

God's Covenants With Us



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 10:22, John 6:29, Deut. 28:1–14, Prov. 3:1–10, Mal. 3:7–11, Matt. 6:25–33.*

Memory Text: “Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God” (*Deuteronomy 28:1, 2, NKJV*).

Amazingly enough, God has made contracts (or covenants) with us. Most are bilateral, meaning that both parties (God and humans) have a part to perform. An example of a bilateral covenant is “If you will do this, then I will do that.” Or “I will do this if you will do that.”

A rarer type of covenant is unilateral. “I will do this whether you do anything or not.” A few of God’s covenants with humanity are unilateral. For example, “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (*Matt. 5:45, NKJV*). Following the Flood, God promised humanity and “every beast of the earth” that there would never be another flood to cover all the earth (*see Gen. 9:9–16*), regardless of our actions. He also promised: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease” (*Gen. 8:22, NKJV*). The seasons will come and go, regardless of what we do.

This week we will study some significant bilateral covenants between God and His children. Let’s pray that, by God’s grace, we will “uphold our end of the bargain.”

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 14.

The Salvation Covenant

The death of Christ on Calvary made salvation possible for every person who has ever lived or who will ever live. Unlike the promise of the seasons, salvation is not unilateral—it is not given to everyone, regardless of what they do. The belief that everyone will be saved is called “universalism.”

Instead, Jesus clearly taught that, though He died for all humanity, many people travel the broad way to destruction and eternal death (*Matt. 7:13, 14*).

What do the following texts have to say about how people receive the gift of salvation in Jesus?

1 John 5:13 _____

Matt. 10:22 _____

John 6:29 _____

2 Pet. 1:10, 11 _____

Paul understood the bilateral nature of the salvation covenant. Knowing that he was soon to be executed, and in spite of the fact that many of his companions had forsaken him, Paul confidently told his dear friend Timothy that he had upheld his end of the bargain. “For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (*2 Tim. 4:6–8*).

Paul says, “I am ready [because] I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.” Paul, though, was always very clear that salvation is by faith alone, not by the deeds of the law, and so here he is not somehow looking at his works or achievements as earning him merit with God. The “crown of righteousness” awaiting him is the righteousness of Jesus, which Paul, by faith, has claimed for himself and has held on to until the end of his life.

Though salvation is an unmerited gift, what’s the difference between those who accept the gift and those who don’t? What does accepting this gift require that we do?

To Hearken Diligently

The book of Deuteronomy is the printed version of Moses' farewell messages to the second generation of Israelites following the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. These messages were given on the plains of Moab just east of Jericho. Deuteronomy has been appropriately called "The Book of Remembrance."

In this book, Moses reviews God's faithful dealings with Israel. He recounts the travels from Mount Sinai to Kadesh Barnea on the edge of the Promised Land, as well as the rebellion and the 40 years of wilderness wandering. He restated the Ten Commandments, the requirements of the tithe and the central storehouse. But the primary focus of Deuteronomy is the counsel to obey God and receive His blessings. Moses portrays God as One who has the ability, and the desire, to care for His people.

Read Deuteronomy 28:1–14. What great blessings are promised the people? But what must they do to receive them?

Moses was very eager for the people to understand that God had wonderful, even miraculous, blessings in mind for them. His words, "If thou shalt hearken diligently," let them know that their eternal destiny was at stake here. What a powerful manifestation of the reality of free choice. They were God's chosen nation, recipients of great blessings and great promises, but those blessings and promises were not unconditional. They needed to be accepted, received, and acted upon.

And nothing God had asked of them was too hard for them to do either. "For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it" (*Deut. 30:11–14, NKJV*).

Of course, besides the blessings, there were the warnings of the curses, what would come upon them if they were to disobey (*Deut. 28:15–68*); that is, what consequences their sin and rebellion would bring.

What does it mean for us, today, to "hearken diligently" to what God tells us to do?

Honor the Lord

The book of Proverbs is not so much about right and wrong as it is about wisdom and foolishness. As one reads through the book, one will see the benefits of wisdom and the pitfalls of foolishness.

Read Proverbs 3:1–10. What wonderful promises are given here? Also, what does “firstfruits of all your increase” mean?

God asks us to put Him first in the management of our possessions as an acknowledgment of His ownership of all things and as a demonstration of our faith in Him to provide for us. But even more than this, He says that if we will put Him first, then He will bless what’s left. For us to do this—that is, to put Him first—is an act of faith, an act of trust, a manifestation of trusting in the Lord with all your heart and, indeed, not leaning on your own understanding (which is especially important, because so often things happen that we cannot understand and cannot make sense of).

