

EXODUS: Lesson Four, Sinai: Decalogue and Book of the Covenant

Exodus 19 – 24

Subject: Israel entered a covenant agreement with God at Sinai.

Main Idea: God's people enter a relationship with Him on the basis of a covenant.

Principles:

1. *God's covenant people are His representatives.*
2. *The principles of the Old Covenant have timeless relevance.*
3. *The Old and New Covenants were both sealed by blood.*

Introduction

Like a lover wooing his beloved, the Lord boldly displayed His power and His faithfulness to the descendants of the twelve sons of Israel, dramatically rescuing them from enslavement in Egypt and supernaturally providing for them in the desert. Having proved His worth, Exodus 19-24 tell us that the Lord then proposed a permanent relationship to Israel by means of a covenant. A covenant is a legally binding agreement. Marriage is a good example of a covenant and an especially fitting one, since love was at the center of the Lord's relationship with Israel (Matthew 22:33-34) and because the Lord later used the analogy when He called Israel's unfaithfulness to Him adultery (Ezekiel 16). Exodus 19-24 tells of Israel and the Lord committing to a covenant relationship with another. Israel was getting married! The chapters tell of the Israelites' preparation to enter the covenant, the God-given stipulations of the covenant, and the ceremony that took place to confirm the new relationship.

In this summary, I am also including some general information about Old Testament "Law." In the thirteen lessons we have in our *Exodus* study, we will never be able to thoroughly study what many scholars have devoted their entire lives to – the books of the Law. Our goal is to have a good understanding of the general outline of these books and their relevance in our present day lives.

I. Preparation for the Covenant – Exodus 19

A. Sinai

i. Arrival

1. The first two verses of Exodus 19 indicate that the Israelites moved to the base of Mount Sinai *in the third month* after they left Egypt. Since the phrase indicating the *day* of their arrival can be translated "on the first day of the third month after [they left Egypt]" or "three months to the very day after [they left Egypt],"ⁱ it may not be possible to determine the day of the third month by the text.ⁱⁱ
2. At the end of chapter 18, Israel had been encamped in the Desert of Sin at Rephidim. The nearby Sinai region was also a desert, but ever since the Lord had made a supernatural provision of water from a rock at Sinai, this was where Israel had been traveling to get water (17:6, 7). Relocation to the base of Mount Sinai would have been a welcome change.

3. We later learn that the Israelites remained at Sinai until the twentieth day of the second month *of the second year* of their travels (Numbers 10:11). They spent the better part of a year at Sinai! The remainder of the book of Exodus, all of Leviticus, and the first ten chapters of Numbers record the events that occurred and the God-given revelation Israel received in that one-year period. All of these events show Israel's birthing from a large, tribal family into a well-organized, governed nation. Her government is sometimes called a "theocracy," that is, "rule by God." Her national identity was defined by her covenant relationship with the Lord. It was at Sinai that the Israelites vowed for the first time to make *God* their national leader.
 - ii. Summary of Events: While at Sinai, Israel entered into a covenant relationship with God (Exodus 19-24); received moral, civil, and ceremonial laws from God, upon which the covenant was based (Exodus 20-23, 25-31, Leviticus 1-7, 11-27, and a few laws scattered throughout Numbers); constructed the Tabernacle according to God's design (Exodus 35-40); instituted the priesthood and established the system of sacrifices, according to God's instructions (Leviticus); took a census (Numbers 1) and arranged their camp (Numbers 2), as God ordered; and celebrated their first Passover outside Egypt (Numbers 9).
 - iii. Location: Mount Sinai has not been conclusively identified. The traditional location is in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula. Some argue for a location further north.
 - iv. Moses' Meeting Place with the Lord: Mount Sinai was the place where God met with and gave instructions to Moses. In Exodus 19 alone, it seems that Moses made several trips (perhaps three) up and down the mountain, receiving and delivering God's instructions.

