

Covenant *at* Sinai



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 19:1–20:17, Rev. 21:3, Deut. 5:6–21, James 1:23–25, Rom. 3:20–24, Rom. 10:4.*

Memory Text: “ ‘ “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; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” ’ ” (*Exodus 19:4–6, NKJV*).

Where did God lead Israel after He had liberated them from Egypt? To the Promised Land—where else? However geographically correct, that answer is theologically wrong. God Himself answers it: “ ‘ “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” ’ ” (*Exod. 19:4, NIV; emphasis added*). Thus, the biblical-theological answer to the question reveals God’s priority and goal: the Lord brought them to Himself.

When humans depart from God, He searches for them and calls them back to Himself. The best model of this profound truth is in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve sinned against God, disobeyed His command, and hid from Him. He took the initiative and called: “ ‘Where are you?’ ” (*Gen. 3:9, NKJV*). He always makes the first step. Jesus states this eloquently: “ ‘Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest’ ” (*Matt. 11:28, 29, NKJV*).

God calls out to all of us; our eternal destiny depends on our response.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 23.

At Mount Sinai

Read Exodus 19:1–8. What did God promise them here, at the base of Mount Sinai?

God led the Israelites to Mount Sinai, where He would soon give them the Ten Commandments (the Decalogue). Jebel Musa (elevation: 7,497 feet, or 2,285 meters) in the Sinai Peninsula is likely where Moses met with God several times (*for example*, *Exod. 3:1*, *Exod. 19:2*, *Exod. 24:18*), and, years later, Elijah encountered God here (*1 Kings 19:8*). This is the same mountain where God called Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt (*Exod. 3:1, 10*). At that time, God informed Moses that he would worship God with liberated Israel in this same location, which would be a sign for Moses that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was leading them (*Exod. 3:12*).

After two months of traveling, the Israelites arrived at Sinai (*Exod. 19:1*), where they would remain for about one year (*compare Exod. 19:1 with Num. 10:11, 12*). During this year, many laws were issued, as described in Exodus 19–40, Leviticus 1–27, and Numbers 1:1–10:10. Israel's stay at Mount Sinai is the central piece of the narrative found in the first five books of Moses. Here is the foundation of their becoming God's chosen people, the only nation not steeped in paganism and idolatry.

God takes the initiative and establishes the covenant between Himself and Israel. On the condition of the people's obedience and their maintaining a relationship with Him, God promises to make them a special treasure, a kingdom of priests, a holy people.

To be a holy people means to be dedicated to God and to reveal His character to others, especially to the nations around them. They were also called to function as a kingdom of priests who would connect other people with God, leading them to Him and teaching them His ways and His laws. They were to be God's special treasure because He wanted Israel as His channel to illuminate the world with knowledge of Him and His character.

This covenant was the legal establishment of a relationship between God and His people. The general covenant formula, which slightly varies in different texts, is: "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (*see Exod. 6:7, Lev. 26:12, Jer. 24:7, Jer. 31:33, Heb. 8:10, Rev. 21:3*).

Imagine being God's "special treasure"! What special privileges would that encompass? What special responsibilities would you have?

Preparing for the Gift

Read Exodus 19:9–25. How did God prepare Israel to receive the Ten Commandments?

God gave specific instructions for what the Israelites were to do in preparation for the giving of the law at Sinai. Their external purity was to reflect their total dedication to God. They needed to be ready for the splendid manifestation of the Lord's glory that was about to come. And when it did, it was accompanied by "thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled" (*Exod. 19:16, NKJV*).

The Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) is the heart of God's revelation and biblical ethics. It forms the substance and foundation of divine standards for all humanity; its principles are eternal and universal.

According to the biblical account, the Decalogue was announced by God (*Exod. 19:19; Exod. 20:1; Deut. 5:4, 5, 24*) and was written by Him (*Exod. 24:12, Exod. 31:18, Deut. 5:22*). It was twice given to Moses as a special gift (*Exod. 32:19; Exod. 34:1; Deut. 10:1, 2*).

In the book of Exodus, the Decalogue is called "the Testimony" (Hebrew: *'edut; Exod. 31:18*); or it is named "the words of the covenant" (Hebrew: *dibre habberit; Exod. 34:28*). In the book of Deuteronomy, they are written on "the tablets of the covenant" (*Deut. 9:9, 11, 15, NKJV*). Neither book in Hebrew uses the term "the Ten Commandments" (Hebrew: *mitzwot*, "commandments"). Instead, three times they call it "the Ten Words." The Hebrew is *'aseret haddebarim*, from *dabar*, meaning "word, sentence, matter, thing, speech, story, promise, utterance." (*See Exod. 34:28, Deut. 4:13, Deut. 10:4.*)

There are two versions of the Decalogue with very slight differences; the first one is recorded in Exodus 20:1–17 and the second in Deuteronomy 5:6–11. The second version, presented orally by Moses to Israel, occurred almost forty years after Sinai, just before the people entered the Promised Land (*Deut. 1:3, 4; Deut. 4:44–47*). These circumstances explain the slight differences between the two.

