

The Covenant



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 9:1–17; 12:1–3; Gal. 3:6–9, 15–18; Exodus 24; Jer. 31:31–34; 1 Cor. 11:24–26.*

Memory Text: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah’ ” (*Jeremiah 31:31, NIV*).

Although the Bible speaks of “covenants” in the plural (*Rom. 9:4, Gal. 4:24*), there is only one basic covenant, the covenant of grace, in which God bestows salvation upon fallen beings who claim it by faith. The idea of plural “covenants” arises from the various ways God has restated the essential covenant promise in order to meet the needs of His people in different times and settings.

But whether it's the Adamic covenant (*Gen. 3:15*), the Abrahamic covenant (*Gen. 12:1–3, Gal. 3:6–9*), the Sinaitic covenant (*Exod. 20:2*), the Davidic covenant (*Ezek. 37:24–27*), or the New Covenant (*Jer. 31:31–33*), the idea is the same. The salvation God provides is a gift, unmerited and undeserved, and the human response to that gift—in a sense, humanity's holding up its side of the deal—is faithfulness and obedience.

The first mention of the New Covenant is in Jeremiah, in the context of Israel's return from exile and the blessings that God would grant them. Even amid calamity and trouble, the Lord extends to His wayward people the offer of hope and restoration.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 12.

God's Covenant With All Humanity

We look at how bad the world is today; that is, we see all the evil in it, and yet God still bears with us. Thus, we can only imagine just how bad things must have been in order for the Lord to destroy the whole world with a flood. “God had given men His commandments as a rule of life, but His law was transgressed, and every conceivable sin was the result. The wickedness of men was open and daring, justice was trampled in the dust, and the cries of the oppressed reached unto heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 91.

Read Genesis 9:1–17. What covenant was made between God and humanity, and how does it reflect God's grace toward the creation?

The covenant God expressed to Noah was the most universal among the biblical covenants; it was with all humanity, and it included the animals and nature too (*Gen. 9:12*). Also, this was a one-sided arrangement: the Lord didn't impose any requirements or stipulations upon those with whom He was establishing the covenant. He simply was not going to destroy the earth with water again, period. Unlike other covenants, nothing was conditional about it.

God then sealed His covenant with a visible sign, that of a rainbow, which symbolizes the covenant promise that the earth will never be destroyed by a flood again. So, anytime we see a rainbow, the mere fact that we are here to see it is, in its own way, a vindication of this ancient covenant promise. (After all, if we had been wiped out in a universal flood, we wouldn't be here to see the rainbow!) Amid the constant sin and evil here on earth, at times we are blessed with the beauty of the rainbow, a sign of God's grace toward the whole world. We can look up at it and draw hope, not only from just how beautiful it is in and of itself, but also because we know that it's a message from God, a message of His love toward our wretched planet.

Dwell upon the grandeur and beauty of a rainbow. Especially in light of what the Bible tells us about the rainbow, in what ways can it draw us toward God, toward transcendence, toward something greater than what this mere earth itself offers?

The Covenant With Abraham

Read Genesis 12:1–3, 15:1–5, 17:1–14. What do these texts tell us about what the Lord intended to do through the covenant He made with Abraham?

The Abrahamic covenant of grace is fundamental to the entire course of salvation history. That’s why Paul used it to help explain the plan of salvation as it was fulfilled in Jesus Himself.

Read Galatians 3:6–9, 15–18. How does Paul connect the covenant made with Abraham to Jesus and to salvation by faith alone?

Through Abraham’s seed—referring not to his many descendants but in particular to one, Jesus (*see Gal. 3:16*), God would bless the entire world. All who would be a part of Abraham’s seed, which happens by faith in Christ (*Gal. 3:29*), would find that Abraham’s God would be their God as well. Even back then, Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness” (*Gal. 3:6*). Abraham was no more saved by works than the thief on the cross was; it’s always and only God’s saving grace that brings salvation. Abraham fulfilled his end of the covenant promise. His obedience revealed the faith that took hold of the promise of salvation. His works didn’t justify him; instead, the works showed that he was already justified. That’s the essence of the covenant and how it is expressed in the life of faith (*see Rom. 4:1–3*).

