

The Covenant



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 9:1–17; 12:1–3; Gal. 3:6–9, 15–18; Exodus 24; Jer. 31:31–34; 1 Cor. 11:24–26.*

Memory Text: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.’ ” (*Jeremiah 31:31, NIV*).

Although the Bible speaks of “covenants” in the plural (*Rom. 9:4, Gal. 4:24*), there is only one basic covenant, the covenant of grace, in which God bestows salvation upon fallen beings who claim it by faith. The idea of plural “covenants” arises from the various ways God has restated the essential covenant promise in order to meet the needs of His people in different times and settings.

But whether it's the Adamic covenant (*Gen. 3:15*), the Abrahamic covenant (*Gen. 12:1–3, Gal. 3:6–9*), the Sinaitic covenant (*Exod. 20:2*), the Davidic covenant (*Ezek. 37:24–27*), or the New Covenant (*Jer. 31:31–33*), the idea is the same. The salvation God provides is a gift, unmerited and undeserved, and the human response to that gift—in a sense, humanity's holding up its side of the deal—is faithfulness and obedience.

The first mention of the New Covenant is in Jeremiah, in the context of Israel's return from exile and the blessings that God would grant them. Even amid calamity and trouble, the Lord extends to His wayward people the offer of hope and restoration.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 12.

God's Covenant With All Humanity

We look at how bad the world is today; that is, we see all the evil in it, and yet God still bears with us. Thus, we can only imagine just how bad things must have been in order for 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 transgressed, and every conceivable sin was the result. The wickedness of men was open and daring, justice was trampled in the dust, and the cries of the oppressed reached unto heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 91.

Read Genesis 9:1–17. What covenant was made between God and humanity, and how does it reflect God's grace toward the creation?

The covenant God expressed to Noah was the most universal among the biblical covenants; it was with all humanity, and it included the animals and nature too (*Gen. 9:12*). Also, this was a one-sided arrangement: the Lord didn't impose any requirements or stipulations upon those with whom He was establishing the covenant. He simply was not going to destroy the earth with water again, period. Unlike other covenants, nothing was conditional about it.

God then sealed His covenant with a visible sign, that of a rainbow, which symbolizes the covenant promise that the earth will never be destroyed by a flood again. So, anytime we see a rainbow, the mere fact that we are here to see it is, in its own way, a vindication of this ancient covenant promise. (After all, if we had been wiped out in a universal flood, we wouldn't be here to see the rainbow!) Amid the constant sin and evil here on earth, at times we are blessed with the beauty of the rainbow, a sign of God's grace toward the whole world. We can look up at it and draw hope, not only from just how beautiful it is in and of itself, but also because we know that it's a message from God, a message of His love toward our wretched planet.

Dwell upon the grandeur and beauty of a rainbow. Especially in light of what the Bible tells us about the rainbow, in what ways can it draw us toward God, toward transcendence, toward something greater than what this mere earth itself offers?

The Covenant With Abraham

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

The Abrahamic covenant of grace is fundamental to the entire course of salvation history. That’s 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 to Jesus and to salvation by faith alone?

Through Abraham’s seed—referring not to his many descendants but in particular to one, Jesus (*see Gal. 3:16*), God would bless the entire world. All who would be a part of Abraham’s seed, which happens by faith in Christ (*Gal. 3:29*), would find that Abraham’s God would be their God as well. Even back then, Abraham “‘believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness’” (*Gal. 3:6*). Abraham was no more saved by works than the thief on the cross was; it’s always and only God’s saving grace that brings salvation. Abraham fulfilled his end of the covenant promise. His obedience revealed the faith that took hold of the promise of salvation. His works didn’t justify him; instead, the works showed that he was already justified. That’s the essence of the covenant and how it is expressed in the life of faith (*see Rom. 4:1–3*).

Dwell upon the great truth that your hope of salvation comes only from the righteousness of Jesus credited to you by faith. What great hope and joy can you derive from this wonderful provision made in your behalf?

