

5: God's Covenant with Moses

Try to place yourself in the shoes of the Israelites. They quickly went from being the slaves of one of the most powerful nations on earth to being set free through a series of frightening miracles. They watched as God made fools of Egypt's gods and Egypt's "divine" ruler through the ten plagues. They marched out of Egypt as their former masters showered them with gifts of gold, silver, and clothing. They witnessed the impossible as God led them along dry ground through the midst of a parted sea. They saw God singlehandedly destroy the most powerful army in the region by simply unparting the sea.

Picture Israel standing on the far side of the Red Sea, having just witnessed some of the most dramatic events in history. They had just been claimed and rescued by a God whose power was clearly uncontested. After the glow of their exodus had worn off, the Israelites had to face some important questions: Who exactly is this God who rescued us and claimed us as His own? Where is He leading us and what are His intentions for us? What does it look like for us to live as the people of this God?

At the Base of Mount Sinai

As they walked away from the Red Sea into the wilderness, the Israelites did not know exactly what to expect. The first few months of their journey were filled with turmoil. The Israelites complained about lacking food and water. Then, when God miraculously provided fresh water and rained bread (manna) from heaven, they complained about the monotony of their diet. At one point they even got so upset that they wanted Moses dead. But everything changed—at least for a time—when they approached Mount Sinai.

When Israel arrived at the base of Mount Sinai, they discovered that God had chosen this place to reveal Himself to His people and enter into a covenant with them. Moses went up the mountain to meet with God, and God immediately explained His intention for Israel:

The LORD called to him [Moses] out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all 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 people of Israel." (Ex. 19:3–6)

Here God defined Israel. First of all, they were the people whom God had miraculously rescued from slavery. It would be impossible for God's people to define themselves without making reference to God's act of redemption in their exodus. But this was not all. God had "brought them to Himself." They were now God's "treasured possession." God was using this moment at Mount Sinai to identify Himself to His people and to tell them about their new identity. They could now rest in the security of being treasured and protected by God! It was also here that God would set the terms for how their relationship would work.

Before they could begin this process, however, the people of Israel had to prepare themselves:

The LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.’” (Ex. 19:10–12)

The Israelites had to “consecrate themselves.” Basically, they had to set themselves apart for a specific purpose; they had to prepare themselves for an encounter with God. This is what a relationship between a holy God and sinful people requires. While Moses met with God on Mount Sinai, the mountain was surrounded by smoke, lightning, and thunder. The people were not even allowed to touch the base of the mountain lest they be killed. God was doing something unique here, and He demonstrated this reality in dramatic fashion.

1. *Read Exodus 19. Explain the significance of the people’s cleansing themselves and staying clear of the mountain.*

2. *How should Israel’s encounter with God at Mount Sinai affect the way we view Him?*

A Holy God and Sinful People

At Sinai, God entered into a covenant with Moses and the rest of the Israelites. When God made His covenant with Abraham, He promised to make his descendants into a great nation, to give them the land of Canaan, and ultimately to bless all the nations of the earth through him. The covenant that God made with Moses built upon the covenant He made with Abraham. As they waited at the base of Mount Sinai, Israel learned that they were the great nation that God had promised to Abraham; they were the ones who would inherit the land of Canaan, and ultimately, their responsibility was to be a blessing to all the nations. The implications of this covenant were clear: the LORD would be Israel’s God, and Israel would be His people.

As we might anticipate, however, there were some potential problems with a holy God binding Himself to sinful people. How could this sinless God maintain a relationship with people who were prone to rebel and do the things He hates? Israel would need to know what God expected of them and what it looked like to live as the people of God.

This is where the Old Testament Law came in. Unlike the covenant with Abraham, the covenant with Moses included an extensive code of conduct. This Law spelled out God’s expectations for His people in their civil, religious, and moral lives. The Law began with the Ten Commandments, but from these ten simple laws followed more than one hundred specific laws related to all aspects of the life of the people of God. These laws were not intended to be comprehensive; they were meant to provide judiciary precedents through which Israel’s judges could make wise decisions about any issue

that might arise.

These laws were legally binding on the people of Israel in the Old Testament. When we read the New Testament, however, Jesus explained that He fulfilled the Old Testament Law (Matt. 5:17), and it is no longer binding on us as Christians (Rom. 6:14, Gal. 5:18). This means that we should not simply read the Law and directly apply it to our lives. At the same time, we cannot discard it or consider it meaningless. The Law gives insight into the character of God and His intention for His people.

For example, God commanded Israel to leave some of their produce in the fields and on the vines when they did their reaping and harvesting (Deut. 24:19–22). Strange as that may sound, it was God’s way of making provision for the “sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.” As we read this command today, we don’t need to literally leave some of the fruit on the vine when we harvest (how many of us actually harvest, anyway?). The point is, we need to provide for the poor. This command teaches us about God’s character and about the way He wants His people to function in the world He created.

Another thing we learn from the Law is that God has every right to dictate to His created beings how they must act. He *can* tell people what they can or cannot eat, what they can or cannot touch, etc. He determines what is morally right and has the freedom to set boundaries on our conduct. This is an important lesson given the prevailing arrogance in our culture.

