the surface in these lessons. There is so much study and consideration needed regarding the happenings of the Old Testament, especially as it pertains to the Old Covenant and the prophecy about what comes after the Old Covenant.

We could certainly spend years walking through all the text.

There are many levels of complexity in it.

There are different forms of writing.

There are symbols/types/shadows.

There are rituals and traditions and prophetic declarations.

The list goes on. Basically, there is no way to say *everything needed* in a few lessons.

But, in this introductory overview we want to bring the key points and markers of our position into view.

And remember, one of the main goals in Covenant Theology is to understand God’s plan and workings in creation as revealed in the Bible so that you have helpful information and tools to aid *you* in *further study* of Scripture.

So, let’s keep moving, keeping in mind that *A divine covenant is a relational agreement initiated by God that may include obligations, rewards, and/or punishments from Him.*

If you look at the Divine Covenants Timeline Layout image I gave you week one, you can locate where we are.

On the very left you see, in eternity past, the Covenant of Redemption,

Then we identify the beginning of creation, and see the Adamic Covenant.

Then we have the Noahic covenant, which we looked at last lesson.

And now, we come to the beginning of the Old Covenant, our focus for tonight.

The prior covenants we considered define and explain the creation as we know it.

This first creation is destined for destruction due to the *broken* Covenant of Works, but for a time it is being preserved *through the kind Noahic Covenant*, in *light of the Covenant of Redemption*, for the sake of God’s glory and the good of His elect. This is how the world is defined biblically.

* **Mankind formally divided-**

If you recall form the least lesson, between the Noahic Covenant and the beginning of the Old Covenant, something very important happened. As mankind multiped again, sin abounded.

Consider how foolish fallen man is, not long after God’s mighty display of wrath towards sin, mankind is right back to its sinful ways. Being wise in their own eyes for their own gain and glory, they sought to make a name for themselves.

But, as a part of God’s plan and as a display of His power and hatred towards sin, the Lord broke up their efforts to build a pride tower by creating varieties of languages and people groups, spreading them all throughout the world. We read in…

**Genesis 11:9**

… the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

For the first time in the human race, there were now *definitively* different people groups/different ethnicities. Still one race of mankind, all created in the image of God, both male and female, *but now distinct ethnicities/groups*. This sets the stage for what God does in the Old Covenant. So, we turn there now.

Let’s read the catechism Q and A ...

* **What is the Old Covenant?-**

**Q58. What is the Old Covenant?**

The Old Covenant was a temporary covenant made primarily with Israelites and was defined by the Abrahamic Covenant, conditioned by the Mosaic Covenant, and focused by the Davidic Covenant. This covenant offered temporary blessings but did not offer eternal life. Through promises, types, and shadows, it taught about the Messiah, who was to come to fulfill the law, establish the New Covenant, and redeem the elect.

As we focus on the Old Covenant now, we will first do an overview of it and consider some of its key features, then we will spend further time looking at some passages of Scripture where we see these things spoken to.

The Old Covenant spans from Genesis 12 all the way into the gospel books.

This Old Covenant, it’s terms and people, are limited to a certain reach and it serves a specific purpose, *all of which play a role in progressing the history of creation to the actual fulfillment of the Covenant of Redemption*.

This Old Covenant serves as a precursor to and conduit to get to the actual covenant that saves—the New Covenant—The Covenant of Grace.

To be clear here, the Old Covenant is not The Covenant of Grace.

None of the Old Testament covenants are The Covenant of Grace.

And none of the Old Testament covenants are *in or of* The Covenant of Grace.

No, as we will see, God used the Old Covenant, (which was temporary), to further promise, point to, and bring about The Covenant of Grace— that is, the New Covenant.

Our catechism answer for this covenant gives some important specifics, so we will work through a portion of it in this first section. It begins by saying,

“The Old Covenant was a temporary covenant made primarily with Israelites …”

* **The Old Covenant was a temporary covenant -**

The answer first tells us this was a temporary covenant.

In these lessons, we will see how the *covenant terms and happenings* prove it to be temporary, but, perhaps the even simpler reason we know it is was temporary is because the Old Covenant was made obsolete by God establishing the New Covenant…hence proving the Old Covenant to be temporary.

Scripture tells us this directly in **Hebrews 8:13**. The writer speaks about the New Covenant and he says that when God speaks “of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete.” We’ll cover this passage in a following lesson, but we must see here that the Old Covenant (called the “first one” here based on how the Hebrews writer is speaking of things) was, *at a definitive point in history*, truly and fully, abolished as a covenant.