B. The Covenant: Treaties were common in ancient civilization. One kind of treaty, a Suzerainty Treaty, was a contract between an overlord and underlings. Many such treaties that have been discovered by archaeologists are formatted in a manner that is similar to the Lord's covenant with Israel. These covenants typically included an identification of the giver and receiver of the covenant, a statement about their relationship, laws and stipulations, instructions to keep the covenant in written form and to read it regularly, and blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Witnesses then confirmed the covenant. As we shall see spelled out in the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy, all of these features are found in God's covenant with Israel. By proposing a covenant to Israel, God related to them in a way they would have clearly understood.

i. The Covenant Proposed – 19:3-9

1. *Basis of the Covenant:* The first time the Lord called Moses up Mount Sinai, He proposed a covenant with Israel. Israel had witnessed His fidelity and power; He had rescued them from Egypt and provided for them along their journey. His statement “the whole earth is mine” (verse 5) introduced Israel to the concept of monotheism. Egypt and the other nations were polytheistic. Since everything rightfully belongs to Yahweh, He could have simply demanded Israel’s allegiance. Instead, He lovingly wooed them and then, on the basis of what He had done (19:4), proposed a permanent relationship.
2. *Summary of the Covenant:* Verses 5-6 summarize the entirety of the covenant, as well as God’s purpose for inviting Israel into the relationship. God had promised Abraham that his descendants (the Israelites) would bless all the nations of the earth (12:2-3). Therefore, God said that if Israel entered into a covenant relationship with Him, He would make them a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” They were to represent God to the rest of the world so that *all people* might know Him! The details of *how* they would do this were revealed in the laws God gave them. In recognition of God’s sovereignty, the Israelites would commit to fully obey God, and as they loyally obeyed Him, they would take on this prized role.
3. *Old Versus New Covenant:* Several different covenants were made between God and people in the Old Testament. For example, after the Flood, God made a covenant with Noah and all people after him that He would never again destroy the world by flood (Genesis 9). God also made a covenant with David, promising that one of his descendants would always sit on the throne (2 Samuel 7). The covenant referred to when speaking of the Old Covenant (“Old Testament”) is the covenant God made with His people Israel that we are now studying. It is also called the Sinaitic or Mosaic Covenant. The prophet Jeremiah foretold a “new covenant” God would make with His people (Jeremiah 31:31-33). “New Testament” means “new covenant.” It is offered entirely on the basis of Jesus’ substitutionary life and death (Luke 22:20).

4. *Response to the Proposed Relationship*: The Israelites heard the Lord's proposal and responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said" (19:8). The next step was to prepare them for a ceremony in which the covenant was officially agreed upon. The Lord planned to give Moses the terms of the agreement in the Israelites' presence, to instill ongoing confidence in them that Moses was indeed God's appointed prophet (19:9).
- ii. Preparation for the Covenant – 19:10-15: The second time the Lord called Moses up the mountain, He instructed Him in preparing the people for the covenant ceremony. The Israelites were required to consecrate themselves for three days. Their clothes were to be washed and they were to fast from sexual activity, in order to remain focused on God and not on themselves. They were also to put limits around the mountain, where God would appear, to prevent them from touching it. The penalty for transgressing the border was death. God was teaching His people to approach Him with respect. He deserved this far more than any human king.
 - iii. The Lord's Descent on Mount Sinai – 19:16-25: The Lord's descent on Mount Sinai was a theophany, in which He appeared within a storm (lightning, thunder, and a thick cloud), in the form of fire. Smoke from the fire covered the mountain and billowed upward. An increasingly loud trumpet sounded at His approach. This memorable appearance inspired awe and respect, so that the Israelites would obey the Lord. Moses later affirmed this, saying, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, *so that the fear of God will be with you and keep you from sinning*" (Exodus 20:20). The Israelites glimpsed the holy nature of the One they were to represent and it prepared them to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6). A proper view of God goes a long way in discouraging sin.
 - iv. Further Instructions: The Lord called Moses up the mountain a third time and gave him yet another warning that the people must not approach Him or the mountain. While they may have been curious, the frightful sights and sounds discouraged them from approaching. God also told Moses to bring Aaron up the mountain with him, presumably meaning the next time the Lord called him up, since Aaron did not ascend the mountain with Moses until later (chapter 24). Moses returned down the mountain to ensure the people understood the importance of observing the limits. There, he remained with the people, ready to hear from God.

