

#02: Covenant of Commencement

By Dr. O. Palmer Robertson

sermonaudio.com

Mount Olive Tape Library

c/o Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

P.O. Box 770

Taylors, SC 29687

Website: www.gpts.edu

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/mtolive

A covenant is a bond in blood sovereignly administered. A covenant is a bond in blood sovereignly administered.

Then we spoke of the basic divisions of the covenant as found in holy Scripture, speaking of the terminology of the classic reformed division of covenant of works and covenant of grace and offering a slightly changed nomenclature—covenant of creation and covenant of redemption—to cover the two basic covenantal dealings of God with his people.

Then we dealt very hastily with the covenant of creation and emphasized in particular consecration and probation, these two aspects of the covenant of creation.

If you look in Genesis chapter one verse 30, verse 29 and chapter two you can see this principle of consecration in the original creation order. In Genesis chapter one verse 30 under the covenant of creation we have the consecration of the lower forms of life to the higher form. “To every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creepeth upon the earth wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for food. And it was so.” So that God consecrates to the use of the higher form of life the lower form.

Then in verse 29 you see the consecration of all the rest of creation, of the totality of that which God had created to man, the highest of his creation. In verse 29 of Genesis one, “And God said, ‘Behold I have given you every herb yielding seed which is upon the face of the earth and every tree in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed. To you it shall be for food.’” So that God consecrates the whole of his creation to man, the highest of his creation order.

Then we have, finally, in chapter two verses one, two and three, the suggestion—and I think a very strong suggestion—of the consecration of all things to God by man. God invites man to come and enjoy his sabbath rest. You notice in chapter two verses one, two and three, verse three, “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it because that in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made.”

Now this rest of God in creation is not to be understood as idleness as on the part of God. The Lord Jesus Christ says, “My Father works up to this day and I work.” But it is an enjoyment of the labor of his hands.

Now God says to man, “You come on this day. You enter into this day of pleasure. You rest from your labors and consecrate to me all that I have given to you.” So this is the basis of the creation covenant. The theme here is one of a consecration order of things.

So that we have the world which is consecrated to man, which in turn is to consecrate all things to God, the Maker and the Creator.

Now in the anticipation of this responsibility of man to consecrate all things to God, you will notice in chapter two verse 16 the word of a concept of probation. Man was a creature with a powerful will in the likeness and the image of God. The inanimate world, very unconsciously offered itself in consecration to God, but man required a conscious act of consecration to his Creator. So then a test was set up which would allow the framework in which man could reach the climax of the consecration of the creation order by a conscious act of his will.

And God says, “Here is one tree in the middle of the garden. I have given you all the trees to eat, but here is one that is a little bit different. It doesn’t look any different, but my Word says you shall not eat of it. Will you listen to the Word of God as it simply speaks and says, ‘Do this as I have commanded you’? Will you hear this raw word and obey?”

That was the probation test that was given to man. So here is the basic aspects of the covenant of creation and you see in Genesis chapter two verses 16 and 17 the negative aspect or possibility of this covenant of creation. “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat of it for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.”

In the garden is a tree of life symbolizing the possibility of blessing under this covenant. In the garden is a tree symbolizing the possibility of curse, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

Now this morning we pick up at this point with the covenant of redemption and the first of these administrations of the covenant of redemption is Adam, the covenant of commencement.

As in so many other regards, so in the realm of the covenant concept beginnings are to be found in the book of Genesis. The biblical beginnings are especially noteworthy in their organic character. This is a most important concept of the covenant theology which we shall elaborate on throughout the week, the organic character of the biblical revelation.

All later developments of a particular concept are present in seed form in their genesis context. This organic character of the covenant concept as presented in the covenant with Adam is especially noteworthy. Therefore, we designate this covenant the covenant of commencement. It is the beginning and everything essential to the remainder of God’s revelation to man is to be found in seed form in the covenant of commencement.

The scriptural passage delineating the circumstances of the covenant of redemption under Adam which commences this long covenant throughout the history until the end of the age is found in Genesis chapter three verse 14 through 19.

As we look at these verses in Genesis three—very familiar verses—it is quite interesting to see that we have here also curse and blessing. We have word first to the serpent or to Satan, then to the woman and then to the man and in each case we have curse and blessing involved in these words.

It is very interesting here to notice that the very same words that pronounce the curses of the covenant of creation inaugurate the covenant of redemption thereby binding these two covenants inseparably together. In other words, as the negative side of the covenant of creation comes into effect, immediately the positive side, the promises of the covenant of redemption also come into effect and therefore the dealings of God with man are actually warned. We must not forget that the creation covenant in many respects still is in effect. Though we do not have a period of probation, the concept of consecration of all of the creation order still is the responsibility of man today under the covenant of redemption.

