

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Pastor Adam Parker

November 9th, 2025

Sermon Title: God Made a Covenant with Adam

Sermon Text: Romans 5:12-14

Rom. 5:10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

Rom. 5:11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Rom. 5:12 ¶ Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

Rom. 5:13 for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.

Rom. 5:14 Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

Main Point: In the Covenant of Works, God graciously promised Adam and his descendants eternal life upon perfect obedience, and death upon disobedience, with Adam standing as the federal head of the human race.

Outline:

1. The Covenant's Gracious Design
2. The Covenant's Representative Head
3. The Covenant's Tragic Breach

Introduction

Paul is telling us a story here in Romans 5. Now, the *larger* story here is the story of how Jesus Christ can lay his life down, and how we (even though we are sinners) can benefit from his life and death and resurrection. But to get there, he has to tell this other story first.

Long before Christ succeeded and died and rose again for his people, someone else did the opposite: he failed, but also his failure became our failure. So for Paul, Jesus and Adam are like flip sides of the same covenantal coin.

Adam was in a covenant with God and failed, as did his descendants. Jesus came in and kept the covenant Adam failed to keep, and in so doing he shared his life with all of his descendants.

And today Paul is set on helping us to make sense of how that can happen. And the concept he draws upon, which ties both of these stories (the story of Adam and the story of Christ) together is this idea of the covenant, and so we have to talk about covenants before we can really follow what Paul is telling us today.

Harrison Perkins, in his recent and very helpful book *Reformed Covenant Theology* gives this very helpful definition of a covenant. He says this:

“A covenant is a divinely sanctioned arrangement in which God sets the terms for his relationship with human beings. It includes promises and obligations, and it always involves God’s own initiative. A covenant is not a pact between equals or a contract based on mutual negotiation, but a sovereign administration by which God binds himself and his people in relationship.” (Perkins, p. 12)

I know that might seem like a mouth full, but essentially what Perkins is saying is this: A covenant is a relationship that God sets up with people—on His own terms—that includes both *His* promises and *our* responsibilities. What he will do, and how we will respond. It’s not a mutual contract, like when two people agree to something. Instead, it’s something God graciously initiates (in his sovereignty) and through it, He binds Himself to His people in love and purpose.

Why am I belaboring this idea that God's arrangement with Adam was a covenant?

First of all, I'm leaning on this because God's covenant with Adam helps us understand why we bear the guilt of Adam's original sin. So there is an apologetic angle here where we are helped to understand the fairness of the doctrine of original sin.

Second, it explains how it is that when Adam does what he does, all of us face the consequences of it. The word for this is federal headship. The covenant helps us understand how Adam could stand in our place before God.

Third, it helps us to understand God's dealings with us and what Christ did for us. The more we understand these things from Scripture, the more rich and fortified will be our appreciation of God's word and his mercy toward us.

I'm going to mention one more reason why it's important that we understand that God made a covenant with Adam: it helps to protect the distinction between law and grace, or if you like, works and grace.

Anthony Burgess, the Westminster divine, for example, said that if you understand the contrast between the covenant of works (which was given to Adam and his descendants) and the covenant of grace (which was given to Abraham and his descendants in Christ) then you have the backdrop for understanding justification by faith alone and why we cannot and will not be able to mingle our works into how we get justified.

So this is important and precious and will enrich your understanding of the gospel. And I want that for all of us. For some, this will be challenging. My job is to fight to make sure that's not the case for you today.

Paul is convinced of the faithfulness of God, the fairness of God, the goodness of God, and the graciousness of God. And Paul is very eager to show us how God can be just, and also gracious in Christ.

If we understand the idea of covenants (but especially this covenant between God and Adam), it will help us to really affirm God's goodness even though the fall took place. I think at rock bottom much of the modern hand-wringing over the idea of original sin comes from a failure to appreciate that God made a covenant with Adam, and that God made Adam the representative of all of his descendants.

Think of why all of this is here in this text today. Just take a step back a moment and ask, “Why is Paul talking about this?” Paul’s fundamental idea in this passage is to tell us how *we* are able to benefit from what *Jesus* has done. How, if we are in Christ, can we benefit from Christ if we are *not* Christ? How can God look at a sinner like you or me and say, “Not guilty. In fact: righteous”?

And Paul is saying, “Well God’s done it before, but the last time it went in the other direction.”

But to get at this question that Paul is dealing with in our text we have to appreciate this covenant. So I’m going to do my best in the time we have to build up your sense of this covenant between God and Adam with three points: first, the covenant’s gracious design; second, the covenant’s representative head; and third, the covenant’s tragic breach.

1. The Covenant’s Gracious Design

First today, we have the covenant’s gracious design.

To begin with, we know from Scripture that God made Adam upright, not fallen. We know in the garden that Adam was good, because God repeatedly refers to mankind as “good.” Adam was made in God’s image, without sin, and upright. He had the law written on his heart, and prior to the fall, he even had the power to keep that law. (Gen. 1:26–31; Eccl. 7:29; WCF 4.2).

