IT’S A BIG DEAL

Why a passage of four entire chapters to start this series? As a pericope (thematic unit), Isaiah 24–27 contains the inScribe verses Isaiah 24:5, 6, which bring the presence and theme of “the everlasting covenant” into sharp focus. It deals with the concepts of judgment and blessing especially in the last days, when God will have final victory over evil.

The text teaches us that “the everlasting covenant” is not a creation of imaginative theological minds or a mere sideline issue meant for esoteric seminarian study only. It has universal application: “the earth...its people... the earth...its people...earth’s inhabitants” (NIV, cf. Gen. 9:16). And it involves “laws” that if “disobeyed”/“violated,” (NIV) results in devastating consequences: Earth’s “people must bear their guilt,” “a curse consumes the earth,” “earth’s inhabitants are burned up” (NIV).

The resolution of this broken “everlasting covenant,” and the devastating results, emerges later in Scripture in a single, cryptic phrase: “the blood of the eternal covenant” (Heb. 13:20, NIV). The entire biblical revelation swirls around this “blood of the eternal covenant.”

Our purpose this week is to expose ourselves to a sweeping glimpse of that story as it unfolded through the historical succession of subsidiary covenants in both Testaments. Fasten your seat belts. This week will be intense but an important foundation for the journey ahead. No worries if it doesn’t all come together this week; we have miles to go before we sleep.

Fast forward to the creation of our world and Adam.
Write out Isaiah 24–27 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Isaiah 24:5, 6. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the pericope.
COVENANT OF GRACE—PHASE 1

The “everlasting covenant” spans both Testaments, manifesting itself in progressive ways in the subsidiary covenants of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. Each of these major Old Testament covenants is identified as an “everlasting covenant” to affirm its role as a unique expression and adaptation, in its time and place, of the archetypal, parent “everlasting covenant.” The multidimensional meaning and scope of the “everlasting covenant” and its sinner-adapted “covenant of grace” has been progressively revealed throughout the entire history of redemption. Each successive covenant, in its turn, incorporated the truths revealed in the previous covenant(s) and added new insights into the details of the progressively unfolding plan of salvation. Therefore, each covenant is a gospel-bearing and gospel-revealing covenant, adding its own unique contribution to a fuller understanding.

Adam

Genesis does not mention a preexisting covenant with Adam, but centuries later, Hosea would say of wayward Israel that like Adam, “they . . . have transgressed the covenant” (Hos. 6:7). God created Adam with a God-focused, other-focused nature. But because of Adam’s transgression, his descendants would be born with a self-focused nature (Rom. 3:10–19). Adam’s transgression plunged him and his descendants into “the pit” of suffering and hopelessness from which they could not escape (Isa. 24:17, 18).

To Adam’s covenant unfaithfulness, God responded with covenantal faithfulness. He promised them a way out of the disastrous pit into which Adam’s sin had plunged them. Ultimate deliverance would be provided through a descendant of Eve (Gen. 3:15). Theologians refer to Genesis 3:15 as the “protoevangelion” (Greek proto, “first”; evangelion, “gospel”), the first gospel proclamation, though it came in cryptic terms that needed be progressively unpacked in succeeding covenants.

Noah

Next came God’s “everlasting covenant” (Gen. 9:16) assurance to Noah, which is God saying essentially: “I will not give up on humanity! Many will still hear My appeal, receive it, and be delivered. I will protect their ability to do so until the last decision is made.”

Abraham

To elderly, childless, nomadic Abraham, God made “an everlasting covenant” (Gen. 15, 17), a promise that from his own loins he would bear a son from whose descendants the Seed promised to Eve would come. Abraham believed and was counted righteous (Gen. 15:1–6, 18).

Israel

When God delivered the Israelites through the leadership of Moses, He instituted a national covenant with them, variously referred to as the Sinaitic covenant (it was made at Mount Sinai), the Mosaic covenant (Moses officially received it), or the “old covenant” (compared to the yet-to-come “new covenant”). The most well-known feature of this covenant is the iconic Ten Commandments that God spoke to the people and wrote with His own finger. In fact, God even named this covenant “the Ten Commandments” (better, “the Ten Words,” to be discussed later) (Deut. 4:13), as they exemplified practical ways that people of the “everlasting covenant” love act toward God and one another. More on this “everlasting covenant” (Ps. 105:10) in future lessons.
COVENANT OF GRACE—PHASE 2

The chart (scan QR code) shows the major historical covenants God made with humanity from Adam at creation and the fall to the final ratification of His covenant of grace in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. Through these covenants He progressively revealed deeper dimensions of the everlasting gospel’s plan of salvation.

Isaiah records Yahweh speaking to the long-awaited Messianic servant: “I, the LORD, have called you . . . to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles . . . to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness”—in short, to deliver people from “the pit” (Isa. 42:6, 7, NIV, emphasis supplied; cf. 24:17, 18).

John the Baptist arrives on the shores of the New Testament to “prepare the way for the LORD [Yahweh]” (Luke 3:4, NIV). One day John passes the baton to the LORD Himself: “ ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ ” (John 1:29, NIV). He had finally come—

• the seed promised to Adam, Abraham, and David to deliver His people from “the pit,”
• the Lamb foreshadowed by the ritual of animal sacrifices that had provided a means of receiving forgiveness until He arrived, and
• the ultimate, sinless Priest and Mediator between God and humanity.

The gospel, progressively revealed through the subsidiary covenants as to how the deliverance would ultimately come, relied on His arrival and the accomplishment of His mission to seek the lost and shed His blood for their deliverance.

Note the different designations that Jesus and the New Testament writers give to His shed blood on the cross:

• “My blood of the covenant” (Matt. 26:28, NIV; Mark 14:24, emphasis supplied—newer Bible translations, including the conservative NASB, follow the manuscript tradition favoring “the covenant”)  
• “the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:20, NKJV; 1 Cor. 11:25, emphasis supplied)
• “the blood of the eternal covenant” (Heb. 13:20, NIV, emphasis supplied)

It is clear from this list that “the covenant,” “the new covenant,” and “the everlasting covenant” are not three different covenants but are three different designations for one and the same covenant, revealing one and the same “everlasting gospel” (Rev. 14:6) by which the “everlasting . . . God” (Ps. 90:2; cf. Isa. 9:6) shared His heart, made His commitment to His people, gave them His promises, appealed for their response, and acted on their behalf to deliver/redeem them from “the pit.”

One covenant, one saving gospel, spanning all eras of earth history. Nevertheless, because Jesus Christ, the covenant Maker, came in at a particular time in earth’s history to ratify “the covenant” in all of its dimensions, manifestations, and promises, we can authentically speak of an old covenant and a new covenant in its outworking on earth. This is two distinct covenantal or gospel dispensations in earth history: the first (the Old Testament era), anticipating the One to come; in the second (the New Testament era), Jesus arrives, “a covenant for the people,” to ratify “the covenant” with His “blood of the everlasting covenant.” Two historical dispensations but one unchanging, everlasting gospel that spanned both dispensations. To miss this point would be fatal to decoding the covenants!
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Matthew 7:9–12
Genesis 3:15
Romans 5:20
2 Timothy 1:8, 9
Psalm 105:7–10
Isaiah 42:6, 7
Hebrews 13:20, 21

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Isaiah 24–27?

Review your memorized verse from Isaiah 24–27.
The Everlasting Covenant

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How do you “relax” into this judgment passage?

What is He saying to you through these texts?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

Prayer: How do you respond to seeing Jesus in this way?

Meditate on Isaiah 24–27 again and look for where Jesus is.

Read more at www.inversebible.org/cov01-6

AUTO STEREOSCOPIC AND COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS

The technical name for them is stereograms or auto stereograms. You’ve seen them, those colorful pictures and graphic designs that, when viewed correctly, display a 3D picture hidden within them. If one just “relaxes” on the surface picture and stops straining to see the hidden one, the latter will emerge. In “relaxing” into our passage in this week’s lesson and the theme of Decoding the Covenants, the following picture emerges.

The “everlasting covenant” (Isa. 24:5) originated in an unparalleled culture of love—the inseparable bonds of love within the Godhead. Jesus summarized the entire Law and the Prophets, and simultaneously revealed the deepest essence of “the everlasting covenant,” in this simple dictum: “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12, NIV).

Could it really be as simple as that? That’s kindergarten language. Perhaps so, but theologians have for many decades recognized Matthew 7:12 as the seminal principle around which Jesus structured His Sermon on the Mount. The Matthew 7:12 principle merely grounded human relationships in the covenant love of the eternal God. From its earliest commencement, all creation was enfolded into and infused with this culture of covenantal love. From the beginning, God furiously loved His creation. The commitment was reciprocal. An attack on one would be met by all. Eventually it would take the Covenant Maker Himself to a cross.

From the beginning, the purpose of “the everlasting covenant” was to protect and enrich relationships. In His relationship with humankind, God used various models to communicate this. Sometimes He used illustrations from nature, such as the close relationship between a vine and its branches (John 15:1–5). In our judgment-laden passage for this lesson, He speaks of watching over His people as a caretaker does his vineyard: “I, the LORD, keep it, I water it every moment; lest any hurt it, I keep it night and day” (Isa. 27:3, NKJV).

