

Covenant *at* Sinai



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Deut. 1:29–31; Hos. 11:1; Rev. 5:9; Deut. 29:10–13; Exod. 19:5, 6; Rom. 6:1, 2; Rev. 14:12; Rom. 10:3.*

Memory Text: “‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself’ ” (*Exodus 19:4, RSV*).

A little boy, one of seven children, met with an accident and was taken to the hospital. In his home there was seldom enough of anything. He never had more than just a part of a glass of milk. If the glass was full, it was shared by two of the children, and whoever drank first had to be careful not to drink too far. After the little fellow was made comfortable in the hospital, the nurse brought him a large glass of milk. He looked at it longingly for a moment and then, with the memory of privations at home, asked, ‘How deep shall I drink?’ The nurse, with her eyes shining and a lump in her throat, said, ‘Drink it all, child, drink it all!’—H.M.S. Richards, “Free Grace,” *Voice of Prophecy News*, June 1950, p. 4.

Like this boy, it was the privilege of ancient Israel, as it is our own, to drink deeply from the wells of salvation. Israel’s deliverance from centuries of slavery and oppression was a marvelous exhibition of divine grace. Likewise, divine grace is involved in our own emancipation from sin.

The Week at a Glance: What imagery did the Lord use to describe His relationship with Israel? In what ways do the stories of the Exodus and Sinai parallel personal salvation? What was the role of the law in the Sinai covenant?

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 15.

On Eagles' Wings

As a people, Israel had been immersed in Egyptian paganism for many long, hard centuries, an experience that no doubt dimmed their knowledge of God, His will, and His goodness.

How could the Lord win them back to Himself?

For starters, He would demonstrate the genuineness of His love for Israel, and He did this through His mighty acts of deliverance. He would begin to woo the nation into a loving response to His covenant proposal. At Sinai, God first reminded the nation of His gracious acts in their behalf.

What two illustrations describe the manner in which the Lord brought Israel from Egypt to Sinai?

Exod. 19:4, Deut. 32:10–12 _____

Deut. 1:29–31, Hos. 11:1 _____

What would these illustrations teach Israel (and us) about the nature of God's attitude toward His people?

These illustrations indicate that our God is very much aware of our helplessness. Read Psalm 103:13, 14. In both the figures of the eagle and the parent carrying his child we sense God's concern for our well-being. Tender, supportive, protective, encouraging, He desires to bring us to full maturity.

“The eagle was known for its unusual devotions to its young. It too lived on mountain tops. In teaching its young to fly it carried them upon its back to those great heights that overlook the plains of Sinai, then it dropped them down into the depths. If the baby was still too young and too bewildered to fly, father-eagle would swoop down beneath it, catch it on his back, and fly up again with it to the eyrie on the crags above. And that, says the divine voice, is ‘how I brought you out of Egypt to myself.’ ”—George A. F. Knight, *Theology of Narration* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), p. 128.

Contrast God's interest in us with our interest in one another. How should His concern for us affect our concern for others?

Based on your personal experience, what illustrations can you think of to describe God's unselfish interest in us? Make up a few images on your own, from your own experiences; draw also from whatever culture you live in. Share them with the class.

The Pattern of Salvation

“Say therefore to the people of Israel, “I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment, and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians” ’ ” (Exod. 6:6, 7, RSV).

Look at the above verses: What principle do we see in them, as before, regarding the role of God toward humanity in the covenant relationship? (Focus on how often the word *I* appears in those verses.)

The deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery and the deliverance of Noah and his family from the Flood are the two prominent salvific events in the writings of Moses. Both provide insights into the science of salvation. But it is the Exodus event in particular that provides the basic pattern.

When God says to Israel (through Moses), “I will *redeem* you” (Exod. 6:6, *emphasis supplied*), He literally says, “I will act as the *kinsman redeemer*,” or *go’el*.

“The word *redeem* in verse 6 [of Exodus 6] refers to a member of a family buying back or ransoming another member of the family, especially when that member was in slavery for debt or about to go into slavery. Israel apparently had no earthly relative to redeem her, but God was now Israel’s relative, her kinsman redeemer.”—Bernard L. Ramm, *His Way Out* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books Division, G/L Publications, 1974), p. 50.

How do you understand the idea of God’s “ransoming,” or buying back, His people from slavery? What was the price that had to be paid? What does that tell us about our worth? (See Mark 10:45, 1 Tim. 2:6, and Rev. 5:9.)