It is within this upright condition that God’s covenant with Adam is realized. Now, even though Genesis doesn’t use the word ‘covenant,’ everything in God’s relationship with Adam has the shape of a covenant. God sets the terms, makes promises, gives a warning, and binds Adam and his descendants to those terms. Later Scripture, like Hosea 6:7, confirms that this was a covenant, even if the label wasn’t used right away. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, well it’s a duck.

Now, I said this covenant is “gracious,” but it’s not “gracious” in the sense of providing salvation, but it *is* gracious in the sense that God willingly was showing kindness on his creation by relating to us with promises, expectations, and obligations. In other words, it was gracious for God to even enter into a covenant

with us at all. To even know the mind of God and what he wills for us as creatures is incredibly gracious and kind of him.

I want you to see something else about the covenant of works. I want you to see that it has a legal character and reward. Even though Adam already owed God obedience as Creator, God still “voluntarily condescended” to offer a reward of everlasting life for perfect obedience (WCF 7.1–2). The covenant of works is not a saving covenant; instead it is a covenant of obedience and merit. It’s a covenant about getting what you deserve. It has a legal character. It is very much a covenant that says, “Do this and live.” Obey, and get the reward. Disobey, and be punished.

Adam was expected to obey God out of love and devotion, without fault or sin. From the beginning, the expectation wasn’t just to do what God said, but to do it from the heart, from a place of love and devotion.

What is the command that Adam is given? The command is in the negative. God issues a prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16–17). In the context of the garden, this was a concrete way for Adam to express covenant loyalty to God. Now, there are all kinds of debates and discussions by theologians about the tree, what the tree meant, why it had the power that it did, and this would be a very long sermon if we went there.

But for our purposes, here is what is important: the tree was clearly forbidden to Adam, and he was told the consequences of eating from the tree. So Adam is in a gracious covenantal arrangement with God where he stands to gain eternal life or experience death.

It is in this situation that we see another aspect of Adam’s covenant with God: he stands in as the representative for all of his descendants.

2. The Covenant’s Representative Head

This takes us right to our second point which we see in this passage today, which is the covenant’s representative head.

By God’s design, Adam stood for “all men” (Rom. 5:12, 14; 1 Cor. 15:21–22). And what that means is that his action in the garden would count for his posterity.

Here is Paul's language in verse 12: "Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."

Notice a few things here. First, he doesn't say that Adam was the only one who sinned. Paul says, sin began with one man. Right? "Sin came into the world through one man." It is this one man that Paul says is the one through whom sin came to all of us.

Now, there's one more part of verse 12 that is very important: The phrase at the end of Romans 5:12 where Paul says, "because all sinned." Death spread to all men because all sinned. He doesn't just say that all were treated like they sinned, but says that "all sinned."

Paul is saying that in Adam, all humans sinned because Adam was their representative. That is, when Adam sinned, his guilt was legally imputed to everyone he represented. It couldn't mean anything else because we did not all exist yet when Adam sinned. And yet Paul says that we all sinned when death entered the world and spread. So this final clause is not saying that each person sinned individually and thus inherited death. Paul says that death came *because all sinned*—but he doesn't mean personal acts of sin. Rather, he means we all sinned in Adam as our representative head.

Something else helps to hammer this home: the consistent use in this passage of "one man" and "one transgression." Where did all this trouble come from? One man who committed one transgression. By the way, next week we will talk about this concept of original guilt. We see that right here: all of Adam's descendants are guilty of Adam's one transgression, not every transgression that Adam or his descendants committed after it, but the first one. The original one.

Another thing that's worth considering: Sin and death are treated as actual objective realities that enter the world as reigning powers, and they do so through the one sin of one particular man. Paul says that Adam's actions ushered something new into creation. This pushes against the ideas of some that sin is merely a negative influence or a bad example. That's what Pelagius believed. But it's not just a bad influence that we see and copy. It is something that actually came into the world. It spread, and we can see it all around us, even in little children.

Paul isn't just saying we all sin like Adam, or that we copy him—he's saying we all sinned in Adam. His one act was our act. His guilt is our guilt. Why? Because God appointed him to stand for us all. We were all there in him. And as much as we stood to lose through Adam, we also stood to gain through Adam. Just as his disobedience yielded death, his obedience would have meant life for him and all of his descendants as well. We stood to gain just as we stood to lose in the covenant of works.

Now, before we move to the next point, there is something that I feel is important to say. Sometimes people mistakenly think that this idea that is sometimes called covenant theology was invented by the Reformers and by much later theologians. It is true that the Reformers made incredible progress in helping to open up this topic of the covenants, but they really weren't ultimately saying things that had not already been taught in the church.

