

Covenant Confirmed

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 24:1-18

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November 3, 2019

DTR

Over the last two weeks we've spent a lot of time learning about God's Law. We've covered the Ten Commandments. And last week Mike dealt with the rest of the law in the Book of the Covenant. We've also learned that God's Law not only teaches Israel how to live; it also teaches us something about God.

So, what's God like? What does the Law teach us about him? Does it simply teach us that God is like a judge who's set on law and order? Is that right? Is God all about rules? Heavens no! God's not all about rules. As evangelicals we reject this thinking, *don't we?* God's not all about rules; he's about relationship. *Right?* Well, yes and no.

You see there are a couple of common misconceptions about God. One is that God is some crotchety old stickler for rules. He's distant from his people and overbearing. That's clearly not the Bible's view of God. But the second misconception is equally wrong. It views God as so loving that he never makes demands on his people. This is a sentimental, Hallmark-view of God that strips him of his power and authority. So what's the right view of God? Well for one, God *does* want a relationship with his people. But the relationship God initiates and establishes *is* clearly defined by certain rules.

How many of you here have ever had a DTR session with someone? You know what I'm talking about. A DTR session is the "talk" couples eventually have to define the relationship. It helps them know where they stand. What's their status? Are they serious? Are they exclusive? Or are they just friends? Well that's kind of what's going on at Mt. Sinai. Israel has been through a lot with God. God's brought them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. Now it's time to define the relationship. And the way God defines the relationship with his people is through covenant. That's my sermon in a sentence—God defines the relationship with his people through covenant.

And the covenant God made with his people was patterned after ancient covenants made between two nations, between the sovereign king of a conquering nation and the vassal state of those who were conquered. These covenants had a number of common features we've seen already in the Mosaic covenant.¹ There was a preamble that declared the lordship of the sovereign king. We see that in Exodus 20:1, "I am the LORD." There was also a prologue that emphasized the benevolence of that sovereign king. We see that in Exodus 20 as well, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." There were certain stipulations of the covenant. We see these stipulations laid out in the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant. There were blessings and curses for keeping or breaking the covenant. We've covered many of these as well. And there were generally two copies of the covenant that were made and placed in the temples of the respective gods of the sovereign and the vassal. We see these copies written by God in verses 12-18 of our passage this morning. And later they're placed in the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle. But I'm not going to cover that section today.

¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*

Today I want to look at four additional aspects of the covenant God established with his people. I think these will help us stay away from the common misconceptions of God and help us to understand what a relationship with God should look like.

Exodus 24:1-11²

¹Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. ²Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.”

³Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.” ⁴And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. ⁶And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷Then 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.” ⁸And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

⁹Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Like I said earlier, I want to look at four aspects of the covenant God made with Israel to try to help us understand what a right relationship with God looks like, a relationship freed from our common misconceptions about God.

THE TERMS ARE SET BY THE SOVEREIGN LORD.

First, the covenant terms are set by the sovereign Lord.³

Ancient Near Eastern covenants were nothing like our modern-day contracts. There was no bargaining or negotiations like we may do in a lease. They weren't mutual contracts. The sovereign king would initiate the covenant and set the terms of the covenant. The vassal's job was to respond to the covenant, to agree to obey.

We see this same thing in Exodus 24. For one, notice that God is the one who takes the initiative in the covenant. Look at verse 1, “Then he said to Moses, ‘Come up to the LORD.’” God issues an invitation for the covenant confirmation ceremony to begin. And we know that he is the one who sets the terms of the covenant as well. Look at verse 8, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

The Israelites couldn't make edits to the final draft of the covenant. They were ultimately written on tablets of stone, as we see in verse 12, and were written with the finger of God (Ex. 31:18).

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

³ Robertson

What's the point of all of this? We learn a principle about relationship with God. We enter relationship with God *his* way. We don't set the terms. And we remain in relationship with God *his* way. We do this through ongoing obedience to God. Sure, relationships are all about love, but there's no contradiction between love and obedience.

