

Covenant Primer



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 9:15; Isa. 54:9; Gen. 12:1–3; Gal. 3:6–9, 29; Exod. 6:1–8; Jer. 31:33, 34.*

Memory Text: “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine” (*Exodus 19:5*).

Last week left off with the fall of humanity because of our first parents' sin. This week is a quick summary of the whole quarter, as we take one day each to look at the early covenants, the ones that in their own way were all present-truth manifestations of the true covenant, the one ratified at Calvary by the blood of Jesus, the one that we, as Christians, enter into with our Lord.

We begin with the covenant God made with Noah to spare him and his family from destruction. We proceed to the covenant with Abraham, so rich and full of promise for all of us; then to the covenant at Sinai and the importance of what was proclaimed there; and finally we look at the new covenant, the one that all the others pointed toward. All of these, of course, will be studied in more depth over the next several weeks. This week is just a preview.

The Week at a Glance: What does the word *covenant* mean? What elements make up the covenant? What was the covenant that God made with Noah? What hope was found in the covenant with Abraham? What role do faith and works play in the human end of the covenant? Is the covenant just a deal, or does it have relational aspects to it? What is the essence of the “new covenant”?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 10.

Covenant Basics

“And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly” (Gen. 17:2).

“The Hebrew word translated as ‘covenant’ (appearing about 287 times in the Old Testament) is *berith*. It can also be translated as ‘testament’ or ‘last will.’ Its origin is unclear, but it has come to mean ‘that which bound two parties together.’ It was used, however, for many different types of ‘bond,’ both between man and man and between man and God. It has a common use where both parties were men, and a distinctively religious use where the covenant was between God and man. The religious use was really a metaphor based on the common use but with a deeper connotation [meaning].”—J. Arthur Thompson, “Covenant (OT),” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), vol. 1, p. 790.

Like the marriage covenant, the biblical covenant defines both a *relationship* and an *arrangement*. As an arrangement, the biblical covenant contains these basic elements:

1. God affirmed the covenant *promises* with an oath (*Gal. 3:16; Heb. 6:13, 17*).
2. The covenant *obligation* was obedience to God’s will as expressed in the Ten Commandments (*Deut. 4:13*).
3. The *means* by which God’s covenant obligation is ultimately fulfilled is through Christ and the plan of salvation (*Isa. 42:1, 6*).

Look at the three elements listed above (God’s promises, our obedience, and the plan of salvation). How can you see those factors at work in your own walk with the Lord? Write down a paragraph describing how they are manifest in your life now.

In the Old Testament, the sacrificial system of types instructed the people regarding the entire plan of salvation. Through its symbols, the patriarchs and Israel learned to exercise faith in the coming Redeemer. Through its rites, the penitent could find forgiveness for sin and release from guilt. The blessings of the covenant could thus be retained, and spiritual growth—restoring the image of God in the life—could thereby continue, even when humankind failed to uphold their end of the bargain.

Though there are covenants made between people, the main use of the word *berith* in the Hebrew Bible deals with the relationship between God and humanity. Considering who God is and who we are in comparison to Him, what kind of relationship would such a covenant depict?

Covenant With Noah

“But with thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons’ wives with thee” (Gen. 6:18).

In the above verse the word *covenant* appears for the first time in the Bible, and, in this context, God has just told Noah about His decision to destroy the earth because of the massive and continuing spread of sin. Though this destruction will come in a worldwide flood, God is not forsaking the world He created. He continues to offer the covenant relationship first set in operation after the Fall. The divine “I” who offers the covenant is Himself the ground of Noah’s security. As the covenant-keeping God, the Lord promised to protect the family members who were willing to live in a committed relationship with Him, one that resulted in obedience.

Was the covenant with Noah just one-sided? Remember that the idea of a covenant implies more than one party. Did Noah have his end of the deal to uphold? What lesson is there for us in the answer to these questions?

