

## Study 3 — the Covenant with Moses

The laws and social habits of Western countries have been shaped in many ways by what is called the 'Judeo-Christian ethic'. The covenant made with Israel through Moses is where this ethic arose. Humanity wants to have a 'good' it can pursue in its own right but God reveals that what he means by 'good' is the outworking of his covenant relationship with us. This is a vital point for us to grasp today.

In the Bible story we are tracing, some 400 years have passed since God made his covenant with Abraham. His descendants have moved to Egypt and become numerous, but they are now slaves—afflicted. All of this is just as God had predicted (Gen. 15:13). God announces himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exod. 3:6), meaning that he is the God who is already in covenant relationship with them. What is about to happen will arise because of this (Exod. 2:4; 6:4).

So follows the story of the exodus, God rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt. God's purpose in this, announced to Pharaoh, is that this people may worship him in the wilderness—that is, not as slaves in Egypt. Through various powerful signs and miracles, Moses does lead Israel out into the wilderness to meet God, at Mt Sinai. It is by this victory and exodus that the children of *Israel* (the new name given to Jacob) are constituted a nation—as God had promised. It is with this newly created nation that God now makes (or 'cuts') his covenant.

But first, God speaks to Israel through Moses

'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.' So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do!' And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD (Exod. 19:4-8).

We note, first, that fulfillment of this covenant is dependent on the people being obedient, and they promise to be so. They have already been rescued, in fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant but will need to walk in God's ways to see this fulfillment as a nation. There are some similarities between this and Abraham being called to 'walk before God and be blameless' (Gen. 17:1-2; cf. 22:15-18).

Second, they will be his 'treasured possession' and they will be a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod. 19:4-8). That is, together, they will approach God, be set apart for God and teach his word to the nations. God intends that nations will see the goodness of God through his care of Israel, acknowledge the socially effective law they have been given and the unique phenomenon of God being near to them (Deut. 4:6-7).

The fact that these privileges are later granted to Christian believers (1 Pet. 2:9) shows that we have an interest in the relationship God is here making with Israel by making a covenant with them. It is important to note that those in covenant with God do not merely have a formal relationship with him but are dearly treasured by him and are called to share in his plan for the world.

God himself speaks to this whole people and gives them what we now know as the ten words or commandments (Exod. 20:1-22).

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before Me. "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and

the fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing loving kindness to thousands, to those who love me and keep my commandments. "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes his name in vain. "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. "Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. "You shall not murder. "You shall not commit adultery. "You shall not steal. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. "You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbour."

We note just a few points about this law because we are focusing on covenant. First, there is no negotiation here. The Hebrew word for covenant (*berith*) signifies a bond or obligation and Israel can have no doubt as to who is in charge. God *commands* his covenant (Psa. 111:9; Jud. 2:20). Second, the commands are not the basis of the relationship—the Lord is already their God and has redeemed them, that is, released them from slavery. Obedience, then and now, is never the basis of a relationship with God. Given our sinfulness, that must always be grace. But obedience is the expression of the relationship.

The first and longest section of commands has to do with this relationship. God alone is to be worshipped; no part of the creation should replace him—this point is made emphatically; he must not be approached or invoked lightly; the rhythm of our life is to be arranged around the truth that God is creator—that he sustains the universe, not us. Given that God made humanity to be his image in the creation (Gen. 1:26), and has now saved them, it is to be expected that those he calls into relationship with him should love and obey him above everything else.

The second section regulates human interaction: honour for parents, respect for life, fidelity in marriage, respect for property, and the governance of our affections so that we never desire what belongs to another. We could not be in relationship with God and not want these things. They are the outworking of him being all that he is to us, and the way in which we represent his care for the world to one another.

Further commands are given that will regulate the worship and conduct of this new nation, and then, the covenant is 'cut' (Exod. 24:8) in a ceremony involving certain leaders and elders of Israel, with sacrifices and a feast.

Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put *it* in basins, and the *other* half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read *it* in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" So Moses took the blood and sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exod. 24:4-8).

We note first, that the 'blood of the covenant' is the blood of an animal sacrifice and represents the sanctions against the parties if they break this covenant, so it is sprinkled on the altar and the people. Second, the elders feast with God, indicating that this covenant is to be a fellowship of kindred minds. Now Moses alone ascends Mount Sinai to receive the 'hard copy' of this covenant or law, engraved by God in stone.

There is no specific promise made in this covenant, making us wonder if it is included in the 'covenants of promise' (Eph. 2:12) but it is the outworking of an existing relationship or promise covenant with this people—the covenant made with Abraham. Paul later insists that the law could not annul the existing promise (Gal. 3:17-18). This point is underlined by what follows. The promise in this covenant lies not so much in its text as in its administration.

Israel immediately breaks the covenant by forging and worshipping a golden calf. God's commands from the mountain are still ringing in their ears. Their commitments to obey are barely out of their mouths, but they want something to see—not a God who only speaks. They are refusing to live by faith. The whole story in Exodus 32-34 needs to be read thoughtfully.

Moses, coming down from the mountain, smashes the stones on which God has written his law or covenant. Where does Israel now stand? God says he will abandon his people but Moses intercedes for them and God promises to renew his covenant. Then God reveals his glory to Moses, proclaiming:

“The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations” (Exod. 34:6-7).

