

Chapter Two

What does it mean to know God?

The Covenant God of the Sabbath

You shall keep my sabbaths
and reverence my sanctuary:
I am the Lord.

Leviticus 26:2

God is the only true and satisfying source of life. The creation of the world is a demonstration of this fundamental fact (Rom. 1:20). But the creation also drives this point home by its own inadequacy. Every attempt to squeeze a reason for living out of this world or its goods in isolation from our creator ultimately runs dry, leaving the idolater unfulfilled, frustrated and bitter. The limitations of creation are a billboard for the sufficiency of God. He alone can meet our deepest needs.

God knows, therefore, that his people will be happy only when they honor him "as God" by fulfilling their role as those created in his image. Hence, God's insistence that he alone be worshipped and that our exercise of dominion should be done in dependence on him is not an expression of an evil egotism but an overture of love. God has created us in such a way that our fulfillment is wrapped up in experiencing his presence and displaying his glory. When God insists that he alone be our God, he is insisting on our happiness, since nothing compares with God when it comes to satisfying our longings.

It follows that if God did not insist that we worship him alone, we would have to conclude that God is evil, or a least twofaced, since he would not be directing us

unmistakably to the one thing we desperately need. Of course, if he insisted that we worship him alone, but could not meet our needs because of his own limitations, then we would accuse him of "false advertising." But because God is both able and willing to meet our needs on the one hand, and since he demands that we worship him alone on the other, the Bible declares that God is not only all powerful, but also all-loving. God's demands are all expressions of his loving response to our dependence as creatures made in his likeness.

So down through the centuries God's message remained both simple and all encompassing: the God who created the world would accompany, lead, protect and provide for his people if they looked to him alone to do so. As Israel's words of worship and wisdom put it,

Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4).

In all your ways acknowledge him
and he will make straight your paths (Proverb 3:6).

The Problem with People

Nevertheless, when it comes to God, people are fickle. In the battle between the seen and the unseen, tangible delights usually win. The wicked road leading to destruction is paved with instant gratification (see Matt. 6:19-20; 7:13; James 5:1-6). Even my son at six years old was hard pressed when faced with the choice of saving his birthday money for the toy he had "always wanted," or immediately spending it on cheaper trinkets (usually wrapped in fancy packaging) that were doomed to perish sooner than later (often before we got home!). One would think that the better toy would surely

win out. But it seldom did.

Unfortunately, we "adults" do not fare any better. Too often we trade the promise of enjoying God forever for the transitory pleasures offered by the world. After all, "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6:10), because it seeks its security and self-worth in material things as a substitute provision for God's presence.

So as the letter to the Hebrews warns us,

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have; for (God) has said, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." Hence we can confidently say (which should deliver us from relying on money so save us),

"The Lord is my helper,

I will not be afraid;

what can man do to me?" (Heb. 13:5-6; Ps. 118:6)

Nevertheless, we are blinded by that love. As C. S. Lewis observed,

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹

The Sabbath as a Signpost

God, of course, knows this about us. So, as yet another expression of his love and mercy, God has left us with signposts that point us back to the only real and reliable source of life whenever we lose our way among the glitter and gold of this world. Nature

itself is one such witness to the glory and sufficiency of God (Ps. 19:1-4). But nature is also very ambiguous. Without a word from God about its meaning, it remains silent concerning salvation and, in its fallen state, even misleading. For every sunset and waterfall there is an avalanche and tidal wave. While it is true that God's "eternal power and deity" are "clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:20), nature by itself cannot communicate God's grace and forgiveness, nor God's unswerving commitment to provide for his people.

In order to make these realities clear, God intervened. In doing so, he left his people with an unmistakable message of his desire and ability to provide for his people. Thus, in Psalm 19, the silent testimony of creation, which often goes unheard, gives way to "the law of the Lord," which is the perfect and sure testimony of the Lord that, as the pathway to life, "enlightens the eyes" and preserves God's people from the error of idolatry (Ps. 19:7-8; cf. Ps. 1:1-3; 119:33-40, 105).

Moreover, the history of Israel recorded in the Old Testament is the strategy God designed to teach his people in every generation this basic truth. God's plan for Israel, from the call of Abraham through the judgment of the Exile, is carefully orchestrated to illustrate the depth of God's love, the surety of his commitments, the disastrous consequences of idolatry, and the contours of the redemption to come in Christ (Luke 24:25-27; 1 Cor. 10:1-13).²

The central pillar of this plan was the Sabbath. The Sabbath was Israel's constant reminder of the truths first declared in the creation.³ Its purpose was to jog Israel's memory week after week concerning God's sufficiency, since our memory, even of God's greatest miracles, is short lived. This is painfully illustrated by the fact that just two and

a half months after the splitting of the Red Sea, when faced with adversity, "the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness" (Exodus 16:2)! Arising out of the creation account itself, the Sabbath decree, like a piece of string tied around her finger, never let Israel forget that the sovereign Lord of creation and history was the only one who could be depended upon to meet her needs.

The Good News of God's Rest

The importance of the Sabbath in the relationship between God and his people is further underscored by its inclusion as the third of the Ten Commandments. Note too how the keeping of the Sabbath is linked directly to the creation account as the basis for the command itself:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it (Exod. 20:8-11).