The Old Covenant was ordained by God to be temporary. Based on God’s eternal decree, based on the Covenant of Redemption, this Old Covenant was not the covenant by which mankind could be saved from the fall—it was not the Covenant of Grace.

* + **Different and separate from the New Covenant -**

One clear implication from this is that the Old and New Covenants are certainly not the same covenant. The Old Covenant is completely different and separate from the New Covenant that came after it. We must understand this, so we don’t blend covenant realities.

So, it was temporary, and it was different from the New Covenant to come. We’ll see this again later in this series.

* **The Old Covenant was made primarily with Israelites-**

Then our answer tells us that this “Old Covenant was … made primarily with Israelites”

For this point, remember the historic context—God just divided mankind into various languages and people groups and spread them all throughout the world. This creates a context for God to choose a covenant head who would be over *a particular people*, not all people.

Unlike the first two covenants that God made with man, this covenant *does not include* all of mankind throughout creation.

God chose *a particular man (Abraham)* from all that now existed *to have a set apart lineage who would be God’s earthly, temporary people*. This people group would come to be known as the Israelite people.

**Deuteronomy 7:6** says that “…The Lord your God has chosen you [the Israelites] to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”

**Deuteronomy 7:7** says they “were the fewest of all peoples.”

Therefore, this temporary covenant was made primarily with the Israelites. (It says “primarily” because it was possible for a non-Israelites to seek entrance into the covenant. This isn’t something we’ll go into further detail on in this series, but an example of this can be seen in Exodus 12:48-49.)

So then, in the Old Covenant, God shows a special, particular *covenant interest* with just one of the now many people groups. In this, they are a typological, physical, temporary chosen people.

* + **A typological, physical, temporary chosen people -**

God’s choice of ethnic Israel (a small and seemingly insignificant group) for the Old Covenant, points to the choice God made in eternity past in the Covenant of Redemption to give salvation to only a limited number of people. Our Lord Jesus says in…

**Matthew 22:14**

**14 “**… few are chosen.”

And in…

**Matthew 7:13-14**

**13**“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. **14**For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

God choosing a smaller and seemingly insignificant group for the temporary Old Covenant was symbolic of how He chose for eternal salvation in the Covenant of Redemption.

To be clear here, we must understand that this choice of the Israelite nation as a whole in the Old Covenant was not for eternal salvation. In our next point we’ll further see that this Old Covenant in itself was about temporal things.

God’s eternal plan was never for every ethnic Israelite nor only ethnic Israelites to be His eternal people. Rather, God choosing them as the typological people was a symbolic display of the true eternal people of God—who are the *one people of God* made of true believers from Adam’s fall until the end of this creation.

Now, some of the ethnic Israelites were in fact a part of the true eternal chosen ones, saved not by the Old Testament covenants but the New Covenant to come, saved by grace through faith in the coming Messiah. However, the ethnic Israelites as a whole are not *and were never* God’s *eternal* people; they were the typological, physical, temporary chosen people. Remember, ethnic Israel was in a temporary covenant.

Next, we’re going to flip the following two lines of the answer to keep with our overview and key features consideration, so next we have…

“The Old Covenant…offered temporary blessings but did not offer eternal life.”

* **The Old Covenant offered temporary blessings, not eternal life-**

This is another *critical* reality of the Old Covenant.

We must understand that the blessings (the rewards) the Old Covenant offered to the people in it were not eternal life—not eternal blessings. Rather, they were in fact temporary blessings.

We will talk in a moment about the *spiritual promises* that were *revealed* in the Old Covenant, but for now we’ll focus on the actual *blessings/rewards* the covenant offered—these were strictly temporary/natural/physical rewards.

How can we be sure that the Old Covenant did not offer eternal life and blessing?

It’s a very simple answer.

First and most importantly, there is only one way of eternal redemption for fallen man, one way to obtain eternal life. It’s by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. *If we say otherwise, we are not Christians*. In Christ alone is salvation.

In **John 14:6** Jesus declared, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

**Acts 4:12** tells us…

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Certainly, once the need for redemption became a reality due to the fall of Adam, no fallen man can earn eternal life and blessing based on his or her personal obedience. **Romans 3:20** tells us…

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

That’s clear as day. Humans cannot be redeemed from the fall unto eternal life by obeying law—the Bible makes clear, it is not possible.

