

Pine Knoll Sabbath School Study Notes
Fourth Quarter 2019: *Ezra and Nehemiah*
Lesson 8 “*God and the Covenant*”

Read for this week’s study

Nehemiah 10:1–29; Genesis 4:8–19; Hebrews 13:20; Joshua 24, Nehemiah 10:30–39;
Hebrews 8:1–7.

Memory Text

“ ‘And because of all this, we make a sure covenant and write it; our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it.’ . . . we will not neglect the house of our God” (Nehemiah 9:38; 10:39, NKJV).

Lesson Outline from Adult Sabbath School Study Guide

- I. Introduction
- II. The Idea of the Covenant
- III. Covenants in History
- IV. Covenantal Structure
- V. Pledges
- VI. The Temple
- VII. Further Study

Questions and Notes for Consideration

Facilitator: Daniel Duda

1. “This week, we will look at the covenant that the Israelites renewed with God, in Nehemiah 10, and also discuss some general information about the history and importance of covenant making in the Bible.” (Sabbath Afternoon)
2. It is one thing to attend a feast, sing praises to God, and hear the Bible read and explained (Nehemiah 7-9), and quite something else to commit yourself to do the will of God.
3. What is the difference between an agreement and covenant? Why does God use a covenant to communicate the relationship He desires? (Sunday’s lesson)
4. There are seven covenants found in the Old Testament. The first six of them are called “everlasting covenant” 13 times. What is the significance of that? (Monday’s lesson)
5. Why does the structure of the covenant (both in Deuteronomy and Joshua 24) follow the established pattern of ancient covenants? (Tuesday’s lesson) The parts are: 1) Preamble (who God is); 2) Historical prologue (past relationship defined); 3)

stipulations or laws (what is expected); 4) blessings & curses (what happens); 5) witnesses; 6) special provision or sign.

6. How does God talk to and work with us today? Do different stages of faith make a difference?
7. Wednesday's lesson deals with the pledges that people make. There are fourfold: 1) No mixed marriages; 2) true Sabbath observance; 3) debt cancellation and Sabbatical year observance; 4) support of the temple
8. How would you express your commitment to a relationship and community today in your context and culture?
9. "Unfortunately, they didn't keep their pledges very well, as demonstrated in the last chapters of Nehemiah. Yet, even if everyone didn't keep them, some or many people did. With God's help and keeping our focus on Him, we can develop the right habits and stick to the right path." (Wednesday's lesson) What was Jesus' evaluation of the spirituality of the strictest followers of those pledges in his day (Matthew 23)? How can we arrive at spirituality which is life-giving?
10. How would "we will not neglect the house of our God" (10:39) apply today within your context? (Thursday's lesson) How does hindsight and the further development of the storyline help us to avoid the pitfalls of the postexilic group?
11. "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:15, NKJV). How did Paul apply it in his life? What was the basis of his hope (cf. Philippians 3:3-10)?
12. What kind of community does God want us to be so that the knowledge of his character would be made known in our times in our culture?

Thoughts from Graham Maxwell

Then the other word, "substance." Well, this is a word we don't often use in English. Hypostasis comes from the Greek *hupostasis*. That doesn't help much to know that faith is a *hupostasis*, does it? But does it help to know that faith is a substance? The Greek word *hupostasis*, not to go into it too much, means "that which stands under," and that's where "sub" "stance" came from. Which is very good Latin but not very good English.

