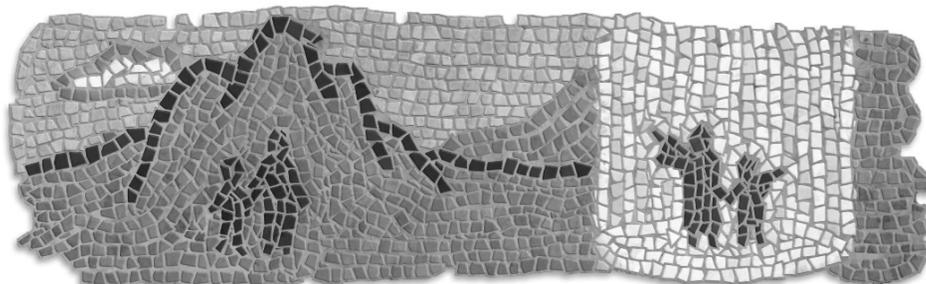


The Two Covenants¹



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 26

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Galatians 4:21–31; Genesis 1:28; Genesis 2:2, 3; Genesis 3:15; Genesis 15:1–6; Exodus 6:2–8; Exodus 19:3–6.

MEMORY VERSE: “But the Jerusalem that is above is free. She is our mother” (Galatians 4:26, NIV).

SOME CHRISTIANS DO NOT ACCEPT THE AUTHORITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT. They often think that the law given on Sinai and the gospel do not work together. They decide that the covenant given on Sinai was based on obedience to the law. They claim that the people failed to live up to the requirements of the law. So God (they say) brought in a new covenant. This is a covenant of grace² for our good through the works of Jesus Christ. The result is that some Christians come to an understanding of the two covenants as the old based on law and the new based on grace.

This opinion may be popular. But it is wrong. Salvation was never by obedience to the law. According to the Bible, the Jewish religion was always a religion of grace. The legalism³ that Paul was dealing with in Galatia was not true of the Christian religion and not true of the Old Testament either. The two covenants show two different ways of trying to connect to God. They are the ways that go back to Cain and Abel. The old covenant shows those who, like Cain, mistakenly think that their own obedience is a way of pleasing God. And the new covenant shows those who, like Abel, depend wholly upon God's grace to do all that He has promised.

1. covenants—promises and/or agreements between God and His people.

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

3. legalism—the belief that salvation can be earned by keeping the law.

SUNDAY—NOVEMBER 27**COVENANT BASICS
(Genesis 1:28)**

Many think that Paul's interpretation of the history of Israel in Galatians 4:21–31 is the most difficult set of verses in his letter. That is because it is a very difficult argument that requires much knowledge of Old Testament persons and events. The first step in understanding these verses is to have a basic understanding of an Old Testament idea that is an important part of Paul's argument. It is the idea of the covenant.

The Hebrew word translated as “covenant” is *berit*. It shows up almost 300 times in the Old Testament. It also speaks of a legal contract, agreement, or treaty. For thousands of years, covenants played an important part in the relationships between people and nations across Asia. Covenants often involved the killing of animals as part of making (or “cutting”) a covenant. The killing of animals symbolized (showed) what would happen to a group of people who failed to keep its covenant promises.

“From Adam to Jesus, God worked with people through a series of covenant promises that pointed forward to a coming Savior who would come through the line of King David (Genesis 12:2, 3; 2 Samuel 7:12–17; Isaiah 11). To Israel, during its slavery in Babylon, God promised a ‘new covenant’ (Jeremiah 31:31–34) in connection with the coming of the Messiah through David's

family line (Ezekiel 36:26–28; Ezekiel 37:22–28).”—Adapted from Hans K. LaRondelle, *Our Creator Redeemer [Savior]* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 2005), page 4.



Covenants often involved the killing of animals to symbolize what would happen to a party who failed to keep its promises.

According to Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 2:2, 3, 15–17, what was the basis of God's first covenant with Adam in the Garden of Eden before sin?

