

The Covenant in the Time of Moses

Psalm 136; Westminster Confession of Faith 7.3-5

Studies in Covenant Theology #7

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LET me set the stage for you. We're focusing our hearts and minds this summer on what we call "covenant theology." This is how we describe the biblical truth that the infinite God who needs nothing creates and relates to us. And the means he uses to do this is a covenant. That's the big story of Scripture. What we've seen is that Adam broke the original covenant of works rejecting that relationship with his Creator. Ever since the Lord God has entered into relationship with sinners, which we call the covenant of grace. We read about the history of this covenant of grace in Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 7.5:

This covenant [of grace] was differently administered in the time of the law [Old Testament], and in the time of the Gospel [New Testament]: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come...

Psalm 136 recounts a part of the history of *the covenant in the time of Moses*, which preached **Christ to come**. Twenty-six times we are called to **give thanks to the LORD**. Why? Twenty-six times we are told because he has

kept his covenant promises: **for his steadfast love endures forever!** The **God of gods...who alone does the great wonders** of creating the **heavens...the sun...moon and stars** (vv. 2, 4-9) is the **LORD of lords** of redemption **who struck down the firstborn of Egypt...brought Israel out...with a strong hand and an outstretched arm...divided the Red Sea in two...made Israel pass through the midst of it...led his people through the wilderness...and who struck down great and mighty kings like Sihon and Og** (vv. 3, 10-25).

The covenant in the time of Moses was the same in substance as the covenant of grace before: it **foresignif[ied] Christ to come**. We've seen it's being **differently administered** in the time of Adam with the mother promise of Genesis 3:15, in the time of Noah, and in the time of Abraham. What makes it so difficult is that it came in a new form that feels legal to us.¹ That's why one writer said there is no point of theology that has led to more confusion than the Mosaic covenant.² So I want to keep it simple.

¹ See Bavinck, 3:220-222; Turretin, 12.5.33; 12.7.24-49.

² Anthony Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis: or, a Vondication of the Morall Law and the Covenants* (London: Printed by James Young for Thomas Underhill, 1647), 229.

Remembering Abraham (Ex. 1–3)

The Mosaic covenant begins with the Lord *remembering Abraham*.

Israel has entered Egypt during famine and been blessed by the Lord to be “fruitful” and to “increase[...] greatly” (1:7). This led to Pharaoh’s forced-labor program to work them to the bone out of existence (1:8–14). But we read, “the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied” (1:12). Then Pharaoh cooked up another plan, this time of infanticide, to breed them out of existence (1:15–22). But again we read, “the people multiplied” (1:20).

Skipping ahead, note well 2:23–25:

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And *God* heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

Note the fourfold response of the LORD: “God *heard*...God *remembered*...God *saw*...and God *knew*.” While he heard their cries we remember his covenant with the forefathers. It was not as if God recalled the covenant because he had forgotten. Rather, on the basis of what he had already promised to the forefathers, he acted. Remember when we looked at Genesis 15 that the Lord’s covenant oath was that if he did not keep his covenant he would be torn asunder like the heifer, ram, and goat. The whole history of God’s

covenant in the time of Moses was rooted in the covenant in the time of Abraham. And what covenant was that? The covenant of grace.

Redeeming Wretches (Ex. 12–15:21)

And what was the Mosaic covenant all about? What every covenant is about: *redeeming wretches*. We fast forward to after the time of Moses' call to serve and after then great plagues on the gods of Egypt (12:12). There was one last plague: the death of the firstborn. And to illustrate how he would redeem wretches like them each household was to kill an animal on their behalf and smear the blood on the doorposts. The Lord would see it and pass them over (12:13). Then came the Exodus at the end of chapter 12 and as verse 40 says, this was in fulfillment of the Lord's promise to Abraham 430 years before. Then they crossed the Red Sea while Pharaoh's army was drowned in the sea. Why? Because God chose Israel and not Egypt. Never forget that! And never forget that the reason he chose you over another is grace, grace, and more grace! Look at how the song of Moses expresses this in verse 13: "You have led in your steadfast love the people who you have redeemed." We've seen that word "steadfast love" so many times in the Psalms lately. It speaks of the fact that God makes covenants and he keeps covenants!

Feasting in the Wilderness (Ex. 15:22–17:7)

But Houston, we have a problem! Look at how unfaithful these wretches are in the next part of the story. One of the things that illustrates for us that this is an administration of the covenant of grace is how the Lord doesn't immediately wipe Israel off the map or send them back to Egypt when they sin. And sin they did! Nevertheless there was *feasting in the wilderness*.

At the end of chapter 15 we read that after three days' journey they found no fresh water to drink. So what did they do after God had just split a sea in two? They grumbled (15:24). But God provided twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees at Elim (15:27). Did they give thanks? No, they "grumbled" again about having no bread and meat like in Egypt (16:2–3). So what did the Lord do? He rained bread and meat down from heaven until it was coming out of their ears! And when there was no water again at Rephidim, they "quarreled" (17:2) and "grumbled" (17:3). So they Lord told Moses to strike a rock and water would flow. As Numbers 20:10–13 reminds us, Moses hit it twice in anger, but most importantly in defiance of the Lord's command. So you have Israel and their leader sinning left and right, but the Lord provides a feast! What a gracious God!

Delivering the Law (Ex. 19–23)

Finally they came to Mount Sinai in chapter 19 and it's a place of smoke and fire, thunder and lightning, and feat. There we read of the Lord's *delivering the law*. And this is where things look so different from the covenant of grace prior to this.³ And we might be tempted to think this is not an administration of the covenant of grace.

One writer made a helpful distinction between the covenant of grace in its internal sense and the covenant of grace in its external sense.⁴ This is an administration of the covenant of grace in the internal grace of the Lord to sinners, but it comes in “a rigid legal economy” externally.⁵ Why do I say this? Look at the preface to the law in Exodus 20:2: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” That's gracious. As Moses says in Deuteronomy 7:8, “it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” After this preface come the commands. It's gospel then law, grace then gratitude. So why give the law? It

³ Turretin, 12.7.24; Witsius, 4.4.1.

⁴ Turretin, 12.7.34, 43.

⁵ Turretin, 12.7.31; Witsius, 4.4.47. This why Turretin even said the laws that speak of personal obedience to receive justification (“do this and live”) were accidental. Turretin, 12.7.32.

was meant to goad sinners to the grace of Christ and to guide saved sinners in gratitude. To paraphrase Galatians 3:24, the first use of the law was to drive sinners to despair that they might be driven to Christ and experience God's love. As one writer said,

The law of Moses...is not antithetical to grace but subservient to it...the covenant of grace took the law into its service...that it might arouse the consciousness of sin, increase the felt need for salvation, and reinforce the expectation of an even richer revelation of God's grace...the law...was not a covenant of works in disguise."⁶

Communing with God (Ex. 25–40)

Finally, as an administration of the covenant of grace, the Mosaic covenant provided a way of *communing with God* in the tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifices.

I think covenant theology is really simple. Even in difficult parts of the Old Testament it's the story of how an infinite God who needs nothing creates us and enters into relationship with us in a covenant. And even after we broke that covenant with Adam and rejected that relationship, the Lord God continues to enter afresh into relationships with sinners in what we call the covenant of grace. Amen.

⁶ Bavinck, 3:222. As Witsius said, The *law* of the covenant of works was repeated, not the covenant of works itself. The covenant of works cannot be entered into with sinners, God did not require perfect obedience, and God did not put them under the curse they would have deserved. Witsius, 4.4.51.