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Lesson 8
The Covenant at Sinai
Exodus 19:1-25

God had a definite plan for Israel. His plan was to make Israel a great nation, which He had originally promised to Abraham in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3). At least 430 years had passed since God had made that promise to Abraham. While Israel was in slavery in Egypt, it appeared that Israel would never become a great nation. Yet, God had a perfect plan that He carried out in His own way and His own timing for Israel. God sent Moses to Israel to be their leader, and under Moses, God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt by the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. God formed an infant nation at the time of the Passover, which spoke of Israel's spiritual, as well as physical, deliverance. Then God took Israel across the Red Sea, which spoke of the new birth that completely separated the new nation from Egypt. Now, in Exodus 19, God gives Israel another covenant, sometimes referred to as the Mosaic Law, or Sinaitic Covenant, or the Law of Jehovah. Exodus 19 and 20 records a turning point for Israel and for all mankind in God's plan for this world.

The exodus from Egypt constituted only the first phase of the creation of a nation. The completion of that nation and the establishment of a particular religious identity took place at Sinai. At Sinai, Israel received the Law and the Tabernacle. The Law provided a way of life for the nation, and the Tabernacle demonstrated the way of worship. The Law of Moses made Israel separate from all the nations of the earth. The Law set the Israelites apart as a specific nation unto God.

THE PARTICULAR TIME OF THE GIVING OF THE COVENANT - Exodus 19:1

“In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt . . .” The exodus began on May 14, 1447 B.C., so the children of Israel came to the desert of Sinai on July 14, 1447 B.C. After two months of being a new, infant nation, God was now going to give them the Law which would make them an official nation with a complete judicial, civil, social, and religious system.

“. . . On that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.” It had been two months since Israel left Egypt by the Jewish calendar. It was at Mt. Sinai that God fulfilled His promise to Moses.

“And He said, ‘Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain’” (Exodus 3:12).

We know from Numbers 1:1 that Israel was at Mt. Sinai for about eleven months. During this time, they received the Law from God through Moses, and they built the Tabernacle according to His instruction.

THE PLACE WHERE THE COVENANT WAS GIVEN - Exodus 19:2

“When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai, and encamped in the wilderness . . .” In the desert of Sinai, God chose to make a marvelous revelation of Himself and His will to the nation of Israel. He gave them the Mosaic Law, and He would deal

with Israel for the next 1500 years under this covenant.

“ . . . And there Israel encamped before the mountain.” This mountain was Mt. Sinai. We are not able to determine the exact location of the mountain today.

THE PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT - Exodus 19:3- 4

“And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel . . .’ This covenant was made with a particular people at a particular point in history. From Adam to Moses there was no Mosaic Law. There was law from Adam to Moses, but the Mosaic Law was for a specific people in a specific economy.

“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’” (Exodus 24:7-8).

“Then Moses summoned all Israel, and said to them, ‘Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully. The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. The LORD did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all those of us alive here today’” (Deut. 5:1-3).

The Mosaic Law had a historical beginning. It was given to the nation of Israel, which God set up as a theocracy. The Law of Moses applied to believers and unbelievers within the nation of Israel.

“For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?” (Deut. 4:7-8)

Every person in Israel, saved and unsaved, lived under the rules of the Mosaic Law.

“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself.” God sovereignly separated the nation of Israel away from Egypt and unto Himself. God delivered the sons of Israel so they would be a people who would love God and reflect His love to all the nations. They were a very special people to God.

“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” (Deut. 7:6-8)

The expression “eagles’ wings” is figurative and denotes the strong and loving care of God. The mother eagle watches over her young in a very careful manner. When the young eagle leaves the nest to learn to fly, the mother eagle pushes the baby off the high rocks, and then she

flies beneath the eaglet and catches it. This is repeated over and over until the baby learns to fly. When Israel left Egypt, it was merely an eaglet nationally speaking. Its vulnerability and defenselessness were perfectly obvious. Without the intervention of God, they would have been easily crushed and defeated, but God dealt with them in grace because they made up His infant nation.