Nothing, though, should spur us on more in trusting God and His love than does the Cross. When you realize what each one of us has been given in Jesus, not just as our Creator (*John 1:1–4*) and our Sustainer (*Heb. 1:3*), but also as our Redeemer (*Rev. 5:9*), returning to God the firstfruits of whatever we have is, indeed, the least we could do.

“Not only does the Lord claim the tithe as His own, but He tells us *how* it should be reserved for Him. He says, ‘Honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the *first fruits* of all thine increase.’ This does not teach that we are to spend our means on ourselves, and bring to the Lord the remnant, even though it should be otherwise an honest tithe. Let God’s portion be first set apart.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, p. 81.

God says that if we put Him first, our “barns will be filled with plenty” (*Prov. 3:10, NKJV*). Yet, this is not going to happen by miracle; that is, you are not going to wake up one day and find your barns and vats suddenly full.

Instead, the Bible is filled with principles about good stewardship, careful planning, and financial responsibility, of which faithfulness to what God calls us to do is our first and foremost responsibility.

How, though, do we learn to trust God and in His promises during hard financial times when, even while we are seeking to be faithful, the barns and vats are not full?

The Tithe Contract

There is a close spiritual connection between the practice of tithing and our relationship to God. The Israelites prospered when they obeyed God and were faithful in tithing. In contrast, they fell on hard times when they didn't. They seemed to follow a cycle of obedience and prosperity, and then disobedience and problems. It was during one of these periods of unfaithfulness that God, through the prophet Malachi, proposed a bilateral contract with His people.

Read Malachi 3:7–11. What are the promises and the obligations found in these verses?

God promised the people that if they would return to Him, He would return to them. When they asked what He meant by returning to Him, He explicitly said, “Stop robbing Me of tithe and offerings.” Their robbery was the reason they were being cursed. Here is God’s solution to the problem of the curse: “ ‘Bring all the tithes [the whole tithe] into the storehouse’ ” (*Mal. 3:10, NKJV*). And if you do this, then “ ‘I will . . . open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it’ ” (*NKJV*). If we don’t have room enough to receive it, we have a surplus with which we can help others and help to advance the cause of God.

“He who gave His only-begotten Son to die for you, has made a covenant with you. He gives you His blessings, and in return He requires you to bring Him your tithes and offerings. No one will ever dare to say that there was no way in which he could understand in regard to this matter. God’s plan regarding tithes and offerings is definitely stated in the third chapter of Malachi. God calls upon His human agents to be true to the contract He has made with them.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, p. 75.

One of the positive cycles of obedience is recorded during the reign of good King Hezekiah of Judah. There was a genuine revival in Judah, and the people started faithfully returning their tithes and offerings to the temple storehouse. So much came in that it was piled in heaps at the temple. Second Chronicles 31:5 tells what happened when the people “brought in abundance the firstfruits of grain and wine, oil and honey, and of all the produce of the field; and they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything” (*NKJV*).

What does your tithing (or lack thereof) say about your own spirituality and relationship to God?

Seek Ye First

It was said of Jesus that “the common people heard him gladly” (*Mark 12:37*). Most of the people in the large crowds who followed and listened to Jesus were members of this class, the common people. They were the ones who were fed on the mountainside and who heard the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said to them, basically, *I know you are concerned about providing for your families. You worry about the food and drink that you will need daily and the clothing that you need for warmth and protection. But here is what I propose . . .*

Read Matthew 6:25–33. What was promised here, and what were the people to do in order to receive those promises?

Many of the promises of God have elements of a bilateral covenant. That is, in order to receive the blessing, we need to do our part, as well.

Read Isaiah 26:3. What are we asked to do in order to have the peace of God?

Read 1 John 1:9. What will Jesus do if we confess our sins?

Read 2 Chronicles 7:14. What are the “ifs” and “thens” of God’s proposal here?

All these verses and many others deal with the important fact that although God is sovereign, although God is our Creator and Sustainer, and although salvation is a gift of grace and unmerited on our part, we still have a part to play in the great controversy drama here on earth. Using the sacred gift of free will, free choice, we must choose to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit and obey what God calls us to do. Though God offers us blessings and life, we can choose cursing and death instead. No wonder God says, “ ‘Therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live’ ” (*Deut. 30:19, NKJV*).

