

God *and* the Covenant



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Neh. 10:1–29, Gen. 4:8–19, Heb. 13:20, Joshua 24, Neh. 10:30–39, Heb. 8:1–7.*

Memory Text: “‘And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it.’ We will not neglect the house of our God” (*Nehemiah 9:38; 10:39b, NKJV*).

What does the Bible mean when it talks about the “covenant”? The easiest explanation of this kind of biblical covenant is that it is the legal establishment of a relationship between God and His people. It is God saying, “You are My people, and I am your God.” Beyond this, we can find the use of written covenants among other people in the ancient world, often between leaders and the vassals under them.

These covenants were established because they were beneficial to both parties. The leader would take care of the people, and the people would pay tribute. But with God, the covenant was different. God wasn’t really getting anything out of it, and yet, He promised to be faithful to it, even when people were not. Indeed, the blessings and curses attached to the covenant made it possible for the Israelites to know when bad things started happening, that they had been breaking the covenant.

This week, we will look at the covenant that the Israelites renewed with God in Nehemiah 10 and also discuss some general information about the history and importance of covenant making in the Bible.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 23.

The Idea of the Covenant

Read Nehemiah 10:1–29 (and refresh your memory by reading Nehemiah 9:36–38). Who is making this covenant, and why did they enter into it?

Although only the leaders signed the document, the text pointedly notes that all of “the rest the people” entered into “a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God” (*Neh. 10:28, 29, NIV*). What was so significant about the covenant that they all desired to enter into an agreement with God? In order to answer this question, we have to go back to the very beginning and understand the biblical idea of the covenant.

The covenant was important because it was part of God’s story in dealing with sinful humanity, and it demonstrated God’s yearning for a relationship with people. It also allowed people to demonstrate their desire to be dedicated to God.

The biblical Creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 reveals not only the creation of the first humans but the relationship between them and God, and between each other, as well. However, sin then entered and broke all those relationships. Sin is the antithesis of creation, bringing de-creation (death) instead.

The genealogy of Adam eventually splits, as Cain chooses evil (*Gen. 4:8–19*) and Seth embraces God (*Gen. 5:3–24*). Cain’s genealogy culminates in Lamech (*Gen. 4:17–19*)—the seventh (inclusively) from Adam, who introduced polygamy. Violence and vengeance on Cain’s side stand in juxtaposition to the faithful lineage of Seth. Seth’s genealogy also is enumerated, but the seventh in this line is Enoch, who “walked with God” (*Gen. 5:24*) and was taken to heaven.

Unfortunately, the world embraced evil more than it did God, and the lineage of the faithful became very small, creating a real possibility of eliminating any family through whom God could fulfill His Word by sending the promised Seed to save humans. At that point, God intervened with the Flood. The Flood, however, was a further de-creation, a reversal and destruction of life, and yet, God destroyed only what humans had already ruined (*Gen. 6:11–13*).

How have you personally experienced the reality of sin’s destructive force? What’s the only power against sin, and how do we avail ourselves of it?

Covenants in History

After the Flood, God began again, now with Noah and the people who came afterward. With them, too, He sought a relationship, and central to that relationship was the idea of covenant. The Bible identifies seven major covenants that God has made with people:

First Covenant—Adam (*Genesis 1–3*)

Second Covenant—Noah (*Genesis 6–9*)

Third Covenant—Abraham (*Genesis 12:1–3*)

Fourth Covenant—Moses and the Israelite nation (*known as Sinaitic or Mosaic Covenant; Exodus 19–24*)

Fifth Covenant—Phinehas (*Num. 25:10–13*)

Sixth Covenant—David (*2 Sam. 7:5–16*)

Seventh Covenant—New Covenant (*Jer. 31:31–34*)

Read the following texts. What do they mean by the “everlasting covenant”? *Gen. 9:16, Gen. 17:7, Isa. 55:3, Heb. 13:20.*

The Bible incorporates the term “everlasting covenant” 16 times. Out of them, 13 are specifically applied to the covenants with Abraham, Israel at Sinai, and David. Each of the covenants mentioned above, although unique, bore the imprint of “the everlasting covenant.” Just as the everlasting gospel is first announced in Genesis 3:15, but then progressively revealed throughout the Bible, the same applies to the everlasting covenant. Each consecutive covenant serves to expound and deepen our understanding of the everlasting covenant of love, which is revealed most fully in the plan of salvation. The New and Old Covenants, as they are often distinguished, contain the same components.

