

Christ and His Law

Christ, the Law and the Covenants

Lesson #10 for June 7, 2014

Scriptures: Genesis 9:12-17; 17:2-12; Galatians 3:15-28; Deuteronomy 9:9; Hebrews 9:15-28; 10:11-18.

1. This lesson is about covenants—promises or agreements—that God has made with different people or different groups down through the centuries. What was the intent and purpose of those promises? Do we still need to be claiming those promises?
2. How do you understand the following statement from the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Saturday, May 31?

Though the Bible speaks of covenants in the plural (*Rom. 9:4, Gal. 4:24, Eph. 2:12*), there is really only the covenant of grace, in which salvation is given to sinners, not on the basis of their merits but on the merits of Jesus that are offered to all who claim those merits by faith.

What are merits? How do we claim them? How are merits related to covenants or promises? Do we need merits? How do we come to be “safe to live next door to for eternity”? Is Someone balancing our good deeds against our bad deeds to see which are greater?

3. In the times described in the Scriptures as in our day, covenants were/are made between two or more parties. The Bible speaks about a former covenant made at the foot of Mount Sinai. What was the covenant dealing with at that time? Who was doing the promising? (Exodus 19:8; 24:3,7) By contrast, compare the new covenant as described in Jeremiah 31:31-34.
4. So, if God does all the promising, do we have to do anything? What is involved in our acceptance of God’s promises?
5. There are two basic kinds of covenants. In the first kind of covenant, two parties come together and agree on the mutual terms of the agreement. Examples would be marriage, a business merger, even purchases of property or a home.
6. A second type of covenant involves one party offering certain benefits to those who agree to the covenant. The second party merely agrees or disagrees. This would include enrollment in an educational institution or paying taxes to a government. One does not have the choice to change the covenant. In all agreements, there are consequences to failing to meet the requirements.
7. Agreements usually have some kind of symbol that represents the legal force of the agreement like a signature on a contract or a seal on a document. These symbols are not the covenant itself; they are merely an indicator as to who—and often when—the covenant was agreed upon.
8. The very first covenant in the Bible is probably implied by Genesis 3:15. God promised Adam and Eve that a future solution to their problem would be coming.
9. Read Genesis 9:12-17 and 17:2-12. In God’s promise to Noah, the rainbow was a universal promise. We do not have the privilege of disagreeing or agreeing; we simply observe the promise. In the case of Abraham’s covenant and the symbol of circumcision, the descendants of Abraham definitely were involved in that ancient ritual. But, today, many men are circumcised who are not of Jewish descent. Does circumcision have any spiritual implication in our day? Why are only males required to be circumcised? Do females in any way acknowledge their consent or their agreement to God’s covenant?
10. Of course, when a covenant is signed or an agreement is made between two parties, it is assumed that they are capable of meeting the requirements. Some covenants mentioned in the Bible, for example in Genesis 31:43-54, had a relatively limited application. The agreement between Jacob and Laban only applied for one or two generations.