Further Thought: “Whenever God’s people, in any period of the world, have cheerfully and willingly carried out His plan in systematic benevolence [tithing] and in gifts and offerings, they have realized the standing promise that prosperity should attend all their labors just in proportion as they obeyed His requirements. When they acknowledged the claims of God and complied with His requirements, honoring Him with their substance, their barns were filled with plenty. But when they robbed God in tithes and in offerings they were made to realize that they were not only robbing Him but themselves, for He limited His blessings to them just in proportion as they limited their offerings to Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 395.

The Bible is very clear that we are saved through faith alone, a gift of God’s grace. Our obedience to God’s commands is a response to God’s grace; it doesn’t earn it (after all, if it were earned, it wouldn’t be grace: see *Romans 4:1–4*).

Indeed, when we look at God’s bilateral covenant with us, we can see both our blessings and our responsibilities. By our responses to what God offers to us, we establish our relationship with Him and, to a great degree, determine our own destiny. Obedience—the service and allegiance of love—is the true sign of discipleship. Instead of releasing us from obedience, it is faith, and faith only, that makes us partakers of the grace of Christ, which enables us to render the obedience that God asks from us.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 It has been said that if every Adventist were faithful in returning tithe, our church would have more than enough money to do all that it needs to do for spreading the message. What are you doing, in terms of tithes and offerings, to help the church do what it has been called to do?
- 2 Dwell more on the idea of how important our choices and our works are in our relationship with God. How do we keep the questions of works and obedience, including tithe paying and good stewardship, before us but without falling into the trap of legalism?
- 3 In class, talk about the question at the end of Tuesday’s study regarding when hard times come even when we have been faithful. How do we understand this if it happens, and how do we keep from being discouraged when it does?

Making a Deal With God

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Dmitry Bagal, a student from Russia, ran out of money several months after enrolling in the master's in theology program at Friedensau Adventist University in Germany. His options seemed limited. He could work on campus or in a nearby retirement home, but the income would only partially cover his tuition. As a foreigner, he could not take out a state loan like the German students. But he could apply for a scholarship, which was smaller than the loan but did not require repayment.

As Dmitry prayed over the dilemma, he felt impressed to make a deal with God. "Lord," he prayed, "if You bless me with this scholarship, I promise to set aside a second tithe to support mission work."

Dmitry applied for the scholarship and, to his joy, it was approved. He began setting aside a second 10 percent of his gross income for mission work. As the semesters rolled by, he was approved for the scholarship again and again, and he kept giving a second tithe to mission work. Despite the second tithe, he still somehow always had enough money to cover tuition and other expenses. He even was able to set money aside for an emergency.

Then Dmitry's five-year-old laptop began to act up as he worked on his master's thesis. Twice he had to buy spare parts to self-repair it. One day, he found that he could no longer close the laptop's screen. The hinges refused to budge. A new laptop was needed if he hoped to finish his thesis, and he was glad to have the small emergency fund.

But as he prayed about the situation, he remembered a friend, also from the former Soviet Union, who was serving with his family of five as missionaries in the South American jungle. High humidity had ruined his friend's tablet, and a robust device was desperately needed to continue his work. Dmitry couldn't understand why he was thinking about his friend in South America when he was the one in need of a laptop to graduate. But he bought a waterproof, dustproof laptop and mailed it to his friend.

Shortly after sending the package, an online advertisement popped up on Dmitry's laptop screen that offered the very hinges that he needed for the laptop. He ordered the hinges and, after installing them, the screen opened and closed like new. Amazingly, the laptop still works today, eight years later.



DMITRY has no doubt that God blesses those who put mission first. "The Lord has prolonged the life of the laptop," DMITRY says. "Truly it is written in the Bible, 'Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done' [Proverbs 19:17, NIV]."

Part I: Overview

The plan of salvation is a covenant that God proposes to human beings. Contracts are part of human relationships, but God's covenant with us, in Jesus, was planned since eternity (*1 Pet. 1:18–20*) and offers eternal life to those who are faithful unto death (*Rev. 2:10*).

The covenant contains the law, whether written on stone or in our hearts (*Deut. 9:11, Heb. 8:10*). Such a divine-human alliance involves on our part diligent obedience, rendered in love, to the law and to the covenant (*1 John 5:3*). Some clauses of this covenant are more extensive, such as the commandment to worship God alone and to love Him above all things (*Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:36, 37*). But there are also specific commands within the covenant, namely, (1) to turn away from idolatry (*Deut. 31:20*), (2) to keep the Sabbath (*Isa. 56:6*), and (3) to observe certain food laws (*Leviticus 11, Isa. 65:1–5, Isa. 66:15–18*).

