

# The Covenant (Agreement)



## SABBATH—DECEMBER 5

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Genesis 9:1–17; Genesis 12:1–3; Galatians 3:6–9, 15–18; Exodus 24; Jeremiah 31:31–34; 1 Corinthians 11:24–26.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “‘A new day is coming,’ announces the LORD. ‘I will make a new covenant [agreement between God and His people] with the people of Israel. I will also make it with the people of Judah’” (Jeremiah 31:31, NIV).

**THE BIBLE SPEAKS OF “COVENANTS” BECAUSE THERE IS MORE THAN ONE (ROMANS 9:4; GALATIANS 4:24).** But there is only one basic covenant. It is the covenant of grace (forgiveness and mercy), in which God gives salvation to human sinners who claim (accept) it by faith. The idea of plural (many) “covenants” arises from the different ways God has reworded the covenant promise in order to meet the needs of His people in different times and settings.

But whether it is the covenant God made with Adam (Genesis 3:15), His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3; Galatians 3:6–9), the covenant at Sinai (Exodus 20:2), His covenant with David (Ezekiel 37:24–27), or the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–33), the idea is the same. The salvation God gives is a gift that we do not deserve or earn. And the human acceptance of that gift should produce faithfulness and obedience.

The first mention of the new covenant is in Jeremiah. Its setting is Israel's return from Babylon and the blessings that God would give them. Even during times of trouble, the Lord gives His backsliding people the offer of hope and restoration (newness of life).

## GOD'S COVENANT (PROMISE) WITH ALL HUMANS (Genesis 9:1–17)

We know how bad the world is today. We know all the evil in it. And yet, God still bears (is patient) with us. So, we can imagine that things must have been very bad to cause the Lord to destroy the whole world with a flood. “God had given men His commandments as a rule of life. But His law was broken by humans. And every possible sin was the result. The wickedness of men was open and daring. Justice was walked on. And the cries of suffering humans reached unto heaven.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Forefathers and Leaders] and Prophets [Special Messengers]*, page 91.

**Read Genesis 9:1–17. What covenant was made between God and humans? And how does it teach God’s grace toward all living creatures?**

The covenant God gave to Noah was the most worldwide among the biblical covenants. It was for all humans. And it included the animals and nature, too (Genesis 9:12). Also, this was a one-sided arrangement. The Lord did not require anything in return from humans. He simply was not going to destroy the earth with water again, period. Unlike other covenants, this one had no conditions.

God then sealed His covenant with a sign that could be seen. This sign is a rainbow, which symbolizes (shows the meaning of) the covenant promise that the earth will never be destroyed by a flood again. So, anytime we see a rainbow, the fact that we are here to see it is proof of this very old covenant promise. (After all, if we had been wiped out in a universal flood, we would not be here to see the rainbow!) Among the sin and evil here on earth, we are blessed with the beauty of the rainbow. This is a sign of God’s grace toward the whole world. We can look up at it and receive hope. The hope is not only from just how beautiful it is but also from our knowledge that it is a message from God. This is a message of His love toward our sin-weary planet.

**Think about the glory and beauty of a rainbow. From what the Bible tells us about the rainbow, how can it bring us closer to God and to something greater than what this earth itself can offer?**



**Anytime we see a rainbow, the fact that we are here to see it is proof of God’s covenant promise to never again destroy the world by a flood.**

**THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM (Genesis 12:1–3)**

**Read Genesis 12:1–3; Genesis 15:1–5; Genesis 17:1–14. What do these verses tell us about what the Lord planned to do through the covenant He made with Abraham?**

The covenant of grace God made with Abraham is very important to the entire salvation history. That is why Paul used it to help explain the plan of salvation as it was fulfilled in Jesus Himself.