Not until the turn of the century did scholars really discover what this word means. As archeologists were digging in the sands of Egypt, looking for manuscripts primarily, they even found crocodiles sometimes, stuffed with manuscripts. Well, among these manuscripts they found some that were title deeds to property, business agreements made, covenants; and the title of these documents was this very word: *hupostasis*. And it dawned on some of them that what the apostle was saying here is that faith is, as it were, an agreement, a covenant. God has much to offer us. But first he presents himself. Do we find him worthy of our trust? Then he has many things he would like to do with us. And if we decide we can trust him, and that we would

like to do business with him, (to speak of this in business terms) then that trusting relationship is faith. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, Conversations About God, #11, “God’s Emergency Measures” recorded January, 1984, Loma Linda, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct link: <http://pkp.cc/3MMCAG>*

What an awful moment in God’s family, when he had to gather his children around and say, “I want all the murdering and the hating to stop. And I want all the stealing, and the cheating, and the lying, and the immorality to stop. Please!” That means it was going on. There was a day when God didn’t have to do that, and there’s a day coming when he won’t have to do it again. You remember the new covenant? It’ll all be written in our hearts, and we’ll do what’s right because it is right. God will not have to lecture us a million years down the line and say, “I want all the murdering up here in heaven to stop.” We won’t have hated a soul for a million years. We’ll be doing what’s right because it is right. Now if you heard your children behind the door saying, “Let’s do what our folks want. I mean, you’ll have to admit that everything they’ve asked us to do makes such good sense, we ought to want to do it anyway.” And you get the impression that even after you’re dead and gone, your children will go on doing what’s right because it is right, because now they’re maturing, and they’ve come to see.

Now, we’re not that perfect as parents, so this doesn’t quite work. But let’s imagine it, for the moment. With God it does. When we say, “God, the longer I live the more I find that everything you’ve ever asked me to do makes such good sense, I ought to want to do it anyway. And now I tell you I do.” Leading to the day when, sometime, we’ll stand in the presence of God and say, “God, I agree with you. And I am pleased to do all these things that I used to do just because you told me to. I agree with you.” And God can say, “At last you’re free. You’ve learned the truth, and the truth set you free.” And now the law is written in our hearts and we do what’s right because it is right, and not because we’re told to. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, The Picture of God in all 66 – Galatians, recorded April, 1982, Riverside, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct link: <http://pkp.cc/65MMPOGIA66>*

And then, one thing that occupies so much space in Deuteronomy, the blessings and the cursings. We will have occasion to discuss these again. Are there not chapters that say if you’re good you’ll be blessed, if you’re bad, you’ll be punished? If you’re good, you’ll prosper, if you’re bad, you’ll be poor.

And this was the theology of the three friends who came to Job, for Job was known as the most prosperous man in the area. If you are prosperous it’s because you are blessed. If you are blessed, it’s because you’re good. So, obviously Job had been a very good man. But when he

lost his family and his belongings and his health, he obviously had been very bad, because when you are bad you are not blessed, and when you are not blessed you lose your prosperity. So they had it all worked out very simply.

They came to Job and said, “We don’t know what you’ve done, but we’ve never seen so wealthy a man now so poor, and you’ve even lost your health. You’ve lost everything. You must have done something very, very wicked. Confess it. It says in Deuteronomy if you will confess and come back God will bless you again and you will regain your prosperity.” And Job said, “I think you’ve misunderstood it all. I don’t know why this has happened, but you are wrong.” “Why,” they said, “we’ve got all the texts in Deuteronomy to prove it!” Of course, Deuteronomy hadn’t been written yet. But this was the idea they had, you see, and the whole book of Job discusses this.

Well, doesn’t that influence us to this present time? How about in the days of Christ? Jesus said it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to be saved. His own disciples said, “Well, if a rich man cannot be saved, who can?” Because you see, if you’re rich, you’re blessed. You’re blessed because you’re good. So if you’re rich, you’re good. Then if a rich man cannot be saved, that means if a good man cannot be saved, how can a poor man be saved?—because if you’re poor, it’s because you’re not blessed, and you’re not blessed because you’re bad.

See, they had it all neatly worked out beautifully, just as we sometimes work it out. You see, when the locusts go through, the neighbor’s field, you know he hasn’t paid his tithe or something like that. Or if a family has an accident, you know there’s an Achan in the camp. We’re so quick to figure it out. What are we to understand from this? The blessings and the cursings. God is talking to his children there. “Be good and I will reward you. Be bad and I’ll have to spank you.” Haven’t you done that to your children?