An important covenant clause is to acknowledge that God gives material possessions and, in return, requires faithfulness in tithes and offerings. Besides being important for the development of the relationship between the worshiper and the Worshipped, the faithful return of tithes and offerings also serves to support God's work (*2 Chron. 31:11, 12, 20, 21; Mal. 3:8–10*). In doing so, we recognize the need to honor the Lord with our possessions, placing God first (*Prov. 3:9*). When we break this specific clause, we violate the covenant. Such a violation constitutes a refusal to acknowledge God as the One who bestows the gifts. Thus, in our refusal, we separate ourselves from our Lord and Savior (*Mal. 3:7, 8*).

God's faithfulness to His covenant is unshakable (*Deut. 4:31*), but we haven't always answered Him with faithfulness in return (*Jer. 11:10*). The One who provides riches also offers grace for obedience, making certain both our calling and election for Christ's kingdom (*2 Pet. 1:10, 11; Rev. 2:10*).

Part II: Commentary

What Is the Covenant or Alliance?

Read "The Law and the Covenants" in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, by Ellen G. White, pp. 370–373.

The word "covenant" (in Hebrew: *berith*) appears approximately 285 times in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the Greek word for "covenant" is *diatheke*. This word was used in connection with the covenant between God and His people. (See T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black, *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, pp. 928, 929.) In modern terms, the word corresponds

to a contract but also is used for an alliance, pact, or testament.

A covenant is not necessarily a law, despite being legally binding on the parties within the terms of the contract. Consequently, a law may sometimes be deemed a contract, given that it is a covenant based on the law. However, law and covenant are conceptually different.

So, for a contract to exist, it is necessary to have a law governing it. Although the law was later proclaimed from Mount Sinai, God's law already existed because it is linked to His own name (*Ps. 119:55*) and thus is eternal. Similarly, God's plan to save humanity through the blood of Christ has been known since the foundation of the world (*1 Pet. 1:19, 20*).

Because salvation is by grace, some may presume that human beings have no obligations under this covenant. But mutual obligations are essential for a document to be recognized as a contract, covenant, or alliance. Among the obligations are the good works of faith, according to the law written in the heart (*Eph. 2:8–10, Jer. 31:31–34*).

Laws, Promise, and Covenant

1. *Laws*: Laws are unilateral decisions from the lawgiver and are not dependent on the other party's acceptance. These laws are promulgated by the lawgiver and must be obeyed. We don't participate in the process of making God's laws that are part of the divine covenant. It wouldn't make sense to have a law in a contract that was not meant to be kept. As such, both the old and the new covenants have law and obedience elements (*Heb. 8:8–13*).

2. *Promise*: Similar to a decree, a promise is unilateral. God alone may make a promise. Trust in the promise depends on the credibility and ability of the one who promises. God promised and will deliver because He doesn't lie and never fails. God's promise of salvation by grace through faith to those who accept His covenant is an assurance for the redeemed (*Heb. 6:13–20, 1 John 2:25*).

3. *Covenant*: A covenant needs at least two people (bilateral agreement) to be binding. A covenant is different from a decree or promise in that there is no alliance or covenant without the contractual parties. In this regard, human beings decide whether they want to be part of God's covenant or not. God invites us to enter His covenant, by faith in Christ, so that we may have eternal life (*John 3:16*).

Characteristics of the Covenant

Everything in the covenant points to faith, followed by obedience.

1. *Mutuality* means that the parties have joint duties and rights under the contract. Therefore, being obedient is our part of the covenant (*Heb. 8:10, Rev. 14:12*).

2. *Achievable* means that the covenant's terms can be fulfilled by both parties. It doesn't make sense to have a contract with rules that one of the parties is unable to observe. As such, honoring the terms of the covenant simply is doing what God requires by His grace because grace brings forth good works (*Eph. 2:8–10*).

If God commands us to keep the Sabbath or to return tithes and offerings, such a command is a divine clause in the contract, indicating that human beings can do what is required. God would never ask anything that is impossible, and His enabling grace is part of the covenant.

3. *Conditionality* means that the contract is valid only if there is practical adherence. Anyone who believes and is faithful will be saved (*Rev. 2:10*) and will be blessed (*Mal. 3:10–12*) because this is part of the contract. There are complementary and basic blessings. Sin may hamper the receiving of some complementary blessings in this world, but it does not change the basic blessings of salvation if we remain in the faith, according to the contract.