In Exodus 3:8 God says that He has “come down” to rescue Israel. This is a common Hebrew verb for God’s interaction with humanity. God is in heaven, and we are on earth, and only as God “comes down” to earth can He redeem us. In the truest sense of the idea, only when Jesus came down, lived, suffered, died, and was resurrected for us could we be redeemed. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14, RSV) is another way of saying that God *came down* in order to save us.

The Sinai Covenant

The book of Exodus draws the reader's attention to three major events. Like three mountains, the Exodus itself, the establishment of the covenant, and the building of the tabernacle sanctuary rise above the foothills of lesser happenings. The establishment of the covenant, recorded in Exodus 19 through 24, was the Mount Everest of the three. A brief outline of Exodus 19 through 24 shows the sequence and the relationship of events.

Even if you do not have the time to look up all the verses listed below, focus on the sequence of events:

1. Israel's arrival and encampment at Sinai after being delivered by the Lord (*Exod. 19:1, 2*)
2. God's proposal of a covenant with Israel (*Exod. 19:3–6*)
3. Israel's response in acceptance of the covenant (*Exod. 19:7, 8*)
4. Preparations for formally receiving the covenant (*Exod. 19:9–25*)
5. Proclamation of the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 20:1–17*)
6. Moses as covenant mediator (*Exod. 20:18–21*)
7. Covenant principles spelled out (*Exod. 20:22–23:22*)
8. Ratification of the covenant (*Exod. 24:1–18*)

This covenant plays a vital role in the plan of salvation. It is the fourth covenant listed in the Bible (preceded by the ones with Adam, Noah, and Abraham), and in it God reveals Himself more fully than before, particularly as the entire sanctuary ritual is established. Thus, the sanctuary becomes the means by which He shows the people the plan of salvation that they were to reveal to the world.

Though the Lord had redeemed Israel from the bondage of Egypt, He wanted them to understand that redemption had a greater, more significant meaning than merely freedom from physical bondage. He wanted to redeem them from sin, the ultimate slavery, and this could happen only through the sacrifice of the Messiah, as taught in the types and symbols of the sanctuary service. It is no wonder, then, that not long after they were redeemed from bondage and given the law, the Israelites were instructed to build the sanctuary and establish its services, for in these things God revealed to them the plan of redemption—which is the true meaning and purpose of the covenant. For the covenant is nothing if not a covenant of salvation that the Lord offers to fallen humanity. That is what it was in Eden, and that is what it was at Sinai.

Why was a covenant between God and the people of Israel a necessity? (*See Deut. 29:10–13; notice, again, the relational aspect of the covenant.*)

God and Israel

“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel” (*Exod. 19:5, 6*).

In these verses the Lord was proposing His covenant with the children of Israel. Though in one sense the Lord had called them, that calling was not automatically bestowed upon them without their choice. They had to cooperate. Even their deliverance from Egypt involved their cooperation: if they had not done what the Lord had said (such as putting the blood on the doorposts), they would not have been delivered. It was that simple.

Here, too, the Lord does not say to them, “Whether you like it or don’t like it, you will be a peculiar treasure unto Me and a nation of priests.” That is not how it works, and that is not what the text says.

Read Exodus 19:5, 6, quoted above. How do you understand what the Lord is saying in the context of salvation by faith? Does the command included there to obey the Lord somehow nullify the concept of salvation by grace? How do the following texts help you to understand the answer? Rom. 3:19–24; Rom. 6:1, 2; Rom. 7:7; Rev. 14:12.

“We do not earn salvation by our obedience; for salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith. But obedience is the fruit of faith.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 61.

Think of what the Lord was willing to do for the nation of Israel: not only did He miraculously deliver them from Egyptian bondage, but He also wanted to make them His own treasured possession, a nation of priests. Basing their relationship with Him upon His salvation (both temporal, as from Egyptian slavery, and eternal), the Lord sought to elevate them to a spiritual, intellectual, and moral level that would make them the wonder of the ancient world, all for the purpose of using them to preach the gospel to the nations. All they had to do, in response, was obey.

In what ways should our personal, one-on-one experience with the Lord reflect that same principle we see here in today’s study?

Promises, Promises . . . (Exod. 19:8)

At first sight, all seems well. The Lord delivers His people, offers them the covenant promises, and they agree: they will do *all* that the Lord asks them to do. It is a deal “made in heaven,” right?