Summary Statement: The Israelites were prepared to enter a covenant with God and become His representatives. Having Israel represent Him was God's express purpose for the covenant relationship (Exodus 19:5-6).

Principle: *God's covenant people are His representatives.*

The New Testament tells us that believers today are also “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that we may declare the praises of Him who called us...” (1 Peter 2:9). Yet some Christians have adopted a very self-centered view of the Gospel. They love having the assurance and hope of Heaven, but seem ignorant of the fact that God saved them for a purpose beyond themselves. In His last words before returning to Heaven, Jesus commissioned His followers to represent Him throughout the world (Matthew 28:18-20) and said that His Holy Spirit would *empower* us to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8). The world cannot see God with their physical eyes; but they can see us! If God had not planned to use us as His representatives, He would just take us to Heaven the moment we are saved. Representing Him is our life mission!

Application: Have you been wondering recently about God’s will for your life? Begin representing Him well *in your present circumstances and location* and you can be sure you are fulfilling His purpose for you. If we obey where we are, He will clearly lead us elsewhere, if that is His design. Have you seen evidence recently that others’ respect and appreciation for God has grown because of the way you represent Him?

Transition: The Israelites understood that they were agreeing to be God’s representatives. Next, God explained exactly *how* they could do that. He gave them laws by which they would be governed, laws that instructed them about His character.

II. Stipulations of the Covenant – Exodus 20-23

A. Nature of God’s Law

i. “Torah”

1. *Meaning:* In the Jewish tradition, the first five books of the Bible are known as “Torah.” This is a word that means “law,” but more specifically, “to inform, instruct, direct, or guide.” It carries the negative connotation of restriction, but it also carries the positive idea of guiding us into good. “Torah” is a noun, the verb form of which is “Yarah,” which means to throw or shoot something, like an arrow, in a certain direction. Since “Yarah” contains the idea of “hitting the mark,” sin is defined as “missing the mark.”
2. *Elaboration Upon by Jewish Rabbis:* In their fervor to protect and apply the Torah, the Jews elaborated upon its specific requirements, creating laws that they held with the same authority as the laws God gave through Moses. These were eventually compiled and put into written forms, known as the “Talmud” and the “Mishnah.” Jesus often chastened the Jewish leaders in His day for burdening the people with their many additional rules or traditions.

- ii. Various Codes: The old covenant contains several different codes. Two of these are covered in this lesson: the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant. Others include a priestly code (in Leviticus), the Holiness Code (also in Leviticus), and the Deuteronomic Code, meaning “second law” (in Deuteronomy).
1. *Formats*: The laws within these codes are predominantly formatted in one of two ways: *Apodictic laws* are stated as absolutes (such as the Ten Commandments’ “You shall” or “You shall not...”). *Casuistic laws* are “case” laws (such as those found in the Book of the Covenant) formatted as “if... then...” statements.
 2. *Subjects*: Within these codes, we find moral laws, civil laws, and ceremonial laws. The Ten Commandments (and other laws like them) are moral laws. The Book of the Covenant in Exodus 21-23 contains civil laws. Most of the book of Leviticus contains ceremonial laws.
- iii. A Paradigm
1. *Principles by Which to Live*: Many present-day societies have thousands of laws by which they are governed, laws that address any and every potential situation, for the purpose of preventing a lawbreaker from avoiding punishment through a technicality (a “loophole”). The Mosaic Law is not like this. The people and their rulers were expected to draw upon *the principles* contained within the given laws and cases for application to situations not addressed. Some of the laws given were broad in nature and some were very specific, making the point that they were meant to be applied literally and also in principle. As one writer put it, the Israelites were to hear them and think, “I now see that in the tiniest detail as well as in the widest, most general way, I am expected to try to keep this law—in all its implications, not just in terms of its exact wording.”ⁱⁱⁱ
 2. *Summaries of the Law*: What we know as the Ten Commandments, or Decalogue (Latin for “ten laws”), are literally called “Ten Words” in Hebrew. These “words” form the *basic constitution* of the law by which God’s people were to be governed. All that follows are applications of these ten, basic “words.” Jesus reduced the Ten Commandments even further to only two: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:34-40). In examining the Decalogue, we see that the first four relate to our relationship with God and the last six relate to our relationships with one another.

