

Sabbath School Today

With the 1888 Message Dynamic

The Promise God's Everlasting Covenant

Lesson 7: Covenant at Sinai

Since God made His solemn promise to Abraham (which He sealed with an oath), nothing under heaven could change an iota so that the giving of the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai 430 years after Abraham's time could not be an extra feature put into the "new covenant." It could not invalidate in the least God's one-sided sworn promise to him (vs. 17).

"If the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise" (vs. 18). The new covenant doesn't specialize in telling us what to do, but it tells us what to believe.

Then Paul asks the logical question everybody asks: why then did God speak the ten commandments from Mt. Sinai? It was a terror-inducing demonstration with lightning, an earthquake, fire, and a death boundary (vs. 19). God didn't need to frighten Abraham out of his wits like that! All He had to do for Abraham was to write the ten commandments upon his heart as being so much Good News; then Abraham found his greatest joy in obedience. Why not do the same for Israel when they were gathered at Mt. Sinai on their way to the Promised Land? That would have

solved all the problems that Israel had to meet ever afterwards.

Paul explains the reason why the law had to be written in stone: “the law . . . was added because of transgressions, till the Seed [Christ] should come to whom the promise was made” (vs. 19; the word “added” in the original has the meaning of emphasized, underlined, but not the idea of changing God’s “will” made out to Abraham). But what were the “transgressions” that made this new “emphasizing” or “underlining” necessary?

The forming of the old covenant is the answer. Before we get to the fire and earthquake of Mt. Sinai and the writing of the law on stone in Exodus 20, we find that Israel had already made the mistake in chapter 19 of forming an “old covenant.” They wanted to substitute it for God’s new or everlasting covenant. The story is fascinating, for we can see ourselves in it.

When the people gathered at Mt. Sinai, God told Moses to renew to them the same “new covenant” promises He had made to their father Abraham: “Tell the children of Israel: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people”” (vs. 5).

When He said “My covenant” He was referring to the same covenant He had made with Abraham—His

one-sided promise. “Keep My covenant,” He said; that is, cherish it. The Hebrew verb *shamar* is the same word used in Genesis 2:15 where we read that God put Adam in the Garden of Eden “to tend and keep it.” It couldn’t make sense to say that Adam was to “obey” the Garden! There’s a play on words in what God said to Israel: If you will “treasure” My promise to Abraham, I will “treasure you above all peoples.” For us to believe as did Abraham makes God very happy!

And the Hebrew verb *shamea* translated as “obey My voice” is rendered in the Old Testament as “hear” 760 times, as “hearken” 196 times, but as “obey” only 81 times. The root meaning of “obey” in either Hebrew or Greek is to listen attentively (in Greek it is to bend the ear down low so you catch every syllable). Any parent knows that if you can get your child to listen to you, you’ve probably gone a long ways toward obedience.

Thus the Lord said to Israel, “If you will listen to My voice and cherish or treasure the promise I made to your father Abraham, you will be ‘a special treasure to Me above all people.’” You will be the head and not the tail; there will be no need for great world empires such as Assyria, Babylon, Grecia, Persia, or Rome, to tread down the earth and oppress you. You will be above all nations. Israel will embody the truths of righteousness by faith. “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (vs. 6). Israel’s temple would outdo and outlast Greece’s Parthenon!

But Israel did not understand. They did not have the faith of Abraham. Mired in legalistic thinking, they made a vain promise, something that God never asked Abraham to do. "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8). Thus they formed the old covenant.

What could God do? If they will not keep step with Him, He must humble Himself to keep step with them. A long detour now becomes inevitable.

It was Paul finally who saw the deep significance of this old covenant promise of the people: "Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin [as in a prison of our own choosing], that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:21-24).

The word "tutor" is pedagogue in the Greek, from *paideuo* which means to exercise stern, harsh discipline. Paul saw the old covenant that the people voluntarily put themselves under as functioning like a stern disciplinarian, a policeman if you please, keeping the people of Israel under custody until such time as they could find their freedom again in the kind of

justification by faith which their father Abraham enjoyed.

Since they brought the old covenant upon themselves, God must let them learn through their own history how vain were their promises to keep His law. The law written in tables of stone imposed upon them a burden of “ought,” a never-ending obligation they could not fulfill, never giving liberty, but always threatening punishment if not kept perfectly. It must serve in this long national detour now as a kind of jailer, driving them “under the law” until at last they come to the experience of their father Abraham to be justified by faith and not by their “works of law.”

Thus the difference between the new covenant and the old covenant is simply “who makes the promise.” In the new covenant, it’s God; in the old covenant, it’s the people. And the keeping of the promise depends entirely on who makes it.

In the new covenant, the foundation is solid Rock; in the old, it’s sand. Our salvation (and Israel’s) does not depend on our making promises to God (or keeping them) but on our believing His promises to us.