Read the following texts. What insight do they give us regarding Israel’s response to the covenant?

Rom. 9:31, 32 _____

Rom. 10:3 _____

Heb. 4:1, 2 _____

Whatever God asks us to do, our relationship with Him must be founded upon faith. Faith provides the basis upon which works follow. Works, in and of themselves, no matter how purely motivated, no matter how sincere, no matter how numerous, can’t make us acceptable in the sight of a holy God. They could not do it either in Israel’s time, and they cannot in our time, as well.

If, however, the Bible again and again stresses works, why can’t works make us acceptable in God’s sight? (See Isa. 53:6; Isa. 64:6; Rom. 3:23.)

Unfortunately, the Hebrew people believed that their obedience became the means of their salvation, not the result of salvation. They sought righteousness in their obedience to the law, not the *righteousness of God*, which comes by faith. The Sinai covenant—though coming with a much more detailed set of instructions and law—was designed a covenant of grace as much as all the preceding covenants, as well. This grace, freely bestowed, brings about a change of heart that leads to obedience. The problem, of course, was not their attempt to obey (the covenant demanded that they obey); the problem was the kind of “obedience” they rendered, which wasn’t really obedience at all, as the subsequent history of the nation showed.

Read carefully Romans 10:3, particularly the last part. What point is Paul making there? What happens to people who seek to establish their own righteousness? Why does that attempt inevitably lead to sin, unrighteousness, and rebellion? Look at our own lives. Are we not in danger of doing the same thing?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Exodus,” pp. 281–290; “From the Red Sea to Sinai,” pp. 291–302; “The Law Given to Israel,” pp. 303–314, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“The spirit of bondage is engendered by seeking to live in accordance with legal religion, through striving to fulfill the claims of the law in our own strength. There is hope for us only as we come under the Abrahamic covenant, which is the covenant of grace by faith in Christ Jesus. The gospel preached to Abraham, through which he had hope, was the same gospel that is preached to us today, through which we have hope. Abraham looked unto Jesus, who is also the Author and the Finisher of our faith.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1077.

“During the bondage in Egypt many of the Israelites had, to a great extent, lost the knowledge of God’s law, and had mingled its precepts with heathen customs and traditions. God brought them to Sinai, and there with His own voice declared His law.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 334.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In what ways was the covenant relationship designed to maintain Israel’s physical and spiritual freedoms? (See *Lev. 26:3–13*; compare *Deut. 28:1–15*.)
- 2 Read again Exodus 19:5, 6. Notice that the Lord makes this statement: “All the earth is mine.” Why would He say that, particularly in this context, one of seeking to establish a covenant with these people? How does our understanding of the Sabbath, and what it means, fit in here?
- 3 We understand that we are forgiven our sins only through God’s grace. How do we understand the role of God’s grace in enabling us to live a life of faith and obedience?

Summary: The covenant God formed with Israel at Sinai was a covenant of grace. Having given abundant evidence of His gracious love and care by an extraordinary deliverance from Egyptian slavery, God invited the nation into a covenant with Him that would maintain and promote their freedoms. Although Israel responded in the affirmative, they lacked a true faith motivated by love. Their later history indicates that, for the most part, they failed to understand the true nature of the covenant and corrupted it into a salvation-by-works system. We need not follow Israel’s failure and ignore the marvelous grace that has been extended to sinners.

“Let’s Go to Church!”

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Something curious happened once Dr. Hernando Díaz began working at the Seventh-day Adventist clinic on the campus of Colombia Adventist University in Medellín, Colombia. He couldn’t stop praising God.

Hernando had long been a Christian, but he had never loved God so much. When no one would hire him as a physician, the Adventist Medical Center offered him a flexible schedule that allowed him to spend as much time as he needed with his critically ill two-year-old son, Samuel.

His love for God overflowed. He prayed with every patient who consented. He told everyone who would listen that God had miraculously saved his son’s life and marvelously provided him with the job at the clinic. He invited people to the university church, where he and his family regularly worshiped on Sabbath, even though they weren’t Adventists.

One Sabbath after his baptism, Hernando stopped at a red light as he was driving the family to church. A street vendor approached the car holding packs of chewing gum for sale. The sight was typical in Medellín, but Hernando had an unusual response. When he rolled down the window, the street vendor eagerly came up to him, hoping to make a sale. Hernando didn’t mention the chewing gum at all. “Let’s go to church!” he said.

