

Jesus and the Covenant



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Hebrews 8 and 9.

MEMORY TEXT: “ ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,’ he also adds, ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more’ ” (Hebrews 10:16, 17, NRSV).

KEY THOUGHT: One of the important topics in Hebrews is that of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ.

IN MODERN TIMES WE DEFINE A HOST of relations by contracts. These are usually for goods or services in which equal sides gain from each other. Hans signs a contract with the plumber to fix the faucet; the plumber receives his money, and Hans gets a fixed faucet. The new covenant, however, doesn't work quite like that. In this covenant, God doesn't need us; we need Him. He extends to us grace, mercy, forgiveness of sins; we offer nothing back because we have nothing to give that merits the gifts we get from Him. All we can do is accept it by faith, a faith that's motivated by a love that leads to heartfelt obedience. This week we'll look at how the new covenant relates to Christ and His ministry in heaven.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What is the biblical covenant? Why the need of a new one? How does it relate to Christ's heavenly ministry? What are we offered in this new covenant?

*Please study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 16.

COVENANTS.

In the ancient Near East, covenants describe the relationship between a superior power and a subordinate people (though a covenant also can be made among equals, as well).

Among the pagan nations, these covenants often contained the following elements: (1) preamble introducing the sovereign; (2) the historical prologue describing previous relations between the contracting parties; (3) the stipulations that outline the nature of the community formed by the covenant; (4) the document clause providing the preservation and regular rereading of the treaty; (5) the lists of gods who witnessed the treaty; and (6) the curses and blessings that attended it.

The covenants found in the Bible share some similarities to this typical covenant form.

Look up the following texts, which deal with various Old Testament covenants. Gen. 6:18; 9:11-13; 15:18; Exod. 19:5; 24:7, 8; Ps. 89:3, 4; Jer. 31:31-34. What elements do they have in common? After reading these texts, write out the essence of what you believe these covenants meant. What do they teach us about the kind of relationship God wants with His people?

The covenant promises are crucial. In Abraham's case, they included the promise of God's constant presence; the Messianic promise that he would be a blessing for all peoples; and the promise of land and of a great nation.

The Mosaic covenant (Sinaitic covenant) was an enlargement of the earlier covenants; it was addressed to the entire people of Israel. Only after having saved the Israelites from Egypt did God graciously offer them His covenant and promise to make Israel His treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.

Why is the concept of a covenant so important in biblical theology? Think of it this way: None of us are forced to serve the Lord. The concept of a covenant comes in usually (but not always) when we choose to serve the Lord, to enter into a relationship with Him. In such a case, why is a covenant so important?

THE OLD COVENANT AND THE NEW COVENANT.

What reason does the author give in Hebrews 8:6-13 for the need of the new covenant?

The introduction of the covenant in Hebrews didn't come in a vacuum. The first seven chapters dealt with the priesthood of Jesus. Chapters 8–10 tell us about the accomplishments of Jesus. However, the author had to show that Jesus is the legitimate Priest, even though He was not a Levite. Therefore, in Hebrews 7, the author pointed to the priesthood of Melchizedek, which foreshadowed Christ's priesthood, and to Psalm 110, which predicted Christ's priesthood. He did this in order to show that although Jesus was not a Levite, still a new priest, from the order of Melchizedek, was to come. In chapter 8, he then related the promise of a covenant that required *a new and better priesthood* and a new and better sanctuary. This, of course, refers to Jesus and His ministry in heaven.

Read Hebrews 13:20 and 8:6. What adjectives are used to describe the new covenant? Why were these terms used?

Though a sharp contrast is portrayed between the old and new covenant, some elements of continuity exist between both. The partners in both covenants are the same: God and His respective people. In both cases, God takes the initiative; He alone saves. In both there are promises, and there are duties. And, certainly, in both, the presence of God amid His people is paramount.

The main, and crucial difference, between the old and new covenant is that there is now total forgiveness and assurance. What the old covenant pointed to in type and shadows and symbols has been fulfilled, in reality, in Jesus. In the new covenant, the law is now internalized, and through faith in Christ, the believer lives in obedience to the law, now written in the heart. The new covenant is permanent; it has been ratified, not with the blood of an animal but with the blood of Jesus. And, finally, if in the old covenant people found hope in the blood of a goat or a lamb or a bull, how much more hope do we have in the blood of Jesus Christ? See Heb. 9:13, 14.

