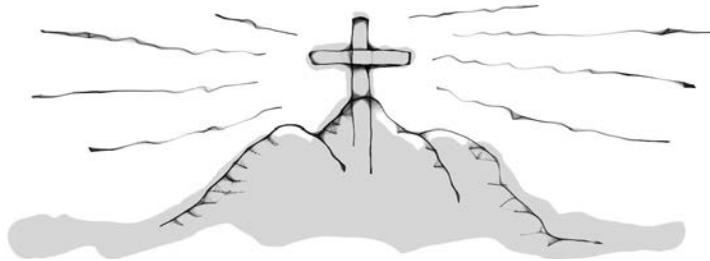


Christ, *the Law and the Covenants*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 9:12–17, 17:2–12, Gal. 3:15–28, Deut. 9:9, Heb. 10:11–18, Heb. 9:15–28.*

Memory Text: “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant” (*Hebrews 9:15, NIV*).

God's eternal decision to save humanity has been revealed to us through the ages by the covenants. Though the Bible speaks of covenants in the plural (*Rom. 9:4, Gal. 4:24, Eph. 2:12*), there is really only the covenant of grace, in which salvation is given to sinners, not on the basis of their merits but on the merits of Jesus that are offered to all who claim those merits by faith. The plural, *covenants*, simply means that God has advanced His saving purposes by restating the covenant in various ways in order to meet the needs of His people in different times and settings. It is always, though, one covenant—the eternal covenant of God's saving grace.

The heart of this covenant is our Lord's steadfast, faithful love, a love that the Bible at times even equates with the covenants themselves (*see Deut. 7:9, 1 Kings 8:23, Dan. 9:4*). As part of that covenant, God calls His people to obey His law, not as a means of salvation but as the fruit of it. Law and grace together have always been central to God's eternal covenant.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 7.

Covenant Signs (Gen. 9:12–17)

A covenant can be simply defined as an agreement between two parties based upon promises made by either one or by both parties. There are two basic methods by which a covenant can operate. In the first, both parties to the covenant agree to the terms of the relationship and make mutual promises. This would be the case in a marriage, business merger, or even the purchase of property. In the second category, one party initiates the covenant by stipulating both the promises and the nonnegotiable terms, and the other party is invited to participate. Examples include payment of taxes or enrollment at an educational institution. In both instances, either party is free to withdraw from the covenant, but there is usually a consequence. (For instance, a person who fails to pay his mortgage will lose his home, or a citizen who refuses to remit taxes will be prosecuted.)

A covenant is usually sealed with at least one symbol. For instance, a person purchasing a home places several signatures on a mortgage agreement with a lending institution, which keeps the title deed for the property in trust until the full amount is paid. Or married people are issued a legal document of marriage by the state. The symbol itself is not the covenant but an indicator that a person is obligated to a covenant.

Read Genesis 9:12–17 and 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 covenants with creation that He will never again destroy the earth with water. Whenever a rainbow appears in the sky, all are expected to remember God's promise. The same is true for the mark of circumcision, which was supposed to remind every Jewish male of His people's role in blessing the nations. One covenant was made with all humanity; the other, specifically with the nation of Israel. Also, in the covenant made with humanity after the Flood, the people didn't have to do anything; the promise was just there, regardless of what the people did. This wasn't so with the second one, the one made with Israel; the people had to fulfill their part of the deal.

Covenant Promises

Covenants are based on *promises*. In fact, it is possible to use the two terms interchangeably. Of course, when a covenant is made, it is expected that the person who makes the promise (covenant) has the ability to deliver what is promised (covenanted).

In the Old Testament, some covenants were local and limited affairs (see, for instance, *Gen. 31:43–54*).

The incident with Jacob and Laban demonstrates that covenants can be transactions made within and between societies. The monument at Mizpah was to serve as the sign of a treaty that would apply only to the two clans. When those to whom the treaty applied had died, the terms of the treaty would be irrelevant. Unlike this covenant made between humans, the covenants that Yahweh instituted with Noah and Abraham have everlasting implications.

