

Ezra and Nehemiah

God and the Covenant

Lesson #8 for November 23, 2019

Scriptures: Nehemiah 9:38; 10:1-39; Genesis 4:8-19; Hebrews 8:1-7; 13:20; Joshua 24.

1. This lesson will focus on the events described in Nehemiah 10. It was a time when the Israelites under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah pledged themselves in a covenant relationship to God. What is a *covenant*? It is an agreement between two parties, in this case, God, who said: "You are my people, and I am your God," and the people who promised to obey and follow God's will for their lives.
2. This covenant was made following a pattern that was common in those days among the nations around them. As we will see, there was a very typical pattern to this covenant, this agreement, between God and His people. There were blessings and curses attached—covenant blessings for those who obeyed and curses for those who disobeyed.
3. Read Nehemiah 10:1-29. Verses 2-27 give a list of 84 names of those who actually signed the agreement, starting with Nehemiah. But, all the people agreed to what was said.

Nehemiah 10:28-29: ²⁸ We, the people of Israel, the priests, the Levites, the temple guards, the temple musicians, the temple workmen, **and all others** who in obedience to God's Law have separated themselves from the foreigners living in our land, we, together with our wives and all our children old enough to understand, ²⁹do hereby join with our leaders in an oath, under penalty of a curse if we break it, that we will live according to God's Law, which God gave through his servant Moses; that we will obey all that the LORD, our Lord, commands us; and that we will keep all his laws and requirements.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Nehemiah 10:28–29). New York: American Bible Society.[†]

4. To understand a little better why this covenant was made, see Nehemiah 9:36-38.

Nehemiah 9:36-38: ³⁶ "And now we are slaves in the land that you gave us, this fertile land which gives us food.

³⁷ What the land produces goes to the kings that you put over us because we sinned.

They do as they please with us and our livestock, and we are in deep distress!"

³⁸ Because of all that has happened, we, the people of Israel, hereby make a solemn written agreement, and our leaders, our Levites, and our priests put their seals to it.—*Good News Bible*.*

5. Is it surprising to you that all the people seemed to agree to this covenant relationship with God? Considering how many times groups have rebelled against God, was this an unusual event? It was an important aspect of God's relationship to His people that such a covenant was recorded. In light of all their rebellion, it is good to see that they understood the conditions and the consequences if they disobeyed God.
6. While God is excited and happy to see us make pledges to Him, He expects those pledges to be followed up by action.
7. Covenant agreements between God and human beings started with Genesis 1&2. Because of Adam and Eve's sin, a chain of de-creation leading to death soon dominated our world. The

stories of the two first surviving sons of Adam and Eve: Cain (Genesis 4:8-19) and Seth after the death of Abel (Genesis 5:3-24) give us a clear example of the results involved in each side. Cain's genealogy culminated in Lamech (Genesis 4:17-19)—the seventh (inclusively) from Adam—who introduced polygamy. Violence and vengeance characterized the descendants of Cain. But, alongside those evil men stood the faithful lineage of Seth. Seth's genealogy is traced up to number seven also; but, in his case, it was Enoch who "walked with God." (Genesis 5:24) He was taken to heaven without tasting death. What a contrast! Which side would you like to be on?

8. Unfortunately, we know what happened. Finally, the world became so evil that God realized that if something very significant was not done, all connection between heaven and earth would be broken. So, at the point when there was still one family but only one family left who were faithful to God, God sent a flood and destroyed all the others. (Genesis 6:11-13)
9. Certainly, we would all agree with the fact that sin has had terrible consequences. We are still living with them on a daily basis.
10. By a careful reading through the Old Testament and the New Testament, we discover that there have been seven major covenants (See *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Monday, November 18.) that God has made with His people:

First Covenant—Adam (Genesis 1-3)

Second Covenant—Noah (Genesis 6-9)

Third Covenant—Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3)

Fourth Covenant—Moses and the Israelite nation (known as the
Sinaitic or Mosaic Covenant; Exodus 19-24)