The Ten Commandments, like the Torah as a whole (Genesis through Deuteronomy), look both backward and forward from the perspective of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. As the Pentateuch presents it, the exodus, the Sinai experience, and covenant that flow from them are the lens through which Israel's pre-history, from creation to the call of Abraham and the enslavement of his descendants, and

subsequent history, from the golden calf to the exile, are to be understood. It is not surprising, then, that the reason for not working on the seventh day of the week, the "Sabbath" (the name itself comes from the Hebrew verb that means "to cease" or "to rest") is that God too took a "rest" after creating the world (Gen. 2:1-3).

But why did God rest? Certainly, God was not tired. God's Sabbath was not the rest of exhaustion. Rather, God ceased from his labors because his work was "finished"; there was nothing more for him to do (see Genesis 2:1-2). God's rest after his week of "hard work" thus indicated by his actions what he declared earlier in his word, namely, that his creation was "very good" (Gen. 1:31). God's job was done. God's Sabbath was like the rest a metal smith takes after the final polishing has been applied to the fashioned piece and the pendant is complete. God rested on the Sabbath because the world he had just made was perfectly suited to meet the needs of mankind and, in doing so, to display the glories of its creator. The Sabbath is a sign that the world he created was just the way God wanted it.

God's "rest" on the last day of the creation was therefore the rest of satisfaction and a stamp of approval on his work. As such, God "hallowed" the Sabbath, or set it apart, which is the same as saying he made it "holy" (Gen. 2:3; Exod. 20:11). The Sabbath is God's unique declaration of the good news that his provision for his people was perfect.

Keeping the Sabbath

Not only did God's "rest" make a divine statement about the nature of creation, it also set a pattern for his people. Just as God's Sabbath declares his creation to be the perfect provision, so too God's people must "keep the Sabbath" as their corresponding

expression of faith and gratitude toward God as their creator and provider. For Israel, each week is to be a reenactment of the week of creation. God's people are to "work" for six days running the world and being nourished from it, just as God worked six days to provide it. By doing so they take dominion over God's creation as he commanded them. Then, after six days of enjoying God's provision, a day of rest is enjoyed as an echo of God's declaration that his creation is good and his provision perfect.

Thus, by not working on the Sabbath, God's people proclaim about creation what God himself said about it when he "rested": God's provision is all they need to fulfill his calling in their lives. Like God, his people do not rest on the Sabbath because they are exhausted or need a break (if so, that would imply that they could go on working if physically or emotionally able to do so!). Rather, God's people rest because they are content in God and his will. Conversely, to break the third commandment is to issue a complaint concerning what God has provided in the past and to distrust him for the future. Why else would Israel work seven days a week unless she was convinced that what God had given her during the week was not enough?

In Israel's history, this kind of complaint and lack of faith, manifested under the Sinai covenant in part by working on the Sabbath, took many other forms as well, the most common being idolatry (the first commandment) and covetousness (the last commandment). At their core, however, all such complaints are the same. Working on the Sabbath, when God rested on it, threw disdain on his gifts, like the toy-crazed child who throws a tantrum when the last Christmas present has been opened because he wants more, or the man who works two jobs instead of spending more time with his family because he "needs" a cabin on a lake or that extra bit of savings to feel safe about his

future. To crave more than God has given is an idolatrous rejection of his love. For Israel to work on the Sabbath was to call God's Sabbath a lie. To love God is to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," or "set apart" because of one's contentment in God's provisions and faith in his promises for the future.

The Sabbath as a Statement of Faith

The centrality of the command to keep the Sabbath can also be seen in the four additional things said about it in Exodus 31:12-17:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel,
 "You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me
 and you throughout your generations, that you may know
 that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the sabbath,
 because it is holy for you; every one who profanes it shall
 be put to death; whoever does any work on it, that soul shall
 be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be
 done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to
 the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be
 put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the sabbath,
 observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual
 covenant. It is a sign for ever between me and the people of Israel
 that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh
 day he rested, and was refreshed."

First, there is no more important command than keeping the Sabbath. Even its position within the giving of the Law signifies its preeminence. The Sabbath is the first

commandment given to Israel, being issued even before she gets to Mt. Sinai (cf. Exod. 16:22-30!), and, as just quoted, the last commandment given to Moses for the people before he returns from atop the mountain (Exodus 31:12-17). As such, the command to keep the Sabbath, established in response to the exodus as God's "new creation" of his people (cf. Isaiah 43:1-2, where God's act of redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt is portrayed as an act of creation), establishes the framework for understanding the Sinai covenant. Like bookends, the command to keep the Sabbath secures the content of God's relationship with Israel as established at the exodus and implemented with the Sinai covenant.

As in the first creation, at the exodus God "creates" Israel by acting to meet her needs and by committing himself to sustain the people as they follow him through the wilderness into the promised land. The promised land, like Eden, was a microcosm of the world from which Israel was to mediate God's glory to the ends of the earth as a kingdom of priests (cf. Exodus 19:6). Like God's preparing the empty world to meet the needs of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:2-2:3, God's delivering Israel and bringing her through the wilderness to Canaan was a demonstration of his power and promise to provide for his people in the land in order that they might fulfill their mandate (see Deuteronomy 32:10).⁴

Again, the sign of this divine provision and the basis of this mandate was the Sabbath, marking out Israel as the people with whom God had once again, as he had done with Adam, entered into a sabbath relationship. For this reason, Israel's new life as God's people began with the Sabbath as God's reassurance to her that he was indeed committed to fight to save her (cf. Exodus 14:13-14; 16:22-30). In turn, God's instructions

concerning the worship of Israel in the Tabernacle climaxed with the Sabbath as Israel's response of praise for God's provision (see Exodus 25:1-31:11).