1. Sanctification: “I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts” (*Jer. 31:33, NKJV; compare Heb. 8:10*).
2. Reconciliation: “I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (*Jer. 31:33, NKJV; Heb. 8:10*).
3. Mission: “No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them” (*Jer. 31:34, NKJV; Heb. 8:11*).
4. Justification: “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (*Jer. 31:34, NKJV; Heb. 8:12*).

Covenantal Structure

Bible scholars recognize that there is a typical structure to biblical covenants; this was seen even in covenants made by the ancient Hittites. That is, God communicated to the people in a manner that they, in their culture, could especially understand.

The covenants that were common during the time of ancient Israel had the following parts: preamble (who God is); historical prologue (past relationship defined); stipulations or laws; blessings and curses; witnesses; special provision or sign of the covenant. Thus, it should be no surprise that God used something similar in communicating to His people back then. He used what they were familiar with.

For example, the whole book of Deuteronomy is written in the form of a covenant, because Moses invites God's people to enter into a new covenant relationship with their God. It expresses the covenant in the following manner: (1) preamble (*Deut. 1:1–5*); (2) historical prologue (*Deut. 1:6–4:43*); (3) stipulations or laws (*Deut. 4:44–26:19*); (4) blessings and curses (*Deuteronomy 27–30*); (5) witnesses (*Deut. 30:19*); and finally, (6) special provision (*Deut. 31:9–13*).

Read Joshua 24. How is this covenant pattern revealed in that chapter, as well?

The same is true with the renewal of the covenant made by Joshua.

First, a preamble is mentioned in which God presents Himself as “the LORD, the God of Israel” (*Josh. 24:2, NIV*). Then follows a long historical prologue through which Joshua reminds the people of what God has done for them in the past (*Josh. 24:2–13*). After this history, the stipulations or laws are enumerated (*Josh. 24:14, 15, 23*), blessings and curses are mentioned (*Josh. 24:19, 20*), witnesses identified (*Josh. 24:22, 27*), and special provision stated (*Josh. 24:25, 26*). Here, too, the basic form of a covenant was used to communicate with the Israelites and show them, not only God's leading in their past, but what was required of them to uphold their end of the covenant.

Read Joshua 24:15. What principle is here that we can apply to ourselves today?

Pledges

Read Nehemiah 10:30–39. What are four things the Israelites pledged to do as part of the renewed covenant?

The people pledged the following:

1. No mixed marriages (no marriage to an individual who could lead one into idolatry),
2. True Sabbath observance (no distractions through business transactions),
3. Debt cancellation and sabbatical year observance to care for the poor and give them freedom,
4. Financially supporting the temple, its services, and personnel through bringing the firstfruits, the firstborn, and the tithe, thus ensuring the continuation of true worship.

The first three pledges related to relationships with others (marriage and debt cancellation) and with God (Sabbath), while the last one (*Neh. 10:32–39*) deals with temple regulations.

The goal of the community was to demonstrate that the people were committed to the covenant, and therefore would implement practical ways of building their relationship with God and others. Even if they didn't always keep the covenant perfectly, they understood that right habits and practices would influence the future. If the Israelite nation was going to get on the right path, it had to establish practices and habits that would be conducive to where it wanted to be. If the people wanted to have a close walk with God, then making the Sabbath important and taking care of the temple were important steps in that direction.

Unfortunately, they didn't keep their pledges very well, as demonstrated in the last chapters of Nehemiah. Yet, even if everyone didn't keep them, some or many people did. With God's help and keeping our focus on Him, we can develop the right habits and stick to the right path.

“Through the right exercise of the will, an entire change may be made in your life. By yielding up your will to Christ, you ally yourself with the power that is above all principalities and powers. You will have strength from above to hold you steadfast, and thus through constant surrender to God you will be enabled to live the new life, even the life of faith.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 48. What's holding you back from experiencing what's written here?

The Temple

Look at Nehemiah 10:32–39 again. Why were the temple’s practices essential for the Israelites, as shown by “we will not neglect the house of our God” (*Neh. 10:39, NKJV*)? Why was the temple so important for the faith as a whole? See also *Heb. 8:1–7*.

The Israelites pledged to take care of the temple. Even though they were a small group financially oppressed by the kings, they decided they needed to give from the little they had in order for the temple to thrive and not just survive. Therefore, they chose to give a third of a shekel for the temple service every year, instead of just when the census happened, as the law commanded. The nation saw a need to go beyond what was required. Additionally, they allotted the responsibility for burning firewood on the altar to specific families, as they recognized that without organization the practice would wane.