11. Having looked at some of the covenants in the Old Testament, how do we understand their application to God's people in the times of the New Testament? Read Galatians 3:15-29. Paul clearly wanted to suggest that everyone may become a spiritual child of Abraham. Everyone has the opportunity to participate in God's promises even though the covenant was with Christ.
12. It is interesting to notice that while the Sinai covenant and the giving of the Ten Commandments were focused particularly on the Israelites, Exodus 12:48-49 and 19:5-6 make it clear that this covenant agreement was open to anyone who wanted to participate and was willing to meet the requirements. Does a new covenant mean that God has changed?
13. Having briefly looked at several covenants, what is your understanding of your covenant relationship with God? What is God promising you? What is He asking of you in return?
14. Read Deuteronomy 9:8-11. Why are the Ten Commandments considered to be a covenant that God has made with us? Did God make any promise in the Ten Commandments?
15. Clearly, the Ten Commandments are not intended to be some kind of difficult challenge to make our lives almost impossible. Understood correctly, they are supposed to be guidelines to help us live the happiest, most fulfilling kinds of lives. Read Hebrews 10:11-18. What do these verses tell us about the prominent nature of God's covenant promise? What are the differences between the old covenant (Exodus 19:5-6) and the new covenant? (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 9:11-14)
16. Aren't you glad that we do not have to sacrifice sheep to have our sins forgiven? Why is that no longer necessary? Almost every covenant in the Old Testament was connected to a sacrifice or the shedding of blood. Why was that? Paul used the death of someone who had written a will as an example of why death was necessary. The will comes into effect only when the writer dies. So, why is it that the death of Christ makes the shedding of blood no longer necessary?
17. Starting outside the gates of the Garden of Eden, lambs were sacrificed, and innocent victims died to try to impress upon the human race how serious sin is. Why did God accept Abel's offering and reject Cain's? Unfortunately, as the keeping of sheep became more and more common, the sacrificing of sheep became less and less significant in the minds of the people. Finally, with the life and death of Jesus, God made the ultimate demonstration of what He had been promising all through the years. In the life of Jesus, we can see what the results are of living a righteous life. In the death of Jesus, we see the results of sin being demonstrated. In Gethsemane and on Calvary, Jesus died the death which is a direct result of sin—the second death. We now have not only God's word, promise, or covenant but also a clear demonstration of the two opposing choices. Are we taking these demonstrations seriously enough?
18. Many look at the Ten Commandments and the other stipulations of God's covenants in the Old Testament and think that if they work hard enough, they can meet the legal requirements of God's law and thus, earn salvation. Notice these words from Ellen White regarding that approach.

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, *Youth's Instructor*, September 22, 1892 par. 1; *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1077.
19. Jeremiah 31:31-34 makes it clear that God's ultimate goal is to have the law written in our hearts. How does that differ from an externally-enforced code of obedience?
20. Could we actually reach the place where we recognize that God never asks us to do anything which is not for our personal benefit? Would a true God of love do anything else? Understood in that way, the commandments of God should be regarded as safety measures to preserve for us the best kinds of lives. Was that true in the old covenant as well as in the new?

21. Read Romans 6:15-23. What does it mean to be a slave of sin? What does it mean to be a slave of righteousness? Do we clearly understand why following our natural desires and tendencies to sin leads to death while accepting God's terms and His covenants and seeking a life of righteousness leads to eternal life?
22. Read Hebrews 9:15-28. How does the death of Christ set you free from the wrongs you did under the first covenant? Is this some kind of a legal arrangement? Or, does understanding the truth about the life and death of Jesus make us want to live righteous lives in the future? If we really have come to study and understand the life and death of Jesus, how does it impact us? Is a person a legalist if he keeps the Sabbath? Notice these words from Ellen White.

We may have flattered ourselves, as did Nicodemus, that our life has been upright, that our moral character is correct, and think that we need not humble the heart before God, like the common sinner: but when the light from Christ shines into our souls, we shall see how impure we are; we shall discern the selfishness of motive, the enmity against God, that [29] has defiled every act of life. Then we shall know that our own righteousness is indeed as filthy rags, and that the blood of Christ alone can cleanse us from the defilement of sin, and renew our hearts in His own likeness.—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 28.3-29.0.

23. Aren't we all sinners? (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:23) Don't we deserve to die the second death? Does the death of Jesus pay for our sins? If so, shouldn't everyone be saved? Or, does understanding the life and death of Jesus Christ and the character and government of God as revealed through that life and death make us change our attitude toward God, come to trust Him, and want to follow His will for our lives as much as possible? Many of our Christian friends regard this as some kind of legal transaction. Is that true? Or, is the life and death of Jesus still supposed to make a real difference in our relationship with God and the way we live?
24. We are told that when we get to heaven, we will cast our crowns at the feet of Jesus. (DA 131.2) Why do the saints do that? Is it because of all that He has done for us? Isn't it a recognition of all He has done for us? Shouldn't that make us want to live more and more like Him every day? Could we actually begin to experience the benefits of living a Christ-like life even today? Think what a difference it would make in our world if people really believed and practiced living Christ-like lives! Ephesians 2:6 suggests that we can be seated with Christ in heavenly places. What does that imply? How does that compare with John 5:24 which says we have passed from death unto life? Even today, can we claim the promises of God?
25. What things can we do or should we do to indicate that we have accepted God's promises? Read Exodus 31:6 and Isaiah 56:4-7. Compare Ezekiel 20. Does Sabbathkeeping save us?
26. If we have come to see God in a new light and truly regard Him as our Friend, wouldn't we want to spend as much time as possible with Him? Wouldn't that mean that the best day of the week would be the Sabbath which is set apart for companionship with Him? Then, keeping the commandments—including the Sabbath commandment—is not a matter of fulfilling the requirements to earn one's salvation! Many people think that the old covenant involved a lot of works while the new covenant is strictly of grace. Do you know of any Bible character—or for that matter, any other character—who has succeeded in earning his/her salvation by good works? Shouldn't we recognize immediately that our good works can never earn us anything? On the other hand, if we recognize the superiority of doing things God's way, shouldn't that be our goal every day of our lives?
27. How broadly are God's covenants supposed to be applied? Many modern-day scientists and even many people claiming to be Christians believe that Noah's flood was only a relatively local event. God promised that He would never again destroy the world by a flood. If it was only a relatively limited flood, what does that imply about God's promise? There have been many other limited floods and some fairly extensive floods since Noah's day. Wouldn't that nullify God's promise?