Fifth Covenant—Phinehas (Numbers 25:10-13)

Numbers 25:10-13: ¹⁰ The LORD said to Moses, ¹¹ "Because of what Phinehas has done, I am no longer angry with the people of Israel. He refused to tolerate the worship of any god but me, and that is why I did not destroy them in my anger. ¹²So tell him that I am making a **covenant with him that is valid for all time to come.** ¹³**He and his descendants are permanently established as priests, because he did not tolerate any rivals to me and brought about forgiveness for the people's sin.**"—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

Sixth Covenant—David (2 Samuel 7:5-16)

2 Samuel 7:11b-16: " 'I promise to keep you safe from all your enemies and to give you descendants. ¹²When you die and are buried with your ancestors, I will make one of your sons king and will keep his kingdom strong. ¹³He will be the one to build a temple for me, and I will make sure that his dynasty continues for ever. ¹⁴I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him as a father punishes his son. ¹⁵But I will not withdraw my support from him as I did from Saul, whom I removed so that you could be king. ¹⁶You will always have descendants, and I will make your kingdom last for ever. Your dynasty will never end.' "

¹⁷ Nathan told David everything that God had revealed to him.—*Good News Bible*.^{*}

Seventh Covenant—New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Jeremiah 31:31-34: ³¹ The LORD says, "The time is coming when I will make a new

covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ³²It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. Although I was like a husband to them, they did not keep that covenant. ³³The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴None of them will have to teach his fellow-citizen to know the LORD, because all will know me, from the least to the greatest. I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs. I, the LORD, have spoken.”—*Good News Bible*.* [Contrast Exodus 19:8 and Exodus 24:3,7. Who was promising?][‡]

11. One interesting aspect of God’s covenants with human beings is that they are often described as *everlasting covenants*. Since human lives are very short relative to God’s life, what does *everlasting covenant* mean? See, for example, Genesis 9:16; 17:7; Isaiah 55:3; and Hebrews 13:20-21. The term *everlasting covenant* is mentioned in the Bible 16 times. Thirteen of those times apply specifically to the covenants with Abraham, Israel at Sinai, and David. The very first covenant between God and sinful human beings, found in Genesis 3:15, finds its fulfillment, ultimately, in the life and death of Jesus. But, the *everlasting covenants* mentioned repeatedly also expand and are repeated in one form or another right through the New Testament. Compare Jeremiah 31:31-34; and Hebrews 8:10-11. Notice a very clear pattern in these covenants. (See the *Bible Study Guide* for Monday.)

1. We are to become like God as He says: “I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts.” (Jeremiah 31:33, *NKJV*.* Compare Hebrews 8:10.)
2. We will, once again, live in harmony with God: “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:34, *GNB**)
3. We will accept God’s mission for us to spread the truth about Him to all nations. (Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:11)
4. God is forgiveness personified; He reminds us that no matter how many times we have fallen away from Him and transgressed His laws, He will forgive us and treat us as if it had never happened. (Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12)

12. So, how does all this happen?

It is a law both of the intellectual and the spiritual nature that by beholding we become changed. The mind gradually adapts itself to the subjects upon which it is allowed to dwell. It becomes assimilated to that which it is accustomed to love and reverence. Man will never rise higher than his standard of purity or goodness or truth. If self is his loftiest ideal, he will never attain to anything more exalted. Rather, he will constantly sink lower and lower. The grace of God alone has power to exalt man. Left to himself, his course must inevitably be downward.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy** 555.2 (1888); *Mind, Character, and Personality*,* vol. 1, 331.1; *Ibid*.* vol. 2, 418.4.[†]

13. So, what is the normal pattern we would expect to see in a covenant? The ancient Hittites spelled out covenants in detail. They lived very close to the place from which Abraham came.

The covenants that were common during the time of ancient Israel had the following parts: preamble (who God is); historical prologue (past relationship defined); stipulations or laws; blessings and curses; witnesses; special provision or sign of the covenant. Thus, it should be no surprise that God used something similar in communicating to His people back then. He used what

they were familiar with.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Tuesday, November 19.

