

God's Special Agreement



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 16

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Nehemiah 10:1–29; Genesis 9:16; Joshua 24; Nehemiah 10:30–39.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘Because of all these things, we are making an agreement that cannot be changed. We are putting this agreement in writing. Our leaders, Levites, and priests [religious leaders] are signing their names to this agreement and sealing [closing] it with a seal [mark]. . . . We all promise that we will take care of the Temple of our God’ ” (Nehemiah 9:38; Nehemiah 10:39, ERV).

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE MEAN when it talks about a “covenant”? The best explanation for a Bible covenant is a legal agreement between God and His people. In this agreement, God says, “You are My people. I am your God.” In Bible times, we find many covenants. Often these covenants were between leaders and the people who served them.

Covenants were helpful. They showed what a leader promised to do for his people. Covenants also showed what the leader expected his people to do. But when God makes a covenant, things are different. God does not get anything from the Covenant. He promises to keep the Covenant, even when the people break it. What happened when the people broke God's Covenant? Then God punished His people with the curses written in the agreement. So, the people knew when they broke the Covenant. Bad things started happening.

This week, we will look at the Covenant that the Jews made with God in Nehemiah 10. It was not really a new covenant at all. It was the one God made with His people long ago.



The people knew when they broke the Covenant. Bad things started happening.

THE BIBLE TEACHING ABOUT SPECIAL AGREEMENTS (Nehemiah 10:1–29)

Read about God’s Covenant, or Special Agreement, with His people in Nehemiah 10:1–29. Then read Nehemiah 9:36–38 again. Who makes this Covenant? Why do they agree to it?

True, only the leaders write their names on the Special Agreement. That means they agree to keep it. But the Bible clearly shows us that “the rest of the people” (Nehemiah 10:28, ERV) “now make this special promise to God” (Nehemiah 10:28, ERV). The “people promise to follow the law of God” (Nehemiah 10:28, ERV). Do you see that all the people want to make this agreement? Why do they all want to do that? What is so powerful about this Covenant that makes everyone agree to it? For the answer, we must study the Bible’s idea about Special Agreements.

The Covenant, or Special Agreement, was important. It was part of God’s story. This story shows how God saves sinners. The Covenant also shows that God wants to be close to His people. The Covenant allows God’s people to show Him how much they want to serve Him too.

Genesis 1 and 2 show us that God made humans. These chapters also show us that God was close to humans. We see how close Adam and Eve were to each other too. But sin changed everything. Sin brought death.

Adam’s sons choose between God and sin. Cain chooses evil (Genesis 4:8–19). Seth chooses to follow God (Genesis 5:3–24). Cain’s future son is named Lamech (Genesis 4:17–19). Lamech starts polygamy. Polygamy is the sin of having more than one wife. Cain’s future children use force to hurt people and take what they want. Seth’s future children include Enoch. Enoch “walked [obeyed] with God” (Genesis 5:24, KJV). So, God takes Enoch to heaven.

Sadly, the human family chooses evil more than it chooses God. A time comes when God does not have many people left on the earth who follow Him. Soon, there may not be any people left that follow God at all. God needs a family who is loyal to Him on the earth. God will save this family. Then God can keep His promise to send a special Child to this earth. This Child will be born from this loyal family. The special Child will save humans from sin. So, God saves Noah and his family. Then God sends the Flood. The Flood is the only way for God to save humans from being fully destroyed by sin (Genesis 6:11–13).



The Flood is the only way for God to save humans from being fully destroyed by sin.

SPECIAL AGREEMENTS IN HISTORY (Genesis 9:16)

God sends the Flood. Then God starts again His plan to save humans from sin. Now God works with Noah and the people who come after him. God wants to be close to His people. God's Covenant, or Special Agreement, is an important part of His plan to be close to the human family again. The Bible shows us seven important Covenants that God made with His people:

- 1st Covenant: with Adam (Genesis 1–3)
- 2nd Covenant: with Noah (Genesis 6–9)
- 3rd Covenant: with Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3)
- 4th Covenant: with Moses and the Israelite nation. This covenant also is named the “Covenant from Sinai” or “Moses’ Covenant” (Exodus 19–24)
- 5th Covenant: with Phinehas (Numbers 25:10–13)
- 6th Covenant: with David (2 Samuel 7:5–16)
- 7th Covenant: the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31–34)

Read these verses: Genesis 9:16; Genesis 17:7; Isaiah 55:3; and Hebrews 13:20. What is meant in these verses by the words the “agreement that never ends” (Hebrews 13:20, ERV)?