Hence, the significance of the Sabbath in Israel's history cannot be over-emphasized. It is God's statement to Israel that she is his chosen, covenant people, to whom alone he is committed to lead, guide, provide, and deliver from evil as the unique recipients of his love. At the same time, it is Israel's statement to God that he is her covenant God, to whom alone she will grant her worship in word and deed by resting in his will, trusting in his sustenance, praising him in every circumstance, and turning to him in time of need. So no labor, no matter how holy or important, takes precedence over the Sabbath rest. And Exodus 34:21 makes clear that this applies even to the most urgent time of year, the harvest:

Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you
shall rest; in plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.

Second, Exodus 31:16-17 declares that the practice of keeping the Sabbath is a perpetual one. The Sabbath serves as an ongoing demonstration that the God who rested has chosen and separated out Israel to be his people. Thus, God's people are commanded to keep the Sabbath continually in response to God's election, and as an expression of their faith in his ongoing commitment to them. To do otherwise would be to deny that the creator is also the sustainer. For as the Lord declared through Ezekiel,

I gave them my statutes and showed them my ordinances by
whose observance man shall live. Moreover I gave them my
sabbaths as a sign between me and them, that they might know
that I the Lord sanctify them (Ezek. 20:11-12, see Exod. 31:13).

This is why nothing is more important in Israel's life than keeping of the Sabbath – it reflects her continuing identity and irrevocable calling as God's own people, those uniquely privileged to know the Creator of the world and enjoy his sovereign provision.

For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the

Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? (Deut. 4:7).

Third, God commanded the Sabbath to be kept as a "sign forever between me and the people of Israel" (Exod. 31:17). The Sabbath signifies something fundamental about God's relationship to his people. As we have seen, it is a weekly bulletin that God, as Creator of the world, not only can, but also will meet Israel's needs, because she is his chosen people. From the beginning of Israel's existence as God's covenant people, the Sabbath stood firm as a divinely given memorial to the commitment he had made to his people. For her part, Israel was to "rest on the Sabbath" as a reminder of what she should do every day in relationship to the Creator who is committed to be her Provider, namely, "call upon him" to meet her needs.⁵ Keeping the Sabbath is a sign that one is resting in God's care.

Finally, because nothing is more important than what keeping the Sabbath signifies, Exodus 31:14-15 warns Israel that "everyone who profanes it shall be put to death." Just as the command to keep the Sabbath picks up God's Sabbath at creation, so too the death penalty for breaking the Sabbath picks up the death penalty instituted in the garden of Eden for breaking the first Sabbath (cf. Genesis 2:17). The relationship between God and Adam and Eve in the garden is now reestablished between God and Israel in the wilderness.

Hence, as in the garden, so too under the Sinai covenant, the significance of the

Sabbath is reflected in the severity of the punishment for breaking it. Breaking the Sabbath is a manifestation of not trusting in God to meet one's needs. And not to trust God to meet one's needs is to dishonor his glory as creator and provider. The consequence of not honoring God is judgment. Thus, we read in Numbers 15:32-36 that,

While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him in custody, because it had not been made plain what should be done to him. And the Lord said to Moses, "The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp."

And all the congregation brought him outside the camp, and stoned him to death with stones, as the Lord commanded Moses.

The Covenant at Creation

The parallel between the establishment of the Sabbath under the Sinai covenant and its original existence in the garden of Eden demonstrates that from the beginning of creation a "covenant" relationship existed between God and his people. Like a "treaty" or a "marriage," a "covenant" is a particular kind of political or legal arrangement that establishes the type of relationship that exists between two parties. And like all such arrangements, a covenant holds the relationship together by expressing its foundation, stipulations, and future expectations.

There are, of course, different kinds of relationships, and hence different kinds of arrangements. We do not establish a political treaty the way we do a marriage (at least

not any more!). The call to love one another as equals because we have become "one flesh" in marriage would hardly work in a peace treaty after an unconditional surrender in a war! Nor do we have the same kinds of stipulations and expectations in a business deal that we have in church membership, etc.

In the same way, the covenant relationship between God and his people has its own particular foundation and character. Working on the Sabbath demanded the death penalty because, as in the garden of Eden, it broke the unique covenant bonds between God and his people. Thus, in order to understand the precise contours of this "covenant" we must return to what it means to be created in the "image of God" as the foundation for our relationship with God.

In addition to Genesis 1:26-27, 5:3, and 9:6 (see chapter one), there is a fourth text that reflects directly on what it means to be created in God's image. Though Psalm 8:3-6 does not mention the "image of God" explicitly, it expresses by way of summary the significance of being created in God's image.

When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the
son of man that thou dost care for him?
Yet thou hast made him little less than God,
and dost crown him with glory and honor.
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of
thy hands;
thou hast put all things under his feet

As the psalm makes clear, mankind is a created being. At that level, the "son of man" is like a caterpillar or an oak tree. Humanity has no self-sufficiency. It is not innately immortal, self-creating, or sustaining. It owes its very existence to another. Men and women are creatures made by God, and within the cosmos that God has created, we are seemingly very small and insignificant creatures at that. It is hardly possible even to see the planet earth on a star map, let alone find my street address. We are dwarfed by the heavens.

Yet, the psalmist marvels that God has made men and women "little less than God and crowned [them] with glory and honor" in a way not true of any other aspect of God's creation. Like the rest of creation, we are of course not glorious in ourselves. However, unlike the rest of creation, we alone are created and called to manifest his glory and honor to the ends of the earth as we rule and reign over the world that God has given us as an act of his sovereign provision. We are "more" than the rest of creation in that the Lord has granted to us "dominion over the works of his hands" (Ps. 8:6). We are "less" than God because this dominion was given to us (not earned!) by the Lord (not ourselves!). Dominion is not an inherent right or something that we have earned by our wisdom and will power, but a gift of creation. We were made in God's image.