How does Galatians 3:15–28 help to explain the broader implications of the Abrahamic covenant?

Throughout the Bible, God has made several universal covenants in which He makes promises that are relevant to all humanity. Recognizing that the entire earth had been affected by the Flood, Yahweh promised not to allow His creation to be devastated by water again. In the case with Abraham, God saw humanity’s need for righteousness, and so He promised to provide a blessing for all nations through Abraham’s seed (*Gen. 22:18*).

Though God made the Sinai covenant with a specific nation, it also has universal significance. God was very clear that any foreigner could be a part of the chosen people (for example, *Exod. 12:48, 49*), and Israel’s mission was to be an evangelistic light to the world (*Exod. 19:5, 6*).

What is your own personal understanding of your covenantal relationship with God? That is, what has God promised you, and what has He asked of you in return for those promises?

Tablets of the Covenant

Although a covenant is based on promises, there are usually conditions to meet before the promises are fulfilled. The Abrahamic covenant involved the circumcision of all males who were born either to Abraham or his descendants. When Yahweh covenanted with Israel, He personally engraved the requirements for the relationship on tablets of stone (*Deut. 9:8–11*). These requirements, preserved in the Ten Commandments, were to form the basis of God’s everlasting covenant with all humans.

Because they detail certain terms of the covenant, the Ten Commandments are often termed the “tablets of the covenant” (*Deut. 9:9, NKJV*). The Ten Commandments are not intended to be an obstacle course designed to make life hard for those who have entered into the covenant with God; instead, as an expression of God’s love, the commandments have been given 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 uphold the everlasting nature of God’s law in the new covenant?

Under the old covenant at Mount Sinai, the Israelites and those who joined the community were obligated to demonstrate faithfulness to the covenant by keeping the Ten Commandments. When they violated a commandment, they were expected to offer an animal sacrifice if they wished to have their sins forgiven.

Under the new covenant at Mount Calvary, God’s people are still obligated to keep the Ten Commandments. However, when they sin they don’t have to offer continuous sacrifices, because Jesus is their full and complete sacrifice (*Heb. 9:11–14*). The new covenant is so much better than the old 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 Abrahamic covenant, which is the covenant of grace by faith in Christ Jesus.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1077.

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

The Covenant and the Gospel (Heb. 9:15–22)

There were strong consequences for violating certain biblical covenants. Yahweh warned Abraham that any male who was not circumcised would be cut off from the chosen (*Gen. 17:14*), and a litany of curses was directed toward those who refused to abide by the terms of the Sinai covenant (*Deut. 27:11–26*). Ultimately, those who violated the terms of the covenant would be punished with death (*Ezek. 18:4*). The same is true for the new covenant: those who refuse to keep God’s law are also denied access to eternal life (*Rom. 6:23*).

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

Hebrews 9:15–28 repeats the gospel story as it proclaims the part that Christ plays in securing the promises for believers. Verse 15 points out that Jesus functions as the “Mediator” of the new covenant, who, through His death, offers eternal life to those who otherwise would face eternal destruction.

In verses 16 and 17, some Bible translations switch from discussing “covenant” and introduce the term “will” instead, even though the same Greek word is used. This brings in the whole idea of death, the death of Jesus for us. When viewed in that context, the passage reminds the believer that without Christ the covenant requires the death of each sinner. However, the sinner can be covered and then cleansed by Christ’s shed blood and thus be among those who “eagerly wait” His return (*Heb. 9:28, NKJV*).

“Then we shall know that our own righteousness is indeed as filthy rags, and that the blood of Christ alone can cleanse us from the defilement of sin, and renew our hearts in His own likeness.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 29.

God Himself, in the person of Jesus, bore in Himself the punishment for our sins in order to spare us that punishment, which we deserve. What does this tell us about the character of God, and why we can trust Him, no matter our circumstances?

Covenant Benefits *(Eph. 2:6)*

In many instances people can experience the promises of a covenant before all the terms are even met. For instance, a person purchasing a home has the opportunity to live in the home before it is paid for. Or a citizen enjoys the public services offered by the government before he has even started paying taxes. Those who enter into a covenant with God can also start to experience the benefits of the covenant before the promises are actualized in the future.

Think, for instance, about the Ten Commandments, and how much pain and suffering people could avoid if they simply followed them. Who hasn't personally experienced the heartache that comes from the violation of these commandments? Even worse, the suffering that comes isn't always limited to the one who violates the law; often others, even those closest to the sinner, suffer, as well.

According to these texts, what other benefits can we find, even now, through being in a covenant relationship with Jesus?

2 Cor. 4:16–18 _____

1 John 5:11–13 _____

Phil. 1:6 _____

John 5:24 _____

Jesus uses very strong language in the Gospel of John when He reports that those who accept Him have already “ ‘passed from death into life’ ” (*John 5:24, NKJV*). So confident is the believer in his or her salvation that although confined to this earth, he or she can claim to be sitting in heavenly places with Christ Jesus (*Eph. 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?

Further Study: For more information on this week's topic, read Ellen G. White, "The Covenant of Grace," pp. 131–137, in *God's Amazing Grace*.

"This same covenant was renewed to Abraham in the promise, 'In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.' Gen. 22:18. This promise pointed to Christ. So Abraham understood it, and he trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. It was this faith that was accounted unto him for righteousness. The covenant with Abraham also maintained the authority of God's law. . . .

"The Abrahamic covenant was ratified by the blood of Christ, and it is called the 'second,' or 'new,' covenant, because the blood by which it was sealed was shed after the blood of the first covenant. . . .

"The covenant of grace is not a new truth, for it existed 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 Abrahamic covenant, which is the covenant of grace by faith in Christ Jesus."—Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, p. 75.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What do Exodus 31:16 and Isaiah 56:4–6 suggest about the importance of the Sabbath to the covenant? *See also Ezekiel 20.*
- 2 It is often thought that the old covenant, the one established with Abraham, was a covenant of works, in contrast to the new covenant, which is of grace. Why is this idea wrong? What Bible verses can you find that prove it was always a covenant of grace? Why must it always have been by grace and never by works?
- 3 Though Ephesians 1 doesn't use the phrase "everlasting covenant," 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, a promise symbolized by the rainbow. If, as some suggest, Noah's flood were only local, what does that make of God's promise? Why is the idea that the Flood was not global a major assault on Bible truth? (After all, look at all the local floods that have happened since then. If Noah's flood were only local, what would these other local floods do to God's covenant promise?)

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Hebrews 10:12–18*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Realize that both the old and new covenants are based on faith in Jesus.

Feel: Appreciate the privilege of being in a covenant relationship with God.

Do: Claim God's promises with confidence.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Old and New Covenants of Grace

- A** What is the difference between a promise and a covenant?
- B** Why were both ancient Israel and the Christian church chosen by God to enter into a covenant relationship with Him?
- C** Why does a covenant need some visible symbol?
- D** Why was the Sinai covenant of universal significance?

II. Feel: The Privilege of Partnership

- A** Even though we are still confined to this earth, how can we be confident of our place in heaven?
- B** What blessings have you already enjoyed in your covenant relationship with God?
- C** We no longer have to bring a lamb as a sacrifice. So, how then can we keep a sense of the magnitude and costly expense of Jesus' death for us?

III. Do: Taking Hold of the Promise

- A** What conditions must I meet to be able to claim God's promises?
- B** How can we enter into a covenant relationship with God? Who takes the initiative?
- C** What does it mean to have God's law written on your heart (*Jer. 31:33*)?

► **Summary:** Both the old and new covenants are really a restatement of the covenant of grace in which salvation is given to sinners through faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Hebrews 10:12–18*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Both the old and new covenants reflect the eternal covenant of grace that is offered to all who claim Jesus' merits by faith.

In our modern world, the idea of a covenant seems very remote and old fashioned. Yet, there is one covenant relationship in which we all hope to find lifelong love and security. Marriage, while under siege and struggling, is still the dream of many. Unfortunately, although we all promise to love each other until death do us part, many marriages end up in divorce.

For Krickitt and Kim Carpenter, divorce would have sounded like an option. Just ten weeks after their wedding, they were involved in a horrific car accident that put Krickitt in a coma for four months. When she regained consciousness, she had no memory of the two years leading up to the accident and didn't even know who her husband was. Her parents told her she was married to him. So, she accepted the fact but felt no love for Kim and didn't even like the man. Yet, walking away was not an option for her as she knew, even though she couldn't remember doing so, that she had taken a vow to stay with Kim. Krickitt decided to learn to love Kim, however long it might take and however hard she might find it to do so.

Kim had made a similar choice. He had married Krickitt for better or for worse. Even though she didn't seem to want him around, he determined to win her love again. For both of them, it was a choice to stay with their marriage covenant. Three years after the accident, Kim and Krickitt got married for a second time to create new wedding memories for Krickitt. Now, almost twenty years later, they are still happily married. (Based on the book *The Vow: The Kim and Krickitt Carpenter Story*.)

For God, it would have been very easy to walk away from His covenant with us. Unfortunately, the Bible records many instances of covenant breaking on humanity's part, but God has entered into an eternal covenant of grace with us. Despite our unfaithfulness, He still is faithful.

Opening Activity: A covenant can be defined as an agreement between two parties, based upon promises made by either one or both parties. Find everyday examples of covenants in your culture.

Discuss: What makes people break their promises? Why is God faithful to His promises?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Covenant Talk (*Review briefly with your class the making of a covenant in Old Testament times, as outlined in Genesis 15.*)

The making of a covenant meant serious business in the world of the Bible. In the nations surrounding Israel, covenants represented a solemnly sworn political agreement between two parties and were associated with oaths and vows. The deities of the two parties would be invoked, and blessings and curses of the covenant would be named. Often, the covenant procedures involved sacrifices and the shedding of blood. In Hebrew, the technical term for covenant making is *karat berith*, which means literally “to cut a covenant.” It most likely marked the killing of an animal, illustrating the possible punishment of the one covenant partner who would dare to break the covenant (*compare Genesis 15*).

The term *covenant* appears first in Genesis 6:18 in the context of God’s election of Noah and his family—even though the concept is much older. The offering suggested by Genesis 3:21 was part of a larger covenant in which God promised a Savior. As a matter of fact, the New Testament tells us that there was a divine plan of salvation that was laid before the creation of this world (*1 Cor. 2:7; 2 Thess. 2:13, 14*), and that is based on God’s everlasting love for humanity (*Jer. 31:3*). Revelation 13:8 describes Jesus’ sacrificial death as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world,” suggesting that the plan was in place when the foundation of the world was laid (*NKJV*).

Consider This: If you were to paraphrase biblical texts referring to a covenant, what modern word or concept would you use?

II. The Eternal Covenant (*Review Hebrews 13:20 with your class.*)

God’s dealing with humanity throughout history has always been consistent. Yet, at the same time, it has been contextualized. At specific times, God establishes specific covenants with specific people, beginning with Adam (*Gen. 3:15–21*), Noah (*Gen. 6:18–20, 9:9–11*), Abraham (*Gen. 12:1–3, 15:1–5, 17:1–14*), and so on. God speaks in a particular context and time. Noah’s covenant sign is a rainbow—something that was indeed meaningful to Noah and his family. Abraham’s sign of the covenant involves circumcision. The covenant established at Sinai, in the context of redemption from slavery, involves written laws that reiterate earlier prac-

tice. Above all, there is the “eternal covenant” that finds its best expression in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross (*e.g., Heb. 13:20, NIV*). In a sense, each individual covenant described in Scripture relates to the eternal covenant made before history began, in much the same way that a Russian matryoshka doll relates to its many members. As one opens up the larger dolls and discovers smaller dolls inside, one recognizes that they all look similar, even though they have different sizes, patterns, and perhaps even colors.

Consider This: In a technology-driven world, “old” often implies outdated or obsolete, while “new” suggests crispness and cutting edge. How do old and new relate to the issue of a covenant? Discuss in your class the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

III. Old Versus New (*Review 2 Corinthians 3:14 with your class.*)

In the New Testament, the concept of the “old covenant” is explicitly mentioned only in 2 Corinthians 3:14, even though Galatians 4:24 implies the concept when referring to “two covenants” (and most likely also in Hebrews 8:7, 13; 9:1, 15, 18, “first covenant”). In order to understand the force of these surprising statements, we need to grapple with the specific context in which Paul wrote his epistles. Faced with persisting opposition from Jewish Christians who tried to make the keeping of the Jewish law (including purity laws) a significant part of the theology of the early Christian church, Paul rejects their program as it focuses upon the law as the means of salvation rather than Christ.

In order to illustrate the clear line between the “old” and “new” covenants, it is helpful to consider the covenant sign of circumcision. Circumcision was part of the conditions of God’s covenant with Abraham (*Genesis 17*). Every male descendant of Abraham was to be circumcised on the eighth day, as part of an eternal covenant (*vs. 7*). Faithfully, every male Jewish child was circumcised according to the eternal covenant established with Abraham. It was to serve as a constant reminder that they were God’s people. God had established that sign (which was at the same time public in its ritual dimension and private in that few people would see it). Some of the Old Testament prophets employ circumcision in a different context. Jeremiah particularly uses that imagery to communicate commitment that goes beyond a mere ritual act. In Jeremiah 4:4, the prophet exhorts Judah: “ ‘Circumcise yourselves to the LORD and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem’ ” (*NASB*). Circumcision is thus described as the outward sign of an inward attitude and commitment. Similarly, in Jeremiah 6:10, the prophet shouts, “To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Indeed their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot give heed” (*NKJV*). The close link between the physical act of circumcising a male and the “circumcision

of the heart” is a reminder that covenants are closely embedded and that “old” and “new” are inadequate terms by themselves to describe biblical covenants.

Consider This: Why did Paul react so vehemently in Galatians against those Jewish Christians who felt that circumcision and other purity laws had to be kept by the new Christian community? Was this not just a matter of cultural tolerance and accommodation? Why was this issue such a big deal in a world that was becoming more and more international?

►STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

- ❶ Why are the Ten Commandments termed the “tables of the covenant” (*Deut. 9:9*)?
- ❷ Hebrews 9:15 names Jesus the “Mediator” of the new covenant. Why do we need a Mediator of the covenant?
- ❸ Why is the “shedding of blood” essential to both covenants?
- ❹ What are the similarities and differences between the old and new covenants?

Application Questions:

- ❶ What are some of God’s covenant signs that are meant to help us remember God’s promises?
- ❷ Is God’s promise to give me eternal life a covenant promise? If so, what do I have to do to claim it?
- ❸ All covenants function on the carrot-stick principle, offering blessings if followed and curses if broken. What are some of the blessings you have enjoyed in following God’s laws, and what are some negative consequences you have experienced in breaking His law?

►STEP 4—Create

Activity: Under the old covenant, whenever the Israelites violated the covenant by breaking the Ten Commandments, they offered an animal sacrifice. This was expensive. Under the new covenant, we do not have to offer continuous sacrifices because of Jesus’ sacrifice. As a class, suggest practical steps to help us not to lose our appreciation for the great sacrifice Jesus has made for us.