

# God of Promise

## *The Beauty of Covenant Theology*

### Part 4 – The Covenant of Grace (2)

“...and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 3:15)

### The Unity of the Covenant of Grace

There is clear biblical warrant for the assertion that there is one everlasting covenant of grace. This is a vital point in Covenant Theology which asserts that the covenants with Moses, David, and the New Covenant in Christ are not different covenants per se but administrations of the one everlasting covenant of grace made with Abraham.

The following 12-point summary is taken directly from Dr. Robert Reymond's [A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith](#):



1. It is the Abrahamic covenant and none other that God later confirmed with Isaac (Gen. 17:19; 26:3-4) and with Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15; 35:12).

2. God redeemed Jacob's descendants from Egypt (which redemptive act is the Old Testament type of New Testament redemption in Christ) in order to keep his covenant promise to Abraham: "God heard their groanings and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Exod. 2:24; 4:5).

3. Again and again throughout Israel's history in Old Testament times, the inspired authors trace God's continuing extension of divine grace and mercy to Israel directly to his faithfulness to his covenant promises to Abraham:

- Exodus 32:12-14: "Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self....' Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."
- Exodus 33:1 (said immediately after the golden calf incident): "Leave this place... and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' "
- Leviticus 26:42: "I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham."
- Deuteronomy 1:8: "Go in and take possession of the land that the Lord swore he would give to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

- Deuteronomy 4:31: "For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath." (See Deut. 4:37)
- Deuteronomy 7:8: "But it was because the Lord... kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery" (See Deut. 9:5; 10:15)
- Deuteronomy 9:27: "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Overlook the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin."
- Deuteronomy 29:12-13: "You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God, a covenant the Lord is making with you this day and sealing it with an oath, to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."
- Joshua 21:44: "The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers."
- Joshua 24:3-4: "I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau."
- Psalm 105:8-10, 42-43: "He remembers his covenant forever..., the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant.... For he remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham. He brought out his people with rejoicing, his chosen ones with shouts of joy."
- 2 Kings 13:23: "But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion and showed concern for them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To this day he has been unwilling to banish them from his presence."
- 1 Chronicles 16:15—17: "He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant."
- Micah 7:20: "You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago."
- Nehemiah 9:7-8: "You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him.... You have kept your promise because you are faithful."

**4. Both Mary and Zechariah declared the first advent of Jesus Christ, including the very act of the Incarnation itself, to be a vital constituent part of the fulfillment of God's gracious covenant promise to Abraham:**

- Luke 1:54-55: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."
- Luke 1:68-73: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come... to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham."

It should be noted in passing that, whereas Christians today mainly only celebrate the Incarnation of God's Son at Christmas time, Mary and Zechariah, placing this event in its covenant context, saw reason in his coming to celebrate the covenant faithfulness of God to his people. In their awareness of the broader significance of the event and the words of praise which that awareness evoked from them we see biblical theology at its best being worked out and expressed!

5. Jesus, himself the Seed of Abraham (Matt. 1:1; Gal. 3:16), declared that Abraham "rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).
6. Peter declared that God sent Jesus to bless the Jewish nation in keeping with the promise he gave to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, in turning them away from their iniquities (Acts 3:25-26).
7. Paul declared that God, when he promised Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3), was declaring that he was going to justify the Gentiles by faith and was announcing the gospel in advance to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). Accordingly, he states that all believers "are blessed [by justification] along with Abraham" (Gal. 3:9).
8. Paul also declared that "Christ became [*gegenesthai*] a Servant of the circumcision... in order to confirm [*eis to bebaisai*] the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Rom. 15:8-9).
9. Paul further declared that Christ died on the cross, bearing the law's curse, "in order that [*hina*] the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, in order that [*hina*] we [that is, Jews and Gentiles] might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14). The two *hina* clauses are coordinate, the latter an elaboration of the first. God, having delivered his covenant people among the Jews from the curse of the law through Christ's cross work, by that same cross work is free to deal likewise in grace with the Gentiles, with both Jew and Gentile receiving the promised Spirit through faith.
10. Paul expressly declared also that the Mosaic law introduced several centuries after God gave his covenant promises to Abraham and to his Seed (Christ), "does not set aside the covenant previously established by God [with Abraham] and thus do away with the promise" (Gal. 3:16-17).
11. Paul also declared (1) that Abraham is the "father of all who believe" among both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 4:11-12), and (2) that all who belong to Christ "are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" which God gave to Abraham (Gal. 3:29).
12. Finally, Christ described the future state of glory in terms of the redeemed "taking their place at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11).

"These passages of Scripture make it clear that the promises of God, covenantally given to Abraham, that he would be the God of Abraham and of his (spiritual) descendants after him forever (Gen. 17:7-8) extend temporally to the farthest reaches of the future and include within their compass the entire community of the redeemed. This is just to say that the Abrahamic covenant, in the specific prospect it holds forth of the salvation of the entire church of God, is identical with the soteric [pertaining to salvation] program of the covenant of grace, indeed, is identical with the covenant of grace itself. It also means specifically that the blessings of the covenant of grace which believers enjoy today under the sanctions of the New Testament economy are founded upon the covenant which God made with Abraham. Said another way, the "new covenant" itself is simply the administrative "extension and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant." Thus the temporal and spiritual reach of the Abrahamic covenant establishes and secures the organic unity and continuity of the one church of God composed of the people of God living both before and after the cross."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Reymond. "[A New Systematic Theology Of The Christian Faith](#)". Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1998. Pages 512-537.

