

Promises We Can Count On  
Session 1  
June 2, 2024

### *God's Promise of Fruitfulness*

**The Point:** God called humanity to rule over His creation.

**Session Passages:** Genesis 1:26-30; 2:16-17; 3:16-19

**Study Theme: Covenants.** A covenant is “a chosen relationship in which two parties make binding promises to each other.”<sup>1</sup> These parties can be individuals or groups. The most significant covenants in Scripture are the relational agreements between God and humanity. Covenants can have both conditional and unconditional aspects. A conditional covenant, as the name implies, involves meeting specific conditions. In an unconditional covenant, God makes a promise or promises that do not depend on the other party meeting specific requirements or conditions.

**The setting.** Genesis 1–2 is considered by many to be the first covenant between God and humanity, known as the Adamic covenant or the Covenant of Creation. The first use of the word *covenant* (*berith*) occurs in Genesis 6:18. That is why some do not recognize the relationship between God and Adam in Genesis 1–2 as an official covenant. However the elements of a covenant are found in God’s relationship agreement with Adam, and the prophet Hosea stated that Adam violated this covenant (Hos. 6:6-7).

### **Genesis 1:26-30**

**Connection to the Point.** As God’s image-bearers, we are to reflect Him as we rule over His creation.

**God said** (v. 26). This clause expresses the idea of God’s creative mind and will, communicating the purposeful action of God in creating mankind. While a part of creation, humanity is unique within creation. Man exists by the will of God.

**Let us . . . in our . . . according to our** (v. 26). Various suggestions are given for the identity of *us* and *our* in this verse. Among the suggestions are that the terms emphasize God’s divine majesty, that God was addressing His heavenly council, and that the terms indicated a dialogue within the triune Godhead. This last view goes back to the time of the early church and was held by the Reformers as well (1500s–1600s). The doctrine of the triune nature of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is not explicitly developed in the Old Testament. However, aspects of the cooperation between the members of the Trinity in creation can be seen (Gen. 1:1–2; Job 33:4; see John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 3:8-9). Furthermore, the Old Testament also indicates that creation was the work of God alone (Isa. 42:5-12). While Genesis 1:26 suggests the triune nature of the Godhead, verse 27 indicates the oneness of the Godhead.<sup>2</sup>

**Image . . . likeness** (v. 26). While two different Hebrew words—*tselem* (*image*) and *demuth* (*likeness*)—are used, they are synonymous in meaning. Together, they emphasize God made humanity in His image, making them distinct from all other creation. This understanding is evident from verse 27, where the word *image* describes God’s creation of man. Various other passages regarding humanity being made in God’s image/likeness demonstrate that the words are used interchangeably (see Gen. 1:27; 5:1,3; 9:6).

**Man** (v. 26). The Hebrew word (*adam*) here is inclusive, referring to both male and female human beings, not as the proper name of the first man, Adam (see 4:25; 5:1).

**They will rule** (v. 26). Using the plural pronoun in this phrase clarifies the inclusive meaning of the word *adam*. God gave mankind, male and female together, authority to rule over all other creatures because mankind alone is made in His image. *Rule (radah)* means to tread down or subjugate, in this context meaning humanity is to have dominion over the whole earth.

**God created man in his own image** (v. 27). The emphasis and importance of humanity being created in the image of God is demonstrated in the parallel statements of the first two clauses of this verse. However, nowhere in Scripture is the nature of people being made in the image of God precisely defined. There are a variety of diverse opinions but none are conclusive. Suggestions include humanity's psychological, moral, and spiritual aspects; humanity's ability to relate to, fellowship with, and serve God; and humanity having been set apart to subjugate and rule over God's creation as His representatives. Despite the varying opinions, what is generally agreed upon is that this distinction sets humanity apart from all other creatures which God created.

**Male and female** (v. 27). God created two genders. We can infer the distinction of gender in the creation of other animals, but it is mentioned explicitly with the creation of humanity. Both male and female human beings have a unique status as image-bearers and are of equal worth. There are, however, natural, God-given differences regarding their sexual identities and roles.

**God blessed them** (v. 28). The Hebrew term for *blessed (barak)* can mean both to pronounce a blessing and to give praise or thanks. In this context, the term has the former meaning. God's blessing upon humanity is two-fold. First, they are blessed in being created in God's image. Secondly, God blessed them by giving them purpose.

**Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth** (v. 28). This command makes the distinction between humanity's genders and their unity of purpose clear. Together the man and the woman (as well as their descendants) were given three commands through which they were to populate the earth. Other animals were also given this command (v. 22). For humans, procreation is to occur within the marriage relationship (2:24).

**Subdue it** (v. 28). The Hebrew word (*kabash*) means to have dominion—to subjugate and bring under control. Not only are humans to populate the earth, they are also given authority over all other species.

**Rule** (v. 28). Humanity will *rule (radah, also used in v. 26)* or reign over all the creatures of the earth. While not all the types of animals are mentioned here, those identified are representative of all creatures that God had created. Humanity was given authority over all the creatures that inhabit the earth. Humans, male and female, were entrusted by God to act as His representatives on earth, exercising authority over all His creation by being good stewards.

**I have given you** (v. 29). God is the all-sufficient Provider. God blessed humanity with His image; He blessed them with purpose; and now He blessed them with provision. Both humanity and all other creatures were supplied with food. Neither would have to hunt and kill for food. While the man and woman were given authority over creation, they would also live in harmony with other species.

**Everything having the breath of life in it** (v. 30). Various Hebrew terms are translated *breath of life*. The phrase indicates the capacity of someone or something to be alive. God alone is the source of this “breath of life.” He can give life (2:7), preserve it (7:15), and take it away (6:17). In 1:30, the term used for *breath* is *nephesh*, which has a broad range of meaning. It can refer to life itself, that within a person that makes life possible, the soul, the seat of emotions and desires, the whole of a being, the physical body, and a corpse.

## **Genesis 2:16-17**

**Connection to the Point.** Our call to steward creation is not without limits. We must do so within the parameters set by God, and we see that in the prohibition God gave to Adam.

**The LORD God** (v. 16). The term *LORD* is a substitution for God’s covenant name, *Yahweh*. The substitution follows the practice of the Jews, who substituted the word *Adonai* (meaning “lord” or “master”) for *Yahweh* because they feared saying God’s name lest they mispronounce it. When *LORD* occurs (in small caps) it is an indicator that the word being referenced is *Yahweh*. The term emphasizes that *Yahweh* is the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists, and He is independent from His creation and self-sufficient in His Person. He is—He has no beginning and no end. *God (Elohim)* emphasizes the infinite nature and majesty of God. It carries the ideas of strength and power. God is the Lord over all His creation.

**Commanded** (v. 16). The word (*tsavah*) has the meaning of to order, instruct, or give direction to. It stresses that what follows is to be heeded and obeyed.

**You are free to eat from any tree of the garden** (v. 16). God generously provided for the man’s needs by planting a garden in which he was to live and work, as well as trees from which he could eat (vv. 8-9,15). God’s command indicates that He made the man free in the sense that he was able to make moral choices. The man was free to either obey or disobey God.

**But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil** (v. 17). God gave Adam only one prohibition, and this command tested Adam’s (and later Eve’s) trust, obedience, and loyalty. This prohibition also demonstrated there were limits to Adam’s freedom. Adam was to live within the limits God established.

**You will certainly die** (v. 17). The consequence for disobeying God’s command would be death. God’s intent for the man (and the woman) was that they would live forever (2:9; 3:22). But such life was contingent on their obedience to God’s command.

## **Genesis 3:16-19**

**Connection to the Point.** God’s plan for us to be stewards over His creation has not changed, but our ability to fulfill that is much harder as a consequence of sin.

**The Setting of Genesis 3.** Genesis 3 details how, at the instigation of the serpent, the man and woman disobeyed God's prohibition and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Because of their disobedience, they faced God's judgment, as did the serpent who tempted them.

**He said to the woman** (v. 16). God judgment upon the woman was two-fold. It related to her roles as both a mother and a wife.

**Intensify your labor pains . . . bear children with painful effort** (v. 16). The woman's pain of childbirth would be intensified. This indicates that she still would have had labor pains in childbirth had she not sinned. The pain was now significantly increased.