The Covenant at Sinai

How was the covenant made between Israel and God at Mount Sinai?

Exodus 24.

Moses and some leaders went to Mount Sinai. These leaders included Aaron and his two sons, who represented the priests, and the 70 elders and leaders, who represented the nation. The men accompanying Moses had to stop from afar, but Moses was allowed to go up to where God appeared.

Moses later returned and affirmed the covenant with the whole nation. He proclaimed what God had spoken to him, to which the nation answered with the following words: “All the words which the LORD has said we will do.” (*See Exod. 24:3, NKJV*)

Of course, as sacred history has shown and as our own experience often proves, it’s one thing to make the claim to be obedient; it’s quite another to reach out in faith and surrender in order to harness the divine power that gives us the grace to do what we say we will.

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

Only by faith and by grasping the promises that come by faith can we be obedient, an obedience that is expressed by loyalty to God’s law. Obedience to the law was no more contrary to the everlasting covenant in Moses’ time than it is in ours. The common misperception about the law and the covenants, which usually arises from reading Paul, stems from a failure to take into account the context in which Paul was writing, that of dealing with his Judaizing opponents. They wanted to make the law and obedience to it central to the faith; Paul, in contrast, wanted to make Christ and His righteousness the central component.

How often have you said, “All that the Lord has told me, I will do,” only to fail to follow through? How does this unfortunate reality make the promise of grace so much more precious? What hope would you have without it?

The New Covenant: Part 1

Read Jeremiah 31:31–34. What do these texts mean both in their immediate context and in ours today?

Jeremiah uttered these words amid the greatest crisis the people had yet faced: the coming Babylonian invasion, when the nation was threatened with all but certain extinction. Here again, however, as in other places, the Lord offered them hope, the promise that this was not going to be the ultimate end, and that they would have another chance to thrive in the presence of the Lord.

So, the first promise of the “new covenant” found in the Bible is in the context of Israel’s eventual return from Babylonian exile and the blessing that God would grant to them upon that return. Just as the breaking of the covenant made at Sinai (*Jer. 31:32*) brought them into exile, so the remaking of this covenant would preserve them and their hope for the future. Like the Sinai covenant, the new covenant would be relational, and it would include the same law, the Ten Commandments, but now written not just on tablets of stone but in their minds and on their hearts, where it should have been all along.

“The same law that was engraved upon the tables of stone is written by the Holy Spirit upon the tables of the heart. Instead of going about to establish our own righteousness, we accept the righteousness of Christ. His blood atones for our sins. His obedience is accepted for us. Then the heart renewed by the Holy Spirit will bring forth ‘the fruits of the Spirit.’ Through the grace of Christ we shall live in obedience to the law of God written upon our hearts. Having the Spirit of Christ, we shall walk even as He walked.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 372.

Under the new covenant, their 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. Old covenant in shadows and in symbols, new covenant in reality, salvation was always by faith, a faith that would reveal “the fruits of the Spirit.”

The New Covenant: Part 2

The prophecy of Jeremiah about the new covenant (*Jer. 31:31–34*) contains a double application: first, it refers to Israel’s return to God and His bringing them home; second, it refers to the work of Jesus the Messiah, whose death ratified the covenant and would change the relationship between humans and God. It’s in the New Covenant that we get the fullest expression of the plan of salvation, which before had been revealed only in shadows and types (*Heb. 10:1*).

Read Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:24–26. How do these texts link back to Jeremiah’s prophecy?

The broken body of Christ and His shed blood were revealed in the Old Testament in the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb. The juice of the vine represents the blood of Jesus shed on the cross, revealed in the New Testament. The work of Jesus did not begin with the New Testament; it embraced the Old, as well, and in the Communion service we can see the link that unites what Jesus has done all through salvation history.

The bread and the juice, then, provide the shortest summary of that salvation history. Though they are just symbols, it is still through these symbols that we understand God’s incredible work in our behalf.