Dwell upon the great truth that your hope of salvation comes only from the righteousness of Jesus credited to you by faith. What great hope and joy can you derive from this wonderful provision made in your behalf?

The Covenant at Sinai

How was the covenant made between Israel and God at Mount Sinai?

Exodus 24.

Moses and some leaders went to Mount Sinai. These leaders included Aaron and his two sons, who represented the priests, and the 70 elders and leaders, who represented the nation. The men accompanying Moses had to stop from afar, but Moses was allowed to go up to where God appeared.

Moses later returned and affirmed the covenant with the whole nation. He proclaimed what God had spoken to him, to which the nation answered with the following words: “All the words which the LORD has said we will do.” (*See Exod. 24:3, NKJV.*)

Of course, as sacred history has shown and as our own experience often proves, it’s one thing to make the claim to be obedient; it’s quite another to reach out in faith and surrender in order to harness the divine power that gives us the grace to do what we say we will.

Read Hebrews 4:2. What does this verse say about Israel’s failure? How can we learn to avoid the same mistake?

Only by faith and by grasping the promises that come by faith can we be obedient, an obedience that is expressed by loyalty to God’s law. Obedience to the law was no more contrary to the everlasting covenant in Moses’ time than it is in ours. The common misperception about the law and the covenants, which usually arises from reading Paul, stems from a failure to take into account the context in which Paul was writing, that of dealing with his Judaizing opponents. They wanted to make the law and obedience to it central to the faith; Paul, in contrast, wanted to make Christ and His righteousness the central component.

How often have you said, “All that the Lord has told me, I will do,” only to fail to follow through? How does this unfortunate reality make the promise of grace so much more precious? What hope would you have without it?

The New Covenant: Part 1

Read Jeremiah 31:31–34. What do these texts mean both in their immediate context and in ours today?

Jeremiah uttered these words amid the greatest crisis the people had yet faced: the coming Babylonian invasion, when the nation was threatened with all but certain extinction. Here again, however, as in other places, the Lord offered them hope, the promise that this was not going to be the ultimate end, and that they would have another chance to thrive in the presence of the Lord.

So, the first promise of the “new covenant” found in the Bible is in the context of Israel’s eventual return from Babylonian exile and the blessing that God would grant to them upon that return. Just as the breaking of the covenant made at Sinai (*Jer. 31:32*) brought them into exile, so the remaking of this covenant would preserve them and their hope for the future. Like the Sinai covenant, the new covenant would be relational, and it would include the same law, the Ten Commandments, but now written not just on tablets of stone but in their minds and on their hearts, where it should have been all along.

“The same law that was engraved upon the tables of stone is written by the Holy Spirit upon the tables of the heart. Instead of going about to establish our own righteousness, we accept the righteousness of Christ. His blood atones for our sins. His obedience is accepted for us. Then the heart renewed by the Holy Spirit will bring forth ‘the fruits of the Spirit.’ Through the grace of Christ we shall live in obedience to the law of God written upon our hearts. Having the Spirit of Christ, we shall walk even as He walked.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 372.

Under the new covenant, their sins would be forgiven, they would know the Lord for themselves, and they would obey God’s law through the power of the Holy Spirit working in them. Old covenant in shadows and in symbols, new covenant in reality, salvation was always by faith, a faith that would reveal “the fruits of the Spirit.”

The New Covenant: Part 2

The prophecy of Jeremiah about the new covenant (*Jer. 31:31–34*) contains a double application: first, it refers to Israel's return to God and His bringing them home; second, it refers to the work of Jesus the Messiah, whose death ratified the covenant and would change the relationship between humans and God. It's in the New Covenant that we get the fullest expression of the plan of salvation, which before had been revealed only in shadows and types (*Heb. 10:1*).

Read Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:24–26. How do these texts link back to Jeremiah's prophecy?

The broken body of Christ and His shed blood were revealed in the Old Testament in the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. The juice of the vine represents the blood of Jesus shed on the cross, revealed in the New Testament. The work of Jesus did not begin with the New Testament; it embraced the Old, as well, and in the Communion service we can see the link that unites what Jesus has done all through salvation history.