Only by grace through faith in Jesus is true redemption is possible.

Therefore, when the Old Covenant requires obedience as a condition of the offered *blessing*, we know it is not eternal life and blessing, but temporary. Period.

In consideration of portions of the Old Covenant, the great theologian John Owen said: “*This covenant thus made, with these ends and promises, did never save nor condemn any man eternally. ... it was confined unto things temporal. Believers were saved under it, but not by virtue of it. Sinners perished eternally under it, but by the curse of the original law of works* (speaking about the Adamic Covenant)*.*”

Second, we know the Old Covenant did not offer eternal life and blessing because when we read and understand Scripture regarding the happenings of the Old Covenant, we see this is the case. The specifics and context inform us of this. It clearly offered only temporary blessings/benefits/rewards. We will see this many time over the next few weeks.

One example of this is:

**Deuteronomy 30:15-19**

15“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. 16If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. 17But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, 18I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. 19I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live

We see this kind of passage often in the Old Testament. What this passage is talking about is the terms of the Old Covenant, namely, earthly blessings and curses.

God is saying: If you obey my commands, it will go well *in this physical life on this physical creation—*ongoing and prosperous life on this creation will be your wage; *but* if you disobey my commands curse unto death will be your wage.

This presents an important practical hermeneutics point: We need to know the *covenant context of a passage* as a key factor in how we understand what is being spoken of in the passage.

Many people error on this. Since modern readers are so used to thinking in terms of eternal life and blessing, it’s common to read eternal things into the Old Covenant passages in ways that are not biblically correct—interpreting something as eternal when it’s not. For example, “choose life” in Deuteronomy 30 is not talking about eternal life. It’s in the context of the Old Covenant, regarding temporary, earthly life and prosperity.

We must remember this as a hermeneutical tool as we read our Bible.

Now, to close out this point, when it comes to the Old Covenant, Scripture most commonly speaks to the reward of the land of Canaan and flourishing upon that land. This is was a real, physical, earthly land and real, earthly, *tangible prosperity*.

AW Pink said this about the Old Covenant: “*It was an engagement of God, to give Israel possession of Canaan, and to protect them in it: to render the land fruitful, and the nation victorious and prosperous, and to perpetuate His oracles and ordinances among them; so long as they did not, as a people, reject His authority, apostatize to idolatry, and tolerate open wickedness. These things constitute a forfeiture of the covenant.*”

* **“A” covenant of works (not “The” Covenant of Works)-**

At this point, let’s recall what we have learned about this type of divine covenant.

If a party must obey law to receive rewards, it’s a ***covenant of works*** to them.

The Old Covenant, therefore, is not a covenant of grace; it is most certainly a covenant of works. Not for eternal things but temporary things. This covenant of works demands obedience based on the covenant terms and commands *in order to* receive or maintain in the covenant rewards.

It was for their good that God initiated this covenant with them, no doubt. But they had to obey *correctly and perpetually* to *fully and continually* enjoy the covenant benefits.

In this, note that it is “a” covenant of works, not “The” Covenant of Works. Remember, the Adamic Covenant (the covenant God made with Adam on behalf of *all* mankind) is referred to as The Covenant of Works.

In Scripture, we clearly see a works-based situation for these temporary blessings.

This language is all throughout the Old Testament, for example God told Abraham in:

**Genesis 17:1-2,9-10,14**

1… “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, 2that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.

9… As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

14Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

A person being cut off *for breaking the covenant* only happens in a covenant of works.

Later in the Old Covenant, God declares likewise:

**Leviticus 18:5**

You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; *if a person does them, he shall live by them*: I am the LORD.

A person receiving or maintaining in covenant rewards *based on obedience* only happens in a covenant of works.

And…

**Deuteronomy 11:26-28**

**26**“See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: **27**the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, **28**and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.”

God repeatedly told them, *Obey these commands, and you will live on this earth in covenant with me, it will go well for you as you earn the covenant rewards. But disobey and be cursed—be cut off.*

Remember, these passages are not about eternal life. God is interacting with the Abraham and his descendants based on the covenant they are in for temporary, earthly benefits. If someone was saved during the Old Covenant, salvation was not administered to them by or based on that Old Covenant. If someone was sentenced to Hades during the Old Covenant, it was because of their spiritually dead condition because of the fall of Adam and their guilt in light of the Holy God in general—enteral punishment was not a penalty of the Old Covenant.