So we do not deserve the world we rule. Our "crown of glory and honor" is the crown of dominion over "the works of his hands." Our dominion over the world is to be carried out in dependence on God as his creatures, so that God gets all the glory for our lives. As a result, our "crown" is a reflection of God's glory, who is the ultimate and only "King." As his vice-regents, God has put us under his feet and put all things under our feet. This is why we emphasize that the image of God is a functional term expressing

our relationship with God and with the rest of his created order by which God is glorified.

"Simply put, humans are God's representatives on earth . . . Humans exercise their 'imaging' of God by relating to their Creator and by ruling the animals and the earth according to the Lord's command."⁶ It is striking and necessary, therefore, that Psalm 8, a psalm about the glory and honor of humanity, begins and ends with a declaration of praise to God's majesty (Ps. 8:1, 9).

Though an ephemeral creature in comparison to the stars,
adam is the one elevated to be God's representative on earth,
 the one with whom God enters into personal relationship,
 and the one in whom the praise of the whole creation can
 become vocal. "There is only one legitimate image through
 whom God is manifest in the world and that is humankind
" This is what prompts the hymnic praise of the psalmist.
 It is not just that the Creator pays attention to this transient
 human creature. Far more than that: the Creator's grace is
 displayed by elevating human beings to a supreme place in
 the creation, crowning them as kings and queens and putting
 the whole earth at their disposal.⁷

In line with this truth, when the narrative of the creation of humanity continues in Genesis 1:27-31, Adam and Eve "wake up," look around, and see that everything they need has already been given to them. Note carefully the order of creation: God does not first create Adam and Eve, wake them up, and then say, "If you keep my commandment to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion, then I will give you everything you need

for sustenance." God does not give them an unformed wilderness to tame into a garden, but a paradise in which to live. God does not say in Genesis 1:27-31, "Be fruitful and multiply and then I will give you every plant for food." Instead he declares, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion" (Gen. 1:28), because I have already given you everything you need (Gen. 1:1-25, 29-31).

In Genesis, chapter one, the commands to Adam and Eve in verse 28 are framed by the prior provisions of God. God gives Adam and Eve dominion as those created in his image before he calls them to exercise it. Being in the image of God precedes acting like God. The order of creation here is all-important. The command to have dominion is not the call for Adam and Eve to go out and secure for themselves something they have not already been promised. The commands of Genesis 1:28 are, in essence, the call to express in their daily lives, as they extend God's rule and reign to the ends of the earth, their continuing dependence on God for his provision. For given the nature of God's command (to go out and subdue the world in the days to come), God's activity of provision in the past must bring with it a continuing commitment on God's part to provide for Adam and Eve in the future, signified by God's sabbath rest. The keeping of the command of God in Genesis 1:28 is nothing more than an expression of depending upon the provision of God in 1:1-25, as God restates it in Genesis 1:28b, 1:29, and 1:30.

In other words, the Sabbath signifies a promise from God that he has and will provide everything they need, so that there is not anything he will have to do that he has not already committed himself to perform. Without such a promise, humanity's exercise of dominion would, in the end, rebound to their own glory and honor as they pushed on beyond God's original provisions to subdue the world in their own strength and wisdom.

But God's sabbath rest at creation brings with it the promise that we will never outstrip God's grace. We will never go further than God has gone. We will never find ourselves in a place God has not provided. In a word, God's provision is sufficient for all our future endeavors of exercising dominion in his name. Understood from this perspective, God declares everything to be "very good" in Genesis 1:31 because it reveals his glory as manifest in the obedience of his people, since their obedience is what dependence on God's provision looks like when it goes "public."

This is why it was so important in our last chapter to emphasize that God's sabbath rest in Genesis 2:1-3 is the conclusion to the creation narrative, not the beginning of a new series of events (the chapter heading in our Bibles at Genesis "2:1" is misleading at this point!). The climax of creation is not the creation of Adam and Eve, but God's rest from his work, which he takes precisely because he has finished providing Adam and Eve everything they need in order to keep his commands. What does it mean, then, for Adam and Eve to keep the Sabbath in the garden of Eden, or for Israel to do so in the wilderness? It means to trust God's promises for the future, as secured and implied in his provision from the past, so that they are willing and able to obey his commandments in the present. In other words, "keeping the Sabbath" in the present is based on God's "sabbath rest" in the past, since it is God's "Sabbath," as the climax of creation, that declares the sufficiency of his provisions and commitment for the future.

Hence, although the word "covenant" is not used in Genesis 1-3 (but cf. Hosea 6:7, where Israel's disobedience to the covenant is compared to Adam's disobedience in the garden), there is from the beginning of creation the establishment of the same covenant relationship that will exist between God and his people throughout redemptive

history: First, God acts to provide for his people as an expression of his ongoing commitment to meet their needs; then, and only then, he calls them to respond by keeping the commands that flow from and are made possible by this provision. So God demands what he demands because of what he has given. God calls Adam and Eve to exercise dominion over the earth because he has already provided for them everything they need to fulfill that command. In this way, God establishes a covenant relationship with his people in which he becomes their God, with all this entails in terms of his commitment to continue to exercise his power to provide for his people. In turn, they become his people, with all this entails in terms of their commitment to trust in God's promises and provisions alone. As a result, "I will be their God and they shall be my people" becomes the basic covenant formula in the Bible.⁸

Clearly, then, from the very beginning, the covenant relationship is based on God as provider. Moreover, the establishment of the Sabbath at creation makes it clear that God reveals the magnificence of his sovereignty and love by providing for his people. Conversely, God's people glorify his majesty, perfection, sovereign self-sufficiency, integrity, and overflowing love by trusting him to do so. As Genesis 1:26-28 demonstrate, this trust shows itself in obedience to God's commands, the keeping of which is at the heart of what it means to be in a covenant relationship with God. So the Giver gets the glory as his provision and promises are reflected in the dominion exercised by those created in his image. The recipients of God's gifts honor him by obeying his commands as the outward display of their desire for and trust in the sufficiency of his grace.