The bread and the juice, then, provide the shortest summary of that salvation history. Though they are just symbols, it is still through these symbols that we understand God's incredible work in our behalf.

The Communion service points not just to Christ's death, but also to His return, without which His death would be all but meaningless. After all, what good would Christ's first coming be without the second, when we are resurrected from the grave (*1 Thess. 4:16, 1 Cor. 15:12–18*)? Jesus established the link when He said, "But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (*Matt. 26:29*). No question, Christ's first coming is inseparably tied to His second. The first finds its ultimate fulfillment only in the second.

Next time you partake of the communion service, think about Christ's vow not to drink of the fruit of the vine until He does so with us in the kingdom of God. How does that make you feel? What does that say about the closeness that Christ seeks with us?

Further Thought: As we saw, the Bible teaches that the rainbow is a sign of God’s covenantal promise never to destroy the earth by water again. Sure, thanks to science, we now know that a rainbow occurs when sunlight is both refracted and reflected in drops of water, dispersing the light at various angles. Light enters a raindrop at one point, is reflected off the back of that drop at another, and leaves at another, creating the colors that we see. Poet John Keats feared that science would “unweave a rainbow,” but even if we could parse, measure, predict, and quantify everything about a rainbow down to the innards of each photon and the underbelly of every quark, what would that prove other than that we understand better the natural laws God used to create the signs of this covenant promise? Science might one day be able to explain everything about how rainbows are made—even to 25 digits to the right of a decimal point—but it can never explain why they are made.

We, though, know *why*. Because God created our world in such a way that when sunlight and mist are in right relationships to each other, the mist breaks up the light by refracting and reflecting it at different angles that create bands of electromagnetic waves, which, when reaching our eyes, imprint the image of rainbows in our minds. And He did it (the “why” that science can never explain) to remind us of His covenant promise that never again would He destroy the earth by water.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What are some other crucial truths revealed by the Bible that science can never teach us? In fact, could you argue that the most important things we know could never be revealed by science? If so, what truths would they be?
- ② In class, go over the crucial relationship between faith and works in the plan of salvation. That is, what is the role of faith, and what is the role of works, and how do they relate to the Christian experience?
- ③ What does it mean to say that the law is engraved on our hearts? How does this idea show the perpetuity of the law, even under the New Covenant?

Cry of the Kalahari: Part 2

The desert sun streamed down mercilessly as the little man crept forward with his bow. From his thin, wrinkled appearance one might suppose he was in his seventies, but his body was accustomed to the scarcity of food and water, and his reflexes were lightning fast.

Steeped in the accumulated wisdom of his ancestors, he cautiously moved closer to the small herd of grazing buck.

When he was close enough, he fitted a poisoned arrow to his bow, aimed carefully, and let the arrow fly.

It found its mark, but the buck's hide was tough and the arrow didn't penetrate deeply. The buck looked around then charged the Bushman, catching him on its terrible horns and tossing him until his intestines hung out of his abdomen, now covered with sand and grit.

After the buck left, the Bushman staggered to his feet and, clutching the dirty mass to himself, headed for the only help he knew—the Seventh-day Adventist hospital miles away!

He was barely conscious when he reached the hospital compound. The horrified staff rushed him to the operating room, marveling at the desperate stamina that had brought him there.

The surgeon prayed earnestly as he cleansed the intestines, replaced them in the abdominal cavity, and sutured the gaping wound closed. He knew that only God could heal the Bushman.

With careful nursing and much prayer, he eventually recovered and returned to his family, leaving the hospital staff to wonder if he also had learned of God's love during his hospital stay.

Several months later, a little man with a horrible scar on his abdomen came to the hospital bringing a four-foot chain of beads, painstakingly handcrafted with primitive tools, as his expression of gratitude to the doctor who had saved his life.

Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help to establish a Seventh-day Adventist primary school in Botswana.

Please plan to give generously on the Thirteenth Sabbath, or any time on our secure Web site: giving.adventistmission.org.

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