

Sermon 116, Welcome Back, Israel, Exodus 34:11-26

Proposition: God renews the covenant with Israel and pays special attention to the heart issues revealed by the golden calf.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw last time the extraordinary promise made to the Mediator that in Him God would do marvelous things, exceedingly marvelous things. The Lord immediately then describes the terms of the covenant once more, in language by and large quoted from ch. 23 or from ch. 13. There is not really anything new in this passage; it is a repetition of material we've already seen. Why? Because God is reiterating the rules that would keep Israel from repeating a golden-calf style incident. The idolatrous outburst revealed what was inside His people's hearts — and clearly, God at least believes that reiterating the law is part of the solution to that problem. The law is not given outside the forgiveness and love that comes through the Mediator; but it is part of the total package. As part of renewing the covenant with Israel, then, God reiterates the law of the covenant so that His people can faithfully keep that covenant.

I. The Covenant Rule: Obey God's Rules, v. 11a

If you are in covenant with God, you are called to do what He commands. The first covenant rule is to obey God's rules. That's why He starts with "be sure to observe what I command you this

day.” Brothers and sisters, you can’t be in covenant with God unless you are paying attention to His commands and seeking to obey them. Someone who is not fundamentally oriented toward obedience to God has no right to claim the status of covenant partner. God puts it this way to the wicked: “What right have you to declare My statutes, Or take My covenant in your mouth, Seeing you hate instruction And cast My words behind you?” (Psa 50:16-17).

You have no right to claim membership in the covenant unless you are listening to God’s instructions. If you are up dancing around a golden calf and saying “This is Yahweh!” you’re not acting like a covenant child. Ultimately, this is because Jesus is the faithful Israelite and we are called to be like Him. Obedience is a key aspect of likeness to Jesus.

II. What the Covenant People Shun, vv. 11b-17

The Lord begins with the negative, describing what the covenant people shun. Most of this section describes the socio-cultural aspect of temptation to idolatry, and the section’s capstone is the direct declaration “Make no molten gods.” If that’s not a callback to the golden calf, I’m not a literature teacher.

A. Covenanting with the Inhabitants of the Land, vv. 11b-16

So — the inhabitants of the land. Once again, the Lord names the six nations that inhabit Canaan. In one sense, from an invader’s perspective this makes entering the land a cakewalk. They are hopelessly divided against each other, and it will be easy to pick them off one by one. But from a socio-cultural perspective, six nations means six different cultures, six different avenues of temptation, six different ways in which the Devil can appeal to different personalities and backgrounds.

The Lord particularly has in view a formal covenant with these six nations, whether on the individual level (marriage, business partnerships) or the corporate level (Israel makes a treaty with the Hittites) or even, it would seem, simply on the social, neighborly level. After all, God doesn’t specifically warn against sending an ambassador to the Perizzites to negotiate border disputes. He specifically warns against going to a sacrificial feast with your neighbors. He warns against letting your son marry a daughter of the land, who will whore after her gods. The language is deliberately coarse. You want your son to have a good wife? Don’t let him even think about the neighbor girl who is not an Israelitess. She will cheat on him with Baal — and what’s worse, she will teach him to cheat on Yahweh with Asherah or some other goddess.

Don’t get into close relationships with the non-believers around you, and particularly into formally defined relationships. Don’t enter a business partnership or a marriage covenant with them. Don’t go to non-Christian worship events for the sake of socializing with your neighbor. Brothers and sisters, these rules are still binding on God’s people. Yes, it’s not wrong to live in the world, to play on the same team as non-believers or to vote in the same elections. But the closer and the more personal the relationship gets, the more likely you are to walk away from God.

B. Making Molten Gods, v. 17

The outcome of being slowly groomed into idolatry is its full flower — the creation of molten gods. Israel had already done this. They had just shown themselves to have the seed of idolatry

within their hearts. They had gathered against Aaron and gotten him to cooperate in their idolatry. And the same is true for us. We may not have broken out and actually built a golden calf. But we have the same seed of idolatry in our hearts. And if we water that seed, we will betray Jesus and break the covenant. Hence the warning: the easiest path into idolatry is the socio-cultural one, and the end of that path is to make literal molten gods and embrace the delusional belief that they can save you.

