

The Creation Covenant

Salvation history is the “plot” of the Bible, the story of God’s plan for human salvation unfolding in the course of human events. But if we want to understand salvation history, we need to understand God’s covenants with his people.

This second lesson examines Creation, the Fall and God’s promise of redemption. What did God create and why? Why did Adam and Eve fall into sin? How did God promise to redeem his fallen sons and daughters?

In the Beginning

In Genesis 1:1–2 we read about God’s calling the world into existence. Not only does he create the world, but he also establishes a covenant with his creation. Jeremiah 33:25 refers to God’s “covenant with day and night.” God did not create us because he was lonely or bored; as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he created us to be his family.

Many people approach Genesis 1 and 2 in terms of a “religion versus science” debate. They often forget to read the text as the ancients would have read it. If readers impose current questions and historical situations on the text of Scripture, they miss the whole point of the account.

The Catholic Church teaches that we are not bound to believe that God created the earth in six twenty-four-hour days. However, the Church teaches that we must believe that God created the world, that he created our first parents and that they existed with him for a time in a state of original justice, happiness and innocence before their fall into sin.

Genesis 1 was not written to tell us *how* the world was created. Rather, it was written to tell us *what* was created and *why* it was created. Creation was the deliberate, purposeful act of a loving God.

In the Creation account God says, “Let there be...,” and things come into being (Genesis 1:3, 6, 14). God does what he says; when he speaks, things happen. Creation occurs because of God’s word (see Psalm 33:6–9). Reading the

Old Testament in light of the New, we know that Jesus is the Word of God by which the world was created (see John 1:1–3; Colossians 1:16–17; Hebrews 1:2).

Genesis 1:2 states that in the beginning the world was “without form and void.” God changes this: he gives the world forms (*realms*) and fills the void (with *rulers*). Please look at the following from the first chapter of Genesis:

Days 1–3: God creates the *realms*:

Day 1: *day* and *night* (1:3–5)

Day 2: *sky* and *sea* (1:6–8)

Day 3: *land* and *vegetation* (1:9–13)

Days 4–6: God fills these realms with their *rulers*:

Day 4: *sun*, *moon* and *stars* (1:14–19)

Day 5: *birds* and *fish* (1:20–23)

Day 6: *beasts* first (1:24–25) and then the *human* to rule over all as the king of creation (see 1:26–28; Psalm 8).

After each day God says that his work is “good” (1:4, 10, 18, 21, 25). But after the *sixth* day, the day of creating mankind, God says that his work is “very good” (1:31).

Genesis 1:26–27 states that humans are made in the “image and likeness” of God. What does this mean? We find a literary clue in Genesis 5:1–3: Adam was made in the likeness of God, and Adam’s son, Seth, was made in Adam’s “own likeness, after his image.” We can conclude from this that “image” and “likeness” refer to sonship. Thus Adam was “the son of God” (Luke 3:38).

The Sabbath

After God creates man and woman, the Scriptures tell us, he ordains the day of rest (see Genesis 2:2). Upon first glance this day of rest can be a little perplexing. Does the all-powerful God *need* to rest? No, he is not tired. The seventh day finishes God’s design for creation. God blesses and hallows the seventh day to give us a gift—a holy day of *rest* from our labor and a call to *worship* him as members of his covenant family. Thus creation is the “first and universal witness to God’s all powerful love (Cf. *Gen* 15:5; *Jer* 33:19-26)” (CCC, 288).

The seventh day seals God’s covenant with creation. He swears a covenant oath. The Hebrew word for swearing an oath is *sheba* [sheh vah’], which liter-

ally means “to seven oneself.” God “sevens” time into seven days to consecrate creation. The Sabbath is “a perpetual covenant” (see Exodus 31:16–17).

God’s Sabbath is the climax of the Creation account. Through it God calls man and woman to something far more glorious than “ruling” creation: God calls them to interpersonal communion with him. The world is not just a place of work; it is also a place of *worship*, a holy dwelling place where God himself is present, where his people worship and offer sacrifice.

Scripture describes Creation as the building of a home or temple (see Job 38:4–11). Solomon builds the temple in seven years and consecrates it in the seventh month, on the seventh day of a seven-day feast, offering seven petitions (see 1 Kings 6—8). In the temple the Holy of Holies is truly the dwelling place of God; the Garden of Eden is described in terms similar to those describing the inner precincts of the temple (see Genesis 2:8–14). Once God completes the temple of the world, he calls man to be a priest-king over it.

Two Creation Accounts

Genesis 1 and 2 record two accounts of Creation. These are not two conflicting accounts; they are complementary accounts with different emphases.

In Genesis 1 God the *Creator* makes a cosmic home or temple for himself. His final creation—man and woman—he makes in his image, and he calls them to imitate him (see verse 28). In Genesis 2 God works as *Father*. He lovingly fashions man from the dirt of the earth, breathes life into him, creates a garden paradise for him and creates a spouse for him from his very side. God commands man to “till . . . and keep” the garden (Genesis 2:15), a call to priestly sacrifice in the garden sanctuary.