Marriage, physical labor, and the Sabbath were important parts of the covenant of creation. But its most important point was God's command not to eat the forbidden fruit. The basic nature of the covenant was “obey and live!” Because we have a nature⁴ created in harmony with God, humans were not required by the Lord to do what was not possible. So, it was easy and natural for humans to obey. But Adam and Eve chose to do what was not natural. In that act,

4. nature—the qualities that make something what it is; who you are.

they broke the covenant of creation. And they made the covenant not possible for humans because they were now poisoned by sin. God had to restore the relationship that Adam and Eve had lost. He did this by starting a covenant of grace based on the eternal (lasting forever) promise of a Savior (Genesis 3:15).

Read Genesis 3:15, the first gospel promise in the Bible. Where in that verse do you find a clue of the hope that we have in Christ?

MONDAY—NOVEMBER 28

THE COVENANT TO ABRAHAM (Genesis 12:1–5)

What covenant promises did God make to Abram in Genesis 12:1–5? What was Abram’s answer?

God’s first promises to Abram make up one of the more powerful set of verses in the Old Testament. These verses are all about God’s grace because it is God, not Abram, who makes the promises. Abram has done nothing to earn or deserve God’s favor. There is no example that suggests that God and Abram somehow work together to come up with this agreement. God does all the promising Himself. And Abram is called to have faith in God’s promise. This is not some weak idea called “faith.” Instead, it is a faith that is shown by Abram leaving his family (at the age of 75!) and heading to the land God promised.

“God’s ‘blessing’ was given to Abraham and through him to all humans. By this the Creator renewed His promise of a Savior. God had ‘blessed’ Adam and Eve in Paradise [Eden] (Genesis 1:28; Genesis 5:2) and then ‘blessed Noah and his sons’ after the Flood (Genesis 9:1). This way God made clear His earlier promise of a Savior who would save humans, destroy evil, and restore Paradise (Genesis 3:15). God renewed His promise to bless ‘all peoples’ in His outreach.”—Adapted from Hans K. LaRondelle, *Our Creator Redeemer*, pages 22, 23.

After ten years of waiting for his promised son to be born, what questions did Abram have about God’s promise in Genesis 15:1–6?

It often is easy to give Abram praise as the man of faith who never had any questions or doubts. But the Bible paints a different picture. Abram believed, but he also had questions along the way. His faith was a growing faith. Abram used different words in Genesis 15:8 to say the same thing the father said in Mark 9:24, “ ‘I do believe! Help me overcome my unbelief’ ” (NIRV). In response to Abram, God kindly told him that His promise was sure. He did that by entering into a covenant with Abram (Genesis 15:7–18). What makes these verses so surprising is that God is willing to bring Himself down to our level to make this covenant. Other rulers in the Near East of Abram’s time rebelled against the idea of making

legal promises with their servants. But God gave His word and symbolically⁵ passed through the pieces of slain (killed) animals. He also risked His very life on it. Of course, Jesus gave His life on the cross to make His promise real.

What are some areas now where you have to reach out by faith and believe in what seems impossible? How can you learn to keep holding on, no matter what?



God gave His word and symbolically passed through the pieces of the slain (killed) animals.

TUESDAY—NOVEMBER 29

ABRAHAM, SARAH, AND HAGAR (Galatians 4:21–31)

According to Galatians 4:21–31, why does Paul have such a different opinion of the story about Hagar in Genesis 16? What important point about salvation is Paul making through his use of this Old Testament story?

Hagar's place in the Genesis story is connected with Abram's failure to believe God's promise. As an Egyptian slave in Abram's household, Hagar probably came to Abram as one of the many gifts Pharaoh gave to him in exchange for Sarai. This is an event connected with Abram's first act of unbelief in God's promise (Genesis 12:11–16).

Abram and Sarai waited ten years for the promised child to be born. But they remained childless. Sarai thought that God might need their help. So she gave Hagar to Abram as a concubine.⁶ This idea may seem strange to us today. But Sarai's plan seemed quite clever. According to customs in Bible times, a female slave legally could serve as a substitute mother for her childless mistress. In this way Sarai could count any child born from her husband and from Hagar as her own. The plan did give Abram and Sarai a child. But it was not the child God promised.