The dominion of the dependent one reflects the sufficiency and trustworthiness of the one upon whom he rests. It follows, then, as John Piper has put it so well, that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."⁹ This principle, embodied in the Sabbath, stands at the center of the covenant relationship established by God at the creation of the world.

The Covenant Structure of the Bible

The covenant structure established in the garden of Eden provides the basis and contours of the relationship between God and his people throughout history. As I read the Bible, this one, unified covenant structure runs from the beginning of time into eternity. Now and forever, God remains God and we remain his people, wholly dependent upon his grace granted to us from the beginning of creation.

Whether or not we call the relationship between God and Adam and Eve at creation a "covenant" (since the specific word "covenant" is not used in Genesis 1-3), the important thing to keep in mind is that this relationship does not begin with humanity. God's first word to Adam and Eve is not a word of command, but a word of provision. Furthermore, God's acts of provision are sovereign and free acts of grace. Nobody forces God to create, provide, rescue, or deliver his people. God's second word is the command that flows from this gift of grace. And, as Genesis 2:17 makes clear, God's third word is a promise of blessing or curse based on the keeping or breaking of his commands as they flow from and reflect the reality of God's provision. Moreover, these "three words" are not isolated, but inextricably interwoven.

This threefold covenant structure may be outlined as follows:

God's Unconditional Acts of Provision
by which he Establishes the Covenant Relationship

(The Provisions and Promises of the Covenant,
given as an act of grace in the past)

which leads to

The Covenant Stipulations or "Conditions"
upon which the Covenant Relationship is Maintained
(The Commands of the Covenant
to be kept in the present)

which leads to

The Covenant Promises or Curses
based on keeping or not keeping the Covenant
(The Consummation of the Covenant Promises or Curses,
to be fulfilled in the future)

The unbreakable link between these three elements within our covenant relationship with God means that obedience to God's will (i.e., keeping the covenant stipulations) is the direct and outward expression of trusting in God's promises as granted in his prior acts of provision. On the one hand, God initiates and provides; on the other hand, we respond by keeping his commandments, all of which express in different ways the fundamental call to trust in God alone for our future. Indeed, there is no place in the Bible where God ever comes to any of his people and says, "I have provided you with an opportunity to secure the blessing of knowing me and the grace of my provisions. But it is up to you to make the first move. Merit my blessings by keeping my commands; earn my blessings by doing my will." Instead, God always makes the first and decisive move by approaching us with his great acts of provision and/or deliverance as acts of unconditional grace. Moreover, as we will see, part of God's provision and deliverance is the ability itself to respond to his subsequent calls for obedience that we might inherit his covenant blessings.

These great acts of divine provision and/or deliverance, from the creation of the

world to the exodus from Egypt, and from Christ's death and resurrection to his return to judge the world in righteousness, together with God's constant work in the hearts and wills of his people, are not simply isolated acts of divine power and love. They are the means by which God brings us into a relationship with him as "his people."

Consequently, God's provisions never stand alone. Every act of God's provision, which brings with it promises for the future, inevitably leads to a command that embodies our response to the God who provides. These commands depend on and express the reality of what God has done, is doing, and will do on our behalf. God's demands correspond to his gifts, past, present, and future.

In doing so, the commands of the covenant make clear the conditions by which our relationship with God will continue by indicating the ways that his gifts are to be honored by those who have received them. God's acts in the past make possible and undergird his promises for the future, which lead to commands in the present. The converse is also true. The promises or curses of God for the future are dependent upon keeping or not keeping his commands in the present as they flow from what God has done in the past.

As we will see in the chapters ahead, this inextricable link between God's gifts, promises, and commands exists because every act of disobedience reveals, at its root, a failure to delight in and depend on God's provisions in the past and promises for the future. Conversely, hope in God's promises because of faith in his character reveals itself in obedience to his commands. The commands of God consequently map out the way in which we magnify the surpassing value, power, and love of God in our lives.

Our lives of faith's obedience, summarized in the command to love others, thus

fulfill God's purpose of revealing the glorious nature of his character in the world. As Jesus taught his disciples, we are to let our "light so shine before men, that they may see [our] good works [of love, even loving our enemies!] and give glory to [our] Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Moreover, inasmuch as God created us to reveal his glory through our "dependent dominion" over our own corner of the globe, exercised through love (!), only those who honor God with their lives will fulfill their own purpose for being, thereby finding the glad satisfaction and security we all seek. The glory of God is the good of his people.¹⁰

We must be careful here. The nature of our relationship with God is all-important, since God's glory and our happiness as his people, which are forever intertwined, are at stake. Given the structure and logic of the covenant relationship we have with God, how we act in the present, i.e., our keeping God's covenant stipulations, can never ever be considered earning or meriting God's blessing in any way, shape, or form. The call to trust-obey God in the present, in order to inherit God's promises for the future, is based solely on what God has done for us in the past, which brings with it his ongoing commitment to us here and now. Hence, the call to trust-obey God is a response to God's past, present, and continuing acts of provision, which leads to inheriting the full measure of God's promises in the future.