Read carefully and prayerfully the quote from Jeremiah in Hebrews 8:8-12. Dwell on what God promises to do for us in the new covenant. Then ask yourself, Have I experienced these promises in my own life? If not, why not, and what can be done to change this?

THE COVENANT AND RELATED CONCEPTS.

How does the covenant relate to the sacrifices, the priesthood, and the sanctuary? Heb. 9:11-15.

In the context of the Abrahamic covenant, a sacrifice is mentioned (Genesis 15). After God had saved Israel from Egypt, he offered them His covenant, and they responded: “ ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do’ ” (Exod. 19:8; 24:7, RSV). He explained the promises and gave His law, which they were obliged to keep. Sacrifices were then offered, and the covenant was ratified by blood (Exod. 24:8). The covenant laws also included the establishment of the sanctuary, the installation of the priesthood, and the formal institution of the sacrificial system (Exodus 25–31). Thus, covenant, sacrifice, priesthood, and sanctuary belong together; hence, a new, better covenant requires a new and better sacrifice, a new and better priesthood, and a new and better sanctuary.

How does the law relate to the new covenant? Heb. 8:10.

On the one hand, Hebrews stresses the necessity of a change of the law (Heb. 7:12)—the Mosaic law being the issue here, because the context is clearly that of the earthly-sanctuary service and its priesthood, all shadows of what Christ was to do: “For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect” (Heb. 10:1). That specific system of law was abolished after the death, resurrection, and high-priestly ministry of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the Ten Commandments are as valid in the new covenant as in the old. Under the new covenant, the law is now written on the hearts (Heb. 8:10), a far cry from being abolished (1 John 5:3). If anything, the life and example of Jesus, and His perfect keeping of the law, have exalted the law in the new covenant, elevating it to a higher, spiritual plane than a mere cold, dead code, which it had become for those who kept it for the wrong reasons. In the book of Hebrews, God does not speak of a new law but of a new covenant, with the law and gospel at the center.

Why is the law important in the new covenant, which emphasizes the substitutionary death of Christ in our behalf? If obedience to the law can never save us, and if Christ fulfilled the demands of the law for us, what role does keeping the law have in the life of a Christian?

BENEFITS OF THE COVENANT.

A number of positive results of the new covenant are stressed in Hebrews. What are they?

Heb. 8:12; 9:26, 28; 10:17, 18 _____

Heb. 8:10; 10:16 _____

Heb. 9:9, 14; 10:2 _____

Heb. 9:12, 15, 28 _____

Heb. 10:10, 14 _____

Heb. 10:19 _____

The new covenant has “better promises” (Heb. 8:6). In the New Testament, the word *promise* is found more frequently in Hebrews than in any other book. What are we promised so profusely in Hebrews?

The promises of the new covenant include, among other things, access to God, a clear conscience, redemption, and forgiveness of sins. Here, indeed, are some of the “better promises” the author talked about, no doubt one of the best being the final promise of Jeremiah 31:34—“I will remember their sin no more.”

How do you understand that phrase, “I will remember their sin no more”? What promise do you see the Lord giving to His people there?

“The blessings of the new covenant are grounded purely on mercy in forgiving unrighteousness and sins. . . . All who humble their hearts, confessing their sins, will find mercy and grace and assurance. Has God, in showing mercy to the sinner, ceased to be just? Has He dishonored His holy law, and will He henceforth pass over the violation of it? God is true. He changes not. . . . In the better covenant we are cleansed from sin by the blood of Christ (Letter 276, 1904).”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 931.

Read over what you wrote on the lines above about the benefits of the new covenant that were stressed in Hebrews. Which ones mean the most to you, and why? Be prepared to discuss your answers in class.

JESUS AND THE COVENANT (Heb. 7:22; 9:15).

Jesus is the “surety” of the new covenant. Hebrews 7:22 and its context associate priesthood and covenant. Three times in Hebrews Jesus is called “mediator,” the Mediator of a better or new covenant (Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). While Hebrews 7 presents Jesus as Priest, Hebrews 8–10 prefer to depict Jesus as Sacrifice. Hence, we can see the link between Sacrifice, covenant, and Mediator.

“By so much was Jesus made a surety [or guarantee] of a better testament” (Heb. 7:22). What does “surety” in this context mean?

“Surety” or “guarantee” occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. “It is common in the papyri in legal documents in the sense of a pledge or as a reference to bail. . . . Since the covenant in the biblical sense is an agreement initiated by God, the surety (i.e. Jesus) guarantees that that covenant will be honoured. . . . The mediator is a go-between whose task is to keep the parties in fellowship with one another. In a case where God is one of the parties and man is the other, the covenant idea is inevitably one-sided. Defection is always on man’s side and hence the mediator’s task is mainly to act on man’s behalf before God, although he has also to act for God before men.”—Guthrie, pp. 165, 166, 174.