But there comes a time when we have to grow up. The book of Job is not a bedtime story, and I have great confidence in bedtime stories. Bedtime stories are for children. In the bedtime story, when a family runs out of food and they pray, they’ve hardly said “Amen,” when someone is knocking on the door with a food basket. That’s happened over and over in wonderful ways, as you know. When a family runs out of food and they pray, and they say “Amen”, and nobody knocks on the door, but they still trust God, that’s for grownups. And that’s the book of Job. {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, *The Picture of God in All 66 – Deuteronomy*, recorded November, 1982, Riverside, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct links:*

*Audio links to the West Covina series recorded in 1983:

<http://pkp.cc/9MMPOGIA66> (Part 1) <http://pkp.cc/10MMPOGIA66> (Part 2)

What impresses you most about God in here? To me the most impressive thing is that he brought them back at all. Why not start over with somebody else? Well, he says, "It's because of my promise to Abraham." Has God been trapped by that promise? Wished maybe he'd chosen somebody more promising? I hardly think so. In fact, I prefer to see God seeing the end from the beginning. And he knew there would be all this apparent failure, but he went ahead anyway. Because in the eyes of the universe looking on, is he failing? Well, what is success for God? Even when they were taken off into Babylonian captivity, look at the behavior of Daniel. Just imagine being the Prime Minister of two world empires. It's never happened before or since. And under Daniel's influence, look what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, and who knows who else was influenced by him, and many other Jews who lived in that part of the world during the next decades.

But when they came back, look at their behavior. And even when they decided they'd obey the law, and read the Bible, and keep Sabbath, and pay tithe faithfully, without fail, had God really won many of them? I mean, how many really were his friends? When Jesus came, four or five hundred years later, to these people who never set up idols again, and spent so much time reading the Bible, how many friends did he find? How many friends has he had all the way along? Has he had more friends during times of prosperity, or adversity? Or does it seem to make much difference? He's had them both times, hasn't he? Look what a friend Daniel was, in captivity. Look at the friend Ezra was. Look at Moses in the wilderness. All along, God has had distinguished friends who've been jealous for God's reputation.

And you notice how they've all been involved with the scriptures. In more recent times God has had friends. I wonder about our own church, what our mission might be. For the first time, will God have millions and millions? He's never had it before. Is that what he's waiting for? And he's never succeeded before in having a very large ingathering of souls; and so he's waiting until he finally does, to say what about himself to the universe? Now, we know he's not willing that any should perish. He wants all to be saved. But he never seems to have won many. But all along he's had most distinguished friends. And some of them have been very quiet people who don't make headlines, as in the Book of Ruth, and elsewhere. And even Elijah the prophet didn't recognize seven thousand other loyal saints.

So there's always been a remnant, and a sizeable remnant. But there's never been a big influx of souls to the kingdom. And Revelation 13, where the Bible ends, suggests that the end of human history will be the same. There will be a remnant of God's loyal friends, and under the most severe adversities they, like Job, will not let God down. More than that, they will be bearing witness to him, as it says in Revelation 12:17 and 19:10. And they will say of God what is right. And God will save all his friends.

How dependent is he on numbers? Well, the question would be, what's he waiting for now? Well, what was he waiting for in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah? Think how long it's been from

the call of Abraham to the captivity in Egypt, to the Exodus, to the entrance to Canaan, and then the kings, and then the captivity. Now they're back under Ezra and Nehemiah. There's a great reformation. Four or five hundred years; Christ comes. And when he dies, he says, "It's finished." Well, if it was finished, why didn't God bring down the curtain at that time? And he's waited for two thousand more years.

