

Sabbath School Lesson #8 – God and the Covenant – 16-22 November 2019

Christ forbearingly worked through Nehemiah to restore the people of God to His commandments. In a reformation led by Nehemiah and Ezra, the people made a covenant: “And because of all this we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal *unto it*. ... we will not forsake the house of our God” (Nehemiah 9:38; 10:39b). Before making this covenant, Nehemiah and Ezra had reminded the people of God’s commandments. “So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.” The people were pricked in their hearts for having violated God’s commandments, and they made a covenant, just as their ancestors at Mt Sinai had made a covenant, to obey God. But the reformation that was for a time marked with success, soon turned into apostacy. The people broke their covenant and profaned the Sabbath and the temple. We read the account from the Spirit of Prophecy:

“The people prostrated themselves before the Lord, humbly confessing their sins and pleading for mercy and pardon, each for himself individually and for the entire congregation. Then their leaders encouraged them to believe that God, according to his promise, had heard their prayers. They showed them that they were not only to mourn and weep and repent of their transgressions, but to trust that God had pardoned them, and to evince their faith by recounting his mercies and praising him for his goodness. Said these teachers, ‘Stand up and bless the Lord your God forever and ever’” (ST January 10, 1884, par. 11).

“Then from the gathered throng, as they stood with hands outstretched toward heaven, arose the song of praise and adoration: ‘Blessed be thy glorious name, which is exalted above all blessing and praise. Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all, and the host of Heaven worshipeth thee’” “In this portion of sacred history is a precious lesson of faith for all who are convicted of sin, and weighed down with a sense of their unworthiness. When they compare their characters with God’s great standard of right, they see themselves condemned as transgressors. There is no power in law to free them from their guilt. But as they confess their sins, they can find pardon through Christ. From him flows the cleansing stream that can wash away the stains of sin. When the sinner has come to Christ with contrition of soul, confessing his transgressions, it is then his duty to appropriate to himself the Saviour’s promise of pardon to the repentant and believing. He who seeks to find goodness and cause for rejoicing in himself, will always be in despair; but he who looks to Jesus, the author and finisher of his faith, can say with confidence, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me’” (ibid, par. 12-13).

“The leaders of the congregation presented the history of Israel, showing God’s great benefits and their ingratitude. Tracing the record from the days of Abraham, they called attention to God’s design to preserve his name upon the earth by preserving for himself a people pure amid the general corruption; they recounted the mighty manifestations of his power in their deliverance from bondage in Egypt, and showed also how backsliding and apostasy had caused the blessing of the Lord to be withdrawn from Israel” (ibid, par. 14).

“Then the whole congregation entered into a covenant to keep all the commandments of God; and that the transaction might be as effectual as possible, this covenant was written out, and those who were thoroughly in earnest in the work of reformation, affixed their names and seals. They wished to preserve for future reference a memorial of the obligation they had just taken upon themselves, as a reminder of duty and a barrier against temptation. Thus it was that the people took a solemn oath to ‘walk in God’s law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes.’ The oath taken also included a promise not to intermarry with ‘the people of the land.’ This had often been done by the people; and sometimes the rulers, as Solomon and Ahab, had formed such unions; and these marriages, by introducing idolatry, had resulted in the ruin of thousands” (ST January 10, 1884, par. 15).

“The Lord had strictly forbidden the intermarrying of his people with other nations. This would prevent the Hebrews from marrying idolaters, and thus forming connections with heathen families. The reason which God assigned for prohibiting those marriages was,

'They will turn away thy son from following me.' But the heathen were less guilty than are the impenitent in this age, who, having the light of the gospel, persistently refuse to accept it. Those among ancient Israel who ventured to disregard the divine prohibition, did it at the sacrifice of religious principle. When those who now profess to be God's people join themselves in marriage with the ungodly, they form a tie uniting them to the world, and they will probably soon be one with them, notwithstanding their present profession" (*ibid*, par. 16).

"Before the day of fasting ended, the people still further manifested their determination to return unto the Lord. With one accord, all pledged themselves to cease the desecration of the Sabbath. Nehemiah did not at this time, as at a later date, exercise his authority to prevent heathen traders from coming into Jerusalem on the Sabbath, for the sale of provisions and other articles; but to save the people from yielding to temptation, he engaged them, by a solemn covenant, not to transgress the Sabbath law by purchasing of those venders, hoping that this would discourage them, and put an end to their traffic" (*ibid*, 17).

"Provision was also made to support the public worship of God. A pledge was given by the congregation to contribute yearly a stated sum for the service of the sanctuary, as well as to bring the tithes and the 'firstfruits of our ground, and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, unto the house of the Lord, also the firstborn of our sons, and of our cattle, as it is written in the law, and the firstlings of our herds and of our flocks, to bring to the house of our God'" (par 18). "The liberality of the Jews in their offerings for religious purposes might well be imitated by Christians. If tithes and offerings were required thousands of years ago, they are much more essential now. The labors of God's servants were then confined almost wholly to the land of Palestine; but the apostles and their successors were commissioned to preach the gospel throughout the world. The people of this dispensation are favored with greater light and blessing than were the Jews; therefore they are placed under even greater obligation to honor God and to advance his cause" (*ibid*, par. 19).

"The efforts of Nehemiah to restore the worship of the true God had been crowned with success. If Israel would be true to the oath they had taken, a bright future was before them; for the Lord has always magnified his law before his people, pouring rich blessings upon them so long as they have been obedient. The history of God's ancient people is full of instruction for the church of today. While the Bible faithfully presents the result of their apostasy as a warning to all future generations, it portrays, as a worthy example, the deep humiliation and repentance, the earnest devotion and generous sacrifice, that marked their seasons of returning to the Lord. There is encouragement, too, in the record of God's willingness to receive his backsliding but repentant people. It would be a scene well-pleasing to God and angels, would his professed followers in this generation unite, as did Israel of old, in a solemn covenant to 'observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes'" (Ellen G White, ST January 10, 1884, par. 20).

"Under the labors of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people of Judah had in the most solemn and public manner, pledged themselves to render obedience to the law of God. But when the influence of these teachers was for a time withdrawn, there were many who departed from the Lord. During the absence of Nehemiah from Jerusalem, idolaters not only gained a foot-hold in the city, but contaminated by their presence the very precincts of the temple. Certain families of Israel, having intermarried with the family of Tobiah the Ammonite, had brought about a friendship between this man, one of Judah's most bitter and determined enemies, and Eliashib the high priest. As a result of this unhallowed alliance, Tobiah had been permitted to occupy a commodious apartment connected with the temple, which had been devoted to the storing of various offerings brought for the service of God" (ST January 17, 1884, par. 1). "Thus not only was the temple of the Lord profaned, but his people were constantly exposed to the corrupting influence of this agent of Satan. Because of their cruelty and treachery toward Israel, the Ammonites and Moabites had by the word of the Lord been forever excluded from the congregation. And yet, in defiance of this solemn interdict, the high priest himself casts out the consecrated oblations from the chamber of God's house, to make a place for the most violent and treacherous of a proscribed people. Greater contempt for God could not have been manifested than was expressed in this favor conferred on this enemy of God and his truth" (Ellen G White, ST January 17, 1884, par. 2).