

Lesson 7

*August 9-15

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.

Sunday

August 10

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Hebrews 13:20, 21.

Teachers Aims:

1. To define what the biblical covenant is and why there is a need for a new covenant.
2. To compare and contrast the old covenant with the new.
3. To outline what the new covenant offers us.
4. To understand how the new covenant relates to Christ's heavenly ministry.

Lesson Outline:

I. The Covenant Relationship.

- A. God's covenant with Abraham included the following promises:
 1. His constant presence
 2. A Messiah
 3. Land
 4. The creation of a great nation
- B. The Messianic promise foretold that a great Blessing would come to the whole world through Abraham's line.
- C. The Mosaic covenant enlarged on the earlier covenants with the promise to make Israel a holy nation.

II. The Old Covenant Versus the New Covenant.

- A. The new covenant provides total forgiveness and assurance.
- B. Far from abolishing the law in the new covenant, Christ's life exalted the moral code.
- C. The law is internalized in the soul and, through faith in Christ, the believer lives in obedience.
- D. The new covenant has been sealed with Christ's blood.

III. The New Covenant and the Ministry of Jesus.

- A. Christ accepted the role of our Sacrifice.
- B. He became High Priest, or Mediator, in our behalf.
- C. We have the assurance that God will uphold His end of the covenant promises—even when we fail to uphold ours.

Summary: The new covenant represents a special relationship between God and His people, one that offers a solution to the great rift caused by sin. Christ chose to become the Solution. He is the Guarantee that God will honor His part of the covenant with humanity. The good news gets even better. Gracious provisions have been made by God through Jesus to pardon and restore those who fail to uphold their end of the covenant.

Monday

August 11

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Commentary.

The “covenant” is an important concept that runs throughout the Bible; thus, we find it here, too, in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The new covenant, according to Jeremiah’s prophecy, involved the implanting of God’s laws into the hearts of the people, not to mention giving them the will and power to obey those laws. It also gives the assurance that their past sins and iniquities would be eternally blotted out from God’s record.

Thus, God’s covenant is given first to His people, and then, in turn, His people share His covenant with the world, according to Jeremiah 31:31-34. God through Christ brings the unsaved into a saving relationship with Him, and God promises to write His moral laws upon their hearts in the new covenant of regeneration.

Christ is called the “surety of a better covenant” (Heb. 7:22, NKJV), because He offered His life as a guarantee of the new covenant. He died for the elect, whom God had given to Him (John 6:37). The word *covenant* in the book of Hebrews (Greek *diatheke* and Hebrew *berith*) is so important that we need to explore its meaning.

The meaning of the word *diatheke* is “to set out in order, to dispose in a certain order, a testament, a covenant.” God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, not in the sense that God came to an agreement or compromise with fallen humanity. Rather, it involves the declaration of God’s unconditional promise to make Abraham and his seed the recipients of certain blessings (Gen. 13:14-17; 15:18; 17:7, 8, 19-21; 21:12, 14; 22:2, 12).

God is bringing about His prearranged plan in regard to Israel in spite of the fact Israel has not yet believed in the Messiah. The Sinaitic *diatheke* to Moses, however, was a conditional dispensation or series of promises (Exod. 19:5-8, 20-23; Heb. 12:18-21), which God made for the Jews, but only if they obeyed.

In the New Testament the idea is that God provided His Son in the execution of His plan. The giving of eternal life to individuals was based on their acceptance of the sacrifice of the Son of God. Christ was given for the sins of the world; those who would enter into a covenant relationship with the Lord needed to accept that sacrifice made in their own behalf.

The idea of setting up a relationship, which may be done by the free act, or choice, of one person, is always present. It is in this latter sense we understand the divine *berith*, or covenant. This is a divine order or agreement, which is established without any human cooperation and springs from the choice of God Himself, whose will and determination account for both its origin and its character.

It’s not easy to find a word that conveys the meaning of the divine *berith*. Why did the Septuagint choose and adhere to the Greek word *diatheke* as the rendering of *berith*? It is because the Greek word *diatheke* had the meaning of will or testament. No better word was

Tuesday

August 12

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

available to express the Old Testament idea of a solemn and irrevocable disposition made by God of His own gracious choice and meant to secure a religious inheritance for His chosen people.

In this covenant relationship, the one who makes the will does not ask the recipient of the will whether it is acceptable or not. It is a unilateral demonstration of the will of the testator. God is the One who begins the covenant and also who finishes it.

The question now arises, Why is the Testator, Jesus Christ, called the Mediator of the new (*kaines*) will or *diatheke*? How can the Testator be also the Mediator? Does a will require a mediator? Jesus is called the Mediator of the new (*kaines*) and better covenant. God expressed His will toward humankind by making known His plan of redemption for humans. He offered Jesus Christ as that guarantee.

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts For Discovery: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 4:23-25; 6:1, 2; Colossians 2:14, 16; James 2:15, 16.

1. Like so many concepts in the Bible, the idea of a new covenant is derived from social and personal relationships between or among people. Yet, it also highlights the differences between human-to-human and God-to-human relationships. Does the covenant between God and ourselves tell us anything about how we should relate to one another?
2. The idea of a new covenant is not unique to the book of Hebrews, or even to the New Testament (a term that is synonymous with the new covenant). It first appears in the book of Jeremiah. Why do you think a new covenant was necessary? What was wrong with the old covenant?
3. The religion of the Old Testament was based, to some degree, on sacrifice. In a slightly different way, so was the religion of the New Testament. Why do you think a sacrifice was necessary? Was it to fulfill a legal requirement, or was it to emphasize the cost of disobedience? Both? Neither?
4. What is the place of the law under the new covenant? It is clear most Christians regard at least some of the Old Testament regulations as outmoded. How are we to decide which we must still literally fulfill?
5. Hebrews warns us against willfully continuing to sin. Yet, most of us continue to sin in one way or another. How can we be sure we are not intentionally cultivating sin while assuming we can have it forgiven later? Isn't any sin an act of will?

Wednesday

August 13

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.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Right from the beginning, in the first gospel declaration (Gen. 3:15), God pledged Jesus Christ as the Guarantee for the effectiveness of what He promised.

When someone makes a will to distribute worldly possessions, the will can't be enforced until after the person's death. Today's news headlines often feature gruesome stories of greedy spouses taking life-insurance policies out on their husbands or wives and then arranging their deaths in order to claim policies worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

This is, in effect, what Jesus subjected Himself to for the human race. Jesus drew up a divine will to save us from sin and then willingly died so we could get the inheritance (Heb. 9:17). Jesus, though, does the impossible: He makes the will, dies to enforce it, and comes back to mediate the distribution of what that will offers us upon His death. This is forgiveness to the uttermost from the sewage of sin and contains gracious provisions of mercy and love and the power to overcome.

WITNESSING

For Christmas one year, Ashlee gave her 11-year-old brother a box of building gadgets for making a model car or airplane or whatever he so desired. Many hobbyists spend hours structuring detailed, small-scaled models of planes, boats, cars, and other things. Architects use models as they make plans for erecting new buildings. But the miniature-sized structure only represents the real thing.

In the Old Testament, God made a covenant with His people. The covenant was simply a contract between God and the people. Under this contract, the Lord promised to be their God and to forgive them and cleanse them from all their sins. And the people would worship the Lord and obey His law. The terms of this contract were put into effect by a model. That model was the earthly sanctuary, with all its symbols and ritu-

als. But the model was only there to represent or point to the real thing. It pointed to a Savior and to the heavenly sanctuary.

When explaining the earthly-sanctuary ministry to those who do not clearly understand its purpose, we can show how the sanctuary services on earth were a part of the old covenant between God and His people. The terms of that covenant, or contract, have been fulfilled in Christ. We are now under a new covenant. Under the old covenant, God's law was written on two tables of stone, and there was hope of a soon-to-come Savior. Under the new covenant, God's law is written in our hearts; the Savior has come, and our salvation is sure. There is no longer a need for the model, because Christ, our eternal Sacrifice, now ministers for us in the heavenly sanctuary above.

Thursday

August 14

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: In the book *The Constant Fire*, A. K. Chalmers tells of two men in China. One was a writer; the other a working man. Because of their devotion to the cause of the revolution, the men were rounded up by the government and put under torture. Eventually, they were released, but they were soon under suspicion again and sought by the authorities. They escaped and eventually reached the seacoast, where a boat was waiting to carry them to safety. There at the water's edge, the worker stopped, held out his hand to the writer, and said "Goodbye." "Why goodbye?" asked the writer. "Because," said the other, "I've decided not to go with you. You must go to America and Europe to interpret to the world by your understanding mind and brilliant pen the meaning of our struggle. But I must go back to face whatever I must with the rest, so you, dipping your pen into my blood, can make the world understand that we mean what we say." (Adapted.)

Thought Questions:

1. The story above illustrates how a partnership, contract, or agreement does not necessarily bring equal benefits and profits to both sides; nor does it always translate into equal investment, effort, or sacrifice!
2. Compare God's new covenant with marriage, a business partnership, and a franchise. What are the similarities and differences? Why is it sometimes so hard for humanity to expect God's gift of grace? What are the advantages of going into a partnership with God? Are there any disadvantages? Explain.

Application Questions:

1. Compare the story of the two Chinese men with your role as a partaker of God's new covenant. How does Jesus' work in the heavenly sanctuary transform you? Think of three ways your life today is better because of Jesus' work?
2. In what ways does the new covenant give you direct access to God? Name some barriers that tend to get between you and God. How might an understanding of Christ's work in the heavenly sanctuary help remove these barriers?

Friday

August 15

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.