

Covenant Law



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Exod. 19:6, Isa. 56:7, Heb. 2:9, Deut. 4:13, Deut. 10:13, Amos 3:3, Gen. 18:19.*

Memory Text: “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments” (*Deuteronomy 7:9, NIV*).

One of the important phrases in Psalm 23 indicates *where* God desires to lead us. “He leadeth me *in the paths of righteousness* for his name’s sake,” David declares in verse 3 (emphasis supplied). Because of His own moral uprightness, God will never lead us astray. He will provide safe paths for our spiritual walk through life.

What are the safe “paths of righteousness”? A writer of another psalm answers this question through a prayer request: “Make me to go *in the path of thy commandments*; for therein do I delight” (*Ps. 119:35, emphasis supplied*). “All thy commandments are righteousness” (*Ps. 119:172*). God’s law is a safe, firm path through the treacherous swamp of human existence.

Our study this week centers on God’s law and its place in the Sinai covenant.

The Week at a Glance: What did Israel’s election mean? How does Israel’s election parallel our own? How important was the law in the covenant? Does the covenant come unconditionally? Why is obedience such an integral part of the covenant relationship?

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 22.

The Election of Israel *(Deut. 7:7)*

Jewish tradition has taught that God made the covenant with Israel only because other nations rejected it first. Though there is no biblical evidence for that position, it does, however, help bring home the point that for whatever reasons the Lord chose the Hebrew nation, it was not because they were deserving of the high honor and privilege the Lord bestowed upon them. They had no merit of their own that would make them worthy of God's love and His choice of them as His people. They were few in number, a group of enslaved tribes, and politically and militarily weak. Plus, in terms of culture and religion, they were mixed, bland, and without much influence. The basic cause, then, for Israel's election lay in the mystery of God's love and grace.

At the same time, however, we need to be careful as we look at this idea of election, because it is fraught with the potential for theological misunderstanding. What did God choose Israel for? Was it to be redeemed, while everyone else was chosen to be rejected and lost? Or were they chosen to be vehicles who would offer the world what they had been offered? How do the following verses help us understand the answers to these questions?

Exod. 19:6 _____

Isa. 56:7 _____

Heb. 2:9 _____

As Seventh-day Adventists, we like to view ourselves as the modern-day counterpart of Israel, called by the Lord, not to be the only ones redeemed but to proclaim the message of redemption to the world, in the context of the three angels' messages. In short, we believe we have something to say that no one else is saying. This was basically the situation with ancient Israel, as well. The purpose of Israel's election was not to turn the Hebrew nation into some exclusive club, hoarding the promise of salvation and redemption for themselves. On the contrary, if we believe that Christ died for all humanity (*Heb. 2:9*), then the redemption the Lord offered Israel was offered to the whole world, as well. Israel was supposed to be the vehicle by which this redemption was to be made known. Our church has been called to do the same thing.

Look at your own role in the church. What can you do to help promote the work that we have been called to do? Remember, if you are not actively helping, more than likely you are, to some degree, standing in the way.

Ties That Bind

“And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone” (Deut. 4:13).

However much we have been stressing that the covenant is always a covenant of grace, that it is only the result of God’s bestowing unmerited favor upon those who enter into a saving relationship with Him, grace is not a license to disobey. On the contrary, covenant and law belong together; they are, in fact, inseparable.

Look at the text quoted above. How tightly does it link the covenant and the law? How does it show how basic the law is to the covenant?

When you think about what a covenant is, the concept of law as an integral part makes sense. If we understand the covenant as, among other things, a relationship, then some sort of rules and boundaries need to be drawn. How long would a marriage or a friendship or a business partnership last if there were no boundaries or rules, either specifically expressed or tacitly understood? The husband decides to take a girlfriend or the friend decides to help himself to the other’s wallet, or one business partner without telling the other invites another person to join their venture. These acts would be a violation of rules, laws, and principles. How long would these relationships last under such lawless circumstances? That is why there have to be boundaries, lines drawn, and rules established. Only through these can the relationship be maintained.

In fact, various expressions such as “law” (*Ps. 78:10*), “statutes” (*Ps. 50:16*), “testimonies” (*Ps. 25:10*), “commandments” (*Ps. 103:18*), and “word” of the Lord (*Deut. 33:9*) are found parallel to or in closest association with (if not having almost the same meaning as) the word “covenant.” Evidently “the words of this covenant” (*Jer. 11:3, 6, 8*) are the words of God’s law, statutes, testimonies, and commandments.

