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Section: Divine Covenants (Covenant Theology)

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**HANDOUT 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.

* **Introduction**

A divine covenant is a relational agreement initiated by God that may include obligations, rewards, and/or punishments from Him.

There were now definitively different people groups/different ethnicities.

The Old Covenant, its 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.

None of the Old Testament covenants are Covenants of Grace. None of the Old Testament covenants are a part of The Covenant of Grace.

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

The Old Covenant was made obsolete by God establishing the New Covenant.

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 made primarily with Israelites**

Unlike the first two covenants 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.

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.

God’s choice of ethnic Israel 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.

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— the one people of God made of true believers from Adam’s fall until the end of this creation.

The ethnic Israelites as a whole are not and were never God’s eternal people; they were the typological, physical, temporary chosen people.

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

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

First, there is only one way of eternal redemption for fallen man, one way to obtain eternal life. It is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone.

Once the need for redemption became a reality due to the fall of Adam, no fallen man could earn eternal life and blessing based on his or her personal obedience.

**John Owen**: 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.

Second, the Old Covenant offered only temporary blessings/benefits/rewards.

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

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 was a real, physical, earthly land and real, earthly, tangible prosperity.

**AW Pink:** 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**

The Old Covenant 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 the covenant rewards.

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

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

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.

* **One made up of three**

The Old Covenant contains 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.

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

These three covenants of the Old Covenant happen progressively as steps in time take 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.

**1689 Confession of Faith:** “[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, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament; and [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…”

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.”

* **The Abrahamic Covenant**

The Abrahamic Covenant (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 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.

God gave physical/earthy stipulations and rewards in the covenant, but God also was doing something incredibly important by revealing spiritual promisesto mankind through Abraham.

* **A physical/earthly covenant**
* **The covenant rewards/blessings**
  + **Physical/natural line of people**

God sets apart Abraham’s line, making distinct the Israelite people, making known His choice of them as His temporary/typological people.

God promised Abraham a physical/natural line of people and this establishes Abraham as a covenantal head over this natural offspring.

* + **Physical/earthly land**

This is speaking of the land of Canaan—real physical land on the earth, on this first creation.

* + **Physical kings**

This chosen earthly people, who would be given a defined land, would also be given their own ruling kings.

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**

God calls this Abrahamic Covenant “an everlasting covenant.” Yet, we are saying that this Abrahamic Covenant was temporary.

There are different ways the word “everlasting” can be used. Context and other factors are key in understanding how the word “everlasting” is being used in any given passage of the Bible.

**Dr. James Dolezal:** “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.”

Considering the full testimony of Scripture, we come to 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 stay faithful to the covenant terms. In that way it’s everlasting.

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

God saw fit to issue a physical/natural sign in this covenant, which was male circumcision.

This sign and condition were only a covenantal reality for the Old Covenant.

It represented an obligation to obey law as the ongoing condition of being in the covenant.

* **“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. The Abrahamic Covenant offered rewards upon conditions of obedience and threatened curse upon disobedience.

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

This covenant of works demanded obedience based on the covenant terms and commands in order to receive and/or maintain the physical/earthly/natural covenant rewards.

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

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.

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.

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

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 helps us see yet again that the Old Covenant, including the Abrahamic Covenant, which demanded works for reward, 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.

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.

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.

Salvation has always been by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone.

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.

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.

* **The “types” of the covenant**

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

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.

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.

* **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, in the next lesson we will see that the subsequent covenants are made with the same parties 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.