**Your desire will be for your husband, yet he will rule over you** (v. 16). The marriage relationship between the woman and man was also changed. The connection between the terms for *desire* (*teshuqah*) and *rule* (*mashal*) are debated. Some suggest that *desire* refers to the woman's sexual desire for her husband. Others think the term refers to procreation. Despite the intensified labor pains, the woman would still desire with her husband to bring children into the world. Others suggest that the woman's desire more broadly refers to the dependence of the woman upon the man for such things as emotional support and provision (food, shelter, etc.). Whereas she acted independently in eating the fruit, now through God's judgment upon her she would be dependent upon her husband. Finally, some suggest that the relationship of these two terms needs to be determined by their usage in Genesis 4:7, where God told Cain regarding his sin, "If you do what is right, won't you be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire [*teshuqah*] is for you, but you must rule [*mashal*] over it." "If we are to take the lexical and structural similarities as intentional, we must read the verses in concert. This recommends that 3:16b also describes a struggle for mastery between the sexes. The 'desire' of the woman is her attempt to control her husband, but she will fail because God has ordained that the man exercise his leadership function."<sup>3</sup>

While the relationship between the husband and wife changed because of sin, this rule by the husband is never justification for harsh or oppressive domination over his wife. Love for one another, not submission of the wife to the husband, is to be at the center of the marriage relationship. A relationship with Christ tempers Eve's judgment and aligns it more closely with God's intention for marriage. The apostle Paul wrote that while wives are to be subject to their husbands, the husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Together they are subject to one another in Christ (Eph 5:21,33).

**Because you listened to your wife** (v. 17). The man Adam was the last to face God's judgment. Adam's God-given duty was to care for and watch over the garden God had made for and placed him in (2:15). It was Adam who had received directly from God the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (vv. 16-17). Part of Adam's watch care should have been coming to his wife's aid when the serpent confronted her and distorted God's command. He should have corrected the serpent. He should have stopped his wife from eating the forbidden fruit. Instead, he stood silently by Eve's side as the serpent deceived her and then joined her in sin by eating the fruit she gave him (3:6).

**Ate from the tree about which I commanded you, "Do not eat from it"** (v. 17). Adam had no excuse. God reminded him that He had directly commanded the man not to eat from the tree (2:16-17).

**The ground is cursed because of you** (v. 17). This is the second occurrence of the word *cursed* (*arar*) in God's judgment in the garden. The serpent was cursed (v. 14), and now because of Adam's failure, all creation would suffer. It was not Adam but the ground that was cursed because of Adam's sin.

**By means of painful labor** (v. 17). However, the man would suffer under the curse. The work which had to this point apparently been relatively easy and enjoyable would now become painful labor. The Hebrew term for *painful labor* (*itstsabon*) is the same word used to describe the “pains” suffered by the woman in process of bearing children (v. 16).

**All the days of your life** (v. 17). The damage done by sin would follow Adam for the rest of his life, as well as through the lives of all his descendants. Furthermore, because of his sin, his physical life would now at some point come to an end in death (2:17; 3:22; 5:5).

**Produce thorns and thistles** (v. 18). *Thorns* and *thistles* represent all the ways the earth rebels against humanity’s efforts to bring forth food. There would be flooding or drought, insects such as the locust would devour crops, and disease would destroy crops in the field. These are just some ways creation was subjected to futility because of Adam’s disobedience (Rom. 8:20-22).

**Bread** (v. 19). The Hebrew word for *bread* (*lechem*) can refer to bread itself, food in general, or the grain used to make the bread. Here it includes everything necessary for humanity’s sustenance.

**By the sweat of your brow** (v. 19). God had placed man in the garden to care for and cultivate the many things God had caused to grow (2:8-9). Until he sinned, the man’s work of tilling and harvesting would have been comparatively easy, rewarding, and fulfilling. Work remained the God-ordained purpose of humanity, but fulfilling that purpose would now entail pain, struggle, and often times frustration.

**Until you return to the ground** (v. 19). The promise of life (the tree of life, v. 22) had now been exchanged for death (2:17). While the immediate result of their sin was spiritual death (they were no longer perfect in righteousness and in fellowship with God), eventually physical death would be another consequence of their disobedience. Because Adam was humanity’s representative, his sin brought both spiritual and physical death to all his descendants as well (Rom. 5:12). These consequences of Adam’s sin would be reversed only through the atoning work of Jesus Christ (vv. 15-21).

**Since you were taken from it** (v. 19). This refers back to God’s creation of the man, whom He formed “out of the dust from the ground” (2:7).

**For you are dust, and you will return to dust** (v. 19). As the man had chosen to act apart from God in eating of the forbidden fruit, so too the man apart from God’s breath of life was merely the dust from which he was made (2:7). In separating himself from God by his sin, the man had separated Himself from the One who gave him life—from life itself. Because of his sin, the man and all of his descendants are doomed to suffer decay (illness, disease, etc.) that ultimately ends in death.

1. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 13.
2. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, vol. 1A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 162–163.
3. *Ibid.*, 249–251.