The covenant of God with His people Israel contained various requirements that would be crucial for maintaining the special relationship He sought with His people. Is it any different today?

Think of someone you have a close relationship with. Now, imagine what would happen to that relationship if you didn’t feel bound by any rules, norms, or laws, but believed you had total freedom to do whatever you wanted. Even if you say that you love this person and that love alone will decide how you relate to him or her, why is there still a need for rules? Discuss.

Law Within the Covenant *(Deut. 10:12, 13)*

What are your first thoughts when you think of law? Police officers, traffic tickets, judges, and jail? Or do you think of restrictions, rules, authoritarian parents, and punishment? Or, perhaps, do you think of order, harmony, stability? Or maybe even . . . love?

The Hebrew word *Torah*, translated as “law” in our Bibles, means “teaching” or “instruction.” The term can be used to refer to all God’s instructions, whether moral, civil, social, or religious. It implies all the wise counsels God has graciously given His people, so they may experience an abundant life both physically and spiritually. No wonder the psalmist could call the man blessed whose “delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night” (*Ps. 1:2*).

As we read the *law*, or *Torah*—the instructions and teachings recorded in the books of Moses that became a part of Israel’s covenant—we are impressed with the wide range of instruction. The law touches upon every part of Israel’s lifestyle—agriculture, civil government, social relationships, and worship.

Why do you suppose God provided so much instruction for Israel? (*See Deut. 10:13.*) In what ways were these instructions for their “good”?

The work of the “law” within the covenant was to provide guidelines to the new life of the human covenant partner. The law introduces the member of the covenant to the will of God, whom one comes to know in the fullest sense through obedience by faith to His commandments and other expressions of His will.

The part played by the law within the living reality of the covenant relationship showed that Israel could not follow the ways of other nations. They could not live by natural law, human needs, desires, or even social, political, and economic necessities alone. They could continue as God’s holy nation, priestly kingdom, and special treasure only through uncompromising obedience to the revealed will of the covenant-making God in all areas of life.

Like ancient Israel, Seventh-day Adventists have received a wide range of counsels pertaining to every phase of Christian living through a modern manifestation of the prophetic gift. Why should we view these counsels as a gift from God rather than a detriment to independent thought and action? At the same time, what dangers do we face of turning that gift into something legalistic, as the Israelites did with their gifts? (*See Rom. 9:32.*)

The Stability of God's Law

What truth about God does the presence of God's law in the covenant relationship teach us about His essential nature? (See *Mal. 3:6*, *James 1:17*.)

God's law is an oral or written expression of His will (see *Ps. 40:8*). Because it is a transcript of His character, its presence in the covenant assures us of the permanence and dependability of God. Although we may not always be able to discern the outworkings of His providence, we know He is trustworthy. His universe is under unvarying moral and physical laws. It is this fact that gives us true freedom and security.

The "assurance that God is reliable and dependable lies in the truth that He is a God of law. His will and His law are one. God says that right is right because it describes the best possible relationships. Therefore God's law is never arbitrary or subject to whim and fancy. It is the most stable thing in the universe."—Walter R. Beach, *Dimensions in Salvation* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1963), p. 143.

If God's law cannot save a person from sin, why did He make it a part of the covenant? (Hint: see *Amos 3:3*.)

A relationship requires agreement and harmony. Because God is not only the Creator of the world but also its moral Governor, law is essential for the happiness of His created, intelligent beings to live in harmony with Him. His law, the expression of His will, is thus the constitution of His government. It is naturally the norm or obligation of the covenant arrangement and relationship. Its purpose is not to save but to define our duty to God (commandments 1–4) and our duty to our fellow human beings (commandments 5–10). In other words, it sets forth the manner of life that God designs for His covenant children to live, for their own happiness and well-being. It prevented Israel from substituting some other philosophy as a way of life. It was and is the purpose of the covenant relationship to bring the believer through God's transforming grace into harmony with His will and character.

Look around. Can you not see the devastating effects of lawlessness? Even in your own life, can you not see some damage done by breaking God's law? In what ways do these realities help to affirm the goodness of God's law and why law should be a crucial part of our relationship with Him?

If . . .

Look up the following verses. What is the one point they have in common, and what does it teach about the nature of the covenant?

Gen. 18:19 _____

Gen. 26:4, 5 _____

Exod. 19:5 _____

Lev. 26:3 _____

God openly acknowledges Abraham's faithful obedience to "my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (*Gen. 26:5*). It is implied that God expects such a lifestyle from His human partner in the covenant. The full statement of the biblical covenant at Sinai makes it abundantly evident that conditions of obedience are one of the basic aspects of the covenant.

