

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 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 but 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.

Farmer Plants Churches

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

A Seventh-day Adventist minister asked Huang Wen-Ming, a farmer with no theological training, to help plant a church in a small village located a two-and-a-half-hour drive from his home in southern Taiwan.

Wen-Ming was surprised. He wasn't a church member, but he worshiped every Sabbath in his own village. He agreed to help. He spoke with a church member who had a female relative in the other village, Ba-Eao, where no Adventists lived. She gave permission to start a house church in her home.

Wen-Ming and the pastor took turns preaching in the house church every Sabbath, and six people were baptized in six months. About a half year after that, Wen-Ming himself was baptized.

Adventist leaders were impressed that God had blessed Wen-Ming's efforts in southern Taiwan, a region where the church has struggled to make inroads. The Taiwan Conference asked him to plant a church in another southern village, Santi. Six years later, that church was prospering, and Wen-Ming was asked to reopen a church in Siateya. For the first time, Wen-Ming was worried. He thought about his lack of theological training and prayed.

Two people showed up on the first Sabbath that Wen-Ming reopened the church's doors. He encouraged the two worshipers to open their own homes to neighbors for Friday-evening programs and to invite them to attend church services the next day. After eight years, the church had 74 members.

After 17 years of planting churches, Wen-Ming said the secret is to follow Christ's method alone, which Ellen White described this way: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.'"—*The Ministry of Healing*, p. 143.

Wen-Ming, 75, said he tries to meet people's needs. At Siateya, he brought mangos, watermelons, and guavas from his farm for a fellowship meal every Sabbath. After three years, worshipers began to follow his example.

The young pastor who replaced Wen-Ming as leader at Siateya asked with astonishment, "How did you grow this church? How can I grow a church like you did?"

"Show mercy, be patient, be humble, and love others," Wen-Ming said. "Just be like Jesus."



Part of a 2018 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering helped open six health-focused "urban centers of influence" in Adventist churches in Taiwan. Thank you for your mission offerings that help spread the gospel.

Study Focus: *Exodus 19:5****Part I: Overview***

God originally established a loving relationship with humanity's parents, Adam and Eve. God now seeks to reestablish that loving relationship with us by means of a new covenant: a covenant that signifies a committed relationship between God and humankind that is centered on the plan of salvation.

Part II: Commentary

The true meaning of grace is brought out in the concept of the covenant. The term *covenant*, from the Hebrew word *berith*, also emphasizes God's free initiative in saving humankind. A covenant, therefore, is a divine constitutional agreement, given to humans, in order that they might serve only Yahweh. By the covenant of grace, Christ offers Himself in a special relationship with humankind. He promises to be our covenant God and our redemptive Emancipator (*see Matt. 1:21*).

Covenant Basics

Scripture depicts three distinctive meanings to *grace*. Grace means loving acts of God toward undeserving sinners; grace points to the wonderful character of God; and grace points to God giving us the strength to overcome. In the New Testament, the equivalent of the Hebrew term *grace* (*chen*) is the Greek idiom (*diatheke*), which refers to a *will*, or *gift*. In common with the covenant, *the will* (a legal document) is a free gift to a party that has no legal claim to it. Thus, *a will* also is a fitting model of God's grace.

Covenant With Noah

The concept of covenant appears in Genesis 6:18. " 'But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall go into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you' " (*NKJV*). Here, right from the start, we can see the idea of a covenant relationship between humanity, in this case, Noah and God.

"The speaker is God, and Noah is the one addressed. . . .

"So God, in fulfilling His divine purpose, made a covenant as an expression of His relationship with Noah. . . .

"The divine, redemptive . . . covenant relationship that had been in operation since the Fall (*Genesis 3:15*) is . . . renewed by God's taking the initiative."—Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God's Everlasting Covenant*, (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 2002), pp. 18, 19. "And Noah found grace in the eyes

of Jehovah.”—Jay P. Green, Sr., gen. ed. and trans., *The Interlinear Hebrew/Greek English Bible* (LaFayette, IN: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1979), vol. 1, p. 14. (*See Gen. 6:8.*)

The Covenant With Abram

For Abram, a promise of protection and reward increase was embedded in the workings of this covenant. “God spread His covenant-making with Abraham over various periods of time. In Genesis 12:1–3 (*RSV*) we find a fivefold ‘I will’ on the part of God, revealing the intensity and greatness of God’s commitment to Abraham.”—Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant*, p. 19.

Christ presented Himself to Abraham, not as *God*, a class, or status, name, but as *Yahweh*, His personal name. He identified Himself as *Yahweh*, “I AM,” a name that expressed His very essence as a God who is self-existent, who has a will, who has a purpose. *Yahweh* is the *covenant* name of the sovereign Jehovah, the name He assumes when He reveals Himself in the most personal way. We see here, too, that the covenant is one of grace: “The Abrahamic covenant is the covenant of grace.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 1092.