III. What the Covenant People Embrace, vv. 18-26

But the Lord does not leave it there. Thank God He does not leave it there. We need far more than the negative and the “thou shalt not” (though we certainly do need those)! We have to build our lives on the positive, on what we should do — and to that end, God quickly covers four topics relating positively to Israel’s life in the land. The covenant people are called to holy days, to present holy gifts, to come to the holy place, and to engage in holy worship by keeping very specific regulations.

How does this relate to us? We don’t have the same holy days and the same holy gifts and holy place; we don’t have the same regulations to keep our worship holy. But we do have a holy day and a holy group called the church. Above all, we have the same holy God that Israel enjoyed.

A. Holy Days

The Lord describes the holy days that will keep Israel holy. I forget where I heard this saying, but it is surely true: “More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews.” These holidays are not just because we need a break and God delights to give us one, though that is indeed part of the truth they teach. They are about binding us closer to our holy God in holiness.

1. Keep Passover, v. 18

Thus, the Lord tells Moses that Israel, having renewed its covenant with Him, is to keep the Passover and the associated Feast of Unleavened Bread. For a whole week each year, Israel is called to commemorate her deliverance from Egypt. The week is set apart for God, as a time to remind all the people of who they are and why they are free in Canaan and not slaves in Egypt.

2. Keep the Sabbath, v. 21

The second holy day mentioned is the sabbath — what I translate as “pause day.” God emphasizes this day by referring to the two busiest, most crucial times of the agricultural year — planting and harvesting. In between there are a lot of days where not much happens. But many crops are very weather-dependent. I was just hearing about Sudan grass. If it is to grow in Gillette, it must be planted between May 15 and 20. Earlier and it freezes, later and it does not reach maturity. So you have a six-day window in which to plant your entire farm. Naturally, you’re going to want to work as long as possible in that window, because on the morning of May 21 you might as well quit planting. Whatever is still fallow is going to have to stay that way for the rest of the growing year. Ouch.

But even at planting time, even at harvest time when you see a hailstorm mounting on the horizon and know that if you don’t get the wheat cut and under cover the hail will destroy a

whole year's worth of work, God says to keep the sabbath. When the day rolls around, don't say "But the weather is so good today and will be terrible tomorrow!" Don't say "Making a living is more important than spending time with God." The Almighty begs to differ. He insists that even when that big project is due, even at the busiest times of the year, you rest. Allow me to just point out that His ways are not our ways and that His idea of what's important doesn't always square with ours. That means our ideas need to change to conform to His.

3. Keep Weeks and Ingathering, v. 22

The Lord also insists that Israel keep the other two pilgrimage feasts: Weeks and Ingathering. The first of these is Pentecost, called "Weeks" here and also known as Firstfruits and Harvest at various places in the Bible. This the day fifty days after Passover, the day on which the cycle of firstfruits and springtime renewal was interrupted by the coming of the Spirit of the risen Jesus. Again, this is not a day to worship idols. It is a day to celebrate the presence of the Spirit of Jesus among His people. The final feast mentioned is the feast of Ingathering, also known as Sukkot (the Hebrew word) which can be translated "Tabernacles" or "Booths." In this feast, you go live in a temporary shelter for a week to remember that God brought you out of Egypt and you lived in a tent while journeying to the Promised Land.

The annual cycle of pilgrimage feasts overlaid atop the weekly Sabbath cycle is one major way in which God would teach Israel to dedicate all their time to Him and to stay away from idols.

B. Holy Gifts, vv. 19-20

The second major way is through the holy gifts. In addition to your time, God wants two other things from you.

1. Offspring, vv. 19-20a

The first of them is your offspring. The firstborn of every womb belongs to God. If you have goats, sheep, cattle, camels, and donkeys, then the firstborn of each mother is to be dedicated to God. In practice, what this means is that you have to go to your local priest when your female animal gives birth to her first baby. You can either donate that offspring directly to your local priest, or give 120% of its value in money. Thus, for even a small-time stockman, every few springs there would be a donation to the local clergy. I can imagine that the more devout among the Israelites even counted their dogs and cats as livestock, assuming that they kept such things as pets, and donated the firstborn of these animals to the Lord.