Exodus 19:5 makes it clear: "If ye will obey . . ." The conditional aspect of the covenant is undeniable; though bestowed by grace, though unearned, though a gift to them, the covenant promises were not unconditional. The people could reject the gift, deny the grace, and turn away from the promises. The covenant, as with salvation, never negates free will. The Lord does not force people into a saving relationship with Him; He doesn't impose a covenant upon them. He freely offers it to everyone; everyone is invited to accept it. When a person does accept it, obligations follow, not as a means of earning the covenant blessing but as an outward manifestation of having received the covenant blessings. Israel should obey, not in order to earn the promises, but so that the promises could be fulfilled in her. Her obedience was an expression of what it is like to be blessed by the Lord. Obedience does not earn the blessings, in that God is obligated to bring them; obedience, instead, creates an environment in which the blessing of faith can be made manifest.

"Ye shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God hath commanded you, that ye may live, and that it may be well with you, and that ye may prolong your days in the land which ye shall possess" (*Deut. 5:33*). Is the Lord saying here to Israel that if they obey, they will earn these blessings, that these blessings are what the people are owed? Or is He saying: If you obey, these blessings can result because obedience opens the way for Me to be able to bring the blessings upon you? What is the difference between the two ideas?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Controversy,” pp. 607, 608, in *The Desire of Ages*; and “The Law and the Covenants,” pp. 363–373, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

How does Matthew 22:34–40 help us better understand (1) the place and meaning of God’s law within His covenant and (2) the concept that covenant is synonymous with relationship?

“There must first be love in the heart before a person can, in the strength and by the grace of Christ, begin to observe the precepts of God’s law (*cf. Rom. 8:3, 4*). Obedience without love is as impossible as it is worthless. But where love is present a person will automatically set out to order his life in harmony with the will of God as expressed in His commandments.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 484.

“In the precepts of His holy law, God has given a perfect rule of life; and He has declared that until the close of time this law, unchanged in a single jot or tittle, is to maintain its claim upon human beings. Christ came to magnify the law and make it honorable. He showed that it is based upon the broad foundation of love to God and love to man, and that obedience to its precepts comprises the whole duty of man. In His own life He gave an example of obedience to the law of God. In the Sermon on the Mount He showed how its requirements extend beyond the outward acts and take cognizance of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 505.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Why does the thread of love exert a stronger pull than the rope of fear to draw human beings to God?
- ❷ Why is the command to “ ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’ ” (*Matt. 22:37, NIV*) the first and greatest commandment?
- ❸ Simone Weil once wrote that “ ‘order is the first need of all.’ ”—Quoted in Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992), p. 3. How do you understand her words in the context of the week’s study, particularly in relation to the idea of law?

Summary: God’s law was an integral part of the covenant. Yet, it was a true covenant of grace. Grace, however, never nullifies the need for law. On the contrary, law is a means by which grace is manifested and expressed in the lives of those who receive grace.

Unexplainable Hospital Visit

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

In Medellin, Colombia, Hernando Díaz stepped out of the hospital to rest. He had spent the past two hours with his young son, Samuel, as the boy's blood was cleaned by a dialysis machine with an artificial kidney. His wife, Erica, was now sitting with the boy for the last two hours of hemodialysis.

Hernando collapsed onto a bench near a water fountain, and he turned on a sermon on his cell phone. Moments later, a stranger walked up and asked whether he could sit on the bench. Hernando nodded, listening to the sermon over the cell phone speaker. The stranger's own cell phone rang.

"I've decided to kill myself," the stranger angrily told the caller. "I haven't been able to find work for two years, and I don't want to live. Don't call me."

As he spoke, he seemed to forget Hernando on the bench. But when he hung up, he came back to reality. The sermon caught his attention.

"Is that a Christian preacher?" he asked.

"Yes, he is," Hernando said. "I heard that you want to take your life."

"Yes, that is what I want to do," the man said. "I cannot bear it anymore."

"I don't think that it is a coincidence that you sat with me," Hernando said. "You need help. Would you like help?"

"Yes, I would like help."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an accountant, and I have a family that I can't support."

"If someone told you, 'I can help you and supply your needs and give you hope for a better future,' would you accept it?"

"Of course!"

Hernando spoke about Jesus, and the man gave his heart to Jesus on the spot. Hernando encouraged him to send out his résumé with faith. The next day, Hernando sat on the same bench and saw the man looking for him.

