

Christ, the Law, and the Covenants (Promises)



SABBATH—MAY 31

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Genesis 9:12–17; Genesis 17:2–12; Galatians 3:15–28; Deuteronomy 9:9; Hebrews 10:11–18; Hebrews 9:15–28.

MEMORY VERSE: “That’s [that is] why Christ is the go-between of the new covenant. Now those God calls to himself will receive the eternal gift he promised. They will receive it now that Christ has died to save them. He died to set them free from the sins they committed [did] under the first covenant” (Hebrews 9:15, NIV).

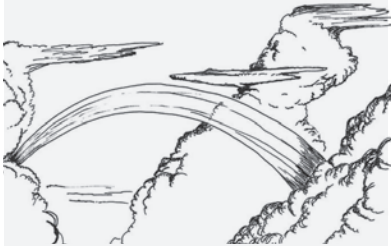
GOD'S ETERNAL DECISION TO SAVE PEOPLE HAS BEEN GIVEN TO US THROUGHOUT HISTORY BY THE COVENANTS. The Bible speaks of several covenants (Romans 9:4; Galatians 4:24; Ephesians 2:12). But there is really only the covenant of grace.¹ In this covenant, salvation is given to sinners who can do nothing to earn it. Instead, it is the sacrifice of Jesus that makes salvation possible for all who accept Him by faith. The fact that there have been several covenants just means that God has changed the wording of the covenant to meet the needs of His people in different times and settings. Really, it has always been one covenant. This covenant is the eternal covenant of God's saving grace.

The heart of this covenant is our Lord's faithful love. It is the love that the Bible says is equal to the covenants themselves (read Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 Kings 8:23; Daniel 9:4). As part of this covenant, God calls His people to obey His law. This is not a way of getting salvation but the result of accepting it. Law and grace together have always been very important parts of God's eternal covenant.

DEFINITIONS

1. grace—God's gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

COVENANT SIGNS (Genesis 9:12–17)



The rainbow is a sign of God's promise to never again destroy the earth with water.

DEFINITIONS

2. circumcision—the removal of the skin (called the foreskin) at the end of the penis of a man or a boy.

A covenant can be described as an agreement between two parties (persons or groups). The agreement is based upon promises made by either person or by both parties. A covenant can work by one of two methods (ways). In the first method, both parties to the covenant agree to the terms of the relationship and make the same promises to each other. This would be the case in marriage, business, or even the purchase of property. In the second method, one party starts the covenant by making both the promises and the requirements. And the other party is invited to take part. Examples include payment of taxes or enrollment at a university or vocational college. In both examples, either party is free to withdraw from the covenant. But there is usually a negative result. (For instance, a person who fails to pay his mortgage will lose his home. Or a citizen who refuses to pay taxes will be punished by law.)

A covenant is usually sealed with at least one symbol. For example, a person purchasing a home places several signatures on a mortgage agreement with a lender. In turn, the lender keeps the title deed for the property in trust until the full amount is paid. Or married people are given a legal certificate of marriage by the state. The symbol itself is not the covenant but a sign that a person is responsible for the agreement.

Read Genesis 9:12–17 and Genesis 17:2–12. What is the difference between the symbol and the covenant in these cases? Also, what are the differences between these two covenants?

In Genesis 9:9, God makes a covenant (promise) that He will never again destroy the earth with water. Each time a rainbow appears in the sky, all people are expected to remember God's promise. The same is true for the mark of circumcision.² It was supposed to remind every Jewish male of his people's role in blessing the nations. One covenant was made with all people. The other was made with the nation of Israel. Also, in the covenant made with the people after the Flood, the people did not have to do anything. The promise was just there, no matter what the people did. This was not true with the second covenant made with Israel. The people had to keep their part of the agreement.

COVENANT PROMISES (Galatians 3:15–28)

Covenants are based on promises. Of course, when a covenant is made, it is expected that the person who makes the promise (covenant) has the ability to do what is promised (covenanted).