Moses climbs the mountain again and receives a second copy of the covenant that God ‘cuts’ with Israel (Exod. 34:27-28). It must be clear—the only copy of God’s covenant law that Israel has (and we have) is the copy that renews a covenant with covenant breakers. Israel (and we) have this covenant because someone asks for mercy—at the cost of their own lives—and because God responds with a revelation of his glorious grace—not a lenient grace because persistent sinners will still be judged—but grace none-the-less. God’s glory is still among his people because Moses’ face is shining when he comes down from the mountain, and shining again whenever he speaks with God (Exod. 34:28-35).

This may be why, when John tells us about the coming of Christ, he writes, ‘For of [Christ’s] fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:16-17). The giving of the law was grace for Israel, but because of the weakness of human flesh (Rom. 8:3), the glory Moses saw was a fading glory and Paul says this is why he veiled his face when he came from speaking with God—so others would not see the glory fading (2 Cor. 3:13). It would take the coming of Christ to be grace *upon* grace and to realise or accomplish the grace that was proclaimed at Sinai.

Israel had no need to misunderstand this law. It came with remarkable promises (e.g. Deut. 30:6). It should have taught Israel to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly before God (Mic. 6:8). It expressed his deep and personal relationship with them in which he wanted to take them into his confidence with regard to the blessing of the nations (e.g. Psa. 25:14).

Throughout Israel’s history, there were times of covenant renewal made necessary, to some degree, by a new situation, but particularly because the covenant had been broken beyond recognition. The prophets of Israel were those who knew the truth and power of God’s covenant relationship with Israel, both its promise and demand, and wrestled to know where they now stood with God. In the long list of possible examples of this, we look at just one from Isaiah 63:

I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has granted us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which he has granted them according to his compassion and according to the abundance of his lovingkindnesses. For he said, “Surely, they are my people, sons who will not deal falsely.” So He became their savior. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his mercy he redeemed them, and he lifted them and carried them all the days of old.

But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned himself to become their enemy, he fought against them. Then his people remembered the days of old, of Moses. Where is He who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put His Holy Spirit in the midst of them, who caused his glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, who led them through the depths? Like the horse in the wilderness, they did not stumble; As the cattle which go down into the valley, The Spirit of the LORD gave them rest. So you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name.

Look down from heaven and see from your holy and glorious habitation; where are your zeal and your mighty deeds? The stirrings of your heart and your compassion are restrained toward me. For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not recognize us. You, O LORD, are our Father, our redeemer from of old is your name. Why, O LORD, do you cause us to stray from your ways and harden our heart from fearing you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. Your holy people possessed your sanctuary for a little while, our adversaries have trodden *it* down. We have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who were not called by your name (vv. 7-19).

We note just a few points that Isaiah makes about God's long relationship with Israel. First, it is established and maintained by the Lord's kindness. Second, he saves them, expecting that they will want to be his people and do his will. Third, God becomes their enemy when they forsake him. His anger is painfully real. Fourth, their relationship is spiritual—that is, consisting in God's Spirit being among them and broken by them resisting his Spirit. Fifth, this same presence of the Spirit among them is used as an argument for God to be gracious to the nation when they are unfaithful. Sixth, God is Father to Israel (as in Exod. 4:22; Deut. 32:6; 1 Chron. 29:10; Jer. 3:19; 31:9; Mal. 1:6; 2:10) and can be appealed to even if the patriarchs cannot recognise the people descended from them. God's relationship with Israel is not formal but familial. It may be references such as these that lie behind Jesus teaching the disciples about 'your Father in heaven' in his Sermon on the Mount. Israel always had good reason to believe they were bonded to God by deep ties that would survive their many failures.

The New Testament makes much of the fact that we are not under this old covenant. It is essentially the administration of a promise already in place and points to something greater to come. Taken by itself—apart from faith (Rom. 9:31-32), it is something from which we must be saved (Gal. 3:13; 4:5); something to which we must die (Rom. 7:6).

Paul later observes the negative but necessary impact of the Mosaic covenant. It exposes our pride in thinking we are good people (Rom. 2:17-24; 3:19). Even though it is spiritual and good, it stirs us up to do the thing we are forbidden to do (Rom. 7:7-13). It makes us subject to death because we fail (Gal. 3:10-12). It's stated purpose, to be a way of life (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 7:10), is true but ineffective, and all because God, in this way, wants to shut us up to his promise, first given to Abraham, but fulfilled in Christ (Gal. 3:21-29).

However, God's covenant with Israel still expresses the richness of the relationship we have with God. Its requirements and provisions are far from irrelevant because Jesus said he would fulfill the law—both its commands and its ceremonial provisions (Matt. 5:17). Under the new covenant that replaces it, the law is written on our hearts (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:10). When Paul says those under the law are under a curse (Gal. 3:10) he does so to show that Christ redeems those under that curse (Gal. 4:5), gives them his Spirit (Gal. 5:18) and works in them all that his law requires (Rom. 8:3).

However, we must not submit to any law that is not mediated to us through Christ. To do so is to be hypocritical about how well we keep it. It is to fly in the face of God's gift of grace in Christ. We must return to this when we look at the new covenant that Jesus seals with his blood (Matt. 26:28).

The covenants God gave to the world are not successive ways of his relating to us but rather, accumulative. The revelation to Abraham did not change God's covenant with the world announced to Noah but established a people through whom God's purpose would be accomplished. The revelation to Moses and Israel did not cancel the promises given to Abraham but administered this covenant for the nation just being formed. Taken apart from the grace in which it is given and administered, it misrepresents God and leads to death. In similar manner, the covenant made with David concerning his kingship (and Christ's) adds a new and dynamic promise to show how the covenants with Abraham and with Israel will be fulfilled. And to this we must now turn.