The street vendor didn’t hesitate. “Let’s go!” he said.

Hernando could tell from the street vendor’s accent that he was from Venezuela. Thousands of Venezuelans have crossed the border into neighboring Colombia to look for work amid an economic crisis at home.

Hernando shared his personal testimony with the street vendor as they traveled to the university church.

The next Sabbath, the Venezuelan man returned to church with his own family. He and his family never missed a Sabbath. He now cooks and sells food on the street outside the Adventist Medical Center, using a food cart donated by church members. He and his family are taking baptismal classes. Hernando is praying that the family will give their hearts to Jesus, joining the six other people who have been baptized through his efforts.

Hernando said it isn’t difficult to lead people to Jesus. He follows the instructions that Jesus gave to the formerly demon-possessed man: “Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you” (*Mark 5:19, NKJV*).



“I haven’t stopped glorifying God with my personal testimony,” Hernando said. “It has touched many hearts.”

This quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help open a missionary training center at Colombia Adventist University.

Study Focus: *Exodus 19:4, RSV*

Part I: Overview

After having lived among the Egyptians, whose religion taught that salvation was purchased by the works of human hands, Israel lost sight of who God truly was. They believed that their obedience to God was their salvation and that redemption arose from their own merit, not in their personal relationship with God.

Part II: Commentary

“When an eagle wants to teach its little ones to fly . . . , it prods one of the little eaglets and with its beak, noses it out of the nest. The eaglet starts to fall, and the great eagle flies underneath, puts its wing out, catches the little one on its back and flies a mile into the air.

“When you can hardly see the eagle as a point in the sky, it turns sideways, and down falls the little eaglet, which goes fluttering maybe a thousand feet.

“Meanwhile, the eagle circles around the eaglet and underneath it, the eagle catches the eaglet on its wings and carries the eaglet up in the air again. After dishing the eaglet out again and letting it go, the eaglet comes down farther and farther—sometimes within a hundred feet of the ground.

“Again the great eagle catches the little one on its back and up they go another mile. Little by little the eaglet will learn how to fly. The eagle knows when the eaglet is tired; it spoons the eaglet into the nest, noses out the next one and starts off again.”—Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 15,000 Illustrations* (Dallas, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1998), pp. 3050, 3051.

On Eagles’ Wings

With His sharp talons of grace, the Mountain Eagle of eternity prodded the Hebrew eaglet from the haughty nest of Egyptian oppression. At the Red Sea, the eaglet plummeted into panic when it heard the desert floor thunder with the ensuing chariot wheels of injustice. As the eaglet’s faith fluttered, it beheld two massive, gaping water walls that rose in glorious attention, saluting the majestic Eagle’s omnipotence. Between the lucid water walls, a dry highway had been carved out in supernatural fashion, pointing the trembling eaglet to safe passage.

The Pattern of Salvation

Just as the Hebrew expression *go’el* in Exodus 6:6 revealed Christ as

Israel's *Redeemer-Kinsman*, there are four Greek New Testament terms that expand upon how Christ is our *Redeemer-Kinsman*: "There are four different words used to denote 'redemption' in the Greek New Testament: *agoridzo*, *exagoridzo*, *lutroo*, and *apolutrosis*. . . .

"The first word for 'redemption' [*agoridzo*] tells us that Jesus Christ came to earth to *locate us* in our depravity and to personally inspect our slavery to Satan.

"The second word for 'redemption' (*exagoridzo*) declares that Jesus came not only to inspect our condition but to permanently *remove us* from Satan's power.

"The third word for 'redemption' (*lutroo*) tells us that Jesus was so dedicated to delivering us from Satan's dominion that He was willing to *pay the ransom price* of His own blood. . . .

"The fourth word for 'redemption' (*apolutrosis*) tells us that, in addition to permanently setting us free from Satan's hold, Jesus *restored us* to the position of 'sons of God.' Now we are fully restored and made joint-heirs with Jesus Christ Himself (Romans 8:17)." —Rick Renner, *Dressed to Kill: A Biblical Approach to Spiritual Warfare and Armor* (Tulsa, OK: Teach All Nations, 2007), pp. 81, 98, 99. (*Study 1 Cor. 6:20; Gal. 3:13; Gal. 4:4, 5; Eph. 1:7; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18, 19; Rev. 5:9; and Rev. 7:14.*)

The Sinai Covenant

In the Sinai covenant (*see Exod. 19:5, 6*), there were three pivotal elements, or points, that Yahweh revealed as He addressed ancient Israel relative to His ordained will for them. The first element of this covenant was God's expressed desire to make the Hebrew nation a treasured possession. "In contrast to other types of possessions, namely, those that could not be moved, such as real estate, Israel became, through God's love and affection, His moveable treasure." —Gerhard M. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God's Everlasting Covenant*, p. 65.