One effect on me every time I go through is to ask this question: What is God waiting for, especially now? That's what affects us. In 1981, he seems to be waiting for something. Is he waiting for the devil to become more evil? Is the devil delaying the coming by withholding his hand, and not being destructive? I can't believe that. I rather read that God is restraining the adversary, because God does not have a group of people like Job, so that God could say to the adversary, "I need not longer restrain you. You can do anything you like. Here is a group of people whom I can trust. They will not let me down." Is he waiting for that? If so, what kind of people are these? These people who are described as friends of God, to whom he can talk face to face as a man speaks to his friend; and short of that, how do we have this conversation? {Graham Maxwell. Excerpt from the audio series, *The Picture of God in All 66 – Ezra and Nehemiah*, recorded December, 1981, Riverside, California} *To listen to the entire audio of the above reference, click on the following direct links:*

*Audio links to the West Covina series recorded in 1984:

<http://pkp.cc/23MMPOGIA66> (Part 1) <http://pkp.cc/24MMPOGIA66> (Part 2)

Further Study with Ellen White

It is God's pleasure and will that the blessings bestowed on man shall be given in perfect completeness. He has made provision that every difficulty may be overcome, every want supplied through the Holy Spirit. Thus He designs that man shall perfect a Christian character. (MS 148, 1897). {7BC 932.5}

As we partake of the divine nature, hereditary and cultivated tendencies to wrong are cut away from the character, and we are made a living power for good. Ever learning of the divine Teacher, daily partaking of His nature, we cooperate with God in overcoming Satan's temptations. God works, and man works, that man may be one with Christ as Christ is one with God. Then we sit together with Christ in heavenly places. The mind rests with peace and assurance in Jesus. . . . In Him there is inexhaustible fullness. . . . {AG 235.5}

God has given us every facility, every grace. He has provided the riches of heaven's treasure, and it is our privilege to draw continually from this capital. {AG 235.6}

God's work is the same in all time, although there are different degrees of development and different manifestations of His power, to meet the wants of men in the different ages. Beginning with the first gospel promise, and coming down through the patriarchal and Jewish ages, and even to the present time, there has been a gradual unfolding of the purposes of God in the plan of redemption. . . . He who proclaimed the law from Sinai, and delivered to Moses the precepts of the ritual law, is the same that spoke the sermon on the mount. . . . The Teacher is the same in both dispensations. God's claims are the same. The principles of His government are the same. {AG 130.4}

Sanctification is not the work of a moment, an hour, or a day. It is a continual growth in grace. We know not one day how strong will be our conflict the next. Satan lives, and is active, and every day we need to cry earnestly to God for help and strength to resist him. As long as Satan reigns we shall have self to subdue, besetments to overcome, and there is no stopping place, there is no point to which we can come and say we have fully attained. {1T 340.2}

Sanctification means habitual communion with God. There is nothing so great and powerful as God's love for those who are His children. {HP 129.5}

The ideal of Christian character is Christlikeness. There is opened before us a path of continual advancement. We have an object to reach, a standard to gain, which includes everything good and pure and noble and elevated. There should be continual striving and constant progress onward and upward toward perfection of character. . . . {CT 365.3}

The followers of Christ are to become like Him—by the grace of God to form characters in harmony with the principles of His holy law. This is Bible sanctification. {AG 20.6}

True sanctification unites believers to Christ and to one another in bonds of tender sympathy. This union causes to flow continually into the heart rich currents of Christlike love, which flows forth again in love for one another. {SD 102.2}

Through the agency of the Holy Spirit, a new principle of mental and spiritual power was to be brought to man, who, through association with divinity, was to become one with God. Christ, the redeemer and restorer, was to sanctify and purify man's mind, making it a power that would draw other minds to Himself. It is His purpose, by the elevating, sanctifying power of the truth, to give men nobility and dignity. He desires His children to reveal His character, to exert His influence, that other minds may be drawn into harmony with His mind. . . . {RC 17.4}

It was taught by the Jews that before God's love is extended to the sinner, he must first repent. In their view, repentance is a work by which men earn the favor of Heaven. And it was this thought that led the Pharisees to exclaim in astonishment and anger. "This man receiveth sinners." According to their ideas He should permit none to approach Him but those who had repented. But in the parable of the lost sheep, Christ teaches that salvation does not come through our seeking after God but through God's seeking after us. "There is none that

understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way.” Romans 3:11, 12. We do not repent in order that God may love us, but He reveals to us His love in order that we may repent. {COL 189.1}