## The Administrations of the Covenant of Grace

If there is one everlasting covenant of grace then why does God make additional covenants with Moses, and David? If the covenant of grace made with Abraham is everlasting, then why is there a “new covenant in Christ”? And what about God’s covenant with Noah? How does it fit?

Covenant of Redemption	Covenant of Works	Covenant of Grace				
Intra – Trinitarian	Adam	Noahic	Abrahamic	Mosaic	Davidic	New Covenant in Christ

### 1. Noahic

God’s covenant with Noah has been referred to by some as the *common grace covenant*. Common Grace is a term meant to describe the ways that God blesses both the elect and the reprobate. It is based upon passages such as **Romans 2:4** where Paul references, “the riches of [God’s] kindness and forbearance and patience” toward the wicked. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that the Father “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (**Matt. 5:45b**).



The doctrine of common grace also appeals to the fact that truth, helpful advances in medicine and technology, and great art can come from the minds and hands of unbelievers. In preaching to the pagan philosophers on Mars Hill, Paul quotes Greek poets in his presentation of the truth of God as distinct *from* their own deities:

...that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

“In him we live and move and have our being”;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“For we are indeed his offspring.”

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man (**Acts 17:27-29**).

There is a seeming paradox to the doctrine of common grace. If we understand the nature of the fall and the pervasive corruption of sin, we are forced to wonder how anything good can come to or from sinful people.

The late John Murray presents the dilemma well:

If we appreciate the implications of total depravity, then we are faced with a series of very insistent questions. How is it that men who still lie under the wrath and curse of God and are heirs of hell enjoy so many good gifts at the hand of God? How is it that men who are not savingly renewed by the Spirit of God nevertheless exhibit so many qualities, gifts, and accomplishments that promote the preservation, temporal happiness, cultural progress, social and economic improvement of themselves and of others? How is it that races and peoples that have been apparently untouched by the redemptive and regenerative influences of the gospel contribute so much to what we call human civilization?<sup>2</sup>

Calvin observed that many good, true, and helpful things have come by God's mercy through even the ungodly:

Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit himself. What then? Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are.<sup>3</sup>

My own opinion is that what is described being described here and what we see with our own eyes in the good gifts that God has given believer and unbeliever is better described as "common mercy." Grace after all is a word which points to God's *saving* actions. Grace is God's unmerited favor; the sum of all his redemptive actions applied to sinners. God's provision of sun and rain for the unjust is not grace but, rather, mercy – *not getting what one deserves*.

Whether the Noahic Covenant is referred to as a covenant of common grace or common mercy can be helpful but only minimally. As stated above, it is true that God's covenant with Noah held blessings for the whole world. But is this not also the case with God's covenant with Abraham? Does not the covenant of grace hold blessings for all the nations? Of course it does. So the fact that the Noahic Covenant was a means to bless all the inhabitants of the world does not automatically make it a covenant of common grace (or common mercy) separate from the Covenant of Grace.

Perhaps the best known proponent of the Noahic Covenant being a covenant of common grace and separate from the Abrahamic Covenant was Abraham Kuyper, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian and Prime Minister of the Netherlands.

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<sup>2</sup> John Murray, "Common Grace," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (4 vols.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:93. Originally published in *WTJ* 5 (1942).

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; 2 vols.; LCC; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:273-74.

Kuyper and others held that the Noahic Covenant was not part of the covenant of grace because it is a sort of reinstatement of the creation mandate; a general blessing for the whole world. There is truth in that but only to a certain extent. In the Noahic covenant the creation mandate was indeed recapitulated but only as God determined to preserve the holy seed promised in Genesis 3:15. It was granted in the context of grace. Like the covenant with Abraham, the blessings are not dependent upon man's obedience as was the covenant of works. The Noahic Covenant was made with one of God's elect (Noah), not the rest of the world's inhabitants (though blessings would flow to all the world). What is more, God preserved only his covenant partner (Noah and his household) while pouring out wrath upon the rest of the world's inhabitants.

#### Genesis 9:8–12

"[8] Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, [9] "Behold, **I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you**, [10] and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. [11] **I establish my covenant with you**, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

In identifying the Noahic Covenant with the Covenant of Grace we must keep in mind its place in redemptive history. God's covenant with Noah came long after the fall. It was made with a sinner who nevertheless found favor in the eyes of the Lord (that's grace!). Also, the covenant with Noah was made after the announcement to the serpent that God would save his people, the first announcement of grace (Gen. 3:15). God's dealings with his people after Genesis 3 were all on the basis of grace.

God preserved Noah and his family while judging the rest of the earth's inhabitants. Like the Exodus still to come, the salvation of Noah's family became an example of the deliverance from sin that would be accomplished through the dying and rising of Jesus. The salvation of Noah's family was not an act of "common grace" but saving grace. The fact that this salvific relationship between God and Noah held blessings for the whole of creation does not broaden it to the category of common grace.

God's covenant with Noah was, in terms of the promise to not destroy the earth with water, a covenant with all the earth. That is, the covenant promise would benefit all the earth's inhabitants. But Noah was the covenant partner. He and his progeny were in the redemptive line of Eve (Gen. 3:15).

#### Genesis 9:12–17

[12] And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: [13] I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. [14] When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, [15] I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. [16] When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." [17] God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

I avoid being overly dogmatic in the debate over whether the Noahic Covenant is of common grace or an expression of saving grace. Though I believe the evidence strongly favors the later, it is understandable how the language of the relevant texts can suggest common grace in the minds of some theologians.

The sign attached to this covenant was the rainbow whereby God promised to never again destroy the earth with water. How appropriate therefore that the sign is caused by the refraction of light through water.