The crucial point, then, is that we can be certain that God will uphold His end of the covenant promises. We fall, we renege, we waver, we become Laodicean. In contrast, Jesus is the Surety, the Guarantee, that He will keep His part of the bargain. What we should do is another matter entirely.

Hebrews also wants to help readers who are troubled by a bad conscience and are not sure of forgiveness and salvation. These people don’t primarily need a list of what is required of them, but they must, instead, for now, understand the gracious provisions God has made and executed in Jesus Christ.

The second part of Hebrews 10 warns against sinning willfully or persisting in sin. To do this is a form of disobedience and a breaking of the covenant *from our end*. The aim of the letter is to turn people away from such a reckless course.

How many do you know who have, in a sense, personally “broken” the covenant, those who once knew and loved the Lord but now have fallen away? Track their course. What mistakes did they make that you can learn from, so you don’t make them yourself?

FURTHER STUDY: Study the concept of the covenant in these texts: Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 1:72; 22:20; Acts 3:25; 7:8. John does not talk about the covenant, and John the revelator mentions the ark of the covenant only (Rev. 11:19).

God's people are justified through the administration of the 'better covenant,' through Christ's righteousness. A covenant is an agreement by which parties bind themselves and each other to the fulfillment of certain conditions. Thus, the human agent enters into agreement with God to comply with the conditions specified in His Word. His conduct shows whether or not he respects these conditions. Man gains everything by obeying the covenant-keeping God. God's attributes are imparted to man, enabling him to exercise mercy and compassion. God's covenant assures us of His unchangeable character."—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 932.

"The great law of love revealed in Eden, proclaimed upon Sinai, and in the new covenant written in the heart, is that which binds the human worker to the will of God."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 329.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What kind of worldly covenants do we engage in all the time? What can we learn from them that could help us understand the divine covenant?
2. There's a great deal of emphasis on forgiveness in the book of Hebrews. Why is that so? How do you understand the sanctuary, the blood of Christ, and mediation in heaven—all in relationship to the forgiveness of sin? What good would any of these do for us without forgiveness?
3. What is a mediator? How are priesthood and the functions of a mediator related to each other? In what situations have you enjoyed the benefit of a mediator?

SUMMARY: After having pointed out Christ's superiority to angels, Moses, and Aaron in Hebrews 1–7, the apostle summarizes his discussion with Hebrews 8:1, 2 before specifically turning to the covenant, the sanctuary, and the sacrifice. From Hebrews 8 onward, he focuses on the accomplishments of Jesus. The covenant allows for a special relationship to God and offers a solution to our deepest needs and problems. Here, the great theme of "something better" appears. A new and better covenant requires a new and better priesthood, sanctuary, and mediator. We have been given them all.



The Angel Brother

Andréa Schá

When I was a teenager, my parents moved to a city in Brazil where my brothers and sisters and I could attend an Adventist academy.

One Tuesday evening after choir practice, I started toward home, which was just a few blocks from the school. My brother had come to meet me and walk home with me, but he was chatting with friends, so I started toward home alone.

The road was dark and deserted. As I approached a mini-market near my house, a strange car stopped beside me and a man opened the car door and told me to get in. I pretended I did not hear him and continued walking. But the man pulled a gun and said, "Get in the car, or I will kill you."

Shaking with fear, I cried out to God. I thought I would never see my family again. I looked around; the street was deserted; no one could help me.

Just then a tall young man in a white shirt appeared beside me. In a firm voice he asked the sinister man in the car, "What do you want with my sister?"

"Keep out of this, boy," the would-be assailant growled, "or I'll kill you both."

The young stranger raised his hand and said, "You can kill us, but you will have to face them," and he pointed to his side. The man jumped back into his car as though he had seen a ghost, and took off, tires squealing on the pavement. I looked around, but I could not see anyone except the young man beside me.

My rescuer placed his hand on my shoulder and said, "The danger is past. Now hurry home." I raced across the street, still trembling with fear. Suddenly I realized that I had not thanked the young man for saving my life. I turned to thank him, but he was not there. The street was once again deserted. After a moment of wonder, I regained my composure and hurried on home.

Some day I want to shake the hand of my angel brother who saved my life.

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