* **One made up of three-**

Next, see that the answer says: “The Old Covenant…was defined by the Abrahamic Covenant, conditioned by the Mosaic Covenant, and focused by the Davidic Covenant.”

The Old Covenant contains the collection of the next three main covenants in the progression of time in human history. These are the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants—they are all under and make up the Old Covenant. And these covenants come in that order.

* **As steps, they are “covenants of promise”**

We need to understand that these three covenants of the Old Covenant happen progressively *as steps* in time taking us *to* a perfect covenant to come later, The Covenant of Grace—that is the New Covenant.

These Old Covenant covenants are preparatory and subservient to God’s final purposes.

Along these lines, the 1689 Confession of Faith says what we’ve seen in this lesson so far, “[The Covenant of Grace—the New Covenant] is *revealed* in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman (we saw this previously in our study), and afterwards by farther steps (we are further focused in these OC lessons on these “farther steps”), until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament; and it [The Covenant of Grace—the New Covenant] is founded in that eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect…”

In future lessons, we’ll see clearly that the New Covenant is the fulfillment of the Covenant of Redemption, so that means the New Covenant is the goal, not the Old Covenant we are focused on in this, (and our following two), lessons.

But, God, *for His own wise and holy purposes*, decreed to take human history through these Old Covenant *steps* rather than sending Christ to take on flesh and do His work immediately after the fall or the flood.

The promise of—the mystery of—Christ is carried along and further revealed, or expanded upon, in the Old Covenant—in “*covenants of promise*.”

Since this Old Covenant plays such a significant role in the Bible and human history, we’ll utilize 3 lessons to take closer look at it and offer some of the important points that help in studying Scripture regarding these things.

The key points and markers seen so far in this lesson, should be the key points and markers that we see in each of the three Old Covenant covenants. Hopefully you see a theme of repetition and consistency in the three Old Covenant covenants we are about to study.

* **The Abrahamic Covenant-**

The first main step in the Old Covenant is the Abrahamic Covenant. Our answer says the “The Old Covenant…was defined by the Abrahamic Covenant...”

The Abrahamic Covenant (which is also called the Covenant of Circumcision) is one covenant revealed in several different interactions between God and Abraham from Genesis 12 to Genesis 22. The most significant and helpful passages about the Abrahamic Covenant are found in portions of Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22. Some passages speak more to God’s side of the covenant, while others speak more to the side of man’s side of the covenant.

We don’t have time in this lesson to read every verse of these sections, but we’ll point to and quote some key passages as we go.

The Abrahamic Covenant begins and sets the stage for all of what the Old Covenant was designed to do; *it defines the Old Covenant*.

The first way it defines the Old Covenant is by establishing a particular people of the covenant and that is first displayed to mankind in God’s choice of Abraham as the covenant head.

Another way this Abrahamic Covenant defines the Old Covenant is in the layers of what it offers, threatens, and promises.

The covenant uniquely has two layers: 1) a physical/earthy covenant, and 2) a spiritual promise layer.

What this means is God gave physical/earthy *stipulations and rewards* in the covenant, (as we talked about a few moments ago), but God also was doing something incredibly important by revealing spiritual *promises*to mankind through Abraham.

These layers get to the depth and content of the Abrahamic Covenant, so we’ll briefly explore them more.

* **A physical/earthly covenant-**

But first, a reminder of the context. God split humanity up into a variety of languages, tribes, and people groups and this sets the stage for God to establish and interact with one chosen earthly people group for the physical/earthly covenant. And that’s what is happening here in the Abrahamic Covenant. God is indicating who this people group is and setting them apart for incredibly important ends and also important means. *This is a defining of the Old Covenant*.

In the Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22 passages, there is a weaving of the earthly covenant realities and the spiritual promises. We see God interacting with Abraham in these passages (who was Abram before God initiated these things).

* + **The covenant rewards/blessings**
    - Physical/natural line of people

The first thing God covenanted in the physical/earthly covenant is that He would give Abraham a physical/natural line of people. In this, God sets apart Abraham’s line, making distinct the Israelite people, making known His choice of them as His temporary/typological people.

We see this when God declares to Abraham in **Genesis 12:2:** “I will make of you a great nation...” This is repeated, for example, in **Genesis 17:2 (NASB):** “I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly.”