The Communion service points not just to Christ’s death, but also to His return, without which His death would be all but meaningless. After all, what good would Christ’s first coming be without the second, when we are resurrected from the grave (*1 Thess. 4:16, 1 Cor. 15:12–18*)? Jesus established the link when He said, “But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (*Matt. 26:29*). No question, Christ’s first coming is inseparably tied to His second. The first finds its ultimate fulfillment only in the second.

Next time you partake of the communion service, think about Christ’s vow 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 seeks with us?

Further 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 occurs when sunlight is both refracted and reflected in drops of water, dispersing the light at various angles. Light enters a raindrop at one point, is reflected off the back of that drop at another, and leaves at another, creating the colors that we see. Poet John Keats feared that science would “unweave a rainbow,” but even if we could parse, measure, predict, and quantify everything about a rainbow down to the innards of each photon and the underbelly of every quark, 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—even to 25 digits to the right of a decimal point—but it can never explain why they are made.

We, though, 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 refracting and reflecting it at different angles that create bands of electromagnetic waves, which, when reaching our eyes, imprint the image of rainbows in our minds. And He 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 crucial truths revealed by the Bible that science can never teach us? In fact, could you argue that the most important things we know could never be revealed by science? If so, what truths would they be?
- ② In class, go over the crucial relationship between faith and works in the plan of salvation. That is, what is the role of faith, and what is the role of works, and how do they relate to the Christian experience?
- ③ What does it mean to say that the law is engraved on our hearts? How does this idea show the perpetuity of the law, even under the New Covenant?

Cry of the Kalahari: Part 2

The desert sun streamed down mercilessly as the little man crept forward with his bow. From his thin, wrinkled appearance one might suppose he was in his seventies, but his body was accustomed to the scarcity of food and water, and his reflexes were lightning fast.

Steeped in the accumulated wisdom of his ancestors, he cautiously moved closer to the small herd of grazing buck.

When he was close enough, he fitted a poisoned arrow to his bow, aimed carefully, and let the arrow fly.

It found its mark, but the buck's hide was tough and the arrow didn't penetrate deeply. The buck looked around then charged the Bushman, catching him on its terrible horns and tossing him until his intestines hung out of his abdomen, now covered with sand and grit.

After the buck left, the Bushman staggered to his feet and, clutching the dirty mass to himself, headed for the only help he knew—the Seventh-day Adventist hospital miles away!

He was barely conscious when he reached the hospital compound. The horrified staff rushed him to the operating room, marveling at the desperate stamina that had brought him there.

The surgeon prayed earnestly as he cleansed the intestines, replaced them in the abdominal cavity, and sutured the gaping wound closed. He knew that only God could heal the Bushman.

With careful nursing and much prayer, he eventually recovered and returned to his family, leaving the hospital staff to wonder if he also had learned of God's love during his hospital stay.

Several months later, a little man with a horrible scar on his abdomen came to the hospital bringing a four-foot chain of beads, painstakingly handcrafted with primitive tools, as his expression of gratitude to the doctor who had saved his life.

Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help to establish a Seventh-day Adventist primary school in Botswana.

Please plan to give generously on the Thirteenth Sabbath, or any time on our secure Web site: giving.adventistmission.org.

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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Texts:** *Jeremiah 31:31–34, Galatians 3:15–18*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Review various covenant renewals that occurred throughout the Old Testament and how they point to the ultimate covenant renewal—the New Covenant as prophesied first by Jeremiah.

Feel: Experience God’s unconditional saving grace that is based on righteousness by faith.

Do: Embrace the beauty of a life of obedience under the eternal rainbow promise of God’s saving grace.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Eternal Covenant

A How did the covenants with Noah, Abraham, and the people of Israel at Sinai lay out the way to salvation?

B What was “new” about the New Covenant that Jeremiah prophesied? Why was it necessary?