4. *Cancellation conditions* refer to the fact that all contracts provide for cancellation in certain special situations. Such also is the case with God's covenant. The covenant parties who remain in sin may create the cancellation conditions by transgressing specific clauses.

God's Covenant Includes Tithes and Offerings

All aspects of life are part of God's covenant. In this covenant, God promises to give human beings strength to obtain material possessions. In return, God requires faithfulness to the covenant, for the following three reasons:

1. *Material possessions should remind us that God is fulfilling His part of the covenant.* God declares that His people shall remember Him, because He is the One who gives them the strength to obtain riches and because these blessings are part of the covenant.

God's aim in providing His people with riches is to confirm the alliance between Himself and His people. Thus, He indicates that the covenant includes both material and spiritual aspects (*Deut. 8:18*). As such, tithes and offerings show the mutual loyalty between God (the One who blesses) and His children (who acknowledge, believe, and obey Him).

The faithful use of our possessions, in turn, reminds us of our mission in our salvation covenant with Christ: namely, that God desires that we, through the blessings bestowed upon us, will make His name known among all nations (*Mal. 3:12*).

2. *The return, or withholding, of tithes and offerings is an indication of*

one's spiritual condition with God. Material possessions are part of God's covenant with His people. This fact becomes clear in ancient Israel's unfaithfulness during times of apostasy. On the other hand, during spiritual revivals, the faithful return of tithes and generous offerings indicated a renewal of the covenant with God (2 Chron. 31:5–10; Neh. 10:37, 38; Neh. 12:44; Neh. 13:5, 12; Mal. 1:9, 14; Mal. 3:7–10).

3. *Being faithful in material possessions is a way of honoring God, according to Proverbs 3:1–10.* As we look at this text in more detail, we observe the following:

- a. The word “honor” (in Hebrew: *kabad*) means to glorify and be rich toward God.
- b. The Hebrew word for “increase” (*hown*) (Proverbs 3:9) means “wealth,” “riches.” This verse conveys a clear message that is still valid today: being faithful with our possessions brings honor and glory to God. This general counsel is well detailed in Scripture, in the laws relating to tithes and offerings.
- c. “Firstfruits” (Proverbs 3:9) in Hebrew is *reshyith*, meaning “first, beginning, best.” God cannot be properly honored by being second or by our giving Him the leftovers. The Lord of the covenant requires top priority where our time is concerned and in the quality of what we offer Him. This requirement is part of God's covenant with us.
- d. The Hebrew word *kol* means “all, the whole of, any, each, everything.” “Increase” is the translation of the Hebrew word *tevuah*. It means “produce, product, income, revenue, gain.” Both words together (*kol* and *tevuah*) indicate that no increase shall be exempted from honoring the Lord, because He is the Lord of any increase. Conversely, no reduction will be accepted as an excuse for not honoring Him with “all the increase.” Thus, God requires “all” (*kol*) the material possessions we have. (Thus, no excuse will be accepted as valid for withholding from Him any aspect of our lives that it is our privilege to consecrate fully to Him.)
 “All” our assets and increase of wealth shall be a reminder that God is the God of the covenant. He is the One who provides all that we have. The Bible clearly shows that an important way of remembering the covenant of God is by regularly returning tithes and offerings.

Part III: Life Application

1. Ask your students: How does your faithfulness or unfaithfulness

to God’s covenant, in terms of material possessions, impact your spiritual life? Why?

- 2. Invite one or two of your class members to read the following two passages from Ellen White’s writings while the rest of the class reflects on the words. Then ask your class to answer the questions that follow each quotation.**

“Let those who have become careless and indifferent, and are withholding their tithes and offerings, remember that they are blocking the way, so that the truth cannot go forth to the regions beyond. I am bidden to call upon the people of God to redeem their honor by rendering to God a faithful tithe.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, p. 96.

- a. In what ways do your students feel that they continue to be “careless and indifferent” in their faithfulness to God with their tithes and offerings? Why do they think that is so?**
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- b. Discuss with your students the expression “blocking the way” and its implications for their spiritual lives. How might they be “blocking the way” of the gospel by a failure to return faithful tithes and offerings? How does this failure impact the people who are waiting and needing to hear this message? If your students feel they are indifferent in this aspect, how can they change?**
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- c. What does the expression “redeem their honor,” when applied to the church’s faithful return of tithes, mean to class members?**

“Every man should freely and willingly and gladly bring tithes and offerings into the storehouse of the Lord, because in so doing there is a blessing.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, p. 67.

Ask students to share their testimonies of how returning tithes and offerings has been an occasion for either joyfulness or blessing in their lives.