When Paul summarized the law as being love, he quoted from the Decalogue (*Rom. 13:8–10*). Love is, indeed, the sum of God's law because He is a God of love (*1 John 4:16*).

How do you understand the idea of the Ten Commandments as an expression of God's love? What does that mean? How is God's love revealed in them?

The Gift of the Decalogue

Read Exodus 20:1–17. What are the principles of the Decalogue, and how is it organized?

Note that the Decalogue does not begin with the commands but with God's gracious action for His people:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (*Exod. 20:2, NIV*). The Lord first shows His grace by giving freedom and salvation to Israel, and only then does He reveal His will. These commandments were to be observed out of love and gratitude for what God did for them.

God's key summation word for the Decalogue is “love” (*Rom. 13:10*). The greatest commandment is the commandment of love, which is expressed in two ways: love to God (*Deut. 6:5*) and love to our neighbor (*Lev. 19:18*).

In the first four commandments, the Decalogue interprets what it means to love God; in the following six commandments, the law interprets what it means to love your neighbor. The Decalogue begins with honoring God above all (vertical love) and continues with respecting others (horizontal love):

1. Honoring and revering God by giving Him the first and the highest place in every situation of our life (the first commandment);
2. Honoring and preserving God's unique position and not replacing Him by an idol in any form, either physical, symbolic, or spiritual. Our purest affections belong to the Lord (the second commandment);
3. Revering God's name—His reputation and character (the third commandment);
4. Honoring His day of rest and worship—the Sabbath (the fourth commandment);
5. Respecting parents (the fifth commandment);
6. Respecting life (the sixth commandment);
7. Respecting marriage (the seventh commandment);
8. Respecting people's property (the eighth commandment);
9. Respecting the reputation of others (the ninth commandment); and
10. Respecting self so that no selfish desires will mar our character (the tenth commandment).

As Jesus Himself said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (*John 14:15, ESV; see also 1 John 4:20, 21*). Thus, true obedience is simply an expression of love and gratitude toward Jesus, a love expressed most powerfully in how we treat our neighbors.

Different Functions of God's Law

The law of God reveals God's character, who He is. As God is holy, righteous, and good, so also is His law. Paul confirms: "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (*Rom. 7:12, ESV*).

In the Bible, the law of God is seen in a very positive light (*Matt. 5:17, 18; John 14:15; 1 Cor. 7:19*). One may create poems on the law (see *Psalm 119*), sing about the law (*Psalm 19*), and meditate on it day and night (*Ps. 1:2, Josh. 1:8*). The law helps keep one from evil and gives wisdom, understanding, health, prosperity, and peace (*Deut. 4:1-6; Proverbs 2; 3*).

1. God's law is like a fence that creates a large free space for life and warns that—beyond a specific point—danger, problems, complications, and even death await (*Gen. 2:16, 17; James 2:12*).
2. The law is also a signpost pointing to Jesus, who forgives our sins and changes our lives (*2 Cor. 5:17, 1 John 1:7-9*). In this way, it leads us as a *paidagogos*, a custodian/guardian, to Christ (*Gal. 3:24*).

Read James 1:23-25. What is he saying, and how do these words help us realize what the function and importance of the law is, even though it cannot save us?

A mirror can reveal your defects, yes. But there is nothing in the mirror that can cure them. The mirror points to the problems but offers no solution to the problems. It's the same with God's law. Trying to be justified before God by keeping the law would be like staring at the mirror in hopes that, sooner or later, the mirror will make your defects go away.

Because salvation is by faith and not by works—including works of the law—some Christians claim that the law is done away with and that we no longer have to keep it. Of course, considering that the law itself is what defines sin—"I would not have known sin except through the law" (*Rom. 7:7 NKJV*)—this claim is a gross misinterpretation of the relationship of the law to the gospel. The existence of the law is precisely why we need the gospel.

How successful have you been in your attempts to obey God's law? Well enough to base your salvation on it? If not, why do you need the gospel?

The Law as God’s Promise for Us

Read Romans 3:20–24. Though Paul is very clear that we cannot be saved by keeping the Ten Commandments, how then should the commandments function in our lives?

The Hebrew meaning of the term *dabarim*, used in the writing of Moses to describe the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 34:28, Deut. 4:13, Deut. 10:4*), does not literally mean “commandments,” but “words.” This “word,” *dabar* (singular), can have the meaning of a “promise.” That is why, in numerous places (*1 Kings 8:56; 2 Chron. 1:9; Neh. 5:12, 13; Deut. 1:11; Deut. 6:3; Deut. 9:28; Josh. 9:21; Josh. 22:4; Josh. 23:5*), *dabar* is translated either in a noun or verb form expressing the idea of promise.

Ellen G. White offers an insight into the function of the Decalogue: “The ten commandments . . . are ten promises.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 1105. The Decalogue should be understood as promises from God that will guide us on the right path so that He can do wonderful things for us. But we must obey them.