God tells Noah that there is going to be a flood and the world will be destroyed. But God makes a deal with him in which He promises to save Noah and his family. Thus, the stakes were quite high, because if God did not uphold His end of the promise, then no matter what Noah did, he would be wiped out with the rest of the world.

God said He would make a “covenant” with Noah. The word itself implies an intention to honor what one says one will do. It is not just some whimsical statement. The word itself comes loaded with commitment. Suppose the Lord had said to Noah, “Look, the world is going to end in a terrible deluge, and I might save you, or I might not. In the meantime, do this and this, and then we’ll see what happens, but I’m not making any guarantees.” Such statements hardly come with the kind of assurance and promise found in the word *covenant* itself.

Some people have argued that Noah’s flood was not worldwide but merely a local deluge. If so, then in the context of what God promises in Genesis 9:15 (see also Isa. 54:9), every time another local flood happens (and they seem to happen all the time), God’s covenant promise is broken. In contrast, the fact that there has not been another worldwide flood proves the validity of God’s covenant promise. In short, what does this tell us about how we can trust His promises?

The Covenant With Abram

“And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (*Gen. 12:3*).

Read Genesis 12:1–3. List the specific promises God made to Abram.

Notice that among these promises God says to Abram that “in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (*Gen. 12:3*). What does that mean? How were all the families of the earth blessed in Abram? See Galatians 3:6–9. In what ways can you see in this earlier promise the promise of Jesus the Messiah? (*See Gal. 3:29.*)

In this, the first recorded divine revelation to Abram, God promised to enter into a close and lasting relationship with him, even before He used any language that spoke about covenant making. Direct references to the covenant that God would make came later (*Gen. 15:4–21, Gen. 17:1–14*). For the moment, God offered a divine-human relationship of great significance. The repeated “I will” in Genesis 12:1–3 suggests the depth and greatness of God’s offer and promise.

In addition, Abram received a single, but testing, command: “Go forth.” He obeyed by faith (*Heb. 11:8*), but not in order to bring about the promised blessings. His obedience was the response of his faith to the loving relationship, which *God* already had established. In other words, Abram already believed in God, already trusted in God, already had faith in God’s promises. He had to; otherwise, he never would have left his family and ancestral land to begin with and headed into places unknown. His obedience revealed his faith both to men and to angels.

Abram, even back then, revealed the key relationship between faith and works. We are saved by faith—a faith that results in works of obedience. The promise of salvation comes first; the works follow. Although there can be no covenant fellowship and no blessing without obedience, that obedience is faith’s response to what God already has done. Such faith illustrates the principle in 1 John 4:19, “We love him [God], because he first loved us.”

Read Genesis 15:6. In many ways, how does it show the basis of all covenant promises? Why is this blessing the most precious one of all?

The Covenant With Moses

Read Exodus 6:1–8 and then answer these questions:

1. What covenant was God talking about? (See Gen. 12:1–3.)

2. How was the Exodus to be a fulfillment, on His part, of the covenant promises?

3. What parallel can you find between what God promised the people here and what He promised Noah before the Flood?

After the Exodus, the children of Israel received the covenant at Sinai, given in the context of redemption from bondage (*Exod. 20:2*) and containing God's sacrificial provisions for atonement and the forgiveness of sin. It was, therefore, like all of the covenants, a covenant of grace, God's grace extended to His people.

In many ways, this covenant reiterated the major emphases in the covenant with Abraham:

1. It was a special relationship of God to His people (*compare Gen. 17:7, 8 with Exod. 19:5, 6*).

2. They would be a great nation (*compare Gen. 12:2 with Exod. 19:6*).

3. Obedience was required (*compare Gen. 17:9–14 and Gen. 22:16–18 with Exod. 19:5*).

“Note the order here: the Lord first *saves* Israel, then gives them His law to *keep*. The same order is true under the gospel. Christ first saves us from sin (*see John 1:29; 1 Cor. 15:3; Gal. 1:4*), then lives out His law within us (*Gal. 2:20; Rom. 4:25; 8:1–3; 1 Peter 2:24*).”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 602.