God speaks to us in a language that we know.

14. One of the best examples of such a covenant is the whole book of Deuteronomy.

It expresses the covenant in the following manner: (1) preamble (*Deut. 1:1-5*); (2) historical prologue (*Deut. 1:6-4:43*); (3) stipulations or laws (*Deut. 4:44-26:19*); (4) blessings and curses (*Deuteronomy 27-30*); (5) witnesses (*Deut. 30:19*); and finally, (6) special provision (*Deut. 31:9-13*).—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Tuesday, November 19. [Italic type is in the source.][‡]

15. The children of Israel were expected to read the book of Deuteronomy at the Feast of Tabernacles at least once every seven years at the year of jubilee—the time of the resettlement of debts. Do you think they were still doing that in the days of Jesus? If so, what might Jesus have said about it? Maybe He would have said, “Those were My words!”

16. Another covenant that was recorded in Scripture is found in Joshua 24.

First, a preamble is mentioned in which God presents Himself as “the LORD, the God of Israel” (*Josh. 24:2, NIV*). Then follows a long historical prologue through which Joshua reminds the people of what God has done for them in the past (*Josh. 24:2-13*). After this history, the stipulations or laws are enumerated (*Josh. 24:14, 15, 23*), blessings and curses are mentioned (*Josh. 24:19, 20*), witnesses identified (*Josh. 24:22, 27*), and special provision stated (*Josh. 24:25, 26*). **Here, too, the basic form of a covenant was used to communicate with the Israelites and show them, not only God’s leading in their past, but what was required of them to uphold their end of the covenant.**—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Tuesday, November 9.[†] [Italic type is in the source.][‡]

17. Some may feel a little uncomfortable with the goal of our becoming more and more like God. We cannot change ourselves; we only have the option of choosing to allow God to change us or allowing Satan to change us. So, what is the focus of our lives? What do we spend our time doing, listening to, and seeing? What did Israel promise to do?

18. **Nehemiah 10:30-39:** ³⁰ **We will not intermarry with the foreigners** living in our land.

³¹ If foreigners bring corn or anything else to sell to us on the Sabbath or on any other holy day, **we will not buy from them.**

Every seventh year we will not farm the land, and we will cancel all debts.

³² Every year we will each contribute 5 grammes of silver to help **pay the expenses of the Temple.**

³³ We will **provide for the temple worship** the following: the sacred bread, the daily grain offering, the animals to be burnt each day as sacrifices, the sacred offerings for Sabbaths, New Moon Festivals, and other festivals, the other sacred offerings, the offerings to take away the sins of Israel, and anything else needed for the Temple. [That is a lot of animals!]

³⁴ We, the people, priests, and Levites, will draw lots each year to determine which clans are to provide wood to burn the sacrifices offered to the LORD our God, according to the requirements of the Law.

³⁵ We will **take to the Temple each year an offering of the first corn** we harvest and of the first fruit that ripens on our trees.

³⁶ **The first son born to each of us we will take to the priests in the Temple and there, as required by the Law, dedicate him to God. We will also dedicate the first calf born to each of our cows, and the first lamb or kid born to each of our sheep or goats.**

³⁷ We will take to the priests in the Temple the dough made from the first corn harvested each year and our other offerings of wine, olive oil, and all kinds of fruit.

We will take to the Levites, who collect tithes in our farming villages, the tithes from the crops that grow on our land. ³⁸Priests who are descended from Aaron are to be with the Levites when tithes are collected, and for use in the Temple the Levites are to take to the temple storerooms one tenth of all the tithes they collect. ³⁹The people of Israel and the Levites are to take the contributions of corn, wine, and olive oil to the storerooms where the utensils for the Temple are kept and where the priests who are on duty, the temple guards, and the members of the temple choir have their quarters.