Firstfruits, firstborns, and tithes and offerings were aspects of the temple service that provided for the ministry of the priests and Levites. A tenth of everything was to go to the Levites. Also, firstborns were redeemed by money, adding to the amount the Levites received. However, a tenth of the Levites’ tenth went to the priests.

The temple served as the heartbeat of the Israelite nation. It was so central to their faith that the greatest tragedy occurred when Nebuchadnezzar tore down the temple and carried away the sacred objects.

When the temple was properly managed, it gave the nation a vibrant spiritual life because it pointed the people to the ultimate solution to the sin problem, which was through the death of the Lamb. When Jesus died on the cross, that solution was provided (*Rom. 5:5–10*). Moreover, through the yearly service of the Day of Atonement, the people learned that ultimately God has a plan to get rid of evil and sin for good. In other words, the temple served as the setting for revealing to the people the entire plan of salvation. The lessons we can gain through looking at the temple services are immense and necessary to give us a bigger picture of God’s character and to illuminate the plan of salvation.

“This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (*1 Tim. 1:15, NKJV*). What was Paul’s hope, and how can we make it our own hope, as well?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Consecration,” pp. 43–48, in *Steps to Christ*.

“The ministration of the earthly sanctuary consisted of two divisions; the priests ministered daily in the holy place, while once a year the high priest performed a special work of atonement in the most holy, for the cleansing of the sanctuary. Day by day the repentant sinner brought his offering to the door of the tabernacle and, placing his hand upon the victim’s head, confessed his sins, thus in figure transferring them from himself to the innocent sacrifice. The animal was then slain. ‘Without shedding of blood,’ says the apostle, there is no remission of sin. ‘The life of the flesh is in the blood.’ Leviticus 17:11. The broken law of God demanded the life of the transgressor. The blood, representing the forfeited life of the sinner, whose guilt the victim bore, was carried by the priest into the holy place and sprinkled before the veil, behind which was the ark containing the law that the sinner had transgressed. By this ceremony the sin was, through the blood, transferred in figure to the sanctuary. In some cases the blood was not taken into the holy place; but the flesh was then to be eaten by the priest, as Moses directed the sons of Aaron, saying, ‘God hath given it you to bear the iniquity of the congregation.’ Leviticus 10:17. Both ceremonies alike symbolized the transfer of the sin from the penitent to the sanctuary.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 418.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think about pledges you have made that you have broken, no matter how sincere and earnest you were in intending to keep them. What have you learned from that experience that, perhaps, could help keep you from making a similar mistake again?
- 2 Covenant is a legal establishment of a relationship. We broke it with God, but He is always faithful to His part, even when we are not to ours. How can this understanding of God’s goodness and faithfulness draw humans into a close relationship with Him and, thus, help us live as we should?
- 3 Think of how many times you have been unfaithful to God and to promises we have under the “new covenant” (see *Luke 22:20, Heb. 8:13, 9:15*). Why is it so important, then, to understand the plan of salvation and the promise of forgiveness that we have because of the sacrifice of Jesus, whose blood sealed the “new covenant” for us?

Volleyball Evangelism

By WILSON MEASAPOGU

Man Bahadur Rai and his family believed that six spirits inhabited their home in a rural village near Nepal's border with China. Six clay pots were placed around the home for the spirits to live in. Whenever Mother cooked a meal, she placed food into each pot for the spirits to eat. She feared that if even one spirit were forgotten, the whole family would suffer indigestion—or worse.

The parents wielded great influence in the village as the local spiritual leaders, and they hated Christianity, the belief in an unseen God. They preferred their visible gods of metal and wood.

One evening, 18-year-old Man was walking home after work and heard a male voice speaking about a virgin who had a child. Man wondered who was making such an illogical statement. He followed the voice to a building and saw a man reading from a black book.

After the meeting, Man argued with the man over his teachings. The man, a visiting Seventh-day Adventist pastor, simply smiled and invited the teen to return the next evening. After a week of meetings, Man obtained a Bible and determined to prove it wrong. The more he read, however, the more he felt convinced that Jesus is the Living God. He gave his heart to Jesus.

Father was furious when Man announced that he had become a Christian. He beat the teen and chased him from the village.

Mother wept all night. In the morning, she asked a friend to find her son and give him a lamb. Man accepted the lamb with joy and, after praying, felt a strong impression to sell it and buy a volleyball and net. Finding a piece of unused land between five villages, Man set up the volleyball net and started to play.

Soon several young people passed by and asked if they could join him. “Sure,” Man said. “But you have to memorize one Bible verse.”

