

The Everlasting Covenant



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 12:1–3, Rom. 4:1–5, Exod. 2:24, Deut. 5:1–21, Deut. 26:16–19, Deut. 8:5, Matt. 28:10.*

Memory Text: “‘And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you’ ” (*Genesis 17:7, NKJV*).

Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6, NKJV*). Notice, “the *everlasting* gospel,” everlasting as in always existing, as in having always been there, as in having been promised to us in Christ Jesus “before time began” (*Titus 1:2, NKJV*).

Hence, it's no wonder that the Bible talks at other times about the “everlasting covenant” (*Gen. 17:7, Isa. 24:5, Ezek. 16:60, Heb. 13:20*), because the essence of the gospel is covenant, and the essence of the covenant is the gospel: God out of His saving grace and love offers you a salvation that you do not deserve and cannot possibly earn; and you, in response, love Him back “with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (*Mark 12:30, NKJV*), a love that is made manifest by obedience to His law: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments” (*1 John 5:3, NKJV*).

This week we will look at the idea of the covenant as expressed in the book of Deuteronomy, where the covenant and all that it entails is made manifest.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 16.

The Covenant and the Gospel

All through the Bible, the covenant and the gospel appear together. Though the idea of covenant existed before the nation of Israel (for example, the Noahic covenant), and though the covenant promise was made before the nation of Israel existed, it was expressed prominently through God’s interaction with His people, starting with their fathers, the patriarchs.

And even from the start, the central truth of the covenant was the gospel: salvation by faith alone.

Read Genesis 12:1–3, Genesis 15:5–18, and Romans 4:1–5. What was the covenant promise made to Abram (later Abraham), and how is the gospel revealed in that covenant promise?

Abraham believed God, believed in God’s promises to him, and thus he was justified before God. This declaration, however, was not cheap grace: Abraham sought to uphold his end of the covenant by obedience, such as seen in Genesis 22, at Mount Moriah. All this, even though “his faith is accounted for righteousness” (*Rom. 4:5, NKJV*). That’s why, centuries later, Paul would use Abraham as the exemplar of what it means to live by the covenant promises God had made with His people.

This theme echoes throughout the Bible. Paul brought it up another time in Galatians 3:6, where he again quotes Genesis 15:6, about Abraham’s faith being “accounted . . . to him for righteousness” (*NKJV*), and he refers back to the promise first made to Abram about all nations being blessed in his seed (*Gal. 3:8, 9*). The covenant promises are made to all, Jew and Gentile, who “are of faith” (*Gal. 3:7*) and, thus, who are justified by faith without the deeds of the law—however much they are obligated, because of the covenant, to obey the law.

Even when Jeremiah talks about the new covenant, he does so in the context of the law: “ ‘But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people’ ” (*Jer. 31:33, NKJV*), reflecting language that goes back to the book of Leviticus: “I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” (*Lev. 26:12, NKJV*).

How does the covenantal idea of the law and the gospel together fit so perfectly with the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14, God’s final warning message to the world?

The Covenant and Israel

“ ‘It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’ ” (*Deut. 9:5, NKJV; see also Deut. 9:27*).

How is the reality of the covenantal promises made manifest in this verse?

Here, too, the covenant of grace appears: God worked for them—despite the constant mistakes. (This, surely, has to be how the gospel works today, as well.) And it was because of the promise made to the fathers that God’s grace was given to their future generations.

In Moses’ dealing with the people to whom the covenantal promises were given as a whole, he often referred back to the covenantal promises made to the patriarchs.

Read Exodus 2:24, Exodus 6:8, and Leviticus 26:42. What is being said here that helps show how the covenantal promises work?

The exodus from Egypt, the great symbol of God’s saving grace, also was based on the covenant the Lord had made to their fathers. That is, even before the beneficiaries of the covenant were born, the promises were made in their behalf. Thus, through no merit of their own (to say the least), they received the promised deliverance, which God did for them through the miracles and events of the Exodus.

Of course, things didn’t end there. They went from Egypt to—where? Yes, Sinai, where the covenant with them was “officially” established (*see Exodus 20*). And central to that covenant was gospel and the law, the Ten Commandments, which they were called upon to obey, a manifestation of their saving relationship with the Lord, who already had redeemed them (the gospel). Hence, again and again in Deuteronomy, they were called to obey that law as their part of the covenant, which had been ratified at Sinai.

What role should the law of God play in our lives today, we who have been saved by grace, and why is that law so crucial to our experience with God?

The Book of the Covenant

Though the idea of covenant (*berit* in Hebrew), to describe God's relationship with His people, is found all through the Bible, this word appears so often in Deuteronomy that Deuteronomy has been called "The Book of the Covenant."

Look at Deuteronomy 5:1–21. What is happening here that helps to show how central the idea of covenant (*berit*) is to the book of Deuteronomy?

Not long after the children of Israel were redeemed from Egypt, God established the covenant with them, at Sinai, just before they were supposed to enter the Promised Land. Then, after a 40-year detour, just before they are again to enter the Promised Land, which was a central part of the covenantal promise (*see Gen. 12:7, Exod. 12:25*), through the mouth of Moses, the Lord again gives them the Ten Commandments, a way to re-emphasize just how important it was for them to renew their covenant obligations, as well.

Yes, the Lord was going to fulfill His covenantal promises to them. Now, though, they are obligated to uphold their end of the deal: " 'So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone' " (*Deut. 4:13, NKJV*). He did it at Sinai, and now He was doing it again, in Moab, just before they were to take the land promised to them through the promise made to the fathers centuries earlier, a manifestation of the "everlasting covenant" that preceded even the existence of the world.