These acts of God's past provision, with their implied commitment of God's ongoing faithfulness to his people, are codified in the "historical prologues" with which the covenants of the Bible and descriptions of our covenant relationship with God always begin (see Exodus 19:4; 20:1-2; Joshua 24:1-13; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 4:25-5:2; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 2 Corinthians 6:16-18; 2 Peter 1:3-11; etc.). In the words of the

Old Testament scholar Jon D. Levenson, "the function of the prologue is to ground the obligations of Israel to YHWH in the history of his gracious acts on her behalf."¹¹ Yet, as Levenson points out,

The revelation of God in history is not, according to covenant theology, a goal in and of itself, but rather, the prologue to a new kind of relationship, one in which the vassal will show fidelity in the future by acknowledgment of the suzerain's grace towards him in the past . . . The historical prologue is only the prologue. It ceases to be at point when the covenant takes effect. From that moment on, what is critical is not the past, but the observance of the stipulations in the present and the sort of life that such observance brings about.¹²

In this sense, all the promises of God are conditional (Ephesians 2:8b: we are saved through faith). There is no such thing as an "unconditional promise" in the Bible, except for the promise attached to the Noahic covenant, which pledges God's providential provision to the world, even to the ungodly, and is made with "every living creature" that came out of the ark, animal and human alike (cf. Genesis 9:8-17; Matthew 5:45). Every covenant blessing or curse having to do with the salvation or judgment of those made in God's image, however, is wholly dependent on keeping or not keeping the covenant stipulations that lead to it.

At the same time, however, we should emphasize again that there is no such thing as a merited promise in the Bible, in the sense of that which we deserve by virtue of our own abilities, self-generated efforts, ethnic or personal distinctives, accomplishments,

feelings, or beliefs. In the words of Ephesians 2:8a, "we are saved by grace." Though all the promises of God are conditional, all the provisions of God that make inheriting those promises possible are given to us unconditionally. This includes the sovereign provisions we need to exercise the very faith that expresses itself in obedience in fulfillment of God's covenant conditions. Again in the words of Ephesians 2:8c, "this [entire process of salvation by grace through faith] is a gift of God." Our lives of obedience are "fruit of the Spirit," not exercises of our own will power (Gal. 5:22-23 – note the condition in Galatians 5:21!). Although there is no inheritance of God's promises without obeying God's commands, no obedience to God's commands ever comes from our own strength. Every act of obedience is a response in the present to what God has made possible in the past through his own acts of provision and promises of future deliverance.

This relationship between the past, present, and future, which is at the very center of biblical theology, is first laid out for us in the garden of Eden. There we see that God's provisions of creation for Adam and Eve in the past were the foundation upon which they were to obey him in the present, the result of which would be receiving his covenant blessings in the future. God's sabbath rest indicated that he had already provided for them everything they needed to fulfill their mandate. The covenant stipulation that flowed from God's acts of provision was not an attempt to earn from God something they did not already have, but was instead an expression of what dependence on God itself would look like in everyday life. As long as Adam and Eve trusted God for their future, because of what he had already provided for them in the past, they could exercise dominion over the earth in confidence as they moved out from the Garden of Eden to the ends of the earth.

The Unity of the Bible

The insight that there is one, uniform covenant structure that runs throughout the various covenants of the Bible leads to an understanding of the message of the Bible in terms of a unity paradigm in which we no longer attempt to divide the Bible into two conflicting messages, the "Law" versus the "Gospel."¹³ Though there are numerous covenants throughout the history of redemption (e.g., the covenants with Adam/Eve; Noah, Abraham, Israel at Mt. Sinai, Aaron, Phineas, David, and the Church, i.e., the "new covenant"), the nature of God's interaction with his people remains the same. All of the covenants of the Bible embody the same threefold relationship between God and his people, which can be summarized in terms of a historical prologue outlining God's provision, its corresponding covenant stipulations, and its consequent covenant blessings or curses. As a result, the commands of the Bible are always embedded within a larger, dynamic relationship with God in which we keep his stipulations in the present because of God's own provisions and commitments in the past, as we look forward to his promises for the future.

This means that I reject the common approach to the Bible that divides it up into two messages, a "law message" in which God demands something from us, and a "gospel message" in which he gives something to us.¹⁴ Our relationship with God never begins with the commands of God as the precursor to receiving his blessings. The Bible makes it clear that our relationship with God always begins with the blessings of God before we move to what God requires from us in response. In expressing our relationship with God, the Bible always starts with the great acts of God in the past that embody and lead to his promises for the future. Only then, sandwiched between what God has done for us in the

past and what he promises to do for us in the future (including our ongoing life with God "in-between"), do we find the commands of God for the present.

In this sense, God's commands embody his gifts, since God demands what he demands because of what he provides and promises. This is true whether we are talking about God's relationship with Adam in the garden, with Israel in the wilderness and promised land, with Jesus throughout his earthly life, or with the Church throughout the world.

¹"The Weight of Glory," in C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965) 1-15, 2.

²The missing element in this introductory work is a sustained development of the history of redemption into which these themes must be integrated. Such a framework would stretch from creation, Sabbath, first exodus, and old covenant to the "second exodus" in Christ, new Sabbath, new covenant, and new covenant. For an introduction to this framework, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom. A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Carlisle, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1994). For more detailed presentations, see Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel, One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), and especially the works of William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), *The End of the Beginning. Revelation 21-22 and the Old Testament* (Homebush West NSW, Australia: Lancer Books, distributed by Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), and *The Search for Order, Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994).