We will not neglect the house of our God.—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

19. It should be clear that these are fairly basic requirements. But, if they were practiced regularly, they would have led to a good relationship with God. Notice, especially the commitment to a proper keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath. But, unfortunately, as we know, they repeatedly broke that covenant. Our only hope of not breaking God's covenant with us is to keep our eyes focused on His plans and His promises and to allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives to change us to become more like Him every day.

Through the right exercise of the will, an entire change may be made in your life. By yielding up your will to Christ, you ally yourself with the power that is above all principalities and powers. You will have strength from above to hold you steadfast, and thus through constant surrender to God you will be enabled to live the new life, even the life of faith.—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ** 48.1.

20. God also required the children of Israel to make a commitment to caring for His temple on this earth. At first, it was only the tabernacle in the wilderness; but, the children of Israel promised to give so much for the construction of that tent that Moses had to tell them to stop bringing their gifts. (Exodus 36:3-4)
21. God set out a very clear pattern as to how the offerings from the people were to be distributed. A tenth of all increases and all offerings were to be given to the Levites. And a tenth of those offerings to the Levites was to be given to the descendants of Aaron, the priests.
22. As we know, the children of Israel were expected to go to the temple for major services at least three times a year. Obviously, that involved a great deal of their time and money. But, the temple in Jerusalem was to be a major place for them to learn about God and worship of Him.
23. There are still many lessons that we could learn about God from the ancient sanctuary and its ceremonies. See Romans 5:5-11. God wants to make us His friends.
24. How does the death of Jesus put us right with God? What are we supposed to learn from His death? **The life and death of Jesus Christ give us a clear choice. We can choose to live a life following His example and live forever; or, we can choose to rebel against Him and die the second death that He died by being separated from God, the only Source**

of life. This was symbolized by the different ceremonies.

25. Look back over your own life. How often have you been unfaithful to God? How often has God accepted you back again? God's covenant of forgiveness and pardon was sealed by the death of Jesus Christ. (See Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:13; 9:15.)
26. So, what led the children of Israel to go through this important covenant-establishing process? Nehemiah 8&9 talk about the reading of Scripture, the confessions, the praises, and the petitions that led up to this experience in Nehemiah 10.
27. Why do we as human beings have such a hard time maintaining our trust in God? Has God ever been unfaithful? In fact, God always takes the first step in trying to reestablish a relationship with us. (See Romans 3:1-4.)
28. One of the most interesting covenant ceremonies found in the Bible is the story of Abram as recorded in Genesis 15.

Abram follows the established custom of establishing a covenant between two parties. The literal translation for making a covenant is "cutting" a covenant because it involved the "cutting" of animals. Depending on how wealthy the vassal (the servant) was, he or she would bring a variety of animals to split in half. The vassal did the work of splitting the animals in half and then pledged an oath to the overlord. Since Abram is affluent, he brings a heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon (*Gen. 15:9*). He cut each of the animals down the middle and placed them opposite each other on the ground, creating a path in between them. The birds were left whole because of their small size and placed opposite each other. The job of the vassal now was to walk between the cut pieces and proclaim something to the effect of: "Let it be done to me as was done to these animals if I break this covenant." The overlord did not do the walking between the pieces because it was done only by the one who had the lower status in the relationship. So, as was customary, Abram would have walked between the pieces as a vassal even though his doing so is not specifically mentioned in the text.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 108. [Italic type is in the source.][‡] (See Genesis 15:10-21.)

29. Try to imagine yourself there as God established that covenant with Abram. Could you cut animals in half and lay them out on the ground? What would it smell like? What would you hear? Would there be anything for you to taste? What would you see? And feel?
30. How do you think Abram felt as he saw that smoking Cloud pass through between the cut pieces of animals?
31. The children of Israel in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to reestablish their relationship with God. And so, they followed the pattern that was recognized in the nations around them at that time.
32. What would a covenant look like in our day? Would we follow the legal example of people in our day? We certainly would not cut animals in half! What role would the Holy Spirit play in a covenant in our day? What is God asking us to do?

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*Electronic version. [†]Bold type is added. [‡]Text in brackets is added.

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