God has also chosen the Church to be a holy people unto God, and the Church is to live for God. "... ***Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him***" (Eph. 1:4).

THE PROMISES OF GOD IN THE COVENANT - Exodus 19:5-6

"Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant . . ." Since God had called Israel unto Himself and was responsible for Israel's freedom and liberty, they were therefore obligated to respond in obedience to the covenant that God was about to establish. The Lord wanted obedience, but not out of fear alone. He expected their obedience to be an expression of their love for Him. However, we should note that the Mosaic Covenant is a conditional covenant. The little word "if" is very significant. The blessing of God upon the nation of Israel was conditioned on their obedience and the "if" tells us that the whole Mosaic Law could be taken away from Israel if they failed to obey it.

The Mosaic Covenant is not like the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional and permanent, and every Jew was under that covenant given to Abraham hundreds of years before the Mosaic Law was given. The Mosaic Law did not abrogate the Abrahamic Covenant, but it was added along side the Abrahamic Covenant until the seed, Jesus Christ, should come.

"Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'AND TO SEEDS,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'AND TO YOUR SEED,' that is, Christ. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made." (Gal. 3:16-19)

Perhaps this is the place to point out that God never designed the Law of Moses as a means to save anyone's soul from sin. The New Testament makes it very clear that the Law does not save but it only convicts of and points out sin.

"... For through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." (Rom. 3:20)

"Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions ..." (Gal. 3:19)

The Mosaic Law never could justify anyone.

"Therefore, let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him (Christ) forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed (justified) from all things, from which you could not be freed (justified) through the Law of Moses." (Acts 13:38-39)

People in every dispensation have always been saved by grace through faith in the promise of God who gives a Savior, the Messiah. Abraham, who came before the Mosaic Law, was saved by grace through faith when he believed God's promise. ***"Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness"*** (Gen. 15:6). Every Jew was under the Abrahamic Covenant and had to be saved the same way as his father Abraham—by grace through faith. The object of faith in the Old Testament was Jehovah-God, which included the promise of the Messiah to come. When the Mosaic Law was added alongside the Abrahamic Covenant, it did not change the Abrahamic Covenant at all, but it did put the nation of Israel under the Law, and their blessings as God's people depended upon the faithful keeping of those laws. Mosaic Law never saved one Jew, but the faithful keeping of the Law was a means used in the Old Testament for a Jew's sanctification. The Jew proved his new birth by his willingness to keep the Law of Moses. He did not keep the Law to get saved. No! He kept the Law the best he could to prove, demonstrate, and give evidence he was saved. The Law, then, was a rule of life, a way of life, for an Israelite, but it never saved any Jew. However, the Law ultimately condemned every Jew, because he could not keep it perfectly. The Jew was to be a holy person unto God, and the way he showed he loved God was to attempt to keep the Law. The Israelite's practical sanctification was tied up with the external keeping of the Law. ***"For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy"*** (Lev. 11:44). This is repeated in the New Testament for the Church. ***"... But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior, because it is written, 'YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY'"*** (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

What happened as the years rolled by was that more and more Jews were not truly saved, but they still gave external allegiance to the Law. Yet their hearts were far from God. However, they thought they were saved because they gave some kind of assent to the Law. It was this spirit that was so viciously condemned by Christ.

"You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS THEIR DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.'" (Matt. 15:7-9)

"... Then you shall be My own possession among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine . . ." If the Israelites would obey, then they would be God's own possession or "special treasure." Israel was to be a special treasure, but her reason for existence was to glorify God and be a light to the Gentiles concerning God's grace.

"... And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." If she would obey, Israel would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Israel was collectively a royal and priestly race, representing all mankind before God. She was elected by God to be holy. She was not to be like other nations around her. She was to be characterized by holiness, which is a fundamental demand for fellowship with God. We should note that in the New Testament the Church is called a people of "God's own possession," "a royal priesthood," and "a holy nation."