"Before the foundations of the earth were laid, the Father and the Son had united in a covenant to redeem man if he should be overcome by Satan. They had clasped Their hands in a solemn pledge that Christ should become the surety for the human race."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 834.

Read Deuteronomy 5:3. How do we make sense of this verse?

What was Moses saying to them? Most likely Moses was emphasizing the fact that their fathers were now gone, and the wonderful covenantal promises made to the fathers were now being made to them. This could have been Moses' way of letting them know that they should not mess up, as the previous generation had done. The promises (and obligations) are now theirs.

His Special People

It's hard for us today to grasp much of what the ancient world was like at the time in which Israel was wandering the wilderness. If whole empires have come and gone, with only ruins (if that) remaining, what can we know of many of the smaller pagan nations that lived in the same area as Israel did?

Not a whole lot, but we do know one thing: these people were steeped in paganism, polytheism, and some utterly degrading practices, which included child sacrifice. Try to imagine just how degrading and evil a culture and a religion would be that would do that to their own children, and do so in the name of some god!

No wonder, again and again, all through the history of ancient Israel, the Lord had warned His people against following the practices of the nations around them. “ ‘When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations’ ” (*Deut. 18:9, NKJV*).

And that's because God had called out this nation for a special purpose. By having entered into the covenant with God, they were to be a special people, a witness to the world of the God who created the heaven and the earth—the only God.

Read Deuteronomy 26:16–19. How is the covenant relationship between God and Israel summed up in these verses? How should their faithfulness to the covenant be manifested in the kind of people they were to become? What lessons can we take from there for ourselves, as well?

How fascinating that Moses begins these four verses with the words “this day,” as in *right now*, again, God commands you to do these things (Moses repeats the idea in verse 17). He had been commanding them all along to do these things. It's as if Moses is telling them they need to commit at this very moment, again, to be the faithful, holy, and special people, which is truly the central reason for their existence as the covenant nation. They were the only nation who knew the true God and knew the truth about this God and how He wanted people to live. In a real sense, they not only had “present truth,” but they also were, in their own way, to embody that truth until Jesus, “the Truth” Himself (*John 14:6*), was to come.

Why is the idea of “this day” committing to God and to His covenant requirements relevant even to us, “this day”?

Other Images

Biblical scholarship has long recognized the similarities between Israel’s covenant with God and other covenantal agreements between kingdoms. This parallel shouldn’t be surprising. The Lord was simply working with His people in terms that they could understand.

At the same time, the idea of a covenant, a legal agreement between two parties, with rules and stipulations and regulations, can seem so cold and so formal. Though that element must indeed exist (God is the Lawgiver), it’s not broad enough to encompass the depth and breadth of the kind of relationship God wanted with His people. Hence, other images are used in Deuteronomy to help portray the same idea as the covenant between God and Israel—but just to give it added dimensions.

Read Deuteronomy 8:5; Deuteronomy 14:1; and Deuteronomy 32:6, 18–20. What kind of imagery is used here, and how could this help reveal the relationship God wanted with His people?

Read Deuteronomy 4:20 and Deuteronomy 32:9. What imagery is used here, and how, too, does this help reveal the kind of relationship God wanted with His people?

In each case, there is the idea of family, which, ideally, should be the closest, tightest, and most loving of bonds. God has always wanted this kind of relationship with His people. Even after their shameful rejection of Jesus during the time of the cross, Jesus said to the two Marys after He had been resurrected, “ ‘Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me’ ” (*Matt. 28:10, NKJV*). Even as the resurrected Christ, He referred to the disciples as “My brethren,” an example of love and the grace that flows from love for those who certainly didn’t deserve it. That’s essentially what the relationship between God and humanity has always been: grace and love given to the undeserving.

What kind of relationship do you have with God? How can you deepen it and learn to love Him, while at the same time understanding your covenant obligation to obey His law? Why are these two ideas not contradictory but complementary?

Further Thought: “The spirit of bondage is engendered by seeking to live in accordance with legal religion, through striving to fulfill the claims of the law in our own strength. There is hope for us only as we come under the Abrahamic covenant, which is the covenant of grace by faith in Christ Jesus. The gospel preached to Abraham, through which he had hope, was the same gospel that is preached to us today, through which we have hope. Abraham looked unto Jesus, who is also the Author and the Finisher of our faith.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1077.

“Before the foundations of the earth were laid, the Father and the Son had united in a covenant to redeem man if he should be overcome by Satan. They had clasped Their hands in a solemn pledge that Christ should become the surety for the human race. This pledge Christ has fulfilled. When upon the cross He cried out, ‘It is finished,’ He addressed the Father. The compact had been fully carried out. Now He declares: Father, it is finished. I have done Thy will, O My God. I have completed the work of redemption. If Thy justice is satisfied, ‘I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am.’ John 19:30; 17:24.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 834.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell on the idea that even before the foundation of the world, the Father and Son had “united in a covenant” to redeem us if the race fell. Why should that be so encouraging to us? What should this teach us about how much God wants us to be saved into His kingdom?
- 2 As the Seventh-day Adventist Church, in what ways should we fulfill the role that ancient Israel should have fulfilled in its time? How can we learn to avoid the mistakes that they made?
- 3 Why are the gospel and the promises of the gospel so central to the whole idea of the new covenant? What texts can you find in the New Testament that show how the law and obedience to the law were not abolished under the new covenant, as commonly taught by other Christians? Why do you think so many Christians say that the gospel nullifies the need to keep the Ten Commandments?