Jesus said, "If you love me, you'll keep my commandments" (Jn. 14:15). Somebody in my community group this week said we see the same thing with our children. We set the rules. And why do our kids obey? Sure, they want to avoid discipline, but the main reason they obey us, at least early on, is because they love us.

This is what I want you to get this morning. God is not only Savior. He is also Lord. He not only brought Israel out of Egypt. He also brought them to Sinai. And he establishes his sovereign rule over them at Sinai. As we submit to God's, rule he blesses us. His commands are for our good (cf. Deut. 6:24). But in our focus on God's blessing, we can't lose sight of the fact that he's God and we're not. He's sovereign and our relationship with him must be characterized by submitting to him as Lord. That's the first characteristic of our relationship with him.

A PUBLIC AND OFFICIAL COMMITMENT

Second, the covenant is a public and official commitment.

In the ancient Near East, covenants were ratified in the presence of witnesses. It was a way to make the covenant public and official. These witnesses were often statues of their respective gods. But Israel knew there is only one true God. So, their witnesses were different. They still used statues, but they represented something different. In verse 4 we see that Moses built an altar and twelve pillars. The altar was for God. And the pillars represented the twelve tribes.⁴

Israel agrees three times at Mt. Sinai to obey God's rules. But this commitment to the covenant was not some private or individualized commitment. It was public and official.

We live in a day when many people are afraid of commitment. Dominick told me this week that the average millennial changes jobs every three years. That's very different from your grandpa, isn't it? We also know that divorce rates are high in our country, but the rate of divorce isn't really growing. What's astonishing in our day is the fact that fewer and fewer people are ever getting married. It's not that people aren't entering relationships. They are, but they're just not making those relationships public and official through marriage. It's a subtle way of dodging commitment. Many would say they're committed to the relationship, but they're not willing to seal that commitment through a public and official covenant.

Now I admit, this passage is not about a marriage relationship. It's about our relationship with God. But if we struggle to commit to human relationships, how much harder will it be to commit to our relationship with God?

But we're not Israel. Aren't things different in the new covenant in Christ? Yes, they are. But the principle still applies to us today. God has given us a way to go public with our relationship with God. I believe it's through baptism. Baptism is the initiation rite for entering into the new covenant with God.

⁴ Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, *Genesis, Exodus*: Cornerstone Biblical Commentary

Some would say that you can be committed to God without being baptized. After all, baptism doesn't save you. But remember God sets the terms of the relationship. And he commands those who believe in Christ to be baptized. It's *his* way to make your relationship with Christ public and official in the presence of witnesses. And speaking of public and official, let's look now at the third way God establishes a relationship with his people. Because it's so important, I'm going to spend a little more time here.

A BINDING RELATIONSHIP SEALED IN BLOOD

The covenant with God is a binding relationship, sealed in blood.⁵

We love the idea of the good ol' days when a man's word was his bond. When deals were made with a handshake. Or maybe a spit shake, where you spit in your hand before you shake. That's even more sacred. At least it was for the Little Rascals.

But in Exodus 24, we see that the covenant was more than a verbal agreement. And more than a handshake. It was made with blood. In verse 3, Moses reads the covenant and the people verbally agree to keep it. Then in verse 4, Moses takes things to another level; he writes the words down and builds the altar and the pillars, as we've seen. Then in verse 5, he offers sacrifices, and takes half the blood and throws it on the altar (v. 6). Then he reads the written version of the covenant in verse 7, and the people agree again to obey. Finally, in verse 8, he throws half the blood on the people.

What's up with all of this blood? Couldn't they just exchange rings? Well, Leviticus teaches us that blood represents life. And when blood is shed it represents death. So, at the most basic level, what this teaches us is that a covenant relationship with God is a matter of life and death.

When the Bible talks about making a covenant, it literally reads "cutting a covenant." In the ancient world, when two nations would establish a covenant they would kill a bunch of animals and cut them in two. Then they would lay them out and create an aisle between the dead carcasses. Then the two parties in the covenant would walk between the pieces. It was as if they were saying, "If anyone breaks this covenant, may his fate be the same as these animals!"