³Though we will develop this point later, to avoid confusion it should be pointed out that I am not a "Sabbatarian," even if the day of rest is moved to Sunday. I do not believe that the command to keep a literal Sabbath must be kept by Christians, though of course a regular pattern of corporate worship is essential. Keeping the Sabbath under the old covenant was a symbolic reminder of the fundamental truths of creation and covenant, the fulfillment of which under the new covenant becomes a life of faith-producing obedience seven days of week (Heb. 3:16-4:13)! In Christ, everyday is the Sabbath! With transformed hearts, we now keep the Sabbath by trusting in God to meet our needs in every circumstance, manifesting this faith by a life of growing contentment and righteousness (1 Tim. 6:6-16). Thus, since the Sabbath was a symbol, whether under the new covenant we honor one day a week above another as a remembrance of God's love and commitment is a matter of personal preference and conscience before the Lord (Rom. 14:5-6).

⁴For this point and its implications, see the important work of John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative, A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) 84-86. Sailhamer argues convincingly that the phrase translated "without form and void" in Genesis 1:2 pictures the world not as a formless mass of cooling gases in space, but as an "uninhabitable stretch of wasteland, a wilderness not yet inhabitable by human beings," that is to say, "the condition of the land before God made it 'good'" (84n.8, 85). The key to seeing this is the parallel between the use of this image in Genesis 1:2 and its uses in Deuteronomy 32:10 and Isaiah 45:18. Thus, "Deuteronomy 32 draws on the same imagery (v. 10) to depict Israel's time of waiting in the wilderness before their entry into the good land" (p.86). The prophets too used this same imagery from Genesis 1:2 to describe Israel's time of exile, during which the land again became "uninhabitable" and a "desert," and the light of the heavens was gone (p.86, pointing to Jeremiah 4:23-26).

The description of the land in Genesis 1:2, then, fits well into the prophet's vision of the future. The land lies empty, dark, and barren, awaiting God's call to light and life. Just as the light of the sun broke in upon the primeval darkness heralding the dawn of God's first blessing (Gen. 1:3), so also the prophets and the apostles mark the beginning of the new age of salvation with the light that shatters the darkness (Isa. 8:22-9:2; Matt. 4:13-17; John 1:5, 8-9) (p.86).

⁵Unfortunately, we know from the history of Israel in the Old Testament that Israel did not normally "keep the Sabbath." See, for example, Exodus 16:27; Nehemiah 13:15-18; Jeremiah 17:14-23; Ezekiel 20:13-16; Amos 8:4-6; and Hosea 2:11. For this reason, the question of what it means to keep the Sabbath became extremely important in post-biblical Judaism and in the ministry of Jesus (see, e.g., Matthew 12:1-14; Mark 2:18-3:6; Luke 6:1-11; 13:10-16; 14:1-6; John 5:9-18; 7:21-24; 9:13-17). In short, the Gospel accounts argue that if the Sabbath signifies God's commitment to meet his people's needs, then Jesus was not breaking the Sabbath when he worked to heal and forgive, since his actions embodied the very heart of what the Sabbath meant. As Jesus put it, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Hence, as the authoritative Son of Man, Jesus is "Lord even of the Sabbath," which is to say that he is the one who has the sovereign right to use it for his people's good as he sees fit.

⁶Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 61, 63.

⁷Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation, Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 129, quoting Wildberger.

⁸See Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:33; 32:38; Ezekiel 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23, 27; Zechariah. 8:8; 2 Corinthians 6:16.

⁹John Piper, *Desiring God, Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, expanded edition, 1996) 50. For a profound exposition of the relationship between God's provisions and promises for the future and the life of faith in the present, see Piper's companion volume, *Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1995), with its restatement of this fundamental point on p.9.

¹⁰This insightful summary of one of the main points of biblical theology is taken from many places in Piper's work.

¹¹*Sinai & Zion, An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985) 37.

¹²*Sinai & Zion*, 43.

¹³The impetus for the conviction that there is a uniform covenant structure that provides the essential content and framework for understanding all of the covenants within the Bible comes from the pivotal work of G. E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Traditions," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 1 (1954), 50-76, which demonstrated that the covenant forms in Israelite tradition are based on a suzerain treaty covenant form that existed throughout the ancient near east. For a detailed survey of the study of the covenant from 1878-1978, see Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People, Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) 3-117.

There were two basic kinds of covenants in the ancient near east. The first was a partnership treaty established between equals that was based on mutual demands and commitments. In this partnership, both parties agree to fulfill obligations and to keep promises toward one another as peers. This is not the kind of treaty formula that provides the foundation for the OT covenant structure. Instead, as Mendenhall argued, the OT covenant structure is based on the ancient near eastern practice of establishing unilateral or "suzerainty" treaties between a great king and a lesser king or between a sovereign and a helpless people, i.e., his vassals, whom the great king has redeemed or rescued from some danger. These unilateral covenants are not based on mutual obligations, but are based on what the king has already done to protect, deliver, or to rescue his vassals. These acts of deliverance are then codified in historical prologues that summarize in brief compass what has already taken place in the past, on the basis of which a relationship has now been established (see, e.g., Exodus 20:1-2). Having rescued them in the past, the king makes covenant stipulations with his people that must be met if they desire to continue as his people and enjoy his ongoing protection. Thus, the covenant blessings for the future were based on keeping the covenant stipulations in the present that flowed from the great act of redemption and provision in the past.