And if you will look at Genesis chapter three verses 14 and following we can see how this original covenant with Adam was instituted. The first word in verse 14 is to Satan, the first of the offenders. “And the Lord God said unto the serpent, ‘Because thou hast done this, cursed are thou above all cattle and above every beast of the field. Upon thy belly shalt thou go and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.’”

The consignment of the serpent to eat this dust of the earth cannot be regarded as some capricious deities loss of temper at some dumb animal. It is not a tale explaining why snakes crawl as some of the most exalted Old Testament scholars of the modern world have suggested. The serpent’s curse, instead, must be understood for its symbolic value symbolizing the ultimate pouring out of God’s wrath on the prince of this world.

Since the serpent had been the tool of Satan in the deception of man the serpent, this animal, becomes the obvious means to symbolize the ultimate state of Satan himself. So then the serpent is cursed.

Now in verse 15 of Genesis three we have a curse directed more specifically at Satan himself, not at the tool which Satan used, but at Satan himself. “I will put enmity between thee and the woman and between thy seed and her seed. He shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel.” Satan had established enmity with God by deceiving the woman. Now God is going to establish a little enmity himself.

We can see three levels of enmity being established at this point. First of all, between Satan and the woman at hand. “I will put enmity between thee and the woman.” So then we have, as we might imagine it, a warfare beginning. And Satan is here and the woman is here. And they are opposed to one another.

Now we have a second level of the enmity in this verse between thy seed and her seed. Now, the exact identification of the seed involved in each of these cases is quite difficult indeed. The woman's seed could—and, perhaps, most naturally would—be identified with the woman's physical descendancy. That would be the totality of humanity. "I will put enmity between thee and they woman and between thy seed and her seed," meaning the whole of the human race. We know, however, from the instructions of the entire rest of Scripture that we cannot simply identify the seed of the woman with the totality of the human race.

So often Scripture emphasizes the fact that natural descendancy doesn't say a thing about relationship with the almighty God. Do you remember John the Baptist's announcement or designation to those perfect pedigreed Jews of his day? "Generations of vipers."

Do you remember Christ's discussion with the Pharisees in John chapter eight verse 44? "Ye are of your father the devil and the works of your father you will do."

So, you see it is impossible to identify the seed of the woman in this case with humanity in general. We must let the remainder of Scripture shed light on this original passage to instruct us into the organic nature of the truth and see what it meant here. From the remainder of Scripture we see that this seed must be the elect of God, those among the woman's seed that in the grace of God will be turned from enmity to God to enmity against Satan.

Now what is the seed of Satan? Well, we may and we must include among the seed of Satan at least those human beings, men who are in opposition to the kingdom of God, most likely we should include also demonic spirits in the seed that sets itself in opposition against the kingdom of God so that when we speak of seed and seed in this case we have an expansion of the enmity. And we have a multiplication of those who war against one another. Inside the human race and outside the human race there is an enmity established that is growing in number and in intensity.

But now we notice in verse 15, again, a third development of this enmity concept, a narrowing again. "He shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel."

Some of you versions may there read, "It shall bruise thy head..." which would refer to the seed, but whatever the case it is singular in the third case and we have, again, a narrowing. "It shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel." It is one seed against one of Satan. So we have a singular Satan and a singular seed of the woman that is involved in this particular enmity on this case.

More than a hollow echo of this pronouncement of covenantal victory in which the seed of the woman is to crush—is the term used here—the seed of the woman shall crush the head of the serpent though the serpent shall bruise the heel of the seed of the woman. We find more than a hollow echo of this victorious concept in Paul's benediction over the church of Rome. If you look at Romans chapter 16 verse 20 Paul says, "The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly." Although the hero of Genesis 3:15

clearly is designated as a singular individual, the victory which he accomplishes is on behalf of a great troop of the seed of the woman as he bruises or crushes the head of the serpent.

Shall we say we are poetic or exegetical when we read a passage—for instance, in 1 Samuel chapter 17 verses eight through 10—in the light of this particular passage? Are we allegorizing or are we finding here and uncovering a principle of redemptive history that runs throughout the whole of God's revelation to us?

If you look at 1 Samuel chapter 17 verses eight through 10 you will remember that the Philippians hero Goliath had come forth. We have the troops of Israel on one side of the hill and the troops of the Philistines on the other side of the other side of the hill. And Goliath walks out.

“Goliath stood and cried unto the armies of Israel and said unto them, ‘Why are you come out to set your battle in array? Am not I a Philistine and you servants to Saul? Why should we have all the bloody gore of killing everyone. You just choose a champion. I am the champion of the Philistines and let's see what happens. Choose you one man for you and let him come down to me. If he be able to fight with me and kill me then we will be your servants. One representative man to fight one representative man and to the victor belongs the spoils. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then shall ye be our servants and serve us.’ And the Philistine said, ‘I defy the armies of Israel this day. Give me one man that we may fight together.’”