The young people eagerly memorized a verse and began to play. As they played, other young people stopped and memorized verses to join in. When the match ended, the young people pleaded to play again.

“OK,” Man said. “But first you have to learn a song about my God.” Before long, many had memorized whole Bible chapters and Christian songs.

Then Man heard that I would conduct a Bible school, and he shared his story on the first day. He introduced three young men seated nearby. “This is the result of my volleyball evangelism,” he said. “These men have accepted Jesus and want to become Bible workers, too.”

Man, left, who has been disowned by his family, is no theologian. He is a frontline worker building a new family who will live forever in God's kingdom.



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Part I: Overview

Key Texts: *Nehemiah 9:38, Nehemiah 10:39*

Study Focus: *Nehemiah 10*

The covenant was a crowning act in establishing a relationship between God and His people. First, the Israelites studied the Scriptures, which led to conviction and confession of sin (*Nehemiah 8, Nehemiah 9*). After the confession, praises, and petition of the Jews, the renewal of the covenant was performed. Nehemiah signed it first, followed by 83 leaders of the nation. The leaders placed a seal on the document, and the rest of the congregation “entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God’s law” (*Neh. 10:29*). Then they pledged their loyalty to God by taking four vows. They vowed (1) to not intermarry with people from other nations, (2) to faithfully keep the Sabbath, (3) to cancel all debts, and (4) to take care of the temple (including paying tithes and offerings).

In other words, the signing of the covenant was not enough. They knew that it had to be followed up by action. Their commitment to God had to be observable, and thus they reintroduced important aspects of walking with God as a holy nation. It was through a relationship with God and intentionality in behavior that they were to grow as people of God. A critical aspect of being faithful to God and developing the right habits is regularly and persistently asking God for transformation and help. With His help and keeping our focus on Him, we can develop the right habits and stick to the correct path. The Jews did not leave their growth to chance but diligently made action plans that would keep them grounded in God.

Part II: Commentary

Thematic Structure of Chapter 10

- I. Leaders seal the covenant (*Neh. 10:1–27*).
- II. The people promise to walk in God’s law (*Neh. 10:28, 29*).
- III. Pledges of the covenant (*Neh. 10:30–39*)
 1. No mixed marriages (*Neh. 10:30*)
 2. Keeping the Sabbath (*Neh. 10:31a*)
 3. Debt cancellation (*Neh. 10:31b*)
 4. Temple service (*Neh. 10:32–39*)
 - a. Temple tax (*Neh. 10:32, 33*)
 - b. Wood (*Neh. 10:34*)

- c. Firstfruits (*Neh. 10:35–37a*)
- d. Tithe (*Neh. 10:37b–38*)
- e. Offering (*Neh. 10:39a, b*)
- f. Summary statement: “We will not neglect the house of our God” (*Neh. 10:39c*).

From Creation to Re-creation

The biblical Creation story begins in Genesis 1, occurring in a series of seven days. The culmination of the Creation story, known as the First Creation Account, is the seventh day, the Sabbath. This narrative tells humans that we were created dependent upon God and were to live in relationship with Him. Genesis 2 describes Creation from a slightly different perspective but still in a series of seven, culminating in the establishment of a horizontal (i.e., human-to-human) relationship through the marriage of the first couple. Unfortunately, because of sin, God’s creation was de- or un-created by humanity when they broke their relationship with God as a result of attempting to live an autonomous life. Saying no to God’s presence in life spiraled the world quickly into wickedness until God had to intervene with the Flood to stop the avalanche of evil; otherwise, there soon would have been no one left to save.

Thankfully, with God, who is faithful to His word, there is always a new beginning; He re-creates again after the Flood in the time of Noah. God preserves a remnant, and through them He will bring salvation. This re-creation story, written in a sequence of seven, culminates with the covenant (*Gen. 8:1–9:17*). Although God had to restart many times (tower of Babel, Abraham, Moses, etc.), the covenant has remained a central aspect of the relationship between God and humanity.

Thus, the covenant between God and humans is an important element of the re-creation mission that God has been on ever since humanity’s fall. The covenant is a legal establishment of a relationship between God and humans. It is an attempt at restoring the broken relationship between God and humans. It is necessary because humanity does not trust God. When people trust each other, they do not need paperwork and legal treaties to guarantee each other that each partner in the agreement will come through on his or her promises. However, God knows that humans have a hard time trusting Him. So, He devised a way to demonstrate to us that He is always faithful. The covenant is a way for God to show us that He is serious about His commitment to us. God always takes the first step. He is the initiator of the covenant; He establishes the covenant with us.