"Guess what!" the man said. "Someone called with a job offer. I feel great!"

Hernando praised God and curiously asked whom he had visited at the hospital the previous day. The man said he didn't know anyone at the hospital. "Yesterday I felt an irresistible urge to come to the hospital," he said. "I sat next to you because I didn't know what to do."

Hernando, a Seventh-day Adventist physician at the Adventist Medical Center on the campus of Colombia Adventist University in Medellin, has many similar stories. During the past five years, more than 100 people have changed their minds about committing suicide after praying with him.

"They now are living normal lives," he said.



This quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help open a missionary training center at Colombia Adventist University.

Study Focus: *Deuteronomy 7:9****Part I: Overview***

The covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai was meant to be an example of God’s grace that all would see who came into contact with His people. The covenant defined Israel’s relationship with God. It also provided parameters within which Israel could work and live that would best spread God’s message.

Part II: Commentary

Examples of Yahweh’s reaching other nations before Israel’s election rest on earlier passages such as Genesis 20:3–6 and Genesis 21:32. Is it not striking to discover, in response to Yahweh, King Abimelech, a Philistine, referred to his *Hamitic nation* as “*a righteous nation*”?

“Yahweh has always been in contact with *non-Hebrews and chose to make ‘heathens’ His representatives and agents, even priests according to His will.* . . .

“Yahweh uses Jethro the Kenite, who was familiar with the name Yahweh before Moses, and, in fact, helped him to understand it, to facilitate His plans and purposes for humankind. . . . Here we have a so-called *heathen*, Afro-Asiatic people preserving this vital intelligence before the Hebrews came on the scene!”—Charles E. Bradford, *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection*, p. 36; emphasis supplied.

The Election of Israel

Likewise, a Hebrew nation had been carved out from an *Abrahamic* lineage. Ancient Israel sprang from divine providence in order to sprinkle its God-ordained witness to surrounding nations. Thus, the connection between Israel’s election and Yahweh’s cosmic law merits explanation: “The giving of the law is as much an act of grace as God’s gift of election. The giving of the law is as much an act of mercy as the deliverance from Egyptian slavery. The gift of law is as much an act of God’s love as the making of the covenant to which the law belongs. The law thus becomes an instrument defining all relationships within the covenant and the covenant community.”—Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant*, p. 72.

Law Within the Covenant

“The Hebrew word *law (tôrāh)* appears in the Old Testament no less

than 220 times. It must not be taken to mean ‘law’ in the Latin sense of *lex*, meaning law of the empire. Nor is it to be understood as the Greeks understood their word for law (*nomos*), namely, that which had always been done. In the Hebrew language the term *tôrāh* comes from the word *hôrāh*, meaning ‘to point out,’ ‘to teach, or ‘to instruct.’ Accordingly, the noun *tôrāh* means in its broadest sense ‘teaching’ or ‘instruction.’ In this sense, the word *law* signifies all the revealed will of God, or any part of it.

“God gave Israel this instruction, this *tôrāh*, in terms of ‘statutes and ordinances’ (Deuteronomy 4:14, RSV) or ‘the testimonies, the statutes, and the ordinances’ (verse 45, RSV) to regulate the life of Israel. *Tôrāh* is used in this sense frequently. Thus law could be a comprehensive kind of ‘instruction’ that included all the laws: moral and ethical, civil and social, sacrificial and worship, and hygienic and health.

“In other instances, *law* (*tôrāh*) can be used in a very narrow sense, meaning only the Ten Commandments or Decalogue.”—Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant*, p. 73.

The Stability of the Law

The psalmist sings: “The law of Jehovah is perfect, converting the soul. The testimony of Jehovah is pure, making the simple wise. The precepts of Jehovah are right, rejoicing the heart; the commands of Jehovah are clear, giving light to the eyes. . . . The judgments of Jehovah are true, they are righteous altogether. They are more precious than gold, . . . and sweeter than honey and drops from the honeycomb.”—*The Interlinear Hebrew-Greek-English Bible*, vol. 2, p. 1400. (See Ps. 19:7–10.)

We should ever be mindful of the fact that our need of God’s law is linked to the lawless condition of the human psyche, and not simply our need to rectify sinful actions. Only Christ is able to incorporate His serenity and stability within humankind, and He does this by pointing us to Himself (see Isa. 26:3, Matthew 12).

At the same time, the law had been given, and still remains, for our benefit. Who hasn’t suffered, or seen others suffer, from disobedience to God’s law? Think of how much better our world would be if people obeyed God’s law. Think of how much better it would be if people obeyed even just the last six commandments!

