

The Covenant of Commencement **Genesis 3:1-24**

Opening Interview questions:

- 1) If you want to get to know someone, how do you start a relationship them?
- 2) What sorts of tests need to be passed in order for the relationship to go further?
- 3) Are there rewards or benefits from being in a relationship with you?
- 4) If a relationship has been broken, how do you restore it?

Now friends, the next question would be how we would answer all these questions about relationships as they applied to a creature and their creator, or more specifically between us and God?

So, How does a human being start a relationship with God?

Well, according to what we learned about the Covenant of Creation last week we are born into it.

And just quickly to recap the specifics of this Covenant that all humans are born into, this Covenant is a Bond between us and God, which exists regardless of our awareness of it... and it

concerns our life and death, and it has been sovereignly administered – meaning God decided it would exist and that we'd be in a relationship with Him.

Now this relationship we have with God is unique, and makes us unique because we were created in the Image of God.

This means that we reflect God to the rest of His creation in our obedience to the command to multiply and fill the earth through male-female marriage, as we rule over the earth as stewards, and through observing Sabbath rest to simply enjoy the creation.

Every human being is born into this Covenant relationship with God.

Now are there rewards and blessings to being in this relationship with God? Absolutely – there is meaning and purpose, there is life in quality and quantity, there is knowing your creator intimately – walking and talking with God in the garden of Eden as Adam did.

Or I should say there would have been these kinds of blessings available to us – had Adam passed the test of the Covenant of Creation.

Which is the other question we asked, what sorts of tests need to be passed for a relationship to go further?

The test in the Covenant of Creation was that God had sovereignly stipulated Adam could eat from any tree in the garden, but not from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. This was a test which addresses the essence of the relationship of this Covenant – Adam was made in the Image of God but he was not God.

The prohibition from eating from this tree was simply a test of obedience for the sake of obedience. Will Adam obey God because God is God and he is not – and thus continue to be faithful in reflecting who God is?

If Adam passed this one time test, he and all his descendants would receive the blessings and eternal life that come from

Imaging God to the creation in work; in male-female relationships and community, and in Sabbath.

If Adam disobeyed and ate from the tree... it would result in death.

So let's read Genesis 3:1-24 to get the details on how this test played out? *(Ask scripture reader to come and read the passage for us)*

So friends, we see that Adam failed the test of the Covenant of Creation – the terms of the Covenant have been violated, Adam and his wife have been unfaithful partners in their bond with God and now the consequences for that unfaithfulness must be brought to bear as God had warned.

Which brings us to the last question we asked this morning, what does one do what a relationship has been broken?

And that's what we want to look at this morning friends and learn from - what God does in response to Adam and his wife's Covenant violation?

Now this instance also provides us with the first of many, many examples of how elements of the biblical story make more sense being understood in the context of the Covenant.

We are so typically "cause-and-effect" type people that when we read about Adam and his wife eating the fruit of the tree and then not dying immediately we get all confused and try to offer some sort of explanation for why the consequences that God has pronounced didn't immediately take effect.

But this isn't a "cause-and-effect" situation friends – it's a Covenant situation and since God sovereignly outlined the consequences, God must be the one to personally bring them into effect once He is aware of violation.

Now I know we have our theology about God being all-knowing and such – but the scripture presents what had

happened in this covenant relationship in a relational way. Setting up the expectation that God had of intimate, close relating with Adam and his wife – a nice evening together in the garden... only to find them hiding from him!?

Only to discover upon further questioning they had been deceived into disobedience and rebellion against Him.

It's presented this way to show how the violation truly violated the relationship and the blessings that came from it – it's not some impersonal law of nature, cause and effect – it was between Creator and creature, God and mankind.

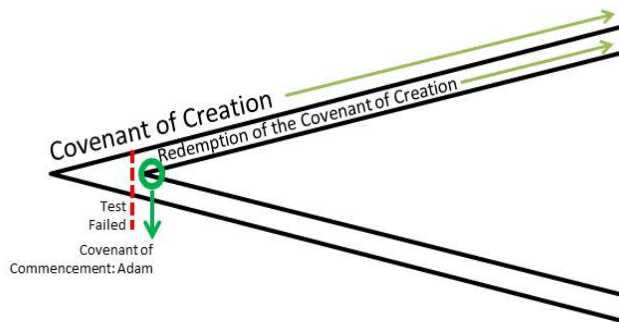
So, God must now pronounce and bring into effect through His Word the forewarned consequence of their actions – which is death.

But this is where we see God's grace and mercy and faithfulness show up. He mitigates the consequences – death, yes... but not immediately and not the extinction of

humanity – the purposes of the Covenant of Creation will still continue even with death on the horizon.

So God shows himself to be faithful to His Covenant intentions, and as He bring the consequences of the Covenant of Creation to bear, at the same time He is committing Himself to bring about events that will restore and redeem His original purposes and intentions for the Himself and Humanity in the Covenant of Creation.

This is the beginning of God’s commitment to Redemption and so we call this the Covenant of Commencement – and if I can help you picture how this is starting to look... it would look like this.