Making a Covenant

The covenant is a legal document, written according to Hittite treaties

between two parties (usually between a suzerain lord and his vassals), making the relationship binding. The best example of how a covenant was made in the Mesopotamian culture is found in Genesis 15 in which God makes a covenant with Abram.

Abram follows the established custom of establishing a covenant between two parties. The literal translation for making a covenant is “cutting” a covenant because it involved the “cutting” of animals. Depending on how wealthy the vassal (the servant) was, he or she would bring a variety of animals to split in half. The vassal did the work of splitting the animals in half and then pledged an oath to the overlord. Since Abram is affluent, he brings a heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon (*Gen. 15:9*). He cut each of the animals down the middle and placed them opposite each other on the ground, creating a path in between them. The birds were left whole because of their small size and placed opposite each other. The job of the vassal now was to walk between the cut pieces and proclaim something to the effect of: “Let it be done to me as was done to these animals if I break this covenant.” The overlord did not do the walking between the pieces because it was done only by the one who had the lower status in the relationship. So, as was customary, Abram would have walked between the pieces as a vassal even though his doing so is not specifically mentioned in the text.

However, although we would expect that action to end the story and for the covenant to be complete, God does not end the ratification of the covenant there. When the sun goes down, Abram suddenly sees “a smoking oven and a burning torch” that pass between the pieces. Smoke and fire represent God in the Old Testament (smoke on the mountain as God’s presence descends and a pillar of fire in the wilderness; later, in the New Testament, we have the tongues of fire [*Acts 2*], etc.). What do these things mean? God walked through the pieces Himself. He did not expect Abram to walk through and pledge the oath; it was God Himself who pledged, “If I break this covenant, may I be cut in half like these animals.” Incredibly, humans were the ones who broke the covenant again and again. In the end, God was the one who was willing to be “cut” on the cross and to die for sinful people in order to demonstrate His faithfulness and incredible love. God never broke the covenant. But because we did, He took our place in being rent in half; God died for us in our place.

God makes a covenant with us in order to demonstrate His commitment and goodness to us. Although we break the relationship with Him, He keeps working on mending it. He wants to restore us to Himself (*Exod. 19:4, John 12:32*).

Pledges of the Covenant

The Jews in the time of Nehemiah realize that God is faithful. Now they

want to make a commitment to be a holy nation for God. The leaders sign a document testifying that they want to be faithful to God. Then, the rest of the Israelites agree to this and swear an oath to follow God's law. They are aware that the responsibility of walking with God rests on them. But walking with God cannot be just talk; it must be physical actions. The people must be obedient to God's teachings.

Thus, in a demonstration of the people's intention to be obedient, the rest of the chapter is dedicated to outlining the specifics of their pledge to God. (1) They will not have mixed marriages with people around them and will not give their children in marriage to those who do not live for God. (2) They will not buy or sell on the Sabbath and will treat it as a holy day, a different day, realizing that buying and selling is done on all the rest of the days of the week. (3) They also will forgive any debt every seventh year and let the ground have rest as instructed in Leviticus 25 during the jubilee year. Finally, (4) they will focus on restoring the services in the temple by providing for the Levites and the priests through paying tithe and offerings and through regulating all temple provisions. The priests were to receive a tenth of the tithes. In the early days, when the Levites greatly outnumbered the priests, this portion was a great provision. But by Nehemiah's time, such a small group of people remained that receiving a tenth of the tenth was a meager allotment. The fact that the priests agreed to this allotment demonstrates their unselfish and humble attitude. The actions taken by the assembly and the servants in the temple show their wholehearted commitment to God.

Part III: Life Application

Covenant With Abram

1. Imagine the scene of the covenant between God and Abram, engaging all five of your senses. Now answer the following questions:

a. What would the place smell like?

b. What would you hear?

c. What would you taste if you were there?

d. What would you see?

e. What would you feel?

2. What do you think about God's actions in walking through the cut pieces of the animals in Genesis 15? What do you think Abram was thinking as God "cut" the covenant with him? What does God's making the covenant with Abram mean to you?

Nehemiah's Covenant

1. Why did the Israelites commit to those four pledges specifically? What is important about each of them?

2. The community had come full circle; they had rejoiced, mourned, and made a commitment to God. In making these new commitments, the Israelite remnant was looking forward to the future, ever bearing in mind that God must help us walk with Him, giving us strength and a greater desire to follow through with living for Him. What commitments can you make to God? What can you do to ensure that you deliver on your pledges as you look into a future of a deeper relationship with God? What role does the Holy Spirit play in your commitment?