**Read Galatians 3:6–9, 15–18. How does Paul connect the covenant made with Abraham (1) to Jesus and (2) to salvation by faith alone?**



**Through Abraham God would bless the entire world.**

Through Jesus, a son of Abraham, God would bless the entire world (read Galatians 3:16). Anyone who accepts salvation in Christ becomes a spiritual son or daughter of Abraham too. Becoming a part of Abraham's seed happens by faith in Christ (Galatians 3:29). Even back then, " 'Abraham believed God. God accepted Abraham because he believed. So his faith made him right with God' " (Galatians 3:6, NIV). Abraham was not saved by works any more than the thief on the cross was. It is always and only God's saving grace that brings salvation. Abraham fulfilled his end of the covenant promise. Abraham was obedient. This showed his faith and proved that he believed the promise of salvation. Abraham's works did not make him right with God. Instead, his works proved that he was already made righteous (holy; right with God). That is the heart of the covenant and how it is to be found in the life of faith (read Romans 4:1–3).

**Think about the great truth that your hope of salvation comes only from the righteousness of Jesus given to you by faith. What great hope and joy can you get from this wonderful gift made for your sake?**

## THE COVENANT AT SINAI (Exodus 24)

**How was the covenant made between Israel and God at Mount Sinai? Read Exodus 24.**

God called Moses and the leaders of Israel to Mount Sinai. These leaders included Aaron and his two sons, who represented the priests. Other leaders included the 70 elders, who represented the nation. The men who went with Moses had to stop from afar. But Moses was allowed to go up to where God appeared.

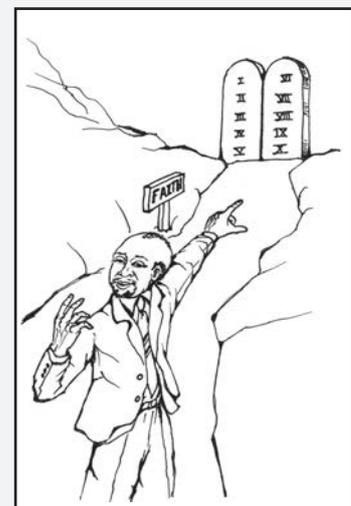
Moses later returned and announced to the whole nation that the covenant was good. He told the people what God had spoken to him. And the nation answered with the following words: “We will do everything the LORD has told us to do” (Exodus 24:3, NIV).

Of course, it is easy to claim (say) we are obedient. But how many of us reach out in faith and surrender, using God’s power and grace to actually do what we have promised?

**Read Hebrews 4:2. How does this verse explain Israel’s failure? How can we learn to avoid the same mistake?**

We can be obedient only by faith and by claiming the promises that come by faith. Our loyalty to God will be made clear by our obedience to God’s law. Obedience to the law was an important part of the everlasting covenant in Moses’ time. Obedience to the law is an important part of the covenant in our time, as well. The common misunderstanding about the law and the covenants usually comes from not understanding what is meant by Paul’s words. Bible readers fail to understand the historical setting in which Paul was writing. They do not realize that he had to deal with enemies who wanted new believers to follow Jewish rules and customs. They wanted to make the law and obedience to it the most important part of the Christian faith. But Paul wanted to make Christ and His righteousness (sinless life) the important part. When Christ and His righteousness have their proper place, then obedience to the law will follow.

**How often have you said, “All that the LORD has told me, I will do” but failed to follow through? How does this human weakness make the promise of grace so much more important? What hope would you have without it?**



**We can be obedient only by faith.**

## THE NEW COVENANT: PART 1 (Jeremiah 31:31–34)

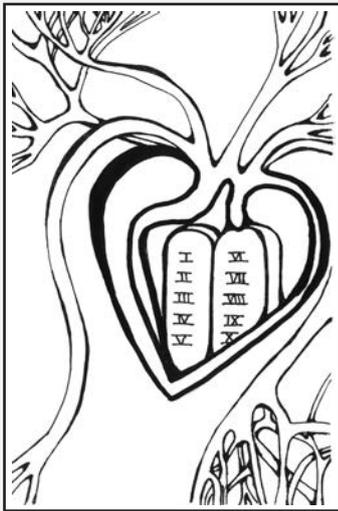
**Read Jeremiah 31:31–34. What do these verses mean, both in their time and in our time today?**

Jeremiah spoke these words during the greatest crisis the people had yet faced. This crisis was the soon-coming Babylonian invasion that threatened the nation's survival. But, again, the Lord offered them hope. God promised that this was not going to be the final end and that they would have another chance to live faithfully in the presence of the Lord.