One of the most extraordinary examples of this teaching in the early church is Irenaeus. Irenaeus was an early church father, who wrote an incredible book around 175 AD, and that book is called *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. It's actually a very incredible book, very readable, and worth your attention. Now, even though he doesn't use the terminology that later students of covenant theology would use, we see all of these themes of covenant theology being used by Irenaeus to explain the fall of Adam. So for example, Irenaeus says this:

“By the disobedience of that one man who was first formed from virgin soil, the many were made sinners and forfeited life” (Demonstration 31).

Here he is in his book *Against Heresies*:

“We were in the loins of Adam when he was condemned to death... and we too have become subject to death.”

I'm giving you this because I want you to see: The early church fathers recognized that we were in Adam, not just physically but also morally and spiritually. Irenaeus is drawing up this idea of federal headship, even if that terminology isn't being used quite yet. But it shows, I think, that these are not only Pauline ideas, and not

only idea from the Reformers, but really that these are small-c catholic ideas that have been around far earlier in the church than we might think.

3. The Covenant's Tragic Breach

Third, very briefly I need to mention the covenant's tragic breach.

I want to be brief because we will talk about this in greater depth next week, but I'd be remiss if we didn't go here.

When Adam commits the one transgression, we all commit the one transgression with him as our head. Paul says that through this one man's one sin, death spread to all (Rom. 5:12). We inherit both guilt (because in Adam, we committed Adam's one transgression) and we inherit a corrupt nature (because Adam and all of his descendants experienced death because of his one sin which he and we are guilty of).

Please note the universal reach of this curse. Even those without the written law die, showing that every human being has solidarity with Adam, according to verses 13 and 14 of this passage.

One of the most painful and tragic realities that many of us know firsthand is the death of children. Though they have not yet committed any sin, they experience death.

This is personal for me. I've shared it before, but my wife and I lost two twins when they were 20 weeks along. It was said that 11 of the Puritan John Owen's children died in infancy or early childhood. Some of you in this very room have experienced the loss of your own children who were far too young to have yet committed any sins of their own.

And here is the question: if death is just a sickness or sin is just a hereditary condition (in other words, if Adam wasn't in a covenant of works with God) then that creates a very real dilemma for the justice of God. Because it means that this world is filled with innocents who have suffered the effects of sin even though they bear no guilt for sin at all.

And yet David says in Psalm 51, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (51:5).

Later the Psalmist says in Psalm 58, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies” (Ps. 58:3).

Genesis 8:21 says, “The intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth.”

Scripture is showing us that sin isn’t something we learn over time—it’s something we’re born with. From David’s confession in Psalm 51 to Paul’s teaching here in Romans 5, we see that even the youngest among us stand in need of grace because we all come from Adam, and in him we all sinned.

And yet Paul is very clear that death spread to all men because all sinned. We will talk more about original sin next week, but for now, we need to understand that we all bear the guilt of Adam’s first sin. Because of this, there is a sense in which none of us are innocents. We are all in Adam. Even the sweetest babies in this room. And therefore we are all under the sentence of death. We have all taken the fruit: young and old. Babies, children, parents, grandparents... all of us. We have done it.

Now, we may struggle with this. We may not like it. But here's the thing: this concept of federal headship is actually, according to Paul here, the very thing that makes it possible for us all to be represented by Christ.

So don’t give up this idea of federal headship. Don’t dismiss it. Because here’s the larger point Paul has been moving us towards: If Adam’s sin can count for others, then so can Christ’s righteousness can count for others. And that gives hope, even in the face of heartbreaking loss.

Conclusion

We’ve been talking a lot today about the covenant of works: the covenant God made with Adam. The covenant of works shows why salvation must come through another covenant head—the Lord Jesus Christ—who fulfills all righteousness and brings life (Rom. 5:15–19). The first covenant head failed. And in him we all failed. But that covenant of works is still in effect, and someone had to keep that first

covenant. So what is our hope? Someone who did fulfill all righteousness and keep God's law perfectly from the heart. That's our hope.

The hope is there in verse 14, because Paul calls Adam "a *type* of the one to come," meaning his covenant headship points forward to Christ's. This word "type" is important because it infuses even this hard message with hope. A "type" refers to someone or something that looks ahead to a greater fulfillment.

That's Adam. He's a type. The head of a race of men who shared in what he had, which was sin and death. But he makes us look ahead to another head who has something great for his descendants. Because in Christ, all who are in him will find life.

How can you have that? The Bible says, it is through faith in Jesus Christ. Not through works, not through associating with the right group, not through doing some ceremony... the bible is clear, it is by resting in Christ and receiving him for ourselves. Repent and believe is how Jesus and John the Baptist both preached. That hope is still alive, because Christ is alive.

I want to end by going back to the early church father Irenaeus again. I want to end on an optimistic and hopeful note, because that's exactly what Paul does (and hope is where he's going). The doctrine of original sin is just, right, and fair, but it's not the end of the story.

Listen to this from Irenaeus as we conclude: "As by the disobedience of one man, who was first formed from the virgin soil, the many were made sinners and forfeited life; so it was necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was first born of the Virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation" (*Demonstration* 31).

Let's pray.