In this, God promised Abraham a physical/natural line of people and this establishes Abraham as a covenantal head over this natural offspring. Abraham was the federal head of the Abrahamic Covenant.

* + - Physical/earthly land

We also see that God covenanted, in this physical/earthly/natural covenant, a physical/earthly land for this physical/earthly people to dwell. In **Genesis 15:18** it says, “On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring *I give this land*…” (and He precedes to describe the land). This is speaking of the land of Canaan—real physical land on the earth, on this first creation.

* + - Physical kings

We also see that God covenanted, in this physical/earthly/natural covenant, physical kings to rule this physical people and physical land. In **Genesis 17:6,** God promised, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, *and kings shall come from you*.” This chosen earthly people, who would be given a defined land, would also be given their own ruling kings. God promised them earthly royalty—kingship.

In this, we have a real, legitimate forming of a now set-apart people for an actual land and a full-scale government to come. These are actual physical/earthly/natural things God offered in the Abrahamic Covenant. This is the beginning of the kingdom of Israel.

* **Defining “everlasting” accurately**

Next, in Genesis 17, God calls this Abrahamic Covenant “an everlasting covenant.” Yet, we are saying that this Abrahamic Covenant (and the fuller Old Covenant that it is a part of) was temporary. So, how are we to make sense of this?

Hopefully you recall this point from the Noahic Covenant. To remind you of what we said there *and build it out a bit further*…

Often, our default can be to only take the word “everlasting” to mean something like: *will never go away/will never become obsolete/will never vanish*.

But, it must be understood that (like many other words in Scripture) there are different ways the word “everlasting” can be used. Context and other factors (IE “Tota Scriptura” - All of Scripture’s teaching) are key in understanding how the word “everlasting” is being used *in any given passage* of the Bible.

The example we considered last lesson is, when the Bible refers to God as “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps 90, 103, etc) it means that God is *timeless and infinite*.

*But*, that can’t be the meaning of everlasting when the Bible calls the Abrahamic Covenant “everlasting”—the Abrahamic Covenant surely is ***not***timeless and infinite.

Dr. James Dolezal gives helpful insight to these things when he says, “Scripture applies the language of eternity [everlasting] in an improper fashion to many things that are *not eternal in the strict sense*. It speaks, for instance, of the following: an eternal covenant (Gen. 17:7); an eternal possession of land (Gen. 17:8); eternal Mosaic rites, ceremonies, and promises (Num. 10:8; 15:15; 18:8, 11, 19, 23); eternal mountains (Gen. 49:26; Deut. 33:15); Solomon’s temple on Mount Zion as God’s eternal dwelling place (1 Kings 8:13; 9:3; Ps. 132:14) ... Each of these realities has a temporal beginning and proceeds through a succession of moments. Some have already passed away and will never return.”

As we saw, the Noahic Covenant is also called an “everlasting covenant” (Gen 9:16) in Scripture, yet it only lasts as long as this first creation does—not for all eternity.

So, as stated last lesson, we need to know that there are various ways the word “everlasting” is used in the Bible.

Now, considering the full testimony of Scripture, we come know that when the Bible refers to the Abrahamic Covenant as an "everlasting covenant" it means that God will not revoke/end the covenant haphazardly (without covenantal reason/justification). This means the Abrahamic Covenant will remain intact *so long as the terms of the covenant are being honored by the other party*. It means, *God will keep His word*—He will remain faithful to the covenant—He will ongoingly maintain it according to its terms. From a human perspective, it is open-ended (time wise)—its end *can be brought about* if the terms are violated, but its end time is not pre-specified in the covenant.

By calling it an “everlasting covenant” God is giving them assurance that they can count on Him being faithful—the covenant will remain intact according to them meeting the terms. He will not cast them aside, withdrawal His blessings, revoke the deal *so long as the people covenanted to stay faithful to the covenant terms*. *In that way* it’s everlasting.

We know that the Abrahamic Covenant (and the fuller Old Covenant that it is a part of) is **not** everlasting (in the sense of will never go away/become obsolete/vanish) *because of* the reasons we covered already and will continue to see affirmed through the rest of our Covenant Theology series.

* **Circumcision: An Old Covenant sign and condition-**

Next, see that God saw fit to issue a physical/natural sign in this covenant, which was male circumcision. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant.