The rabbis had a saying that there is rejoicing in heaven when one who has sinned against God is destroyed; but Jesus taught that to God the work of destruction is a strange work. That in which all heaven delights is the restoration of God’s own image in the souls whom He has made. {COL 190.1}

Christ came to give to the world an example of what perfect humanity might be when united with divinity. He presented to the world a new phase of greatness in His exhibition of mercy, compassion, and love. He gave to men a new interpretation of God. As head of humanity, He taught men lessons in the science of divine government, whereby He revealed the righteousness of the reconciliation of mercy and justice. {1SM 260.2}

Jesus says, “My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” The peace spoken of by the great Teacher is larger and fuller than we have imagined. Christ is ready to do large things for us, to restore our natures by making us partakers of His divine nature. He waits to link our hearts with His heart of infinite love, in order that we may be fully reconciled to God; but it is our privilege to understand that God loves us as He loves His Son. When we believe in Christ as our personal Saviour, the peace of Christ is ours. {LHU 332.2}

God has given us the power of choice; it is ours to exercise. We cannot change our hearts, we cannot control our thoughts, our impulses, our affections. We cannot make ourselves pure, fit for God’s service. But we can choose to serve God, we can give Him our will; then He will work in us to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus our whole nature will be brought under the control of Christ. {MH 176.2}

When one surrenders to Christ, the mind is brought under the control of the law; but it is the royal law, which proclaims liberty to every captive. By becoming one with Christ, man is made free. Subjection to the will of Christ means restoration to perfect manhood. {MH 131.1}

Christ came to break the shackles of sin-slavery from the soul. “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.” “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” sets us “free from the law of sin and death.” Romans 8:2. {DA 466.3}

In the very fact that men are free moral agents, God teaches us not to be forced or compelled into any course of action, also that as responsible beings in copartnership with God we are to represent God in character. We are to have an interest in our brother, in our neighbor, in all around (Letter 65, 1895). {5BC 1098.1}

With untold love our God has loved us, and our love awakens toward Him as we comprehend something of the length and breadth and depth and height of this love that passeth knowledge. By the revelation of the attractive loveliness of Christ, by the knowledge of His love expressed to us while we were yet sinners, the stubborn heart is melted and subdued, and the sinner is transformed and becomes a child of heaven. God does not employ compulsory measures; love is the agent which He uses to expel sin from the heart. By it He changes pride into humility, and enmity and unbelief into love and faith. {MB 76.3}

In striking contrast to the wrong and oppression so universally practised were the mission and work of Christ. . . . He planned a government which would use no force; His subjects would know no oppression. . . . Not as a fierce tyrant did He come, but as the Son of man; not to conquer the nations by His iron power, but “to preach good tidings unto the meek;” “to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;” “to comfort all that mourn” (Isaiah 61:1, 2). He came as the divine Restorer, bringing to oppressed and downtrodden humanity the rich and abundant grace of Heaven, that by the power of His righteousness, man, fallen and degraded though he was, might be a partaker of divinity. . . . {AG 14.3}

God never forces the will or the conscience, but Satan’s constant resort—to gain control of those whom he cannot otherwise seduce—is compulsion by cruelty. Through fear or force he endeavors to rule the conscience and to secure homage to himself.—GC 591 (1888). {1MCP 325.1}

With intense interest the unfallen worlds had watched to see Jehovah arise, and sweep away the inhabitants of the earth. And if God should do this, Satan was ready to carry out his plan for securing to himself the allegiance of heavenly beings. He had declared that the principles of God’s government make forgiveness impossible. Had the world been destroyed, he would have claimed that his accusations were proved true. He was ready to cast blame upon God, and to spread his rebellion to the worlds above. But instead of destroying the world, God sent His Son to save it. Though corruption and defiance might be seen in every part of the alien province, a way for its recovery was provided. At the very crisis, when Satan seemed about to triumph, the Son of God came with the embassy of divine grace. Through every age, through every hour, the love of God had been exercised toward the fallen race. Notwithstanding the perversity of men, the signals of mercy had been continually exhibited. And when the fullness of the time had come, the Deity was glorified by pouring upon the world a flood of healing grace that was never to be obstructed or withdrawn till the plan of salvation should be fulfilled. {DA 37.2}