We see this in Genesis 15, when God makes a covenant with Abraham. It seems like the same thing is at play here in Exodus 24 (cf. Jer. 34). But instead of walking between the pieces, half the blood was thrown on the altar, for God's responsibility in the covenant. And the other half was thrown on the people for theirs.⁶

The relationship God is making with his people is a matter of life and death. It's not some Downy-soft relationship. Not some half-hearted commitment. The stakes are high when it comes to a relationship with God.

At first blush, that's not very good news for Israel. You see once Israel entered a covenant with God, if they broke the covenant, there had to be bloodshed. And as we know, Israel regularly violated their covenant with God. They never perfectly kept it.⁷

But there's more going on with all this blood than simply establishing the stakes of the relationship. The blood not only speaks of the demands of the covenant. It also speaks of the grace of God

⁵ Robertson

⁶ Ross and Oswalt

⁷ Robertson

present in this covenant. It points to the sacrifices God established for Israel, which we'll learn more about in coming weeks.⁸

How does this work? Like I said earlier, if Israel broke relationship with God there had to be bloodshed. Breaking covenant required death! But God made a gracious provision for his people. He said he would accept the blood of a substitutionary sacrifice. The blood of a lamb could make atonement for the broken covenant.

How does this apply to us? I think you know that we don't have to sacrifice animals to enter a relationship with God. Well, this sacrificial system was never meant to last forever. It served its purpose for a time. But its main purpose was actually to point to a permanent and perfect sacrifice. It was meant to point to Jesus!

But that doesn't mean that the old system is irrelevant for us. The same principle applies to us today. We too are all covenant breakers. We don't keep God's commands. And so, we too deserve to die. So, what can wash away our sin? What can make us whole again? What can for sin atone? Is it the good that I have done? What will give us hope and peace? What will give us righteousness? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

As we turn to the New Testament, we see that we can enter the new covenant through Christ's blood. God put forward Christ as a propitiation (an atoning sacrifice) by his blood, to be received by faith (Rom. 3:25). We have now been justified (declared righteous) by his blood (Rom. 5:9) In him we have redemption, through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses (Eph. 1:7). We have been brought near (relationship) by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:13). God has made peace (reconciled us) by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:20).⁹

This is amazing grace. Don't ever get the idea that God has ever required rules to get into a relationship with him or to stay in a relationship with him. Our relationship with God is solely grounded in God's sacrificial grace.

But those who have been saved by grace are then called to good works. Our salvation cost him dearly; it cost him his own son. God went to great lengths to save us. We should go to great lengths to serve him. Christ died for our sins. We're called to die to ourselves. We're called to lose our life in order to find it.

Do you see? A relationship with God is no light thing. It is a matter of life and death.

Now at this point in the sermon, you may be feeling a little overwhelmed. The tone may sound a little hard or severe. All of this talk about a sovereign God, a public and official commitment, blood, death, and obedience. These are weighty themes. And our relationship with God is a weighty matter.

But the dominant theme of this passage, the dominant tone, is not hard or severe. The theme that begins and ends this passage sets the tone for the whole. And it's an Ode to Joy! And that leads me to the fourth thing we learn about covenant relationship with God.

⁸ Cf. Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage*, *The Bible Speaks Today*; Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, *Preaching the Word*

⁹ Robertson

COMMUNION WITH GOD

The covenant is all about communion with God.

At the beginning of this passage, Israel is invited to come up to the mountain to worship God. But they're not to come too close, for God is too holy. At the end, they went up to the mountain. Then in verse 10 we're told they actually see God. This all seems very scary and overwhelming. You see the Bible teaches us that you can't see God and live (Ex. 33:20)! But in some mysterious way that I don't quite understand, they see God and live to tell about it.

In verse 11 it says, "And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank." This is amazing.