The Covenant With Moses

“And God spoke to Moses and said to him, I (am) Jehovah; and I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, and (by) My name Jehovah I never made Myself known to them. And I also established My covenant with them, to give to them the land of Canaan, the land of their travels, (in) which they traveled. And I also have heard the groaning of the sons of Israel, whom the Egyptians are enslaving; and I have remembered My covenant.”—*The Interlinear Hebrew/Greek English Old Testament*, vol. 1, p. 153. (*See Exod. 6:1–5.*)

A broad-based biblical unfurling of God’s unknown name is relevant in this discussion with Moses: “Yahweh [is] the proper name of the God of Israel. . . . Many recent scholars explain [Yahweh] as . . . (*the one bringing into being, life giver*) . . . (*giver of existence, creator,*) . . . (*he who brings to pass, . . . performer of his promises*) . . . (*the one who is . . . the absolute and unchangeable one,*) . . . (*the existing, ever-living, as self-consistent and unchangeable,*) . . . (*the one ever coming into manifestation as the God of redemption,*) . . . *he will be it, . . . (he will approve himself [give evidence of being, assert his being]).*”—Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), pp. 217, 218.

Yahweh is “the name of the God who revealed Himself to Moses at Horeb, and is explained [as] . . . *I shall be the one who will be it . . . He who will be it . . . I am he who I am, i.e. it is no concern of yours . . . I am (this is my name), inasmuch as I am . . . I am who I am,*

he who is essentially unnameable, inexplicable.”—Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon*, p. 218.

“‘Jesus said to her, **I AM**’ (John 4:26); . . . ‘But He said to them **I AM!** Do not fear’ (John 6:20); . . . ‘For if you do not believe that **I AM**, you will die in your sins’ (John 8:24); . . . ‘Then Jesus said to them . . . you will know that **I AM**’ (John 8:28); . . . ‘Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, . . . Before Abraham came into being, **I AM**’ (vs. 58); . . . ‘From this time I tell you, before it happens . . . **I AM**’ (John 13:19); . . . ‘Jesus said to them, **I AM!**’ (John 18:5). . . . ‘Jesus answered, I told you that **I AM**. Then if you seek Me, allow these to depart—that the word might be fulfilled’ (vs. 8).”—*The Interlinear Hebrew-Greek-English Bible*, vol. 4, pp. 258–307.

The covenant that God desired for Israel was for them to know that divine love had no cloaked motive, and all that God sought from His people was a genuine love response, a response that would, indeed, be made manifest by their works.

The New Covenant

“In Jeremiah 31:31–34 we find the Bible’s most profound and exciting promise of the new covenant. . . .

“Few people realize that the New Testament received its name from this particular passage. Since the Latin word for covenant is testament, Origen, the famous church father (ca. A.D. 185–254) called the twenty-seven books of the Bible . . . the New Testament.”—Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant*, pp. 21, 22.

Part III: Life Application

For Reflection: Before World War II, a woman was traveling through Georgia on her way to Moscow. She happened to meet an elderly woman living in a cottage. When the old woman learned that the traveler was headed for Moscow, she inquired, “Would you deliver a box of homemade toffee to my son?” Her son was Joseph Stalin. To the rest of the world, however, he was the dictator of Russia. But what others thought of him made no difference to his mother.

- 1. God’s love is like that of Stalin’s mother. It does not matter how bad we look in the eyes of others; God will continue to love us. Consider how this kind of love directs Him to offer us a covenant relationship.**
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2. What role does our faith play when we understand that God takes the first step toward reconciliation? When we exercise our faith, how does God's first step affect our everyday deeds and actions? Give an example of the dangers we face if we put works before faith.
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3. A covenant is a relationship entered into between two people, a bargain for mutual profit, an engagement for mutual friendship. In the Bible, we repeatedly see God taking the first step to initiate a covenant relationship. If it is mutually beneficial to both parties, why is it that we wait for God to come to us? What does God's persistence in pursuing lost humanity say to the universe?
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4. The lesson compares our covenant relationship with God to marriage. A good marriage lasts not because of obligation but because of love. Based on this comparison, describe the "ideal" covenant relationship between God and you.
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5. In a marriage, love increases in proportion to the amount of quality time put into the relationship. Think of ways in which you can improve the quality of time you spend with God in prayer and meditation. Consider having a "spiritual-growth partner" who will encourage you and remind you to periodically reassess the time you spend with God.
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6. The Bible speaks of several covenants, concluding with the new covenant. Are they in reality distinct from one another, or are they really the same covenant expressed in different ways? Is it possible for God to make more than one covenant?

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7. Why do you think it was necessary for God to reiterate His covenants with His people? Did His people forget, or might there have been points that God needed to stress more strongly at one time or another?

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8. By definition, a covenant is an agreement between or among two or more parties. Usually, these are parties who exist at some level of equality with one another. The relationship between Creator and creation would not typically be considered an example of this; yet, God feels the need to enter into an agreement with His creation. Why?

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9. What does the statement that God's law will be written in our hearts mean? (*See Rom. 2:15.*)
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