So the Covenant of Commencement is the *beginning* of a modified Covenant relationship with humanity that continues within the Covenant of Creation and carries through the stipulations of the Covenant of Creation – now modified and affected by the violation that took place – which we also call Sin.

And that’s another example of something that is better defined and understood by seeing it in the context of the Covenant – Sin, and it is possible to call this modified relationship a Covenant, and understand how it defines Sin, because it still meets all the criteria of a Covenant.

It is still a bond, demonstrated in that God seeks out Adam and Eve in spite of their disobedience and speaks to them, makes pronouncements about it and the consequences. It still deals with Life and Death, in what God speaks to Adam and Eve there is curse and blessing, life and death.

And it is still Sovereignly Administered. It is still God and God alone taking the initiative, seeking out Adam and his wife,

determining that this will not be the end, but the beginning of redemption and setting the terms and conditions of how the relationship will continue and redemption will be achieved.

So what do we learn from the Bond that God sovereignly speaks into existence that deals with life and death?

Well friends note the order in which God speaks to those involved in this violation – this sin...

To find out what happened He approaches the one with the responsibility, Adam - the one who should know better because He directly received the command from God himself.

And already we see the effects of this Sin upon the male-female partnership and upon the human divine relationship, and the human creation relationship.

“This woman that You put here... she gave me some and I ate.” (vs 12) all true yes – but twisted to lay blame and offer an excuse.

So God inquires of the woman and the response is *“The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”* True yes – but twisted to offer an excuse as well - your creature deceived me.

Then God pronounces the consequences of what has been done, addressing them in the order of their participation and perpetration of this Sin.

Thus the Serpent, the perpetrator and instigator of this rebellion is cursed first and told that whatever unholy alliance he had formed with the woman – God was going to put a stop to it, there would be enmity instead: opposition, hatred – divinely instituted between his offspring and the woman’s, and that eventually the woman’s offspring would crush His head.

And the prediction of this future clash and destruction gives us indication that when the scripture is speaking about “the serpent” here it does not simply mean an ordinary snake.

Yet the snake seems to serve well as a reference point for us to understand the nature and character of this interloper who has shown up to instigate rebellion in God's peaceful creation.

So Satan – the deceiver – is cursed and will crawl on his belly and eat dust all his days. Is this the first reference that we have to understand later biblical references about how Satan was cast down, cast out of heaven – and went from being the created angelic being Lucifer to the Ancient Serpent who leads the whole world astray? Perhaps... that what makes the most sense to me.

And so what we often see reflected in the character of snakes from our day to day experience – how they can be dangerous, poisonous, cold-hearted killers and so on – scripture uses to reveal something about the nature of the Deceiver and his curse to us. *(This does not mean snakes are inherently evil)*

And the good news here friends is that from the offspring of the woman – those who have enmity in their hearts: “the divine hatred of the serpent and his rebellious way against

God” one of them will crush the Deceiver, sure the serpent will inflict a painful bite on his heel but that will be nothing in comparison.

In declaring this God is pronouncing how it's going to be from now on. As humanity continues there will be those who set themselves against God in rebellion, to pursue autonomy and practice idolatry, and there will be those whom God prevents from doing this by His grace.

The offspring of the woman are those who remain faithful to the Covenant(s) that God is putting in place; the offspring of the serpent are those who rebel against it – and friends that is essentially the perspective which the scripture takes on the history of the world.

Now in cursing the serpent – God reveals blessing for the Woman; instead of instant death for eating the fruit of the tree – she will continue to live and she will bear children!

And what is an even greater blessing is that although she in her capacity as woman – intended to help Adam - is guilty of being the first to collaborate with Satan and thus bringing incurring the covenant consequences for all humanity...

God gives all womankind the honor of what is uniquely theirs in bearing children, to play the key role in the redemption of the Covenant of Creation and bringing about Satan's destruction.

Again – an example of how the context of the Covenant make it easier to make sense out of things, consider what Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:15 *“that women shall be saved through childbearing”* in light of this part of the blessing of the Covenant of Commencement.

But there is consequence as well – there must be for God had said there would be.

So when God speaks to the Woman, He reveals to her that her curse is pain in child-bearing – not just physical labor pains,

but in the original Hebrew the wording indicates a multiplication of sorrows that come from bearing many children into the world that will fall on either side of this clash between the woman and the serpent. To quote Shakespeare *“good wombs have born bad sons”*

And there is another consequence for woman. The image of God which was supposed to be reflected in male female marriage relationships / partnership which produces offspring will be distorted.

God says *“your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.”* Friends this is correctly understood in the sense that God is decreeing that as a consequence for her disobedience, marriage relationships will have a fundamental conflict in them where wives wish to possess and control their husband and husband aggressively dominate their wives.

Why? Because friends this consequence fits her covenant violation.

The woman's relationship was to be a helper to Adam; instead she played a role in offering him the forbidden fruit.

So the curse of relationship conflict is there to expose how Sin pushes us towards autonomy – to be independent... not only of each other, but ultimately from God. (*this why Paul always instructs wives to submit, and husbands to love – as counterpoint to this curse*)

And thus we are reminded of what God will be working to restore to the Covenant of Creation.