The second point in this covenant was that Yahweh designed to make Israel a kingdom of priests. In other words: "Each Israelite, in one way or another, was to function as God's priestly agent to bring blessings to the nations of the entire world and to minister to their needs." —Gerhard M. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God's Everlasting Covenant*, p. 66. The third point in this covenant focused on Yahweh's design for Israel to be made a sanctified nation. In essence, the Israel of the covenant of grace was to become a sacred entity. Having already known that ancient Israel would soon break its covenant agreement (*see Exod. 19:7, 8*), Yahweh initiated the Sinai covenant. Why? (*Study Exodus 32.*)

God and Israel

"And now if you will surely listen to My voice, and will keep My covenant, you shall become a special treasure to Me above the nations, for all the earth is Mine. And you shall become a kingdom of priests for Me,

a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the sons of Israel.”—*The Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament*, vol. 1, p. 192. (See *Exodus 19:5, 6*.) “The Gospel is the Law unfolded, nothing more nor less. . . . The Law points to Christ; Christ points to the Law. The Gospel calls men to repentance. Repentance of what?—Of sin. And what is sin?—It is the transgression of the Law. Therefore the Gospel calls men . . . back to obedience to the Law of God.”—Ellen G. White, “The Law and the Gospel,” *The Signs of the Times*, Feb. 25, 1897.

Promises, Promises . . .

“Should faith and works purchase the gift of salvation for anyone, then the Creator is under obligation to the creature. Here is an opportunity for falsehood to be accepted as truth.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 20.

Here is another way to express this truth: it is not faith and works; it is not faith or works. It is a faith that works. We reveal our faith by our works; in fact, works can and do strengthen faith.

Part III: Life Application

For Reflection: During the last week of 1999, salon.com ran a story titled “The Hall of Shame.” It was about the ten most dishonorable sports figures of that year. The list included offenders ranging from someone who was arrested for murder to another person who had been caught with drugs. These were men who had entered into a contract with their teams and fans. They began their careers with the best of intentions: to play well, live honorably, and prove worthy of the signatures on their contracts.

Before one enters into a contract with anyone, it is important to know that person’s character. What is it about God’s character that makes us feel comfortable about entering into a covenant relationship with Him? Do you think He first looks at our characters before entering into relationships with us? Explain.

- 1. In most partnerships, the benefits to both parties are equal. However, when a holy God enters into a partnership with a sinful human, the relationship begins terribly imbalanced—God brings so much more to the partnership than we ever could. How is it possible to be subject to Him yet have the privilege of being in a partnership with Him? Explain.**

2. Before you sign a contract, you should read all the demands and the fine print. But when God makes a covenant, He is very clear. There is no fine print or reading between the lines. His words are a series of definitives: “I will, I will, I will . . .” (for example, see *Exod. 6:6, 7*). In response, what will you bring into the partnership? If you were in God’s shoes, how comfortable would you be about entering a partnership with someone like you?

3. Contracts are customized to suit the parties concerned, the type of businesses involved, et cetera. In what ways has God customized His covenant with you? How do you show appreciation for the “allowances” He has made in the event you break your contract? How does God’s role as your Friend affect His role as your Partner? Is there a conflict between the two roles? Explain. God recognizes our frailty (see *Ps. 103:13, 14*). Does this mean that God excuses sin(s)? We know that God forgives sin(s). How is this different?

4. The idea of God coming down to our human level is most obvious in the New Testament, and people often assume that God was remote and unapproachable in the Old Testament. Why is this conception inaccurate?

5. Many of the instructions given to Israel after the Exodus may seem irrelevant and outmoded to the modern person, and it is clear that at least some of them do not directly apply today. How do you think the regulations and rituals given after the Exodus functioned in teaching the lessons God wanted the Israelites to know? How do we know which might still apply to us today?

6. Many commentators on the Bible regard Israel's collective promise to obey God (*see Exod. 19:8*) as boastful and misguided. If so, why? Can you think of other responses that might have been more appropriate? What distinguishes true obedience from false or misguided obedience?