II. Feel: Saved by Grace

A How can we deal with the supposed tension between law and grace? How do you experience this in your own life?

B What is the importance of the message of righteousness by faith for your life? In what ways do you see this message preached in your church?

III. Do: Life Under God’s Rainbow

A As Seventh-day Adventists we are often accused of being legalists adhering to the Old Testament law. What impact does the law have on our daily Christian walk?

B What does it mean, in practical terms, to have God’s law written on the tablets of our hearts?

► **Summary:** Jeremiah’s prophecy of the New Covenant is the reaffirmation of God’s eternal covenant, which finds its ultimate expression in Christ’s death on the cross. God’s covenant in its various phases has always offered salvation through righteousness by faith in Christ’s death.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *1 Corinthians 11:24–26*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: We need opportunities to renew the covenant that we made with Christ when we were initially joined by baptism to His body, the church. Communion offers a tremendous opportunity to renew our covenant by remembering how Christ's life and death have made salvation possible for us.

Just for Teachers: The concept of covenant renewal, as demonstrated by the various covenants in the Old Testament, is not such a strange one as it is often portrayed. We practice it in each Communion service. God's covenant is like a house that He has rented out to His people, giving them a rental contract that stipulates the conditions of occupation. However, the renters, God's Old Testament people—Israel—disregarded the contract and began to demolish the house.

Through the centuries, God sent His prophets, and at various moments, He renewed the contract, not because the contract was deficient but because the occupants did not adhere to it and even tried to change it. Eventually, God had to make a new contract, the new covenant, which is still based on the same conditions, but it is now ratified by Christ's blood; and thus, it is the most complete manifestation of the eternal covenant. What the Old Testament covenant phases were anticipating, the New Testament covenant completes in Christ. This is just an analogy (with some limitations), but it can help to illustrate to the class the idea of the eternal covenant in its phases.

Opening Discussion: During a vacation some time ago, a man and his wife visited a church, participating in their Communion service. For the foot-washing ceremony, this church did not offer a separate room where couples could wash each other's feet. So, the husband and wife were obliged to join the individual men's or women's sections and look for a foot-washing partner.

What a refreshing experience! The man realized that he had become so accustomed to washing his wife's feet at Communion that he was in danger of robbing himself of the blessing of reaching out to another brother (or sister in his wife's case) with whom he might have some differences that needed to be resolved or just for the sheer pleasure of serving a friend or stranger through the ordinance of humility.

Sadly, more often than not, churches in some places are noticeably

emptier on Communion Sabbath than on other Sabbaths. Some churches are even discussing the option of leaving out footwashing altogether or considering economizing other parts of the service, losing out on an opportunity for covenant renewal.

What importance does Communion play in your church and in your personal Christian experience?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The covenant is an important theological topic, and Jeremiah’s new covenant raises the obvious question: What about the old covenant? Many churches base their understanding of the covenant on a dichotomy (division of two things) between the old and new covenant, which translates into discontinuity between the Old and New Testament. Often we are confronted with statements like the following one: “In the Old Testament they lived under the law, but now we are under grace, and in the New Testament the law has been nailed to the Cross and is not binding anymore.” One objective of this lesson is to demonstrate the continuity of the covenants between the Old and New Testament (which actually means “covenant”).

Bible Commentary

Any confusion about the covenant(s) is resolved through the statement in Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews: “Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant” (*Heb. 13:20, NKJV; compare also Gen. 17:7, Lev. 24:8, for the Old Testament everlasting covenant*). It is important how the different phases of this one eternal covenant move toward and point to Christ.

I. Abraham’s Covenant (*Review Genesis 15:1–6 and Galatians 3:6–9 with your class.*)

Following the universal covenant of God with humanity after the Flood that promised that the earth would never again be destroyed by water (*compare Gen. 9:7–17*; note that this covenant was ratified only after Noah had been saved), the Abrahamic Covenant is more explicit in laying out the covenant conditions. And not surprisingly, it is as much grace and righteousness by faith as it is in the New Testament: “And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (*15:6, NKJV*). This affirmation is followed by a covenant ritual (*vss. 7–21*), in which (again) God takes the initiative.