Well, the more stock you had, the more you would be giving to the Lord. The more often you brought a new breeder online, the more often you would be heading down to your local place of worship and dedicating a firstborn to God.

2. Sacrifices, v. 20b

The second way in which the covenant people were to give themselves to the Lord and thereby shun idolatry was this: They were to bring a gift every time they came on a pilgrimage feast. Many people interpret this clause to mean for today that we ought to bring something to give to the Lord at each worship service. That may indeed be the case. But we must recall that the covenant-keeping Israelite was called to appear before God only 3x/year. Thus, it is better to

think of this as implying that you should bring something to contribute at the special times when you come into God's presence in an extraordinary way.

Why does God say "Don't come before Me empty-handed"? He doesn't say this for His own benefit, but for ours. He is teaching Israel to shun idolatry and golden calves. We do that by shunning close covenantal ties with non-believers and by practicing great generosity toward God. The more you give to Him, the less you will desire to give to your idols. Giving is a practice that orients you toward the thing to which you're giving. Holy gifts help you stay holy.

C. The Holy Place, vv. 23-24

The third element in the anti-calf strategy God puts forward relates to holiness of place. Israel is being taught to shun idolatry through God's covenant promise of land.

1. God Will Enlarge Your Land

God will enlarge the Promised land. As He keeps saying, He will drive out the other nations that reside there and enlarge Israel's territory.

2. God Will Dwell in Your Land

But further implied in the verse here is that God will dwell in the land. Why is the land holy? Not because Israel is there, but because God is there.

3. God's Sanctuary May Be far from Your Home

Of course, God's sanctuary may be far from your home, and the more He enlarges the land the farther away the sanctuary could be.

4. You Must Present Yourself Before God 3x/Year

Add to that the truth that you must present yourself before God three times each year, and it can get concerning. Imagine having to be away from home almost six weeks per year. That's hard when you make your living as a farmer. It's doubly hard when your godless neighbor does not go up to Jerusalem during those weeks, and he starts casting his covetous eyes on your land when you're not there to protect it. It could be downright dangerous to go worship the Lord! Much better to sit tight and make sure that prowling neighbors don't come trespassing while you're hundreds of miles away in Jerusalem.

Or so you might think.

5. God Will Protect Your Land While You Worship

But God specifically promises that no one will covet your land while you are busy about His worship. He wrote legal protections for landownership into Israel's laws, such that the land could not be permanently alienated from the family who held it. But this is an even greater degree of protection. Not only will no one successfully steal your land, no one will even want to steal it because God will restrain your neighbor's sinful heart while you're off worshiping.

How do we apply this today? God does not promise that you will suffer no financial loss from worship. But the God who promises to keep your light-fingered neighbor off your property has not changed. Surely we can trust that He will not allow you to starve just because you worshiped Him! We can trust that He will care for your stuff while you give your attention to worship.

Brothers and sisters, to be in covenant with God requires that you go and worship Him. No longer do we need to keep Passover, Pentecost, and Booths. Rather, we worship Him on the Sabbath and take some time with Him every day.

D. Holy Worship, vv. 25-26

That worship is regulated by Him. He tells us how He wants to be worshiped. It's not our job to come up with new ideas and guesses about what He would like. It is our job to do what He wants us to do. Thus, His minutely detailed "no leaven in the bread of my sacrifice," "no leaving the Passover overnight," and "no eating your firstfruits." God has a certain way He wants things done.

You are a people in covenant with God. These regulations are not for us verbatim, because we no longer approach God through the Levitical system. But He has not changed and what He loves has not changed. Don't enter binding relationships with non-believers. Do keep God's holy day and trust that when you enter His holy space He will protect the rest of your life. Worship Him in a holy way.

When you do these things, you will show that you are His covenant people. You will act like those who have been saved from worshipping the golden calf. You will resemble God's beloved, obedient children. Amen.