Read Exodus 6:7. What is the one thing that comes through in the first part, where the Lord says they will be His people and He their God? Notice the dynamics there. They will be something to God, and God will be something to them. Not only does God want to relate to them in a special way; He also wants them to relate to Him in a special way, as well. Does the Lord not seek the same kind of relationship with us today? Does that first part of Exodus 6:7 reflect your relationship with the Lord, or are you just someone whose name is on the church books? If your answer to the first part of the question is yes, give reasons why.

The New Covenant (*Jer. 31:31–33*)

These passages are the first time the Old Testament mentions what is referred to as the “new covenant.” It is lodged in the context of Israel’s return from exile, and it talks about the blessings they will receive from God.

Again, as in all the other instances, it is God who initiates the covenant, and it is God who will fulfill it by His grace.

Notice, also, the language there. God referred to Himself as a husband to them; He talked about writing His law within their hearts; and, using language from the Abrahamic covenant, He says He will be their God, and they will be His people. Thus, as before, the covenant is not just some legal binding agreement, as in courts of law today. It deals with something more.

Read Jeremiah 31:33. Compare it with Exodus 6:7, which details part of the covenant made with Israel. Again, what’s the key element that comes through here? What does God want with His people?

Read Jeremiah 31:34. Compare what is being said there to John 17:3. What is the key thing that the Lord does that builds the foundation for this relationship?

In Jeremiah 31:31–34, one can see the elements of both grace and obedience, just as in the earlier covenants. God will forgive their sins, God will enter into a relationship with them, and God will bestow His grace in their lives. As a result, the people simply obey Him, not in some rote, mechanical way, but purely because they know Him, because they love Him, and because they want to serve Him. This captures the essence of the covenant relationship the Lord seeks with His people.

How do you understand this idea of the law as being written in our hearts? Does it imply that the law becomes subjective and personal, something to be interpreted and applied according to the individual configurations of our hearts? Or does it mean something else? If so, what?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Abraham in Canaan,” pp. 132–138, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Prophets of God Helping Them,” pp. 569–571, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“The yoke that binds to service is the law of God. The great law of love revealed in Eden, proclaimed upon Sinai, and in the new covenant written in the heart, is that which binds the human worker to the will of God. If we were left to follow our own inclinations, to go just where our will would lead us, we should fall into Satan’s ranks and become possessors of his attributes. Therefore God confines us to His will, which is high, and noble, and elevating. He desires that we shall patiently and wisely take up the duties of service. The yoke of service Christ Himself has borne in humanity. He said, ‘I delight to do Thy will, O My God: yea, Thy law is within My heart.’ Ps. 40:8. ‘I came down from heaven, not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me.’ John 6:38. Love for God, zeal for His glory, and love for fallen humanity, brought Jesus to earth to suffer and to die. This was the controlling power of His life. This principle He bids us adopt.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 329, 330.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Was God’s covenant with Noah, Abram, Moses, and us a continuation of His covenant with Adam, or was it something new? (Compare Gen. 3:15; Gen. 22:18; and Gal. 3:8, 16.)
- ② Why is the personal, relational aspect of the covenant so important? In other words, you can have a legally binding deal, a “covenant,” with someone, without any close, personal interaction. That kind of arrangement is not, however, what the Lord is seeking in His covenant relationship with His people. Why is that so? Discuss.
- ③ In what ways is marriage a good analogy for the covenant? In what ways does the analogy of marriage fall short in describing the covenant?

Summary: The entrance of sin ruptured the relationship the Creator had originally established with the human family through our first parents. Now God seeks to reestablish that same loving relationship by means of a covenant. This covenant signifies both a committed relationship between God and us (like a marriage bond) and an arrangement for saving us and bringing us into harmony with its Maker. God Himself, motivated by His great love for us, is the Initiator of the covenant relationship. By gracious promises and gracious acts, He woos us to come into union with Him.