

## Sabbath School Lesson #7 – Covenant at Sinai – 8-14 May 2021

**C**hrist would have understand the Covenant at Sinai. Our memory text reads: “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and *how* I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto Myself” (Exodus 19:4). Given the importance of understanding the Covenant at Sinai, as the Lesson does not explain well, we will have a general commentary.

There are many covenants mentioned in the Bible, but there are two which stand out prominent, and sustain such a relation to each other that they are called the old covenant and the new covenant. Our lesson has to do with the old covenant (“Covenant at Sinai”), but we shall refer to the new covenant as well, since both concern the same people. The old covenant is first introduced in the nineteenth chapter of Exodus, and we must study that in order properly to understand the passage covered by the lesson. The children of Israel had come into the wilderness of Sinai, and the Lord called to Moses from the mountain, saying:

“Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto Myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine; and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the Lord commanded him. And all the people answered together, and said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the Lord” (Exodus 19:4-8). Now notice:

This was really the first or old covenant. It was simply a mutual agreement between God and the people, which is all that is usually understood by a covenant. So far as the covenant itself was concerned, the people entered into it here; Exodus 24:1-8 simply records the ratification of the covenant. The reader will notice, however, in the above quotation, that although the people said, “All that the Lord hath spoken we will do,” the Lord had not yet told them anything to do, except to keep His covenant. Now ordinarily a covenant implies mutual obligation, but here we have a covenant mentioned which was the Lord’s special property, and which the children of Israel were to keep; and their promise to keep this covenant was their part of the covenant which God made with them. Thus we see that the first covenant with Israel was made concerning something else that is also called a covenant (in verse 5).

The reader needs to watch closely here, lest he become confused. The simple facts are these: The “covenant” which the people were to “keep” was the ten commandments, which had not yet been given. It was not a covenant made with them, but God’s own covenant given to them. Moses refers to it as follows: “And the Lord spake unto you out of the midst of the fire; ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice. 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” (Deuteronomy 4:12-13).

Let the reader bear in mind these points, and he will have no difficulty: (1) The ten commandments are God’s covenant. (2) God did not make this covenant with the children of Israel, but He commanded them to keep it by faith as had Abraham. (3) This covenant is entirely different from a covenant in the ordinary sense of the term; for there was no agreement about it; it was God’s will which He commanded the people to keep by faith. (4) Notwithstanding the fact that it was the duty of the people to keep God’s law, – His covenant which He commanded them to perform, – God made a covenant with them concerning it. Although He could rightly have required unconditional obedience of them, He condescended to enter into covenant relation with them; as they presumed to promise on their own part to keep His covenant, – the ten commandments, – as was their duty, He on His part agreed to grant them peculiar blessings. This was the covenant which God made with Israel here.

Three days after this the Lord spoke His law from Sinai “out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice,” which caused the earth to tremble. This was the covenant which He commanded the people to perform, and which they had already promised to keep as their part of the contract. And now that they had heard the words which they had before promised to do, it remained to be seen if they would stand by their own agreement. This ratification is a part of the subject of this present lesson, and was on this

wise: First, Moses repeated God's words to the people, and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words which the Lord hath said will we do" (Exodus 24:3). Then Moses wrote all the words of the Lord in a book, and built an altar, and offered sacrifices (verses 4-5). Next he took the book and read all the words in the hearing of the people, and again they said, "All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient" (verse 7). Finally he took the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkled both the book and the people, saying, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words" (verse 8; Hebrews 9:19-20). Thus was the covenant ratified; the people had emphatically and repeatedly promised to keep God's commandments, and He had promised to make of them a peculiar treasure to Himself, above all people. This was the first or old covenant.

But this covenant was not kept by the people, and so one of two things was necessary: either God must cast off the people, which would have been their eternal ruin, or else a new covenant must be made. Accordingly we read: "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which My covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord; but this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; after those days, saith the Lord, I will put My law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord; for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Notice that this covenant was made with the same people ("with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah") and concerning the same law of God ("I will put My law in their hearts"). The reason why it is made with same people and same law is because the people had broken the first covenant, and there was in it no provision for forgiveness of sins. In the first covenant people promised to keep the commandments, and God promised to make them a peculiar treasure unto Himself. This was all. When they violated their agreement, as they did almost immediately when they worshiped the golden calf, they had no more claim on the Lord, according to the covenant which they had entered into with Him. They could not go on under that covenant any more, for no matter how perfectly they might abide by its terms in the future, the fact would remain that they had once broken it, that was sufficient to forfeit all God's blessings. As God did not wish to cast off His people, it necessitated making of a new – "a better covenant, which was established upon better promises" (Hebrews 8:6).

What were these better promises of the new covenant? Chief among them was the forgiveness of sins. It was in the people that the first covenant was faulty for if the first covenant had not been faulty in this respect, there would have been no place for the second. There was in the first covenant no provision for forgiveness of sins. It was ratified by the blood of beasts, which could never take away sin (Heb. 10:4, 11). But the second covenant was ratified by the blood of Christ which "taketh away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). This covenant is made concerning the same law, but if people break it, they may by repentance obtain pardon, and still remain in covenant relation with God. God not only knew that the people would not keep the first, but He knew that they could not keep it. They had broken the law, concerning which the covenant was made, before the covenant was made. It was utterly impossible for people to keep the commandments by their own unaided efforts, yet that is what they promised to do. Then why did the Lord go along with such faulty promise? For the purpose of showing them their own weakness, and of directing their minds to the second covenant, which already existed, in effect, in the covenant made with Abraham. That covenant "was confirmed before of God in Christ" (Galatians 3:17), and the giving of the law, and the unconditional promise made by the people to keep that law, could not disannul it, that it should make of none effect the promises which it contained. It provided forgiveness for transgression of the law concerning which the covenant was made, and also help to keep the law. And so when the Lord made a new covenant with Israel, He was simply directing their attention to the covenant made long before with Abraham. And the proof of this is found in the fact that all who are heirs of the promises, are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:29).