SECOND QUARTER 2021

SABBATH SCHOOL INSIGHT #7

MAY 15, 2021

“COVENANT AT SINAI”

This week we will be continuing our study and specifically looking at the Covenant made at Sinai. As I learned about the covenants several years ago and up until very recently, the old covenant was presented as the response of the Children of Israel on Mount Sinai, "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do." So, in this Insight, we will return to Sinai and review what happened there. Exodus 19:3-8 says, "3 And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: 4 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. 5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. 6 And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel." 7 So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the Lord commanded him. 8 Then all the people answered together and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." So, Moses brought back the words of the people to the Lord." The response to God was "All that the Lord has spoken we will do. This we have identified as the Old Covenant because, we have rightly said, we have no ability to keep the commandments of God in our own strength. But are those words wrong? I want to submit that those words are words that could have been music to God's ears. In Deuteronomy 5:28, 29 after the reviewing of the Ten Commandments in verses 1-22, we read these words from the heart of God as seen through the eyes and heart of Moses "28 "Then the Lord heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me: "I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. 29 Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!" So, we see that God said the words were right. There was nothing wrong with the words. The problem was that, as the text says, they did not have a heart to know Him. So, as we look at this topic in this Sabbath School Insights, we will attempt to see, from God's point of view the difference between the Everlasting (New) covenant and that which is not the everlasting covenant, what we have termed the old covenant.

The context for what we call the Old Covenant is the giving of the Law at Sinai. The passage above from Exodus 19 is the prelude to the giving of The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. To understand the context of the giving of the Ten Commandments, we need to view it from the perspective of Hebrew culture. In Exodus 19, God has brought His people out of bondage, a people to whom He said in Deuteronomy 7:6-9, "6 "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. 7 The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; 8 but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 "Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God Who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments:". He says that He chose them to be a people to Himself and that they were a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the

earth and that He set His love upon them. So, in Exodus 19 and 20, we are about to witness a very fascinating event. God has a problem. These people were devoid of a knowledge of Who He was. They had been in bondage in Egypt, and He has just delivered them and is now leading them through the wilderness. Before they go too far, He makes a decision to not only deliver them from Egypt but to get Egypt out of them. He takes them to the mountain of God, Mount Sinai and speaks to them and in Exodus 19:10, 11, He has them wash their clothes. Strange. Why? In the Hebrew mind this was what is known as a Mikvah...a ritual bath, part of preparation for a wedding. This should come as no surprise. Jeremiah 3:14 says “14 “Return, O backsliding children,” says the Lord; “for I am married to you...” Have you ever wondered when was the wedding? Here it is. They are now ready for the marriage vows, the Ketubah or the marriage covenant which God gives in Exodus 20:1-17. If we look at the wedding covenant, the Ten Commandments, we see the heart of God. When we get married, we get rid of all previous letters, pictures, gifts from previous friends of the opposite sex. There pictures are taken off the walls, the nightstands, the wallets. Our thinking is single-minded. So, God necessarily begins His presentation of the wedding covenant as follows: “And God spoke all these words, saying: 2 “I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. 3 “You shall have no other gods before Me.” Why does He do that? He is trying to get Egypt out of the people and change their way of thinking. He then presents in the other nine parts of the marriage covenant, His heart for how they will relate to each other. So, the people respond as they did, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Except for one problem, they did not have the heart to know Him.

From God’s perspective, Sinai was to be a new covenant experience. But the people were clueless and did not realize their true condition. They looked at the marriage covenant and said, “sure we can do that”, not realizing that He Who gave the covenant would be the One to see to it that it was faithfully kept. It was His intent to get Egypt out of them, to call them as His people, His treasured possession, and a holy nation who would display His character and purposes to the world and the onlooking universe. He does this by taking them as His bride and living among them, disciplining and testing them in order to mold and shape them to be his faithful witnesses to the world. But they did not pick up on that. Praise God, He did not give up hope.

Jeremiah 31:31-33 says, 31 “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah — 32 not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. 33 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.” Two points in this passage are worthy of notice. Verses 31 and 32 above seem to say that God was going to give a new covenant unlike the one He gave at Sinai which can leave one with the impression that the one at Sinai was, in fact, the old covenant. But, in his book *In Granite or Ingrained*, Dr. Skip MacCarty says that what God intended to be different