God has bound our hearts to Him by unnumbered tokens in heaven and in earth. Through the things of nature, and the deepest and tenderest earthly ties that human hearts can know, He has sought to reveal Himself to us. Yet these but imperfectly represent His love. Though all these evidences have been given, the enemy of good blinded the minds of men, so that they

looked upon God with fear; they thought of Him as severe and unforgiving. Satan led men to conceive of God as a being whose chief attribute is stern justice,—one who is a severe judge, a harsh, exacting creditor. He pictured the Creator as a being who is watching with jealous eye to discern the errors and mistakes of men, that He may visit judgments upon them. It was to remove this dark shadow, by revealing to the world the infinite love of God, that Jesus came to live among men. {SC 10.3}

Christ came to reveal God to the world as a God of love, a God of mercy, tenderness, and compassion. By the world's Redeemer the thick darkness with which Satan had enshrouded the throne of the Deity was swept away, and the Father was again manifest to men as the Light of life. {RH, February 15, 1912 par. 4}

Up to the time of Christ's first advent, men worshiped cruel, despotic gods. Even the Jewish mind was reached through fear, and not love. Christ's mission on the earth was to reveal to men that God was not a despot, but a heavenly Father, full of love and mercy for His children. {18MR 112.4}

Satan was exulting that he had succeeded in debasing the image of God in humanity. Then Jesus came to restore in man the image of his Maker. None but Christ can fashion anew the character that has been ruined by sin. He came to expel the demons that had controlled the will. He came to lift us up from the dust, to reshape the marred character after the pattern of His divine character, and to make it beautiful with His own glory. {DA 37.3}

By His life and His death, Christ has achieved even more than recovery from the ruin wrought through sin. It was Satan's purpose to bring about an eternal separation between God and man; but in Christ we become more closely united to God than if we had never fallen. In taking our nature, the Saviour has bound Himself to humanity by a tie that is never to be broken. Through the eternal ages He is linked with us. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son." John 3:16. He gave Him not only to bear our sins, and to die as our sacrifice; He gave Him to the fallen race. To assure us of His immutable counsel of peace, God gave His only-begotten Son to become one of the human family, forever to retain His human nature. This is the pledge that God will fulfill His word. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder." God has adopted human nature in the person of His Son, and has carried the same into the highest heaven. It is the "Son of man" who shares the throne of the universe. It is the "Son of man" whose name shall be called, "Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6. The I AM is the Daysman between God and humanity, laying His hand upon both. He who is "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners," is not ashamed to call us brethren. Hebrews 7:26; 2:11. In Christ the family of earth and the family of heaven are bound together. Christ glorified is our brother. Heaven is enshrined in humanity, and humanity is enfolded in the bosom of Infinite Love. {DA 25.3}

Christ's atonement includes the whole human family. No one, high or low, rich or poor, free or bond, has been left out of the plan of redemption. –Letter 106, 1900. {7ABC 464.7}

Looking upon man, God saw his desperate rebellion, and He devised a remedy. Christ was His gift to the world for man's reconciliation. The Son of God was appointed to come to this earth to take humanity and by His own example to be a great educating power among men. His experience in man's behalf was to enable men to resist Satan's power. He came to mold character and to give mental power, to shed abroad the beams of true education, that the true aim of life might not be lost sight of. The sons of men had had a practical knowledge of evil; Christ came to the world to show them that He had planted for them the tree of life, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations. {CT 33.3}

We are not to think of God only as a judge, and to forget him as our loving Father. Nothing can do our souls greater harm than this; for our whole spiritual life will be molded by our conceptions of God's character. {RH, April 5, 1887 par. 10}