Adam is God’s royal firstborn son, the high priest of humanity. In ancient Israel the father, as head of his family, was a priest who offered sacrifices and performed acts of worship on behalf of his household. This priesthood was passed down from father to firstborn son, who inherited the mantle of the authority of the family to lead the people to be holy. Jesus—as the “new Adam” (Romans 5:14)—calls his people, the Church, to be “a holy nation” and “a royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9; see Revelation 1:6).

Not only does God create man and woman in a covenant relationship with him, but he also creates them in covenant union with each other. They are

joined as one in the covenant of marriage. God establishes marriage as a sign of his covenant love for us.

In a very real sense the Trinity is the divine family, and the image of the Triune God is reflected in our natural families. In marriage two become one (see Genesis 2:24), and the one they become is so real that nine months later you might have to give it a name! More than a sign, marriage is an image of who God is. The human family is created to image the Trinity, the divine family.

Temptation and Fall: Making Sense of the Story

Man's fall into sin is a very puzzling thing. The *Catechism* gives us three important things to remember when examining man's temptation and fall: (1) "The account of the fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language"; (2) "but [the account] affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place *at the beginning of the history of man* (Cf. GS 13 §1)"; (3) "revelation gives us the certainty of faith that the whole of human history is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents (Cf. Council of Trent: DS 1513; Pius XII: DS 3897; Paul VI: AAS 58 (1966), 654)" (CCC, 390). Though the account in Genesis 3 is written more like poetry than journalism, it affirms an actual event—the "original fault" of Adam and Eve—that forever marks human history.

From the very beginning God alerts Adam and his helpmate Eve that there is a *danger*. Adam should "keep" or guard the garden (see Genesis 2:15); this implies that there is something to guard against! God also gives Adam a *limitation* or *restriction*: Adam can eat of every tree of the garden except one (see Genesis 2:16–17). Furthermore, God gives Adam a *warning*: if Adam disobeys and eats of the forbidden tree, he will die that day (see Genesis 2:17). Death has to be meaningful (understood) and dreadful (fearing the loss of life), or the boundary would be meaningless to Adam.

When God breathes life into Adam, he gives him more than he gave any other creature: God gives Adam the grace of divine sonship. He gives Adam *natural life* and *supernatural life*.

Adam and Eve are created in a state of grace (see CCC, 375). They live in harmony with God, with each other and with all of creation. They are not prone to sin, nor are they simple-minded or inadequate to the test God gives them. Quite the contrary: they are intelligent and upright people who live in right relationship with God.

Along Came a Serpent

We've all seen Bible story images of a long, thin snake slithering around an apple tree. It is important to note, however, that the Hebrew word for serpent is *nahash* [nuh hawsh'], which is a much more dangerous animal than the garden-variety snake. *Nahash* refers to an extremely deadly and dangerous creature (see, for example, Numbers 21:6–9; Isaiah 27:1; Revelation 12:3, 9). Once we see the nature of the serpent that confronts Adam and Eve, we see the *serious challenge* and *grave threat* Adam faces in guarding the garden and his wife (see CCC, 395).

The Serpent speaks to Eve, but he addresses Adam also. (The Hebrew word for “you” is plural.) The Serpent directly contradicts God’s solemn warning to Adam about the forbidden fruit: “You will not die” (Genesis 3:4). This temptation is a test.

Adam’s test involves four questions: (1) As a *son*, will Adam trust God as Father enough to obey? (2) As *king*, will Adam exercise dominion over the beasts and drive the Serpent out of the garden? (3) As *husband*, will Adam protect his bride? (4) As *priest*, will Adam—if need be—offer his life in a sacrifice of love and obedience? In short, will Adam fear a loss of *supernatural* life more than a loss of *natural* human life?

Adam fails the test: He does not trust in his heavenly Father. He fails to guard the garden, and the Serpent gains entrance. Further, Adam is *silent* when he should speak. Then Adam allows his wife to lead him into sin, instead of leading her into righteousness. Finally, Adam refuses to offer himself to God; he prefers himself to his Creator (see CCC, 397–398).

God Confronts Adam and Eve

God comes to Adam and Eve in the garden, not in a leisurely stroll but in judgment. They hear the powerful “sound” of the Lord (see Genesis 3:8; Psalm 29:3–9; 46:6), and they are afraid. Instead of running to the Lord, they hide.

In Genesis 3:9–13 God asks Adam and Eve four questions: (1) “Where are you?” (2) “Who told you that you were naked?” (3) “Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (4) “What is this that you have done?” (3:8–13).

The all-powerful and all-knowing God surely knows the answers to these questions. But he wants Adam and Eve to face the reality of the grave sin they

have committed. He gives them every chance to confess their sins and to be reconciled to him. Rather than facing their sin, however, Adam and Eve make excuses and blame others—even God (3:12–13).

God turns to the source of the trouble: the Serpent. He *curses* the Serpent with humiliation and destruction. God also *prophesies enmity* between the Serpent and the woman, between his offspring and hers (see Genesis 3:14–15).