about the “new” covenant from the one made at Sinai was the faithfulness of the recipients of the covenant. The newness and oldness is in the receiving. The recipients at Sinai were unfaithful and God wants faithfulness which He Himself will supply. But this is not new. **What makes the covenant old is the way in which it is received.** The second point is that new can refer to ever increasing revelation of the character and purposes of God as revealed to each of the recipients of the covenants. For example, we read in Exodus 6:2-3, these words, “2 And God spoke to Moses and said to him: “I am the Lord. 3 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name Lord [Yahweh] I was not known to them.” Is that so? Yes and no. Clearly God presented Himself to both Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as Yahweh (Genesis 15:6-7; Genesis 27:20; Genesis 28:13). So, what could be the meaning? Dr. MacCarty points out that God was about to “reveal Himself in a new way to Moses and Israel, a way that Abraham and the patriarchs had not seen. His revelation would be so much greater than the old that by comparison, it would seem as if God had never revealed Himself as Yahweh.” (p 61 In Granite or Ingrained). Amongst a multitude of new revelations of Himself, God was about to reveal to them His law on Sinai and as Dr MacCarty very correctly pointed out, this is the first record of God declaring Himself to be a loving God, a forgiving God, a gracious God, a merciful God. By this alone, God was revealing a “new covenant at Sinai. So, at Sinai, this was the new covenant and, for that matter, a “newer” covenant because they were given a fuller revelation of the character of God. It was the people whose unready hearts made it old.

Of course, we must hear from EJ Waggoner, “Note the statement which the apostle makes when speaking of the two women, Hagar and Sarah: “These are the two covenants.” So, then the two covenants existed in every essential particular in the days of Abraham. Even so they do today; for the Scripture says now as well as then, “Cast out the bondwoman and her son.” We see then that the two covenants are not matters of time, but of condition. Let no one flatter himself that he cannot be under the old covenant, because the time for that is passed. The time for that is passed only in the sense that “the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revelings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries.” 1 Peter 4:3. {October 11, 1898 EJW, ARSH 647.4}

The difference between the two covenants may be put briefly thus: In the covenant from Sinai, we ourselves have to do with the law alone, while in the covenant from above, we have the law in Christ. In the first instance it is death to us, since the law is sharper than any two-edged sword, and we are not able to handle it without fatal results; but in the second instance we have the law “in the hand of a mediator.” In the one case it is what we can do; in the other case it is what the Spirit of God can do. Bear in mind that there is not the slightest question in the whole epistle to the Galatians as to whether or not the law should be kept. The only question is, How shall it be done? Is it to be our own doing, so that the reward shall not be of grace but of debt? or is it to be God working in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure? {October 11, 1898 EJW, ARSH 647.6}

Sarah answers to the covenant, which is from above, because she is free. But the freedom which that covenant gives is the freedom of the Spirit, for Isaac was born of the Spirit. See Galatians 4:29. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." 2 Corinthians 3:17. "If ye be led by the Spirit, ye are not under the law." Galatians 5:18. But this does not mean that the Spirit gives one license to break the law; for "the law is spiritual." Romans 7:14. There is no liberty in sin, and "sin is the transgression of the law." So, the liberty of the covenant from above is that perfect liberty that belongs alone to those who are law-abiding. We become law-abiding only by having the law written in our hearts by the Spirit. {October 11, 1898 EJW, ARSH 647.7}

"Stand fast therefore." Stand where? - "In the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free." And what freedom is that? - It is the freedom of Christ Himself, Whose delight was in the law of the Lord, because it was in His heart. Psalms 40:8. "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." Romans 8:2. We stand only by faith. {October 11, 1898 EJW, ARSH 648.1}

Let it not be imagined that there is any trace of bondage in this freedom. It is liberty of soul, liberty of thought, as well as liberty of action. It is not that we are simply given the ability to keep the law, but we are given the mind that finds delight in doing it. It is not that we comply with the law because we see no other way of escape from punishment; that would be galling bondage. It is from such bondage that God's covenant releases us. No; the promise of God, when accepted, puts the mind of the Spirit into us, so that we find the highest pleasure in obedience to all the precepts of God's word. The soul is as free as a bird soaring above the mountaintops. It is the glorious liberty of the children of God, who have the full range of "the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of God's universe. It is the liberty of those who do not have to be watched, but who can be trusted anywhere, since their every step is but the movement of God's own holy law. Why be content with bondage, when such limitless freedom is yours? The prison doors are open; walk out into God's freedom. {October 11, 1898 EJW, ARSH 648.2}

So, was the covenant at Sinai an Old or New Covenant? God intended it to be the new covenant with a fuller and richer revelation of Who He was, where He would write His law in their hearts and give them a heart to know Him. But the people were wholly unprepared to let go of self. Sadly, God knew what was in them, 8 "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me." (Matthew 15:8). He knew His covenant was falling on hearts that were far from Him and would produce works worthy of death. As Waggoner said the two covenants are not matters of time, but of condition... the condition of the heart. God has made us a promise in Jeremiah 24:7, "7 Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart." It is my prayer that we will accept the heart He offers us.

~Andi Hunsaker