The Bible uses the words the “agreement that never ends” 16 times. Thirteen of these times talk about the Covenants, or Agreements, with Abraham, Israel at Mount Sinai, and David. Each of the Covenants above are different from each other in many ways. But one thing about them is the same. All of them are Agreements that never end. The 1st Covenant that God makes with Adam shows God's love for sinners. Each Covenant that comes after the 1st one shows us something more about the idea of God's love. Each Covenant that comes next deepens our understanding of the 1st Covenant. The rest of the Covenants help explain the 1st one better.

The Old Covenants and the New Covenant have four parts:

1. **God makes us holy.** “ ‘I will put my teachings in their minds. And I will write them on their hearts’ ” (Jeremiah 31:33, ICB; also read Hebrews 8:10).
2. **God brings us close to Him again:** “ ‘I will be their God. And they will be my people’ ” (Jeremiah 31:33, NIV).
3. **God tells us His plan:** (Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:11).
4. **God forgives us from sin and makes us new:** (Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12).



God made His second covenant with Noah.

THE DIFFERENT PARTS OF A COVENANT OR AGREEMENT (Joshua 24)

Covenants, or Agreements, were an important part of life in Bible times. Bible thinkers teach that most Bible covenants have the same basic parts. We see these basic parts in covenants made by the Hittite people in Bible times too. What does this information tell us? It tells us that God chooses to communicate with His people in a way they will understand best for their time.

The covenants in Old Testament times had six basic parts: (1) a beginning. This part announces who God is. (2) A record of history. This part shows the things that happened in the past between God and His people. (3) Laws or rules. (4) Blessings and curses. (5) The witnesses. And (6) proof that God will keep His promises. This part also can include special things God asks His people to do.

Now that we know these parts, we can understand the Bible better. It is easy to see that the whole book of Deuteronomy has these six basic parts. The book starts with Moses inviting God's people to accept God's agreement. Then we see: (1) the beginning of Israel's agreement with God (Deuteronomy 1:1–5); (2) a record of Israel's history (Deuteronomy 1:6–4:43); (3) God's laws for His people (Deuteronomy 4:44–26:19); (4) blessings and curses (Deuteronomy 27–30); and (5) witnesses (Deuteronomy 30:19). Finally, (6) we see the special commands God gives His people (Deuteronomy 31:9–13).

Read Joshua 24. This chapter also shows us the six parts of a covenant. What are they?



Joshua puts a big stone under a tree. This stone is proof that God will keep His agreement with His people.

God's Covenant with Joshua in Joshua 24 also has these six parts. In the 1st part, the covenant starts with God saying who He is. He tells Joshua that He is "The LORD, the God of Israel" (Joshua 24:2, ERV). In the 2nd part, Joshua tells the people to remember everything God did for them in the past (Joshua 24:2–13). In the 3rd part, Joshua announces God's laws (Joshua 24:14, 15, 23). Then in the 4th part, Joshua announces the blessings and curses (Joshua 24:19, 20). In the 5th part, Joshua names the witnesses of the agreement (Joshua 24:22, 27). Finally, in the 6th part, Joshua puts a big stone under a tree. This stone proves that God will keep His agreement with His people (Joshua 24:25, 26). God uses this covenant to help His people remember that He led them in the past. God also shows His people their part in the agreement.

PROMISES (Nehemiah 10:30–39)

What four things do the Israelites promise to do as part of their Covenant, or Agreement, with God? For the answer, read Nehemiah 10:30–39.

The people promise to do four things:

1. They promise not to marry anyone who worships false gods.
2. They promise to keep the Sabbath holy. They will not do business on the Sabbath.
3. They promise to take care of the poor. They agree to free all slaves after seven years. At that time, the Jews also promise not to make the ex-slaves pay back the money they borrowed.
4. They promise to support God’s temple with their offerings.

The 1st three promises show us how the Jews wanted to be fair to each other. The last promise shows that they want to honor God.

The Jews want to show that they support the covenant. Their promises show that they want to build ties with God and each other. They are not perfect all the time. But they understand that the things they do now can make a big difference in the future. So, they want to do what is right. If they do these things, then God will bless them. They feel that keeping the Sabbath holy and taking care of the temple will help them move in the right direction.

Sadly, not all the people keep their promises. (Look at the last chapters in Nehemiah.) Yes, some people failed to keep the promises. But many people did keep them. God can help us to have good habits. He can give us strength to do the right thing.

“We must choose to do what is right. God can change our whole lives if we let Him. So, give your heart to Jesus. Choose to serve Him. Then He will become your Friend and Helper. He has more power than all the kingdoms that rule on the earth. Jesus will help you to stay firm and strong. He will help you to give yourself to Him every second of your life. Then you will have His power to live a new life. It is the life of faith.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, page 48, adapted. How can you have the same experience you read about here? What is in your way?