"But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR GOD'S OWN POSSESSION, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD: you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY." (1 Pet. 2:9-10)

The Church is fulfilling that which was promised to Israel. How is this? These blessings to Israel were tied to her obedience to the Mosaic Covenant. She failed ultimately, even rejecting the Messiah. God set physical Israel aside and began to work with the Church. The Church is “spiritual Israel.” **“And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God”** (Gal. 6:16). The Church is fulfilling spiritually what God ultimately meant for Israel. This does not mean, however, that God does not yet have a plan for physical Jews, even the nation, in the future, for Romans 11 seems to indicate a massive turning of Jews in or around the second coming of Christ. The question is why was this peculiar relationship of a “special treasure,” and the “kingdom of priests” position, and the privilege of being a “holy nation” taken from Israel? Because she failed to obey, the blessings of the covenant were taken from her and given to the Church. Disobedience to God always has devastating consequences, whether a person is a Jew in Israel in 1447 B.C. or a Christian in America in 1979 A.D.

“These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.” These promises were to be made known to the children of Israel. All they had to do was be obedient to the Law of Moses.

What was the Law of Moses? It was the whole body of legislation for the whole nation of Israel that included social, moral, civil, judicial and religious responsibilities. The Mosaic Law traditionally has been divided into three parts: moral (the Ten Commandments and all other commandments); ceremonial (tabernacle, feasts, priesthood, circumcision, sacrifices, etc.); and social or civic (civil laws, sanitation, rotation of crops, quarantine, diet, tithing, etc.). As to the moral section of the Law, there are 613 commands, and the Ten Commandments are just ten of those laws. It is interesting to note that the moral law is interwoven all through the ceremonial and civil sections of the Mosaic Law. Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of moral, ceremonial and civil elements or aspects of the Law rather than moral, civil, and ceremonial sections of the Law. The whole Law was given to make Israel a distinct nation unto God. The Law was given to direct a theocracy (rule by God)

It seems as though the whole Mosaic Law was designed by God to be a type or shadow of salvation and Christian living which Christians now enjoy since Christ has come.

“And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:13-17).

THE PROMISE BY THE PEOPLE TO KEEP THE COVENANT - Exodus 19:7-8

“So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him.” Moses gathered the elders (leaders in Israel) and the people and set before them this challenge to keep the Law.

“And 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.” The sons of Israel bound themselves voluntarily to this covenant because, in their hearts at that point of time, they desired

to show their obedience to God.

Some extreme dispensationalists say that when Israel agreed to keep the Law they abandoned the grace principle for their lives; that is, they put themselves under law rather than grace which was an act of the flesh. There simply is no basis for this view that Israel forsook grace for law at Sinai. Admittedly, they seemed to have a cocksure attitude, and perhaps they did not realize the high demands of the Law and all that was involved in keeping it. However, it was God who gave the Law and the people simply ratified the Law by agreeing to the terms of the Law.

THE PREPARATION TO RECEIVE THE COVENANT - Exodus 19:9-15

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, I shall come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe in you forever.’ Then Moses told the words of the people to the Lord.” God appeared to Moses in a cloud and spoke audibly to Moses so the people could hear and know that God was with Moses and this would cause them to follow him. Surely, this was effective for a while, but just in a few months Israel would forget all they had seen and heard at Sinai and once again complain, grumble and gripe against Moses.

“The LORD also said to Moses, ‘Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; and let them 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.’” The first thing the Jews were to do in preparation for this important event of receiving the Law was to sanctify themselves through the ceremonial washing of the body and clothes and the abstaining from sexual intercourse (cf. 19:15).