Read Romans 10:4. How should we understand Paul’s statement that Christ is the “end” of the law?

Paul states that Jesus Christ is the *telos* of the law, but not in the sense that Christ abrogates the law or does away with it. Instead, this means that Christ is the goal and intent of the law; it does not mean that His atoning sacrifice terminates the validity and perpetuity of it.

On the contrary, Paul speaks about the importance of the law, about its legitimacy, and about its enduring authority (*Rom. 3:31, 1 Cor. 7:19, Gal. 5:6*). The meaning of the word *telos* is primarily purposeful and goal-oriented, not time related. Christ is the key to unlock the true meaning and purpose of God’s law. Thus, it would be incorrect to state that Christ invalidated, superseded, or abrogated the law. Christ is the goal of the law, the One to whom it points.

How does the law point us to Jesus? That is, what does the law reveal to us about ourselves that would indeed point us to Jesus?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Law Given to Israel,” pp. 303–310, and “Satan’s Enmity Against the Law,” pp. 331–342, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“God purposed to make the occasion of speaking His law a scene of awful grandeur, in keeping with its exalted character. The people were to be impressed that everything connected with the service of God must be regarded with the greatest reverence.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 303.

This principle of reverence is valid today. It springs from an understanding of God’s greatness, transcendence, and majesty. Seeing God’s glory creates gratitude in our hearts and humbles our pride. The closer we see God’s holiness, the more imperfections we will discern in our lives, leading us to thirst even more for His transforming Presence and to desire to be more like Him.

And, too, knowing what we are in contrast to Him and to His holy law makes us totally dependent upon Christ’s substitutionary death for us.

At the same time, Jesus made it clear that, if we humbly accept God as our Lord and King, His commands are not difficult to obey (*Matt. 11:28–30*). Christ made it plain that the divine law has permanent validity (*Matt. 5:17–20*). When we keep God’s laws out of love and gratitude to Him because of the salvation that He has freely bestowed upon us, we can experience the fullness of a saving relationship with Him. While enjoying the great advantages of keeping the law (after all, look at the pain and hardship that violating it brings), we also can enjoy the assurance of knowing that our salvation is found in Jesus, not in our law-keeping.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 The preparation for receiving the law helped the people understand the sense of reverence they needed. Today, in our church and church life, where is there a similar sense of reverence and awe before God? Or have we somehow slowly lost it?
- 2 Dwell more on this covenantal formula: “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” What does this mean to us today, and how should it be revealed both individually and as a corporate people?
- 3 What God commands us to do, He enables us to do. Ellen G. White states that “all His biddings are enablings.”—*Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 333. How does one put this promise, this *dabar*, into practice?
- 4 How are we to respond to the common argument we hear that, after the Cross, the law has been done away with? In most cases, what are they really saying has been done away with?

A Dream Comes True

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Eniah Ngulube grew up in a non-Adventist home that observed the seventh-day Sabbath in Zambia. In addition to the Sabbath, her parents' church taught that sick people should refuse medicine and instead seek prayer from church leaders. If an ill person died, church members accepted it as God's will. Many church members died of malaria and other treatable diseases.

Eniah loved her parents and their faith. But as she grew into a teen, she and a sister began going to church on Sundays. Five of her other siblings joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church and kept worshiping on Saturdays. Their parents didn't mind which church the children attended.

As a teen, Eniah also wanted to become a nurse. Even though she had been raised to reject medicine, she wanted to care for the sick. She dreamed of studying at Mwami Adventist School of Nursing in the town of Chipata, located about 20 miles away from her home. When she finished high school, she shared her desire with her brother, Kenson, who was an Adventist church elder. Kenson liked the idea of his sister studying in an Adventist school, and he contacted the president of the East Zambia Field to ask when the school would open enrollment for the next school year. Learning that enrollment had ended, he pleaded for a place for his sister. The East Zambia Field president, Moses Banda, called the school and discovered that it was unlikely that she would get in. Classes were packed. But a day or two later, the school found a place for her. Eniah couldn't believe it, especially because she was not a Seventh-day Adventist. Her dream had come true!

A week after her arrival, the school held a week of spiritual emphasis. Her heart was stirred as she listened to the speaker, Zambian police chaplain Godfrey Sianga, talk about baptism. She had not been baptized by immersion. She thought, *Let me get baptized like Jesus. He's coming soon.* At the end of the week, Eniah was baptized and joined the Adventist Church.

Eniah is among many students who have grown in their knowledge of Jesus at Mwami Adventist School of Nursing, said Emmanuel Mwale, Adventist Mission coordinator for the East Zambia Field. "Like Eniah, many non-Adventist students are coming to Mwami Adventist School of Nursing and receiving Jesus," he said. "The Mwami Adventist School of Nursing actively shares the love of Jesus with new students every year."



Pray for the gospel to be proclaimed in Zambia and other countries in the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division, the recipient of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering.