

Moses and the Covenant of Law

Exodus 19:1-6

preached @ Hawkwood Baptist Church
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We come this morning to the covenant of law, or the covenant of Sinai, with Moses as the mediator. This is the one that is often called the Old Covenant because it is contrasted in both testaments with the New Covenant that is sealed in the blood of Christ (See Jer. 31:31 and Heb. 8:13). This covenant easily gets the most attention in the Old Testament, and it is also the one most easily misunderstood. To this day it has been misunderstood by most of the Jews, and, sadly, it is misunderstood by too many Christians. But before we get into that, let's review just a little. Let me explain again the role and purpose of the Biblical covenants.

The Biblical covenants are:

- the outline for the unfolding of God's plan of salvation from the fall to full redemption.
- progressive, in that each is a logical expansion of the previous covenant.
- essentially one covenant, designed to ultimately restore man's lost fellowship with God.
- key to understanding the overall purpose and meaning of the Bible. You already know that proper Biblical interpretation requires that a verse be understood in its context. The covenantal context is the highest level of Biblical interpretation.
- necessary to understand the sweep and direction of world history

The covenants include:

- The Covenant of Creation (Adam)—foundation for all that is to follow
- The Covenant of Noah—the earth is preserved in preparation for the coming Saviour
- The Covenant with Abraham—the gospel is declared for the first time (Gen. 15:6)
- The Covenant of Law (Moses)—Gospel worship is instituted and gospel holiness is revealed
- The Covenant of the Kingdom (David)—Christ's kingship and lordship foreshadowed
- The New Covenant, or the Covenant of Consummation (Christ)—Everything lost in Adam is finally restored in Christ! Everyone who comes to Christ, who by the Spirit is baptized into Christ (I Cor. 12:13-14), finds that he or she is included in all the covenants.

Two big mistakes (re the covenant of law)

(1) The first big mistake is to think that at Sinai God established a covenant of works. He did not. He established a covenant of law. The New Testament hammers against those who think they can save themselves by works, but it praises the law as the divine expression of God's will. (2) The other mistake is to think that Sinai has nothing to do with New Testament Christians, that it was only for Israel. Nothing could be further from the truth. God only has one covenant people, and by His grace we are privileged to be a part of it. All the covenants belong to all those who are in Christ Jesus by grace, and through faith.

Today's text: The Covenant of Law

Exodus 19

1 In the third month, on the same day of the month that the Israelites had left the land of Egypt, they entered the Wilderness of Sinai. 2 After they departed from Rephidim, they entered the Wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness, and Israel camped there in front of the mountain.

3 Moses went up the mountain to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain: "This is what you must say to the house of Jacob, and explain to the Israelites: 4 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. 5 Now if you will listen to Me and carefully keep My covenant, you will be My own possession out of all the peoples, although all the earth is Mine, 6 and you will be My kingdom of priests and My holy nation.' These are the words that you are to say to the Israelites."

Let's take a few moments to unpack this passage and let it speak to us.

Wilderness of Sinai

The wilderness of Sinai is considered to be today's Sinai peninsula, which rests like a giant arrowhead between Egypt and Israel. I'm well aware that there is a strong, Biblically-based argument, suggesting that Mt. Sinai is actually in Northwestern Arabia. I'm very open to that position, but the main thing today is not the geography, but the miracles involved in bringing Israel from Egypt to the Mountain of God.

The Road to Rephidim (v. 2)

We should not underplay what God did to bring the Israelites to this place. First there was (1) the call and preparation of Moses, followed by (2) the ten plagues that afflicted Egypt until Pharaoh finally let the Israelites go. On their journey Israel was miraculously enabled to (3) cross the Red Sea on dry land, after which the Egyptian army was drowned. Immediately upon reaching safety they were (4) provided with fresh water in the desert three different ways, (5) they were fed with manna and quail, (6) they were supernaturally empowered to defeat the Amalekites in battle (Moses called God *Yahweh Nissi*, the Lord is My Banner, 17:15), and all the time they were (7) protected and led by the Angel of the Lord in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire.

Moses went up to God

Look now at verse 3, where, as soon as the Israelites arrived at Sinai, Moses "went up the mountain to God." If you ever find yourself wondering why people in the Bible sometimes just seem to know what to do without being told, you can usually find the answer if you just look hard enough. How did Moses know to go up the mountain? You can find the answer in Exodus 3:12, Speaking from the burning bush "[God] answered, 'I will certainly be with you, and this will be the sign to you that I have sent you: when you bring the people out of Egypt, you will all worship God at this mountain.'" So now we know where the burning bush was, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and Moses went up the mountain to basically say, "Ok God, here we are. You did it! I never thought You could do it, but You got us here. Now what's next?"

God's message to Israel

- God reminds Israel of his judgment and His grace (v.4): judgment in the forms of plagues visited upon Egypt and grace toward the descendants of Abraham in the form of His guidance, His protection, and His provision.
- God also mentions two other things in verse 4: the fierce love He feels toward Israel (the image of a mother eagle), and the ultimate purpose of all His work (to bring the Israelites to Himself). The eternal purpose of God is to bring a people to Himself for worship and fellowship. If there is any phrase in the Bible that makes God sound like a broken record, it is the phrase “you will be my people, and I will be your God.” All the covenants are dedicated to this ultimate end; “You will be my people and I will be your God.”

Lev. 26:9 “I will turn to you, make you fruitful and multiply you, and confirm My covenant with you. . . . 11 I will place My residence among you, and I will not reject you. 12 I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be My people.

Jer. 31:33 “Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days”—the Lord’s declaration. “I will put My teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people.”

John 14: “Your heart must not be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me. 2 In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if not, I would have told you. I am going away to prepare a place for you. 3 If I go away and prepare a place for you, I will come back and receive you to Myself, so that where I am you may be also.”

II Cor. 6:16 And what agreement does God’s sanctuary have with idols? For we are the sanctuary of the living God, as God said: “I will dwell among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be My people.”

Rev. 21: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea no longer existed. 2 I also saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. 3 Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look! God’s dwelling is with humanity, and He will live with them. They will be His people and God Himself will be with them and be their God.

- Do you see what is going on? In the Old Testament God brought His people to Himself at Mt. Sinai, but as the Scriptures progress we learn that God will not rest until He has brought His one people into His very presence.

In verse 5 God makes two demands and offers two promises

Demands

1. Listen to Me
2. Carefully keep My covenant

Promises

1. You will be My own possession out of all the peoples
2. You will be My kingdom of priests and My holy nation

Now some of you may be wondering, “What does a covenant God made with Israel 3,500 years ago have to do with me?” Just this. According to the New Testament, these promises that God made at Sinai are explicitly fulfilled in the followers of Jesus Christ, the Christians—you and me.

I Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

If this covenant is fulfilled in us, and it is, then the corresponding responsibilities are also attached. We need to listen to all God has said in the covenant of law, and, with the full understanding of how Jesus rolled this covenant into the New Covenant, we are under the same obligation as those Israelites to keep it just as carefully. Actually, we are under a greater obligation than they because in this New Covenant era we possess the Holy Spirit in His fullness, and thus those same laws that God proclaimed on Sinai are now written on our hearts.

It’s obvious that Jesus had in mind that His people would actively keep the law, isn’t it? Did he not say in Matthew 5:17 that He had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets? And did He not say in that same passage that there would always be a special blessing for those who “practice” and “teach” the commands of the law? Yes, I think He did.

Major aspects of the covenant of law

1. The overwhelming, awesome glory of God
 - a. The purpose of the fire, smoke, trumpet blasts, earthquake and thunder was deliberately intended to let the people know that the God we serve is in fact “a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29).
 - b. Our only recourse is to “serve God acceptably with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28).
2. The revelation of God’s righteous heart in the giving of the law
 - a. The Ten Commandments are a summary of the will of God. All righteousness is summed up in them.
 - b. The difference is that under the New Covenant God’s Holy Spirit writes these commandments on our hearts as expressions of His love and His nature, now implanted within us as the fruit of the Spirit. The commands don’t change, but by the grace of God we are changed so that “from the heart we are able to obey the pattern of teaching we’ve been given” (Rom. 6:17).
3. The sacrificial system whereby sinful man approached Holy God by means of the shedding of blood.

- a. Sin offerings, fellowship offerings, grain offerings, thanksgiving offerings, and the double offering on the annual Day of Atonement—all were designed to teach salvation by means of a substitute, a grace purchased at the price of shed blood.
- b. Rightly understood, all of the offerings were designed to prepare God's people to understand what John meant when he pointed to Jesus and cried out, "the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).