We see this in

**Genesis 17:9-14**

9And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. 10This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, 13both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

Male circumcision was the physical/natural sign of the temporary Old Covenant. This sign and condition was only a covenantal reality for the Old Covenant.

**Galatians 5:6** “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”

Circumcision was commanded and critical for those in the Old Covenant, but the command and sign *that it was* went away with the Old Covenant.

And note that it represented an obligation to obey law as the ongoing condition of being in the covenant… “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised … shall be cut off from his people…”

* **“A” covenant of works-**

God will ongoingly maintain the covenant and give the covenant blessings *if* Abraham fulfills His role and duty, and if the descendants of Abraham do what is required of them as well—thus far, that includes male circumcision. See that, the Abrahamic Covenant offered rewards upon conditions of obedience and threatened curse upon disobedience.

Sam Renihan has some helpful points regarding circumcision and the need for Old Covenant obedience. He says, "God’s demand for loyalty in Abraham's offspring is of utmost importance.

**Genesis 17:9** And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.

The verb 'to keep' is the same verb used in Genesis 2:15 when God placed Adam in the garden to work and keep it. In other words, this is a demand for strict obedience from Abraham and his descendants. The way in which they will keep the covenant is the circumcision of all males on the eighth day after their birth. Circumcision will be the sign of the covenant, making the covenant 'in [their] flesh' 'throughout [their] generations.'

A sanction was put in place to guarantee the fulfilment of this commitment. Failure to keep the demand of the covenant will result in disinheritance.

**Genesis 17:14** Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

Ongoing participation in the blessings of Abraham's covenant depend on obedience to a positive law. Circumcision was not a moral issue. It was a positive law that could be, and was, removed later in history. A failure to circumcised prior to this command was in no way a form of disobedience to God, by anyone. But circumcision was added to the covenant as a positive law, deriving its obligation and the details of its administration purely from the divine authority of God.

The primary purpose of circumcision was to mark the boundaries of the people of this covenant. The offspring of Abraham and inheritors of his covenant are not just those who dwell in Canaan, but those who bear the sign of his covenant in their flesh. The blessings for the nations will come from the people who belong to the covenant of circumcision.

Abraham's offspring, circumcised according to God's command, had a legal covenantal right to Canaan. But their inheritance would be annulled by breaking the law of circumcision. Disobedience forfeited the rights to the blessings of the covenant. Circumcision thus signified not only the special promises that God made to Abraham and his descendants, but it also served as a sign of curse sanctions for Abraham and his descendants. … One who does not cut off his foreskin will be cut off from the covenant. Circumcision was thus a promise a blessing and a threat of curses at the same time.

… Consequently, this covenant can be classified as a covenant of works, or obedience."

As the Old Covenant is further established, we will continue to see how it is in fact based on works. God required Abraham, and all those after him, to a covenant righteousness. See for example,

**Genesis 17:1-2**

1… the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, 2that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.”

As we have established, when a covenant requires those covenanted with to obey law or commands in order to receive the rewards it offers, it as “a covenant of works” to them.

The Abrahamic Covenant, therefore, is not a covenant of grace; it is most certainly a covenant of works.

And the covenant itself was not eternal things but temporary things. This covenant of works demanded obedience based on the covenant terms and commands in order to receive and/or maintain in the physical/earthly/natural covenant rewards.

* **Spiritual *promise* layer (not conditioned on covenant earning)**

Now, while the Abrahamic Covenant is temporary, and first and certainly an earthly covenant of earthly rewards, we said earlier that these interactions also had aspiritual *promise* layer.

God revealed spiritual promises to mankind through Abraham.

Ultimately, this is the most important thing about the exchanges between God and Abraham; Mankind’s need for a savior from eternal wrath, unto reconciliation with God forever, is far superior to mankind’s need for temporal physical flourishing.

To this point, Augustine wrote, “Now it is to be observed that two things are promised to Abraham, the one, that his seed should possess the land of Canaan, … **but the other far more excellent, not about the carnal but the spiritual seed**, through which he is the father, not of the one Israelite nation, but of all nations who follow the footprints of his faith …”

In a great display of His wisdom, God used the temporal physical covenant to bring about the greater things. As we read Scripture and consider these things, we always need to keep in mind that these temporal physical things more importantly served the spiritual things that God further promised and revealed during this time.

Let’s see this in the text.

In God’s interactions with Abraham, the second promise given was that Abraham would be the “father” of the promised Seed of the woman who would bless all nations. Throughout history, God repeated this spiritual promise over and over.

We see God tell Abraham in, **Genesis 12:3**  “*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*.”

While in limited detail, (like in Genesis 3:16), this is God preaching the gospel! (If you doubt…)

What God promised to take place in Genesis 3:16 (the protoevangelium), God now repeated and narrowed here to Abraham—namely, the birth of the Messiah—the victorious Savior—would be of Abraham’s line.

This spiritual promise layer is repeated to Abraham in:

**Genesis 22:17-18**

17“… your offspring shall possess the gate *of his* enemies, 18and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed …”

Now, see that in Galatians, the Apostle Paul references promises in Genesis to make an argument about how in Abraham’s offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed. In this the inspired Paul tells us that the spiritual promises spoken to Abraham were God preaching the gospel to him!

**Galatians 3:8 & 16** **8**And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.”… **16**Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.

Paul gives us the New Testament affirmation and confirmation of the spiritual promises spoken to Abraham. This is speaking of God’s promise that from Abraham’s line will come the Messiah who will bless all nations.

Note as well, that in Romans 4, the Apostle Paul confirms that God spoke spiritual promises to Abraham, spiritual promises that were a further revealing of the gospel itself, whereby Abraham believed God—Abraham was given saving faith:

**Romans 4:1-5, 13, 16**

1What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” 4Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5And to the one who does not work but believes *in him who justifies* the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...

13For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

16That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace…

This helps us see yet again, that the Old Covenant, including the Abrahamic Covenant, which demanded works for reward, GET THIS, was not what saved Abraham. The Old Covenant, including the Abrahamic Covenant, was not The Covenant of Grace, or *a part of* The Covenant of Grace. The Old Covenant, including the Abrahamic Covenant, was a covenant of works for physical/earthly/natural blessings.

Therefore, Abraham was saved not by the Old Testament covenant God made with him, rather, Abraham was saved by having saving faith in the promised One who was to come and establish a better, saving covenant—the New Covenant.

See this in

**Galatians 3:6 & 9**

**6**…Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”

**9**So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Scripture says that God preached the gospel to Abraham in His interactions with him. It was still very much in the form of a promise at that time. In speaking of the Offspring to come as a blessing, God was preaching the gospel to Abraham about the coming Messiah (Christ). And what did Abraham do? By the work of the Holy Spirit, Abraham believed in this promise—He trusted God. Scripture teaches us elsewhere how this happens; Abraham was regenerated and *given* saving faith in this coming Messiah. Whereby he was justified by the work that this Messiah would do. This means, again, that the Old Covenant did **not** save him, and his justification was not based at all on His works. His justification was not based at all on the Abrahamic Covenant. Scripture says, “in order that the promise may rest on grace.” Salvation has always been by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. It was only by the grace of the New Covenant *working in* the Old Testament time that Abraham, and any other Old Testament elect saved.

Any people in Abraham’s day that were saved eternally during that time were *not saved by this Abrahamic Convent*, rather they are saved eternally by faith in the promise of the Messiah—by Jesus’ Covenant of Grace to come in the future. The Covenant of Grace worked in time before it was formally established, but it was not the same substance as the Abrahamic Covenant.

Eternal life is only given to the chosen ones of the Covenant of Redemption as God effectually calls them into a different covenant, the New Covenant.

Abraham is used in Scripture as a clear and important example of how people were saved by the same gospel, by the same Messiah, by the same work of the Messiah as we are. It always has been this way, as it will be until the end of this first creation. This is very important. “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight…” (**Romans 3:20**). The Abrahamic Covenant did **not** offer justification/redemption in itself (the blessings/rewards were not eternal); instead, it *pointed to* Jesus and the New Covenant to come, the only way of eternal salvation.

To be clear, because some are confused on this point, The Abrahamic Covenant was not The Covenant of Grace, or *a part of* The Covenant of Grace. The Abrahamic Covenant was a covenant of works for physical/earthly/natural blessings.

Abraham being saved by grace through faith in the One who justifies—the Messiah who earns righteousness to credit to His members in another covenant—proves Abraham’s covenant played no role in saving Abraham. This Abrahamic Covenant not a covenant that gives the elect eternal salvation—this covenant does not give eternal life, for eternal life only comes through the New Covenant, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

* + **The “types” of the covenant**

Now, we have said that the Old Covenant is preparatory and subservient to God’s final purposes. We’ve said that the promise of—the mystery of—Christ is carried along and further revealed, or expanded upon, in the Old Covenant.

What is happening in this Abrahamic Covenant is what we saw in the confession.

Speaking of this new covenant to come, the 1689 Confession of Faith again:

Th[e New] covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament…

The Abrahamic Covenant is one of these Q”farther steps”, it is not the substance of the gospel, but it further reveals the gospel and points forward to it.

The Abrahamic Covenant is one of these Q”farther steps”, it is not the same substance as the saving covenant—The Covenant of Grace, but it further reveals The Covenant of Grace and points forward to it.

To that then, the physical/earthly covenant made to Abraham was given in order to establish a shadowy, typological kingdom *that would bring about and teach us about the Messiah and His kingdom*, so that mankind can have powerful insight of what exactly He accomplished when He came.

The temporary physical/natural land of Canaan was used by God *to also symbolize the eternal land* that God will deliver all the Christians to in the new creation to come, the eternal place of living we are looking forward to.

And, God’s choosing of the small and seemingly insignificant nation of Israel *was symbolic of how He chose for eternal salvation*. The physical seed of Abraham pointed to the spiritual seed: the eternal chosen ones.

To these things Renihan writes, “The Abrahamic Covenant anticipates the New Covenant in two ways. First, it promises the New Covenant. Second it typologically pictures or prefigures the New Covenant.

As mentioned above, this Covenant promises to provide one who will bless the world. … So, from its inception, the Abrahamic Covenant is not just anticipating the New Covenant but carrying it within itself. The Old Covenant is pregnant with the New Covenant. It promises the New Covenant because it promises the mediator of the New Covenant to be born from their midst. The Abrahamic Covenant provides Christ. Christ provides the New Covenant.

Typologically, the Abrahamic Covenant is a picture of something other and greater than itself. It's people, land, and kingship were pictures of a greater and other, people, land, and kingship.

…the multiplied offspring of Abraham's body in Canaan under their own rulers are types. But as types, they point onward to the antitypical fulfillment on a heavenly level, through the heavenly covenant. The great privilege of Israel, established in the Abrahamic Covenant, is that the one who will effect and bring about the final fulfillment will be one of their own. … The Abrahamic Covenant was designed to push history towards this by marking out the people and place of the Messiah's birth, and it was designed to foreshadow it, positively and negatively, in God promises and Israel's failures.

… And as Abraham trusted in the Son of his covenant, he became a child of the Son's Covenant. As Abraham looked past the earthly blessings to the heavenly ones, and believed in them, all Israel was called to do the same.” … But so many of them did not.

There is much going on in all of this, but the main takeaways for us are:

The covenant that God made with Abraham here is very unique and very important. The unique thing about it is that it has two layers: a physical/earthly/natural covenant and a spiritual promise layer.

* **The Old Covenant was defined by the Abrahamic Covenant**

In this lesson, I hope you are seeing that the Old Covenant was defined by the Abrahamic Covenant. This means that this begins and sets the stage for all of what the Old Covenant was designed to do. As we continue in our study next lesson we will see that the subsequent covenants (namely, the Mosaic and the Davidic covenants) are made with the same parties (primarily Abraham's offspring), with the same promises of blessed life in Canaan through the continuing of required obedience all the while having the same threat of curse. Therefore, as we have said, the Old Covenant began with Abraham and must be viewed collectively in such a way that the Old Covenant includes the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, and the Davidic Covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant establishes, what the Mosaic and the Davidic covenants connect to and expand.

In our next lessons we will consider how the Old Covenant was conditioned by the Mosaic Covenant and was focused by the Davidic Covenant.

We will consider further how through promises, types, and shadows the Old Covenant taught about the Messiah, who was to come to fulfill the law, establish the New Covenant, and redeem the elect.

We will also see in Scripture that ethnic Israel broke the covenant and as their sin continued, they were eventually put off by God.

We have lots ahead in this series, and we hope you are learning a lot, unto a heightened worship of God.

Since we’re out of time, and since we’re teaching on the Old Covenant over three lessons, we won’t close with some additional application tonight—but I trust you have plenty of content here to consider, know, and apply.

Let’s pray…

TMOC, 6

Next time we are going to look at the Mosaic Covenant—another step in the story of history to get to the fulfillment of God’s plan. See you next week.