In the end the challenge of the Philistine Goliath sticks in his own throat so that the beheading of one man renders the whole army of the uncircumcised servants to the living God.

In here and in this imagery of the accomplishment of redemption through the victorious overthrow of the seed of Satan lies a principle of God's dealings. As we say, this is an organic revelation in which all the truths of Scripture are found in the beginning to be exposed more fully as history proceeds. In here in this imagery is a principle of God's dealings which has continued throughout the ages, the deliverance of God's people always comes through the destruction of God's enemies. The only adequate to some of the most difficult and knotty problems of Old Testament biblical theology may be found in this particular principle, that God's victory for his people must revolve about the total defeat of his enemies.

Put it to justification for the [?] warfare in the book of Joshua. Put it to justification for God sending his troop in to totally annihilate a people—women and children included. Only if you see that in and among the human race is a seed of Satan prepared by God for destruction and worthy of nothing but his curse can you understand this concept of [?] warfare in the Old Testament.

How is a Christian to view the imprecatory psalms in the Old Testament? What are you to do when you are reading in your devotional literature and you read, “May my enemies...the infant heads of my enemies’ children be dashed against a stone”?

If the principle is recognize that salvation from God comes only through the destruction of his enemies, the Christian may join the psalmist in his solemn prayer. Indeed it is not the Christian’s place to pervade to identify specifically those among men who are the seed of Satan. We might call out a few addresses in Richmond or Atlanta and say [?]. But we cannot presume as Christians to find those among humanity who are the seed of Satan. And we need, indeed, to remember that we all as Paul the apostle so clearly says, “You once were alienated, the enemies of God, identified with the seed of Satan, cursed. You were the ones that were God’s enemies.”

And yet we do enter with solemn prayer into the prayer of the imprecatory psalms. “Oh Lord, yes there are enemies among the human race. May you destroy them. May their victory in the glory of Christ be found in the destruction of those who have set themselves against the Lord and against his Christ. Dash them with a rod of iron.”

Our soft universalists cannot swallow these doctrines. Those who would attempt to embrace all of humanity and even Satan himself in the redemption of Christ cannot bear the true doctrine of Scripture concerning the seed of Satan that is among humanity.

In the word of God to Satan, then, both the pronouncement of curse and blessing may be detected. In the blessing, indeed, the word of blessing which is the deliverance of the singular seed is not addressed to Satan, but indirectly to the woman in Genesis chapter three verse 15.

Now the second word of covenant inauguration of the covenant of redemption, the covenant of commencement given to Adam is to the woman, verse 16 of Genesis three. “Unto the woman he said, ‘I will greatly multiply thy pain and thy conception. In pain thou shalt bring forth children and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee.’”

Here we have also curse and blessing. The woman will have children, but it will be in a context of excessive travail. A seed will be provided—and that is a blessing—to enter into this conflict with the satanic seed. And this blessed promise of a seed despite the new fallen state of man, the grace of God and his ability to provide deliverance becomes most prominent.

And we notice, thirdly, the final word which is addressed to the man in verse 16 and following or verse 17. “And unto Adam he said, ‘Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife and hast eaten of the tree of which I commanded thee saying, “Thou shalt not eat of it” cursed is the ground for thy sake. In toil thou shalt eat of it all the days of thy life. Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee and thou shalt eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground for out of it wast thou taken.’”

We think perhaps more of yesterday morning than this morning in the sweat of our face we do our labor. But here we see the final word of the inauguration of this covenant of redemption which is addressed to the man. Both curse and blessing again are prominent. Man will eat bread. The gracious character of these simple words cannot be overlooked. The creative grace of God which gave to man the bounties of every tree of the garden has continued. God's grace and mercy is still to man, though he has rebelled against him.

This extension of the provision of the creation covenant characterizes the totality of human history from that day unto the present. Even today you eat bread and you very fittingly give thanks at the table each time you eat bread for the grace of God which permits you to sustain life. Jesus' reference to the God who causes his rain to fall on the just and the unjust indicates the unbroken strain of God's common grace to the seed of Satan as well as to the seed of the woman which was begun in the days of the covenant of creation and has extended throughout the days of the covenant of redemption.

Now the ultimate curse of this covenant appears in Genesis or in verse 19, the last phrase. "For dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return."

The threat of the creation covenant, Genesis 2:15, finds its ultimate fulfillment in this consignment of human life to the grave. Now we have a complete reversal of the order of creation under the curse.

Saved are in the saddle and ride mankind. The tree which was to be a symbol of the blessing of man now becomes a symbol of his curse.

You remember Paul the apostle's reference to the curse of the Old Testament. "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law being made a curse for us. For it is written, 'Cursed is everyone that hangs from a tree,' that the blessing of Abraham might be given to us."