Meanwhile, Paul tells us the following: “But now He reconciled in the body of His flesh, through death, to present you holy and without blame, and without charge before Him, *if you continue in the faith grounded and settled*, and not being moved from the hope of the gospel.”—*The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, vol. 4, pp. 542, 543; emphasis supplied. (See Col. 1:21–23.)

For the believer, spiritual maturity in Colossians is not summed up in a moment. Growth in grace had been perceived by Paul as a regenerative lifetime process. Hence, this Pauline account restated the conditional terms of the covenant of grace as Yahweh had established with ancient

Israel. (Study *Exod. 19:5; Lev. 26:3, 4, 14, 16; Deut. 5:33; Deut. 6:5; Deut. 10:12; Deut. 11:1, 13, 22; and Deut. 13:3, 18.*)

“Thus it is evident that the way of salvation in the Old Testament and the way of salvation in the New Testament are the same—both being salvation by grace through faith, which results in obedience.”—Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant*, p. 78.

On the other hand, it is just as important to keep in mind the sheer impossibility of repentance, apart from Christ, in the arena of sanctification: “You cannot have a thought without Christ. You cannot have an inclination to come to Him unless He sets in motion influences and impresses His Spirit upon the human mind.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 73. (Study *John 14:15, John 15–17, Acts 5:32, Rom. 2:4, 1 Corinthians 13, Gal. 5:14–26, Eph. 2:8–10, Ephesians 5, 1 John 4:7–21, 1 John 5:1–3, and Rev. 22:14.*)

Part III: Life Application

For Reflection: William Barclay said that to be truly religious is to love God and to love the ones whom God made in His own image. This love is not some vague, nebulous sentimentality but a full commitment to God that issues forth from the heart in practical service toward our fellow humans.

- 1. Read Deuteronomy 6:5. This verse is part of the “Shema,” Judaism’s creed. Every religious service opens with this sentence. Every Jewish child memorizes it before anything else. It is a constant reminder that our love to God must come before everything else. Read Jesus’ words in Matthew 22:34–40. How are we like the Pharisees pictured here? How does the new covenant emphasize the application of love?**
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- 2. God gives us His law within the realm of His unfathomable love. Compare the relationship between God and humanity with the relationship between a parent and child. What is the purpose of law in a love relationship? How do boundaries and spoken expectations enhance a relationship? What do God’s laws and boundaries teach us about His character?**

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3. Name two or three specific incidents from Jesus' life that are examples of how He truly loved His neighbor as Himself. What if Jesus were to walk the streets of your town today? How would He show love for your neighbors, and why? When you break part of God's law, His grace comes to the rescue. Does this mean that grace nullifies the law? Explain. Think of instances in which you have appreciated boundaries set by the Bible, the church, or society. Share an example with your class.
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4. The old covenant played an important role in Israel's exodus from Egypt. This covenant was a sign of God's protective love and care. In your spiritual life, how does the covenant translate into signs of God's love and care? What is your role in the process of experiencing what it means to live in a covenant relationship with Christ?
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5. Read, again, the thought above from William Barclay in the For Reflection section. Think of specific ways we love God and humanity with "nebulous sentimentality." What can you do in your local church to encourage one another to be more sincere in your love to God and your neighbor? Name things, issues, and circumstances that interfere with your attempts to be sincere. How can you protect yourself from these interferences?
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6. As noted, God's law as given to the Israelites was almost painfully specific. Why might God be so concerned about how His children conduct their lives? Is it for our own good or His? Discuss. Can God be impacted by our choices? Explain.

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7. Both Israel and the church, as the elect of God, were, and are, in possession of something the world at large needed and still needs but of which it was and is mostly unaware. For the most part, Israel did little to change this. Is it possible that we today run the risk of making ourselves ineffectual or irrelevant? Explain.

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8. One occasionally hears the quip that the Ten Commandments have today become the Ten Suggestions. Do we, in fact, sometimes act as if that were the case? Explain. How can we distinguish between freedom and license in our own lives?

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9. Is obedience to the law a condition of having a relationship with God? If so, is it an error to say that God's gift of eternal life and His continuing presence are in some sense unconditional? Explain. Do we have any basis for believing in the unconditionality of God's love? Why, or why not?

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10. In thinking about the issue of obedience, we tend to think of it as something that we *do*. Is it not equally true that it could be a description of what we *are* when we choose to associate ourselves with God? Explain.
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