With God’s help we can form good habits.

THE TEMPLE (Nehemiah 10:32–39)

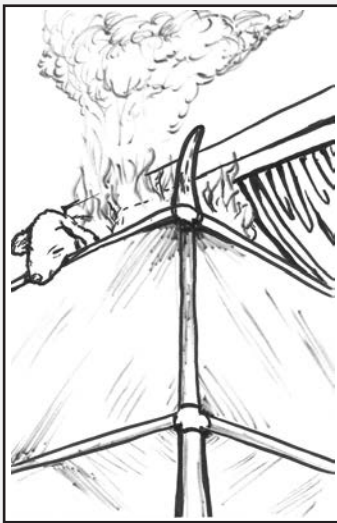
Look at Nehemiah 10:32–39 again. As these verses show, why is the temple important for the faith of the Jews?

The Jews promise to take care of the temple. True, they are a small group. They do not have a lot of money. The Persian kings make them pay a lot of taxes. But the people decide to give what they can to help the temple. The law commands the Jews to pay 1/3 of a shekel to the temple. A shekel is a coin. The law says that the people only need to pay the shekel during the time of the census. The census is the time when the leaders count the number of people in the different family groups in Israel. But the Jews decide not to wait for the census to happen. They decide to pay 1/3 of a shekel to the temple every year. Why? Because the people see the need to do more for the temple than the law asks. Also, different families are responsible for bringing firewood to the temple. The wood is used for the fire on the altar. The people see that someone needs to be put in charge of the families and the firewood. If not, the families may stop bringing wood soon. Then the fire will die out.

The people also give the Levites 10% of everything they earn. Then the Levites give 10% of this money to the priests, or religious leaders.

We see that the temple is the most important part of the lives of God's people. It was awful when Nebuchadnezzar came from Babylon. He destroyed the temple. He stole its holy objects. That was a sad time for the Jews.

We also see that the temple gives strength to the spiritual lives of God's people. It shows them God's plan for solving the sin problem: the death of a lamb. When Jesus died on the cross, God showed us His answer to the sin problem (Romans 5:5–10). So, the temple shows God's people His plan to end evil and sin forever. The temple shows God's whole plan to save humans. We can learn many lessons from studying God's temple. It helps us to see God's love. It shows us what God does right now to save us.



The temple shows the Jews God's plan for solving the sin problem: the death of the Lamb of God.

“What I say is true, and you should fully accept it: Christ Jesus came into the world [earth] to save sinners. And I am the worst of those sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15, ICB). What was Paul's hope? How can it become ours?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Read Ellen G. White, “Consecration,” pages 43–48, in *Steps to Christ*.

“The work in God’s house has two parts. The priests, or religious leaders, work daily in the Holy Room. Then one time a year, the high priest, or chief religious leader, does a special work in the Most Holy Room. On that day, he cleans all the sin out of God’s house. Every day, the sinner brings a live animal to the door of God’s house. The sinner shows he is sorry for his sins. He puts his hand on the animal’s head. The sinner confesses his sins. This act is a word picture. It shows us that the man put his sins on the innocent animal. Then the animal is killed. Paul tells us: ‘The law says that almost everything must be made clean by blood. Sins cannot be forgiven without a blood sacrifice [death of an innocent animal]’ [Hebrew 9:22, ERV]. ‘This is because the life of the body is in the blood.’ Leviticus 17:11 [ERV]. Humans broke God’s law. The law says that anyone who breaks the law must die. The blood shows us the life of the sinner. The sinner’s guilt is put on the innocent animal. Then the priest carries the animal’s blood into the Holy Room. There, he sprinkles some blood on the front of the curtain. This curtain separates the Holy Room from the Most Holy Room. God’s ark is behind this curtain. In the ark is the law the sinner broke. This word picture shows us how the priest takes sin from the sinner to God’s house. The priest carries the sin into God’s house by the blood of an innocent animal. Sometimes, the priest does not take the blood into the Holy Room. The priest eats the meat from the animal. Moses told the sons of Aaron the High Priest to eat it. He said, ‘That meat is very holy! God gave it to you to carry away the guilt of the people—to make the people pure [clean] before [in front of] the LORD.’ Leviticus 10:17 [ERV]. So, the priest eats the meat or brings the blood into God’s house. Both of these actions are word pictures. They show us how the high priest moves sin from the sinner to God’s house.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, page 418, adapted.



“The priest carries the sin into God’s house by the blood of an innocent animal.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 How does understanding God’s love bring us close to Him? How does it help us to live as we should?
- 2 Why do we need Jesus’ blood to save us?