In other words, God used the historical experience of the ancient Near East as a vehicle for revealing what his relationship with his people was to be like. God is the great king and we are his vassals. Out of his benevolence he has rescued us from our plight. Having made us his people, he grants to us the covenant stipulations that flow out of and maintain the relationship that he has inaugurated on the basis of his acts of creation and redemption. The keeping of these covenant stipulations, which God himself enables (!), makes it possible not only for God to maintain his rule and reign over us in the present, but for him to commit himself to doing that in the future as well, since our lives of obedience to the covenant glorifies him.

¹⁴I am aware that this is a controversial approach to the Bible, since a Law/Gospel contrast has dominated the interpretation of the Bible ever since the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, this Law/Gospel contrast became the centerpiece of the two predominant biblical-theological systems of the 20th. century, dispensationalism and modified covenant theology, despite their differences in many other areas.

Both of these systems inherited from the Lutheran Reformation a theological framework in which the Bible is interpreted from the perspective of two fundamentally different messages: a "law" message and a "gospel" message. This contrast divides the Bible into three major periods of history: a "gospel" message to Abraham [justification by grace through faith], a "law" message to Adam, Moses, and Christ [works righteousness], and a repetition of the Abrahamic "gospel" message to the Church on the basis of Jesus' own perfect keeping of the Law [justification by grace through faith]).

Moreover, in and of themselves, the Law/Gospel messages are seen to be in fundamental conflict with one another, so that two diametrically opposed ways of relating to God run through the heart of the Bible. In this view, the "Gospel" is the message of what God has done, is doing, and promises to do for us, while the "Law" is what God demands from us. While the Gospel is "good news," the Law becomes "bad news" because it brings us into a place of failure so that, as Law-breakers, we become bankrupt in our attempt to earn our righteousness through our own works. As a result, when Adam and Eve break the commandment in the garden they find themselves under the condemnation of God, because the Law demands sinless perfection. In the same way, the purpose of the holy and just and good Law later given under Moses (Romans 7:12), which once again demanded sinless obedience just as God did before the Fall, was to show us our sin and to make our sin even more sinful by bringing about repeated acts of disobedience (cf. Rom. 3:20; 5:13, 5:20; 7:7-8).

So the Law, with its demand for sinless perfection, drives me to despair (like Luther's own experience in the monastery). Positively, the Law does this by declaring to me the holy righteousness of God and proclaiming his judgment on all those who break his commands. Negatively, the Law does this by showing me all the ways that I fail to live up to God's expectations. Thus, in this reading of the Bible, everybody begins by being condemned under the Law of God, which is viewed as distinct from the gracious provisions of God. God always comes to us first with a word of Law, i.e., a word of demand. In this way, God shows us our need for himself by showing us our own sin. Furthermore, the consequence of being under the Law is a downward spiral of despair: the more we try to keep the Law, the more we realize that we are law-breakers. The more we respond to our plight by making vows of religious will, the more depressed we become because of our inability to follow through. The Law consequently brings us to your knees, depressed by our inability to keep it.

The good news, however, is that, having been brought under condemnation by the Law, God himself responds by giving us the Gospel. The Gospel replaces the Law by replacing a system of demand with a message of promise. Instead of having to keep the Law's demand for sinless perfection in order to be righteous in God's sight (which in our fallen state nobody can do!), all we have to do is to trust the Gospel. As a result, the Law/Gospel contrast becomes a contrast between "faith" and "works."

Hence, in the Law/Gospel contrast model, the unity of the Bible comes out of this diversity, since from the beginning of the Bible to the end the Law drives us to the Gospel in order that we might be saved by grace. The unity of the Bible consequently derives from the unification of two conflicting messages in an overarching and unified, divine purpose

In this reading of the Bible, it is therefore important to see that the Law of Moses and its system of "works-righteousness," by which we are summoned to try to earn our righteous standing before God by virtue of our own obedience to God's Law, is a parenthetical act of God that was never intended to save us, but to drive us to the Gospel. In other words, the Law of Moses drives us back to the Gospel of Abraham and forward to the Gospel of Jesus. Under the Gospel, we cease our attempt to earn our righteousness through our obedience and instead simply accept God's provision for our salvation through Jesus.

Finally, then, in the Law/Gospel model, God grants the commandments to Adam and Eve before the Fall to test their obedience, in order to see whether they will be entitled, by virtue of their own obedience, to a further blessing of God that is not yet theirs. This blessing is usually associated with the right to eat of the tree of life in order to live forever. Hence, God's commandment places Adam and Eve in a probationary period during which, through their obedience to God's commands, they will inherit God's ultimate blessing. However, when Adam and Eve fail to inherit God's blessings through their obedience because of their sin, God turns from this Law principle or "covenant of works" to the Gospel or "covenant of grace," by which God's people are granted his blessings unconditionally. Nevertheless, God has not abandoned his righteous character: God's blessings can only be given in response to perfect obedience to his commands; salvation is always merited as a matter of "works righteousness." In blessing his people in spite of their sin, God is therefore granting to them what Christ has merited through his perfect obedience in their place as their "second Adam." In other words, Christ keeps the Law or "covenant of works" perfectly and then gives to us the blessings he has earned.

For further representative examples of dispensationalism and covenant theology, see

John S. Feinberg, *Continuity and Discontinuity, Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1988), Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985 [1948]), and Mark W. Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000). For an analysis of these respective systems, see Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel & Law, Contrast or Continuum, The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980).