Sarah decided to “help” God keep His promise to give Abraham a son. So she gave Hagar to Abraham as a concubine.

5. symbolically—having one thing stand for or mean something more than what it is.

6. concubine—a woman who lives with a man but is not his wife; also, in some countries, a concubine is an additional wife who has less power and importance than the first wife.

In this story we have a powerful example of how a great man of God (Abram) showed a lack of faith. In Genesis 17:18, 19, Abraham pleaded with God to accept Ishmael as his heir. But the Lord refused that offer. The only surprise in the birth of Ishmael was Sarah's willingness to share her husband with another woman! There was nothing unusual about the birth of a child to this woman. It was a child born "according to the flesh." If Abraham had trusted in what God had promised him, none of this would have happened. And Abraham and Sarah would have saved themselves a lot of grief.

The birth of Ishmael was different. Read Genesis 17:15–19; Genesis 18:10–13; and Hebrews 11:11, 12 and think about what happened after Isaac's birth. Why did these things require so much faith of Abraham and Sarah?



Abraham pleaded with God to make Ishmael his heir, but God refused.

In what ways has your lack of faith in God's promises caused you some pain? How can you learn

from these mistakes to accept God's promises, no matter what? What choices can you make to help give you more strength to trust God's promises?

WEDNESDAY—NOVEMBER 30

HAGAR AND MOUNT SINAI

(Galatians 4:21–31)

After reading Exodus 6:2–8; Exodus 19:3–6; and Deuteronomy 32:10–12, what type of covenant relationship do you think God wants to establish with His people at Sinai? How is it almost the same as God's promise to Abraham?

God wants to share the same covenant relationship with the children of Israel at Sinai that He shared with Abraham. In fact, God's words to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 are almost the same as His words to Moses in Exodus 19. In both examples, God shows what He will do for His people. He does not ask the Israelites to promise to do anything to earn His blessings. Instead, He will give the blessings, and then they are to obey. The Hebrew word translated as "to obey" in Exodus 19:5 really means "to hear." God's words do not suggest righteousness (goodness; salvation) by works. Instead, God wants Israel to have the same faith that Abraham showed to His promises (at least most of the time!).

If the covenant relationship God offered to Israel on Sinai in Exodus

19:7–25 is much the same as the one given to Abraham, why does Paul compare⁷ Mount Sinai with the negative experience of Hagar? Read also Hebrews 8:6, 7.

The covenant at Sinai pointed out the sins of humans and the remedy (cure) of God's grace. The sanctuary services⁸ showed God's grace. The problem with the Sinai covenant was not on God's part. Instead, the problem was with the faulty promises of the people (Hebrews 8:6). Instead of answering God's promises in humble faith, the Israelites answered with self-confidence.⁹ "We will do everything the Lord has said" (Exodus 19:8, NIV). The children of Israel had lived as slaves in Egypt for more than 400 years. They did not fully understand God's power and how terrible their sins were. In the same way that Abraham and Sarah tried to help God fulfill His promises, the Israelites tried to turn God's covenant of grace into a covenant of works. Both Hagar and Sinai show that humans tried to earn salvation by "good" works.

Paul is not claiming that the law given at Sinai was evil or that it had been removed. He is concerned with the Galatians' wrong interpretation of the law. He wants them to know it is impossible to keep the law on our own without Christ. "But the people were

more determined than ever to earn salvation by their works. So the law did not serve the purposes of grace in leading Jews to Christ. Instead, it closed them off from Christ."—Adapted from O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), page 181.

THURSDAY—DECEMBER 1

ISHMAEL AND ISAAC TODAY (Galatians 4:28–31)

Paul's short note of Israel's history is meant to oppose the arguments of his enemies. His enemies claim that they are the true children of Abraham and that Jerusalem—the center of Jewish Christianity and the law—is their mother. They charge that the Gentiles (non-Jews) are not true children of Abraham. They believe that if the Gentiles want to become true followers of Christ, they must first become sons of Abraham by accepting the law of circumcision.¹⁰

Paul says that this is not true. These legalists¹¹ are not the sons of Abraham but are illegitimate (false) sons, like Ishmael. By putting their trust in circumcision, they were depending on "the flesh." It is the same thing that Sarah does with Hagar and as the Israelites do with God's law at Sinai. But the truth

7. compare—to show how two or more things are the same or different.