28. Do we take God's promises seriously? Have we enjoyed some of the benefits of our relationship with Jesus Christ? What does it actually mean to have God's love written on our hearts? (Jeremiah 31:33)
29. Our Roman Catholic friends believe that we are saved by merits. What does that mean? The idea is that when God judges your life, He balances your bad deeds with your good deeds to see whether you have earned salvation. Thus, if you think you do not have enough good deeds to meet the goal, you can pray to the saints who have excess merits; they can share some of those merits with you so you look better in the judgment. Of course, Jesus has the most merits of all because there were no bad deeds that needed to be balanced! Our *Bible Study Guide* discusses claiming Jesus's merits by faith. What would that mean? Isn't salvation a free gift from God that we can choose to accept or reject?
30. Can you think of any example in the Bible in which God broke one of His covenants? How many examples can you think of where we as humans have broken our covenant with God? Is there a danger that God will nullify His covenants because we have broken them so many times? See Romans 3:1-4. Does God ever make promises He cannot keep? Do we? (Exodus 19:8; 24:3,7)
31. Read Genesis 15:9-21. What was happening in these verses? Does God need animals cut in pieces to confirm His promises? Why was Abraham doing all those things? It should be evident that covenants or agreements were confirmed in different ways in different cultures, times, and places. Abraham was simply following a pattern recognized in his day. Aren't you thankful that we do not have to do that today? It is interesting to notice that the Hebrew word for covenant is *karat berith*, literally, "to cut a covenant." Does that imply that just as animals lives were taken to sign the agreement, a partner in the agreement might suffer a similar fate if he breaks the agreement?
32. Read 1 Corinthians 2:7; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; Revelation 13:8; and 14:6-7. What is implied by the idea that God's covenant was in place before this world was created? Is that supposed to teach us that these covenants were not just intended for one group of people at one time in history? What is implied by calling the covenant an eternal covenant? (Hebrews 13:20, *NIV*)
33. Circumcision is described as an outward sign of an inward attitude and commitment. How does that fit with Jeremiah 6:10 where it talks about uncircumcised ears? Or, Deuteronomy 10:6 and Romans 2:28-29 where it talks about circumcised hearts?
34. As we know, Paul was vehemently opposed to the idea that his Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and meet all the Jewish requirements before they could become Christians. Why was that? Did he want to make it very clear that there is nothing that we can do to earn our salvation? Was he trying to remove a major hurdle for Gentiles?
35. In Hebrews 9:15, Jesus is called our Mediator. This word could be translated "Intercessor" as well. Why do we need a Mediator of the covenant? Would God's promises not be effective without a Mediator? Or, could it be that it was only through the life and death of Jesus that we have come to understand the great controversy and what sin does to us and what God offers to us? Do we need to see the death of Jesus to really understand that sin is deadly?
36. Are all covenants or promises or agreements based on a carrot-stick principle? They promise certain benefits but threaten certain negative consequences if the covenant is broken.
37. As 21st century Seventh-day Adventist Christians, where do we stand in our relationship with God? Do we clearly understand the conditions of salvation?

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