In the Old Testament, some covenants were local and limited affairs (for example, read Genesis 31:43–54). The event with Jacob and Laban points out that covenants can be transactions (business deals) made within and between societies (groups). The monument at Mizpah was to serve as the sign of an agreement only between the two groups (Jacob's and Laban's). When the persons making the agreement died, the agreement itself would no longer have power or meaning. Unlike this covenant made between humans, the covenants that God made with Noah and Abraham last forever.

How does Galatians 3:15–28 help to explain the broader meaning of the covenant made to Abraham?

Throughout the Bible, God has made several universal covenants. In them God makes promises for all people. God knew that the entire earth had been spoiled by the Flood. So, He promised not to let His creation be destroyed by water again. In the case with Abraham, God understood people's need for righteousness (holiness). So, He promised to give a blessing for all nations through Abraham's seed (Genesis 22:18).

God made the Sinai covenant with Israel. But it is for people all over the world too. God was very clear that any foreigner³ could be a part of the chosen people (for example, Exodus 12:48, 49). Israel's mission was to be a light to the world (Exodus 19:5, 6).

What is your own understanding of your covenantal⁴ relationship with God? What has God promised you? And what has He asked of you in return for those promises?



Israel's mission was to be a light to the world.

DEFINITIONS

3. foreigner—a person from another nation living in a country he or she was not born in.

4. covenantal—having to do with the covenant or agreement between God and His people.

TABLET OF THE COVENANT (Jeremiah 31:31–34)

God personally engraved His requirements for a relationship with Israel on tablets of stone.



Jesus is the full and complete Sacrifice for our sins.

A covenant is based on promises. But there are usually conditions (requirements; rules) to meet before the promises are met. The covenant with Abraham required the circumcision of all males who were born to Abraham or to his future children. When God covenanted (made a promise) with Israel, He personally engraved the requirements for the relationship on tablets of stone (Deuteronomy 9:8–11). These requirements, engraved in the Ten Commandments, were to form the basis of God’s everlasting covenant with all humans.

The Ten Commandments are often called the “tablets of the covenant” (Deuteronomy 9:9, NKJV). The Ten Commandments are not given to make life hard for those who have entered into a covenant with God. Instead, the commandments have been given as an example of God’s love. They are for the benefit of those who have entered into a covenant relationship with their Lord.

In what ways do Jeremiah 31:31–34 and Hebrews 10:11–18 support the everlasting nature of God’s laws in the new covenant?

Under the old covenant at Mount Sinai, the Israelites (people of Israel) were responsible for being faithful to the covenant by keeping the Ten Commandments. When they broke a commandment, they were expected to offer an animal sacrifice if they wanted to have their sins forgiven.

Under the new covenant at Mount Calvary, God’s people are still responsible for keeping the Ten Commandments. But when they sin, they do not have to offer continuous sacrifices. This is because Jesus is their full and complete Sacrifice (Hebrews 9:11–14). The new covenant is so much better than the old. This is because now, by faith, we claim the promises of forgiveness offered to us through the sacrifice of Jesus. “There is hope for us only as we come under the covenant with Abraham. This is the covenant of grace by faith in Christ Jesus.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 6, page 1077.

What does it mean to have God’s law written in your heart? How is this different from understanding God’s law as a code (law) of obedience?

THE COVENANT AND THE GOSPEL (Hebrews 9:15–22)

There were strong negative results that came from breaking certain Bible covenants. God warned Abraham that any male who was not circumcised would be cut off from the chosen people (Genesis 17:14). And a list of curses was directed toward those who refused to follow the rules of the Sinai covenant (Deuteronomy 27:11–26). In the end, those who broke the rules of the covenant would be punished with death (Ezekiel 18:4). The same is true for the new covenant. Those who refuse to keep God’s law cannot have eternal life (Romans 6:23).

Read Hebrews 9:15–28. In what ways is the gospel explained in these verses?

Hebrews 9:15–28 tells again the gospel story. It announces the part that Christ plays in making the promises available for believers. Verse 15 points out that Jesus works as the Mediator⁵ of the new covenant. Through His death, Jesus offers eternal life to those who otherwise would face eternal destruction (death).