The divinely chosen models of His covenant(s) with humanity most often involve personal relationships. The master/servant relationship (closer to the employer/employee relationship in most modern societies) serves as a model. For example, the apostles often and fondly referred to themselves as God’s servants (see 2 Pet. 1:1, for example).

But Jesus preferred more intimate relationship models for comparisons to His covenant commitment to fallen humanity—like husband/wife and parent/child models. He likened His covenant with Israel to a marriage covenant: “I will betroth you to Me forever . . . in lovingkindness and mercy . . . in faithfulness” (Hos. 2:19, 20, NKJV). “I was a husband to them” (Jer. 31:32, NIV). Ideally God could have used the marriage relationship as the closest example of His covenant with us; husbands and wives generally have a choice in the matter of who they pair up with, whereas children do not get to choose their parents.

But Christ chose the parent/child relationship, the strongest bonds on earth, as His model of choice to represent His bonds of love to us. A refrain from the Song of Moses asked, “Is He not your Father, who bought you? Has He not made you and established you?” (Deut. 32:6, NKJV). Yahweh/Jesus emotively asked His doubting nation, “Can a woman forget her nursing child . . . ? Surely they may forget you, yet I will not forget you” (Isa. 49:15, NKJV)! Jesus asked us to pray, “Our Father” (Matt. 6:9) and used a parent/child illustration to introduce the Golden Rule as the essence of the “everlasting covenant” culture of heaven and of God’s love for us (Matt. 7:9–12)! Ellen White reveals that “Christ’s favorite theme was the paternal character and abundant love of God” (Testimonies, 6:55).
**GRACE**

“As the Bible presents two laws, one changeless and eternal, the other provisional and temporary, so there are two covenants. The covenant of grace was first made with man in Eden, when after the Fall there was given a divine promise that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent’s head. To all men this covenant offered pardon and the assisting grace of God for future obedience through faith in Christ. It also promised them eternal life on condition of fidelity to God’s law. Thus the patriarchs received the hope of salvation.

“This same covenant was renewed to Abraham in the promise, ‘In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.’ Genesis 22:18. This promise pointed to Christ. So Abraham understood it (see Galatians 3:8, 16), and he trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. It was this faith that was accounted unto him for righteousness. The covenant with Abraham also maintained the authority of God’s law. The Lord appeared unto Abraham, and said, ‘I am the Almighty God; walk before Me, and be thou perfect.’ Genesis 17:1. The testimony of God concerning His faithful servant was, ‘Abraham obeyed My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.’ Genesis 26:5. And the Lord declared to him, ‘I will establish My covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee.’ Genesis 17:7.

“Though this covenant was made with Adam and renewed to Abraham, it could not be ratified until the death of Christ. It had existed by the promise of God since the first intimation of redemption had been given; it had been accepted by faith; yet when ratified by Christ, it is called a new covenant. The law of God was the basis of this covenant, which was simply an arrangement for bringing men again into harmony with the divine will, placing them where they could obey God’s law.” (Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 370, 371.)

“The terms of this oneness between God and man in the great covenant of redemption were arranged with Christ from all eternity. The covenant of grace was revealed to the patriarchs. The covenant made with Abraham four hundred and thirty years before the law was spoken on Sinai was a covenant confirmed by God in Christ, the very same gospel which is preached to us. ‘The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham’ [Gal. 3:8, 9]. The covenant of grace is not a new truth, for it existed in the mind of God from all eternity. This is why it is called the everlasting covenant.” (White, *Signs of the Times*, August 24, 1891, par. 10.)

“The salvation of the human race has ever been the object of the councils of heaven. The covenant of mercy was made before the foundation of the world. It has existed from all eternity, and is called the everlasting covenant. So surely as there never was a time when God was not, so surely there never was a moment when it was not the delight of the eternal mind to manifest His grace to humanity.” (White, *Signs of the Times*, June 12, 1901, par. 7.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How has the topic of the covenants confused you in the past? What was your initial understanding?

How have you resolved the positive benefits of God’s promise with the negative repercussions of the judgment toward human sinfulness?

Why do you think God used multiple generations to reveal His covenant?

How does seeing the Ten Commandments as a promise instead of rules change your spiritual perspective?

What is a contemporary example of a covenant you have made?

What lessons can you derive from this covenant that parallel God’s covenant with us?

How does the apparent complexity of God’s solution reveal the complexity of humanity’s problem?