So, the first promise of the “new covenant” found in the Bible was given when the Babylonian invasion was about to happen, but a chance for a future return was possible. The breaking of the covenant made at Sinai (Jeremiah 31:32) brought them into the wilderness. In the same way, the remaking of this covenant would protect them and their hope for the future. Like the Sinai covenant, the new covenant would be the same, and it would include the same law, the Ten Commandments. But this time the covenant was written in their minds and on their hearts, where it should have been all along.

“The same law that was engraved [carved] on the tables of stone is written by the Holy Spirit on the tables of the heart. Instead of going about to establish [set up; prove] our own righteousness [holiness], we accept the righteousness of Christ. Jesus' blood washes away our sins. His obedience is accepted for us. Then the heart is renewed by the Holy Spirit and will bring forth ‘the fruits of the Spirit.’ Through the grace of Christ we will live in obedience to the law of God written upon our hearts. With the Spirit of Christ in us, we will walk even as He walked.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 372.

Under the new covenant, the people's sins would be forgiven. They would know the Lord for themselves. And they would obey God's law through the power of the Holy Spirit working in them. The old covenant was in shadows and in symbols. The new covenant was real. Salvation was always by faith, a faith that would show “the fruits of the Spirit.”



**This time the covenant was written in their hearts, where it should have been all along.**

**THE NEW COVENANT: PART 2 (Luke 22:20)**

The prophecy (special message) of Jeremiah about the new covenant has two meanings: First, it is about Israel's return to God and His bringing them home. Second, it points to the work of Jesus the Messiah. His death made the covenant legal and would change the relationship between humans and God. It is in the new covenant that we get the fullest picture of the plan of salvation, which before had been explained only in shadows and symbols (Hebrews 10:1).

**Read Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:24–26. How do these verses connect with Jeremiah's prophecy?**

The broken body of Christ and His blood were revealed in the Old Testament in the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. Jesus was the Passover lamb. The work of Jesus did not begin with the New Testament. It was involved in the Old Testament, too. We can find the connection with what Jesus has done all through salvation history in the Communion service.

The bread and the juice give the shortest summary of that salvation history. They are just symbols. But it is through these symbols that we understand God's wonderful work for us.

The Communion service points to both Christ's death and His return. Without His return, Jesus' death would be just meaningless. After all, what good would Christ's first coming be without the Second Coming? At the Second Coming, the dead in Christ are brought back to life from the grave (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:12–18). Jesus established the connection when He said, " 'Here is what I tell you. From now on, I won't [will not] drink wine [grape juice] with you again until the day I drink it with you in my Father's kingdom' " (Matthew 26:29, NIV). No question, Christ's first coming is very closely tied to His second. The first finds its fulfillment only in the second.

**Next time you take part in the Communion service, think about Christ's promise not to drink of the fruit of the vine until He does so with us in the kingdom of God. How does that make you feel? What does that say about the closeness that Christ wants with us?**

**ADDITIONAL THOUGHT:** As we saw, the Bible teaches that the rainbow is a sign of God’s covenantal promise never to destroy the earth by water again. Sure, thanks to science, we now know that a rainbow happens when sunlight is reflected in drops of water. Then the light is spread out at different angles. Light enters a raindrop at one point, is reflected off the back of that drop at another point, and leaves at still another point. Then it creates the colors that we see. Poet John Keats worried that science would “unweave a rainbow.” But even if we could study and measure everything about a rainbow down to each molecule, what would that prove other than that we understand better the natural laws God used to create the signs of this covenant promise? Science might one day be able to explain everything about how rainbows are made, but it can never explain *why* they are made.

But we do know *why*. Because God created our world in such a way that when sunlight and mist are in right relationships to each other, the mist breaks up the light by reflecting it at different angles that create bands of light. Our minds tell our eyes that what they are seeing are rainbows. And God did it (the “*why*” that science can never explain) to remind us of His covenant promise that never again would He destroy the earth by water.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What are some other important truths, taught by the Bible, that science can never teach us? In fact, could you argue that the most important things we know could never be taught by science? If so, what truths would they be?
- ② In class, go over the important relationship between faith and works in the plan of salvation. What is the duty of faith? What is the duty of works? And how do they relate to the Christian experience?
- ③ What does it mean to say that the law is engraved (carved) on our hearts? How does this idea teach that the law stands forever, even under the new covenant?