In verses 16 and 17, some Bible translations change the word *covenant* to the the word *will* (a legal paper). This is done even though the same Greek word is used. This brings in the whole idea of death, the death of Jesus for us. The verses remind the believer that without Christ the covenant requires the death of each sinner. But the sinner can be covered and then cleansed by Christ’s shed blood. Then he or she can be among those who “eagerly wait” for His return (Hebrews 9:28, NKJV).

“Then we shall know that our own righteousness [holiness] is as filthy [dirty] rags. We also shall know that the blood of Christ alone can cleanse us from sin, and renew our hearts to be like Him.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, page 29.

God Himself, in the person of Jesus, accepted the punishment for our sins to save us from that punishment, which we deserve. What does this tell us about the character (who God is) of God? And why we can trust Him, no matter what our situations are?

DEFINITIONS

5. mediator—a person working to make peace or an agreement between two opposing persons or groups. Jesus is our Mediator. It is His goal to bring God and His people closer together.

**COVENANT BENEFITS (PROFITS)
(Ephesians 2:6)**

In many examples, people can experience the promises of a covenant before all the requirements are even met. For example, when a person buys a home, he or she can live in the home before it is paid for. Or a citizen enjoys the public services offered by the government before he or she has even started paying taxes. Those who enter into a covenant with God can also start to experience the benefits (profits) of the covenant before the promises become real in the future.

Think, for example, about the Ten Commandments and how much pain and suffering people could avoid if they simply followed them. Who has not experienced the heartache that comes from breaking these commandments? Even worse, the suffering that comes is not always limited to the one who breaks the law. Often others, even those closest to the sinner, suffer too.

**Read 2 Corinthians 4:16–18; 1 John 5:11–13; Philip-
pians 1:6; and John 5:24. According to these verses,
what other benefits can we have by keeping a covenant
relationship with Jesus?**

Jesus uses very strong language in the Gospel of John. This is when He reports that those who accept Him have already “ ‘crossed over from death to life’ ” (John 5:24, NIV). The believer has so much hope in Christ that he or she can claim to be sitting in heavenly places with Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6).

**If someone were to ask you, “What does it mean to
be sitting with Jesus in heaven now (as Ephesians 2:6
says)?” what would you answer, and why?**

ADDITIONAL STUDY: For more information on this week’s topic, read Ellen G. White, “The Covenant of Grace,” pages 131–137, in *God’s Amazing Grace*.

“This same covenant was renewed to Abraham in the promise, ‘All nations on earth will be blessed because of your children.’ Genesis 22:18, NIV. This promise pointed to Christ. So, Abraham understood it. And he trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. It was this faith that made God recognize Abraham’s righteousness. The covenant with Abraham also included the authority of God’s law. . . .

“The covenant with Abraham was sealed by the blood of Christ. It is called the ‘second,’ or ‘new,’ covenant. This is because it was sealed by the blood of Christ after the blood of the first covenant was shed. . . .

“The covenant of grace is not a new truth. It has been in the mind of God from all eternity. This is why it is called the everlasting covenant. . . .

“There is hope for us only as we come under the covenant of Abraham. It is the covenant of grace by faith in Christ Jesus.”
—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, page 75.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What do Exodus 31:16 and Isaiah 56:4–6 suggest about the importance of the Sabbath to the covenant? Read also Ezekiel 20.
- ② It is often thought that the old covenant, the one made with Abraham, was a covenant of works. This one has been thought of as different from the new covenant, which is of grace. Why is this idea wrong? What Bible verses can you find that prove the old covenant was always a covenant of grace? Why must it always have been by grace and never by works?
- ③ Ephesians 1 does not use the words “everlasting covenant.” But in what way do these words help us to understand why the covenant has been called that?
- ④ God promised that He would never again destroy the world by a flood. This is a promise symbolized (represented) by the rainbow. Suppose Noah’s flood had been only local (small). Then what would that make of God’s promise? Why is the idea that the Flood was not worldwide a big attack on Bible truth?