These people were to prepare themselves ceremonially to receive divine revelation from God, and we Christians should prepare ourselves spiritually to receive God’s revelation of the Bible. We must prepare ourselves by prayer and meditation to read the Word, to listen to a sermon or to hear the Word taught in a Bible class. We should confess our sins, ask for a special filling of the Holy Spirit, and desire conviction from God when the Word is set before us in any form. Spiritual preparation is essential to understanding divine revelation.

“And you shall set bounds for the people all around saying, ‘Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the ram’s horn sounds a long blast, they shall not come up to the mountain.” The second stipulation was that bounds should be set around the mountain in order that people might die in wrongly approaching the presence of God. The Law was from a holy God, and the Law, at least the moral law, was a reflection of God’s holy character. The Mosaic Law can show us God’s holiness and our own sinfulness, but it cannot take us to God. The Law actually stands between the sinner and God so as to cause a person to stand afar off. ***“So the people stood at a distance (afar off), while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was”*** (Exodus 20:21).

“So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments. And he said to the people, ‘Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.’” Apparently the people all complied with these conditions, and God did appear to the people.

THE PHENOMENA SURROUNDING THE GIVING OF THE COVENANT - Exodus 19:16-20

“So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there was thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.” The purpose of all these dramatic phenomena surrounding the giving of the Law was to impress upon the people the majestic power of a sovereign God. It helped to highlight the tremendous importance of this occasion and call to their attention that the commitment, which they had made was not to be taken lightly. These phenomena reminded Israel that God’s judgments are sure and His voice is fearful. The people trembled.

The Mosaic Law, when rightly understood, reflects the character of a holy, righteous, and majestic God. When a man sees this, he knows he is a sinner and he begins to tremble before God, knowing that he needs deliverance from the fear and the guilt of the Law.

“And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. And the LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.” There was a fearful and frightening scene, for God had taken up residence on Mount Sinai. What must have been going through Moses’ mind as he approached that mountain? Moses was a brave man!

THE PROHIBITION CONCERNING THE GIVING OF THE COVENANT - Exodus 19:21-25

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, ‘Go down, warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. And also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.’” The people were warned again that they were not to break over the boundaries lest God slay them.

“And Moses said to the LORD, ‘The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for Thou didst warn us, saying, “Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.”’ Then the LORD said to him, ‘Go down and come up again, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come to the LORD, lest He break forth upon them.’ So Moses went down to the people and told them.” The God who was at Mount Sinai was not approachable, for He was a holy God and that holiness was to be reflected in the Sinaitic Covenant, which God was about to give them.

CONCLUSION

What were the statements and phenomena surrounding the giving of the Law? Listen very closely. Thunder and lightning, which speaks of God’s judgment. Bounds were set for the people so they could not approach the God who was on Mt. Sinai. Those who attempted to approach God would be put to death. The people were threatened with perishing and that God would break out against them for disobedience. Everything accompanying the giving of the Law spoke of warnings, threatenings and judgments. Why? The Law is a reflection of the holy character of Almighty God!

The ultimate design for the Law was to convince and convict men of sin. The Law says, “Thou shalt not lie!” Have you ever lied? Then you are guilty before a holy God. The Law says, “Honor thy father and mother!” Have you ever disobeyed your parents? Then you are guilty before a holy God. The Law says, “Thou shalt not covet!” Have you ever desired something to feed your own lusts? Then you are guilty before a holy God. The Law threatens us; the Law

condemns us; the Law frightens us; the Law makes us feel guilty. Good! You see, the design of the Law is to show us we are sinners and this drives us to Jesus Christ Who loves sinners, Who forgives sinners, Who comforts sinners, Who removes guilt feelings, and Who takes away all fears of eternal judgment.

The Law causes a person to stand off from God, but Jesus Christ causes a person to draw near to God. The New Testament says in Hebrews 4:16, ***“Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*** Any sinner who believes in Christ can draw near to Christ, for Christ has died for the sinner and borne the curse of the Law for him. Draw near, fearful sinner, for Jesus Christ is full of grace, truth, and love!