Now finally God addresses Adam, the one who bears the ultimate responsibility in this situation, and God is very blunt with him.

Because you listened to your wife and ate of the tree – which I commanded to not to eat from... cursed is the ground because of you! Though painful toil you will eat of it... curse and blessing.

Yes humanity will survive and food will be available and it will sustain life, but only for a limited time and it will be produced at a painful cost.

The ground will not co-operate, there will be thorns and thistles to contend with and a great deal of effort will be required to produce a little bit of food – and increase the temptation to not take Sabbath.

You will work the ground, and be sustained by it for a time, but only to return it... the ground, the creation does not give everlasting sustenance.

And friends, Adam's curse is there because it fits His covenant violation – the essence of what God's command was testing in him, that He is not God – and this will be driven home to him by this mortal existence.

And this experience also exposes the foolishness of Sin as it is expressed in Idolatry – which is confessing the believing and acting as if life comes from the creation and can sustain us.

Our mortal existence says otherwise, and this also reminds us of what God intends to restore to the Covenant of Creation.

So we've just covered what God spoke and declared would be the beginning of his Bond with humanity as He has committed Himself to restoring the Covenant of Creation - and so now you know what the Covenant of Commencement is all about and how it fits into our original relationship with God.

So how do we respond to this? Because whenever God speaks, especially when what He speaks bonds us to Him, it requires a response – a faithful Covenant response.

In two ways friends, first – we should take a cue from Adam's response and allow our faith to affect and shape how we see each other as men and women, and define our understanding of what our relationships to each other are all about.

What do I mean – well in response to all that has just been pronounced by God, the scripture says *“Adam named his wife*

Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.”
(vs. 20)

Now that sin has entered the world through them and there is conflict between husband and wife... Adam could have called his wife quite a few names – but instead He calls her Eve.

Adam believes God's promises about the offspring of the woman, and that life will be sustained and continue – even if his will not continue indefinitely – and He sees a new way that He and his wife will work together -to produce “the living.”

This is an appropriate response, because it recognizes the reality of the new context of how the relationship between God and humanity has changed – but also how that relationship will be restored... eventually... in spite of no evidence to the prove it at that point – only what God has spoken to them.

But Adam believed, called His wife Eve and this gives us an example of how to respond to God in faith.

So the second way we respond is in how our actions show that we understand and accept what this Covenant has to say to us about the reality of being male and female, about marriage and childbearing, working for a living, what nourishes and sustains our life and the practice of taking Sabbath.

And I know we are aware that it connects with all that somehow because as I was writing this message I was wrestling with how to cover material where I found myself cringing because of how it sounds to our post-modern ears.

For example Adam names his wife – that sounds so patriarchal! Even to those of us who aren't feminist... and so we're tempted to write it off or ignore it as "old testament" and forget about how we would even consider acting on it...

Or to have God say that the woman's curse will be to control and possess her husband and that the husband will rule over her – I was struggling to make myself communicate the full force of what the text says here, and not attempt to soften it or spin it so that it's not so offensive to us.

You see friends the reality is that hearing the terms and conditions of the Covenant of Commencement hits too close to home for us.

We all know the conflict between men and women, the pain of child bearing, the futility of feeling like we're working to survive to keep on working to survive and how that seems to make Sabbath a ridiculous prospect.

And yet our sinfulness wants to deny what the scripture reveals about the reality of these experiences because it would expose where God really intends for the changes to happen.

No one cringes when we read about the offspring of the woman who is going to crush the head of the serpent – because that's Satan getting what's coming to him.

And we're quite happy to confess that Jesus Christ is the promised offspring who fulfilled this promise – but then we leave off...

We're not quite willing to go as deep with what Jesus came to restore as what the Covenant of Commencement reveals to us.

And in fact – true to his nature as the Deceiver – Satan has actually twisted this to make people think that the curse is the way God wants things to stay, or to justify the abuse of women and the oppression of men.

But friends – Jesus Christ came as the long awaited fulfillment to the Covenant of Commencement – not just to defeat Satan but to restore what was established in Creation.

The curses have been lifted in Christ, and the blessings of the Covenant of Creation have been restored in Christ! As the apostle Paul says “Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation.” (2 Cor 5:17)

So those of us who are “IN Christ” we will have a very different understandings and beliefs about work, and marriage, male female relationships, childbearing, and what

we do and eat to sustain our life, than those who are not IN Christ – and where we cringe right now when we read Genesis 3 is probably where God needs to bring some restoration into our lives and help us gain a different understanding, a restored understanding.

And this restoration will show up in our actions, as we pursue these essential activities of life – work, marriage, family, sustenance and so on as God's Image Bearers together as male and female, ruling over creation and taking Sabbath.

The good news is that it can be – and will be – the way it was in the beginning once again...

What God started in the Covenant of Commence He wants to start in each of our lives – and bring it to completion through Jesus Christ, so that you are a New Creation.

May the Holy Spirit use what we have covered today to show you where He wants to go deeper and renew you and bring you to your Creational purpose. Amen.