8. sanctuary services—the offerings of animal blood given as a payment for sin. The animal blood was offered in place of the sinner's blood. This service represented Jesus' dying on the cross for our sins. After Jesus died, these services were not needed.

9. self-confidence—having too much faith in one's self.

10. circumcision—when the skin (called the foreskin) of the penis is cut off from a man or a boy.

11. legalists—people who believe, practice, and teach legalism, which means they believe in obeying the law in order to earn salvation.

is that the Gentile believers are the sons of Abraham not by natural birth but, like Isaac, by a miracle of God. “Like Isaac they were a fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham . . . ; like Isaac, their birth into freedom was the result of God’s grace. Like Isaac, they belong to the side of the covenant of promise.”—Adapted from James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle [Letter] to the Galatians* (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), page 256.

According to Galatians 4:28–31 and Genesis 21:8–12, what will the true children of Abraham face in this world?

Isaac, as the promised child, is blessed. But he also is attacked. Paul is speaking of a ceremony in Genesis 21:8–10. There Isaac is being honored and Ishmael appears to make fun of him. The Hebrew word in Genesis 21:9 means “to laugh.” But Sarah’s action suggests Ishmael is making fun of Isaac. Ishmael’s behavior might not sound very important to us today. But it shows the deeper bitterness involved in a situation when the family birthright¹² is the issue at stake (risk). Many kings in Bible times try to make their position safe by killing possible rivals (competitors), even family members (Judges 9:1–6). So, Isaac faces attacks. But he also enjoys all the honor and rights of love, protection, and favor that come with being his father’s heir.

As spiritual children of Isaac, we should not be surprised when we suffer hardship and attacks, even from within the church family itself.

In what ways have you suffered attacks, especially from those closest to you, because of your faith? Or ask yourself this hard question: might you be guilty of attacking others for their faith? Think about it.

FRIDAY—DECEMBER 2

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “The Law and the Covenants,” pages 363–373, in *Patriarchs [Leaders in Early Bible Times]* and *Prophets [Special Messengers From God]*.

“But if the covenant to Abraham held the promise of salvation, why was another covenant formed at Sinai? In their slavery to the Egyptians, the people had lost the knowledge of God and of the principles [important rules] of the covenant to Abraham. . . .

“God brought His people to Sinai. He showed His glory.¹³ He gave them His law, with the promise of great blessings on condition of obedience. ‘Now obey me completely. Keep my covenant. If you do, . . . you will be a kingdom of priests to serve me. You will be my holy nation’ (Exodus 19:5, 6, NIV). But the people did not understand that their own hearts were sinful. Or that without Christ it was not possible for them to keep God’s law.

12. birthright—the gifts and blessings that belong to a person simply for being born into a certain family or place.

13. glory—great beauty, power, and royal perfection.

So, they readily entered into a covenant with God. . . . Only a few weeks passed before they broke their covenant with God and bowed down to worship a graven [carved] idol. They could not hope for the favor of God through a covenant which they had broken. Now they realized their sins and their need of pardon. They were now brought to feel their need of the Savior shown in the covenant to Abraham. And they also understood how the sacrifices of the sanctuary pointed to the coming Savior who would forgive their sins. By faith and love they were connected to God as their Savior from the slavery of sin. Now they were prepared to appreciate the blessings of the new covenant.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pages 371, 372.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Is your own walk with the Lord more of an “old covenant” or a “new covenant” kind? How can you tell the difference?
- ② What are some of the issues in your local church that are causing problems? How are they being solved? You might find yourself being the victim of “attacks.” But how can you make sure, too, that you are not the one making the attacks? (Read also Matthew 18:15–17.)
- ③ How many times have you made promises to the Lord that you would not do this or that, but you still did this or that? How does this sad fact help you understand the meaning of grace?