So that now instead of man ruling the world, the world rules man. Instead of the dust of the ground being the servant to man, now the dust of the ground shall consume man and the curse of the covenant has been completed.

To conclude this brief treatment of the Adamic covenant as that bond which commenced the covenant of redemption, some of the major elements which emphasize the organic relation of this covenant to that which followed may be noted.

We shall later be dealing somewhat with the dispensationalist's approach to holy Scripture and its schematized arrangements, yet we presume to offer a little scheme ourselves. If this is [?]. Here we have Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Christ. But the point to note here is the organic relationship of these various covenants. It is not that Adam is a solid concrete block to himself, not that Moses is a unique covenant of law which has no relation to that which precedes or that which follows, but that organically the growth, the seed here, the sapling here, the full grown tree here.

And quite prominently we can see in the first establishment of the covenant of redemption in the Adamic covenant of commencement some of these organic elements.

First of all, note in the realm of common grace to all men the continued operation of this provision of the covenant of redemption may be noted. If, as some suppose, these verses were written as a tale trying to explain why snakes crawl, why women shriek when they see snakes, they must have been written by a genius indeed if this is the type of thing that was written. For with all their assignments of modern life those principles laid down in these brief verses continue to describe man and his condition perfectly. Even today what are the basic questions that men face? Providing bread, relieving pain, performing labor, bearing children, dealing with the inevitability of death.

How could it be that these brief verses could summarize the whole of man's experience and man's struggle? How could it be that all of human history could be captured in this little passage written so long ago?

Secondly, and more specifically, the Adamic covenant foreshadows all subsequent administrations of the covenant of redemption. These verses quite remarkably anticipate the method by which redemption was to be accomplished as well as the mystery of the application of the redemption.

In due time one representative man was born of woman who destroyed the power of Satan even as Satan bruised his heel. Read Colossians chapter two verse 15. Compare Romans chapter one verse six. Not only do these verses anticipate the method of redemption's accomplishment, they illuminate something of the mystery of redemption's application.

Why is it that some men receive the offer of the gospel of Jesus Christ while others sitting right next to them reject that offer? Why is it that some even in this congregation feel and understand the truth of Scripture and to others it is a mystery that they cannot comprehend? The ultimate answer is found in that essential distinction between men, some being of the seed of woman and others of the seed of Satan. Some never will receive the gospel because they partake of Satan's nature. Only those who have been regenerated, only those who cry to faith have been given a new nature in Jesus Christ by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit will respond to the call of the gospel. Inherent, again, in these small verses is the very basis of the method of redemption's accomplishment and the explanation of its application to the hearts of men.

Finally, this covenant with Adam anticipates the consummation of redemption. The reference to Adam's laboring echoes the original cultural mandate of the covenant of creation.

Now some of you may not be familiar with this phrase "cultural mandate." It is a most important phrase, "cultural mandate." Listen to it and write it down and become familiar

with it, “cultural mandate.” It is the mandate of God that man is to subdue the earth and to bring it into subjection to himself.

Recently a very fine Christian man, one of the finest that I know personally was probing me with questions concerning the justification of man’s probe to the moon. Is it right for man to attempt to subdue?

Yes, indeed, it is. God has given us the mandate to subdue the earth, to bring it into subjection to himself. All the powers that he has given to us are for our usefulness and we must do all that we can to take these things and offer them in consecration to the Lord God our Maker.

The ultimate goal of redemption, therefore, as described in Scripture, as it is further developed is not merely a return to the original pristine beginnings of the garden. Beginning at this point in time a new imagery arises, the imagery of a city, of a hustling bustling center of activity for the redeemed, this glorious consummation focusing as it does on the redemption of man in the context of the total possibilities available to man maintains a continuing prominence throughout the covenant of redemption by the continuation of the cultural mandate.

Christians, you are not living as Christians just in church. You have an obligation as a Christian scientist, as a Christian doctor, as a Christian teacher...whatever your profession, to consecrate, to take all that is at your disposal and to offer it as a sacrifice to the Lord God who has made you.

Here we who sometimes and all of us at one time or another are tainted by the fundamenatlistic, the negative side of fundamentalism which would see Christ’s work only in the preaching of the gospel and the witnessing of Christ’s Word to one another and not see our obligation as men remade in God’s image to bring the whole of God’s creation in subjection to the Creator.

Quite obviously, in conclusion, serving to provide the binding personal dimension through the entire sweep of human history which has transpired under the covenant of redemption is Jesus Christ, singular seed of the woman, denoted by Isaiah thousands of years later as the Emmanuel child. He embodies the fulfillment of the God with us principle implicit from the beginning in the covenant of redemption.

Now I have gotten all wind up and I don’t...what time are we to finish? John, where are we?

Now? All right.