And here's the point I want you to get. At the end of the day, obedience to God wasn't the end game. Fear of God wasn't the end game. Sure, obedience and fear were part of the game, but it wasn't the main goal.¹⁰

We're in the middle of football season. What's the main goal of football? Some people will say, football is all about blocking and tackling. And blocking and tackling are a very basic part of the game. But blocking and tackling aren't the goal of football. Blocking and tackling serve a bigger purpose. The purpose of keeping the other team from making touchdowns and for your team to make touchdowns. And then to celebrate when all that happens with some awesome touchdown dance.

The main goal at Sinai wasn't fear and obedience. Those elements were critical to a relationship with God. But the main goal was intimacy with God, fellowship with God, communion with God.

In the ancient Near East, it was common to eat a meal together after a covenant was cut. We see the same thing today. Even in big business deals or mergers between two companies, what do you do after the deal is cut? After a big deal, there's a big meal. A celebration. We see this in marriage ceremonies as well. After the solemn vows in the presence of God and many witnesses. After all of the sickness and health, till death do you part. After the giving and exchanging of rings, what do you do? You celebrate. And how do you celebrate? You eat! You drink. You cut the cake and pour the punch. Or maybe you cut the prime rib and pop the cork on the champagne. Then you dance until your clothes are soaked through.

That's what's going on in Exodus 24. The covenant ceremony begins with an invitation to a feast. And after all of the vows are said and the sign of blood is exchanged, the key players sit down to eat together.

Few things establish fellowship or friendship more than a meal. When we share a meal with someone, it says we belong.¹¹ And in this setting, we see God, the holy God of the universe, sharing a meal with his people. They belong to him! This was surely a joyous occasion. And it was certainly the goal of the whole thing.

¹⁰ Ross and Oswalt

¹¹ Ryken and Hughes

God wants a relationship with his people. Sure, it's a relationship defined by obedience to the sovereign Lord. But it's communion with that same God! And it is meant to be marked by intimacy and joy.

What's your relationship with God like? Is God just some distant, judgmental rule-maker for you? Or is God so loving or impotent in your mind that he would never make demands on your life?

Neither of these pictures of God is accurate. That's not the way God defines a relationship with him. A relationship with God is one of submission to a sovereign king. He gave his all for you and demands your life and your all. And he wants that relationship to be public and official. But don't forget. The goal of it all is for you to experience deep communion with him, fellowship, intimacy.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Jesus said that his coming kingdom would be like a great banquet, "Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11). There's a place for everybody at the table. His covenant meal isn't just for Israel anymore. It's for all nations.

Phil Ryken says that God is always busy handing out invitations to his feast. Every time the gospel is preached, people are invited to come and eat and drink with God. When Christ returns he will throw the biggest feast of all time. It's called the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). And did you know that you can put your RSVP in for that meal today? If you place your faith in Jesus Christ you will be a guest at his table. If you trust that through his blood you are forgiven and that you are now in covenant relationship with him, then you will sit down and eat with him.¹²

But there's more. We don't have to wait for that day to enjoy communion with God at the table. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we proclaim his death until he comes. At the Lord's Supper we remember that Christ has made a covenant with us in his blood. The bread represents his body torn in two for us. The cup represents his blood shed for us. We remember the covenant he made and we give thanks.

But there's more to the Lord's Supper than that. Throughout the history of the church, most people believe that the Lord's Supper is also a covenant renewal ceremony. The way we enter into covenant relationship with God is through baptism. But as we come to the Lord's Supper, we renew that covenant relationship each time. We remember the sacrifice Christ paid for us. But we also remember that we belong to him. That we are not our own. We were bought with a price. So we are called to obey all that Christ has commanded us as his disciples. And our obedience is motivated by Christ's great sacrifice for us. By his grace.

If you have placed your trust in Jesus, I want to invite you to come to the table this morning. Allow these elements to nourish and confirm your faith.

If you have not yet placed your trust in Jesus, I would ask that you not participate in this meal this morning. Instead, use this time to reflect on the gospel. Even though you have failed to keep God's commands, Christ has shed his blood for you. Trust in the blood of Christ today and you will be saved.

¹² Ryken and Hughes