However, it is necessary to make it clear that Abraham's faith was not a pre-condition to righteousness but rather an acceptance of it. The Hebrew makes it clear in verse 6; what has been translated as "believed" is a Hiphil form of the verb *amn* from which our modern word *amen* is derived. We could translate this verse also with: "And Abraham declared 'Amen' in Yahweh, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Abraham accepted God's promises as true, and all he could say as a human being was "Amen—so be it!"

Consider This: Faith is saying "Amen" to God's promises. Why does nothing else need to be added to this simple amen in order to be saved?

II. Covenant at Mount Sinai *(Review Exodus 24:1–18 and Genesis 12:1–3 with your class.)*

The covenant renewal that accompanies the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai is a significant event, especially its sequence in following the Exodus. Again, the message is clear: the law is for people who have been saved; it is not a way to be saved. However, Israel's reaction and the subsequent events of Exodus 24:7 are sobering: " 'All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient' " *(NKJV)*.

A short time later, this self-sufficiency is derailed by the golden-calf episode of Exodus 32. Righteousness by faith is contrasted with righteousness by works, and it goes back to the initial covenant promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12:2, " 'I will . . . make your name great' " *(NKJV)*. This is in contrast with the preceding chapter, Genesis 11, which describes the tower of Babel, the epitome of works *(compare verse 4, " 'let us make a name for ourselves' " [NKJV])*. God's covenant was based on grace through righteousness by faith and not by works, and the Old Testament knew very well how to differentiate between the two.

Consider This: What is the difference between righteousness by faith versus righteousness by works?

III. The New Covenant *(Review Jeremiah 31:31–34 with your class.)*

Jeremiah's new covenant is prophesied at a time that is in stark and dark contrast to what this new covenant foresees. Israel throughout its history had, again and again, violated the precepts of God's eternal covenant that He had clearly communicated from the earliest beginnings of humanity *(compare Gen. 3:15)*. It was time for a covenant renewal that would surpass all previous ones: the new covenant. It is new because it points to the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant stipulations by Jesus Christ on our behalf. Thus, it creates a contrast with the old covenant that Jeremiah connects with Mount Sinai. It offers a different way to salvation since the old way had become distorted by human unfaithfulness *(Jer. 31:32)*.

Note that *khadash*, the Hebrew word for “new,” can also be translated as “renewed” and is used with that meaning in other parts of the Old Testament (for example, *Lam. 3:23*; compare *Ps. 103:5* where it is used as a verb). The important detail of the new covenant is the internalization of the law in the heart and mind (*Jer. 31:33*). But even this is not a new precept but a renewed invitation to have a personal and saving relationship with God as already expressed in the Pentateuch (compare *Deut. 6:4–6*).

Consider This: What does it mean in practical terms to have God’s law written on the heart?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The covenant appears to be a highly theological and abstract issue that theologians could debate for hours without any practical meaning for our lives. However, theology was never a theoretical enterprise but always needed to be applied in the lives of God’s children. Covenant really is at the basis of the relationship between God and humankind.

Thought/Application Questions:

① Law and grace are often played against each other, and, as Seventh-day Adventists, we find ourselves sometimes on the law side of the conflict. How can we communicate the importance of the law without being legalists?

② From the very beginning, all covenants were always built on grace. What is your covenant with God built on?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Communion is a great opportunity to renew the covenant that we have made with God. Make sure that no part of this important ceremony is neglected in your church.

Class/Individual Activities:

① Celebrate a covenant renewal in the form of a Communion service designed specifically for your class. It could take place on a Friday evening and should allow sufficient time for the footwashing and testimonies.

② Prepare for the above Communion service during the week by resolving differences with people with whom we have tensions.