3. *Read Exodus 20:1–21. What do the Ten Commandments reveal about the character of God?*

4. *What do the Ten Commandments reveal about the way God wants humanity to live?*

Maintaining the Relationship

The Law poses some difficult theological questions for Christians today. We know that we are saved by grace and not by works. In other words, there is no way that we can earn our way to God by keeping rules and doing good deeds—we are too sinful to be sufficiently obedient, and God saves us by grace through faith. When we read the Old Testament Law, however, it appears as though God is giving the Law to Israel so that they can be made right with Him by rule-keeping and good deeds.

But there is nothing in the Law that tells the Israelites that they will receive ultimate salvation if they perfectly keep every aspect of the Law. In fact, the Law itself assumes that the Israelites will fail in keeping it—that’s why the sacrificial system was included (we will discuss this more in the next session). The Law does promise blessing for obedience and a curse for disobedience (we will discuss this in a moment), but this is not the same thing as salvation by works. Even now God blesses us for obedience, and we suffer consequences when we rebel against Him.

In reality, the Law was never intended to give the Israelites a moral ladder they could climb and thereby earn God's favor by showing what good people they were. Instead, the Law was about maintaining a relationship with God. The Law solved the problem of how a holy God can bind Himself to a sinful people. It gave the people of Israel a tangible code of conduct that would allow them to faithfully live out their identity as the people of God. It taught them to relate to God and one another appropriately. We put too much strain on the Law when we try to make it into a system of salvation through good works.

5. *Explain the difference between Israel's keeping the Law in order to earn God's favor and keeping the Law in order to maintain a relationship with God.*

6. *In your own words, explain why it was important for God to give Israel the Law.*

Blessing and Curse

While the covenant with Moses was an extension of God's covenant with Abraham, there is an important difference between the two. With Abraham, the covenant was unconditional. In other words, God was making a promise to Abraham that was not dependent on Abraham's actions—God would fulfill this covenant no matter what Abraham did or didn't do. With Moses, however, God added a conditional element. God would bless Israel, bring them safely into the Promised Land, bless them in the land, and make them a blessing to the rest of the nations *if* they were faithful to observe God's Law.

God would always keep His promise to Abraham, but the promises He made at Mount Sinai to bless Israel were dependent on faithful obedience. These blessings were not dependent on Israel's sinless perfection—remember that God built a system of sacrifice, atonement, and forgiveness into the Law itself—but God required the Israelites to faithfully uphold their end of the covenant. If they did, they would be blessed and receive the promises. If they didn't, they would be cursed and taken into exile.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Israel stood at the brink of the Promised Land (many years after Israel stood at Mount Sinai) and prepared to walk in and claim the land that God was giving them. But before they entered the land, Moses gathered them together and reminded them of this covenant. Deuteronomy 28 clearly explains that if Israel would be faithful to God and keep this covenant with Him, He would bless them unimaginably. But if they rebelled and failed to keep their end of the covenant, God would send them a curse instead. The second half of Deuteronomy 28 is hard to read because God painted a horrifically vivid picture of what would happen if Israel chose to disobey. As we will see, the rest of the Old Testament shows Israel's failure to remain faithful to this covenant and the consequences they suffer for it.

7. *Read Deuteronomy 28. How do these promises of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience help us understand the importance of God's covenant with Moses and Israel?*

A Kingdom of Priests

Though God's covenant with Moses promised blessings for Israel, there was more at stake than the well-being of a single nation. Just as God promised to bless Abraham so that he would be a blessing to "all the families of the earth," God intended His covenant with Israel to be a blessing for every nation.

In Exodus 19:5–6, God told Israel that they were to be a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation." These two titles are extremely important for understanding Israel's calling. A priest has two responsibilities: to represent a holy God to sinful people, and to represent a sinful people to a holy God. As a kingdom of priests, Israel was meant to represent their God to the nations around them. Collectively, they were to show the world who their God was and what He demanded of the world. On the other side, God meant Israel to represent these nations to Himself. In other words, they were to pray on behalf of the people around them, asking God to bless them. These concepts are also present in the title "holy nation." They were meant to stand out, to be clearly different from other nations. They were set apart for God's purposes. They were to minister on God's behalf, to show the holy character of God to the world around them and be a light to the nations.

As the rest of the Old Testament unfolds, we find that Israel was largely unfaithful to this command. But that did not change God's heart. Israel was still God's "treasured possession," but that did not mean that God wanted Israel to feel superior to the world around them. They were special because God chose them for a specific purpose: to show the world that the LORD is God and to call them into a relationship with Him. God's heart has always been to restore every part of His creation, and He still calls His people to join Him in this work.

8. *As a "kingdom of priests" and a "holy nation," what was Israel's responsibility to the nations around them?*

9. *We are not the nation of Israel, but God uses similar phrases to describe the church (see 1 Peter 2:5, 9). How should God's covenant with Moses and the Israelites affect the way we view ourselves as the people of God?*

10. Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for reaching down into this broken world and choosing to work in and through broken people to accomplish His purposes. Ask Him to give you a heart that is set on obedience and a passion for reaching out to the world around you.



Watch the video for this session.