God then *punishes* the man and woman. Childbirth will be painful. Relationships will be marred by sin. Work will be toil; it will not always be fruitful and instead will bring forth thorns and thistles. Even the ground will be cursed. Finally, physical death will be inevitable for all (see Genesis 3:16–19).

While Adam and Eve don't die physically in the garden, they do die spiritually. That day they lose God's divine life in their souls. This spiritual death is far worse than any physical death. This is the original mortal sin: the "death of the soul (Cf. Council of Trent: DS 1512)" (CCC, 403).

Adam and Eve lose their innocence and intimacy with God. Furthermore, their harmony with each other and with creation is lost. Seduced into trying to be like God without God, they exercise freedom that plunges them—and us!—into slavery and death (see CCC, 398). They discover their nakedness and are ashamed.

God shows mercy to Adam and Eve. He covers their nakedness by making them garments out of animal skins, thus making the first sacrifice of animals to cover the shame of his children. Then he drives them out of the garden, and he posts cherubim at the entrance so that they will not be tempted to reenter and seal their damnation by eating of the Tree of Life (see Genesis 3:21–22).

The First Gospel

God does not give up on his fallen son and daughter, however. He promises a Redeemer who will save his children, who will set right the wrong of Adam and Eve. The early Church fathers understood this promise as the "first gospel" (or the *Protoevangelium*) (see CCC, 410). The Fathers also understood the "seed of the woman" to be a reference to the Virgin Birth, since "seed" (*sperma*) comes from the man rather than the woman.

God's promise of a redeemer is the promise of a "New Adam" and a "New Eve" who will do what the first Adam and Eve failed to do (and undo what the first couple did) (see CCC, 410–411). The *New Adam* will be the one who will

achieve victory over the Serpent. The *New Eve* will be his mother, the one who gives birth to the Redeemer. Just as death comes into the human race through the sin of the first Adam and Eve, so new life will come through the victory of the New Adam and the New Eve, Jesus and Mary (see Romans 5:17–21; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45–49).

Sin enters the world through the “fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14–15); for Adam fears natural death over supernatural death. In contrast, Jesus takes our human nature so that through his death he can destroy the devil, who has the power of death. Jesus’ death, then, delivers all of us from lifelong bondage to sin, to which we succumb because of the fear of death.

Jesus bears the curses of the covenant as the New Adam. He goes into a garden (see Matthew 26:36–46), and his sweat is like drops of blood (see Luke 22:44). However, unlike the first Adam, Jesus faces the fears of suffering and death; he chooses to trust his heavenly Father: “Father, if thou art willing, remove this chalice from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

Jesus’ crown of thorns (see Matthew 27:29) harkens back to the thorns and thistles of Adam’s fate. Like Adam and Eve, Jesus is reduced to nakedness (see Matthew 27:31, 35). Jesus dies on the cross, which was referred to as the “Tree of Life” in the early Church (see Acts 5:30). Finally, falling into the sleep of death, his bride—the Church—is formed from his side (see John 19:34).

Jesus gives us the perfect example of total self-offering when he lays down his life for us on the cross. Unlike the first Adam, Jesus yields his will completely in trust to his heavenly Father. He lays down his life for his bride, the Church. Through the Last Adam, what was lost through the sin of the first Adam is restored. Even more, we now become partakers of the divine nature, since we have been given Jesus’ divine life.

Church tradition has always seen Mary as “the New Eve.” In contrast to the first Eve’s disregard of God’s commands, Mary offers herself freely to the will of God: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).

The story of the Bible is the story of God’s love for his people. Just as Adam and Eve are united in marriage on the seventh day, so God wants to be united to his people in a “nuptial” or marriage-like (covenantal) bond.

We hardly can grasp God’s love for us in human language. So here, in the first pages of the Bible, the Word of God uses the most powerful images of

human love imaginable—that of parent and child, that of husband and wife.

Covenant love requires total self-giving: God gives himself to his people, and his people give themselves to him. This kind of love images the life-giving love of the Trinity. And since God destined us to share in his divine life, we need to learn to love as he does. From him we learn how to give ourselves fully—how to sacrifice ourselves—for each other and, most importantly, for him.

We can say that the Bible tells the story of God’s raising us as his family from infancy to adulthood. Little by little he guides us, chastises us, woos us and prepares us to be fit for the wedding supper of the Lamb of heaven. He calls us to divine, heavenly union with him, which can be symbolized best by marriage—the most ecstatic and intimate of human relationships.

This is our heavenly calling, our supernatural end.

Review Questions for Personal Study

1. How is God’s creation like the tabernacle and the temple?
2. How is Adam both a royal firstborn son and a priest?
3. What is the first promise that a savior will redeem the human race?
4. Read Romans 5:12–21. How does Saint Paul contrast the old Adam with the New Adam, Christ?
5. What are some practical ways I can draw strength from God to resist temptation and avoid sin?
6. How can I grow in an attitude of repentance when I commit sins?
7. Have I tried to “hide” from God? Have I refused to acknowledge my need for his mercy?

Recommended Verses to Memorize

Genesis 1:1–2

Genesis 1:26

Genesis 3:15