B. The Decalogue – 20:1-17

i. Enumerated

1. *You shall have no gods before me*: What little tradition may have remained among the Israelites from their forefathers after 400 years of living in Egypt is unknown. Presumably, monotheism was a new concept to the Israelites of Moses' day. God is rightfully jealous (20:5) since He alone deserves our worship. This first commandment was foundational to the rest.
2. *You shall not make images*: The first commandment deals with *who* we worship, and the second, with *how* we worship. We are not to create anything that we hold to resemble God. Images give us a false concept of God and therefore, cheapen our worship of Him. Rather than creating images, we can only know and worship God as He really is by carefully studying the Scriptures.
3. *You shall not misuse the name of the Lord*: The name of God is holy because it represents His character. His name should inspire reverence in us. Therefore, this command extends beyond the misuse of the name "God" to speaking *about Him* in any disrespectful way. Anytime we use His name casually or flippantly, we break this command. Too many professing Christians have joined non-believers in misusing God's name this way.
4. *Keep the Sabbath holy*: The wording, "*Remember the Sabbath*" indicates that this command had already been given. It was first issued at Creation (Genesis 2:2-3). The Lord ceased His creative work on the seventh day. We are to follow His example. The book of Hebrews speaks of believers entering the Sabbath rest by coming to faith in Christ. In this sense, the Sabbath has always been a reminder that we cannot satisfy God (or even ourselves) with our works. Faith in God's provision of Jesus allows us to be at rest. Practically speaking, the command was for our benefit (Mark 2:27), to give us time for special worship of God and for physical rest.
5. *Honor your parents*: This is the first of the commands dealing with human relationships. Respect for authority begins in the home. If respect is not learned at home, other societal structures of authority will not be respected either, eventually leading to the breakdown of authority in general. It is the only command that is accompanied by a promise: keeping it would result in longevity.

6. *You shall not murder*: Life is sacred because human beings are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27). The word used specifically refers to murder, including taking one’s own life or ending another person’s as an act of “mercy.” However, capital punishment, which was instituted by God in Genesis 9:6, is not included in the prohibition.
 7. *You shall not commit adultery*: Other violations of sex outside of the marriage relationship, including bestiality and incest, are addressed specifically elsewhere.
 8. *You shall not steal*: Stealing takes many forms: stealing of time, stealing of someone’s reputation, and even keeping what we owe God in tithes and worship.
 9. *You shall not give false testimony*: This is an example of a narrower type of command that was to be applied in principle. Therefore, while the context suggests a legal situation, lying in general is condemned. A “neighbor” is anyone with whom we come into contact, not merely those who live near us.
 10. *You shall not covet*: This command is broad, encompassing the sixth through ninth commands. The Israelites were not to lust after what rightfully belonged to someone else.
- ii. Response to Hearing God’s Voice: The Israelites heard God speak these commands (Deuteronomy 4:12-13; 5:4, 22-27). We cannot know whether the people were able to understand the voice they heard or if only Moses understood. The sights they were experiencing and the sound of God’s voice was so overwhelming to them that they “trembled with fear” (19:16; 20:18). Once the Ten Commandments were spoken, the people said to Moses, “...speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die” (20:19). They then “remained at a distance, while Moses approached” God and received further instructions to pass on to them (20:21-22). It may be that part of their unwillingness to continue hearing God’s voice was that their consciences deeply convicted them deeply after hearing the “ten words.” How could the Israelites approach such a holy God who held such a high standard? Thus, the subject of an altar is addressed.
- iii. The Altar: Chapter 20 ends with the Lord’s instructions about building an altar. In order to avoid the possibility that the altar *itself* would become an object of veneration, the Lord forbade the use of tools in constructing them. Unlike the elaborate altars of the pagan nations, their altars were to be unadorned. The Israelites’ altars were also not to have steps, as was common in the worship of other gods,^{iv} so that the priest wouldn’t be indecently exposed.

C. Book of the Covenant – 20:22 – 23:19

- i. Use: The laws contained in Exodus 20:22 – 23:19 have been dubbed “the Book of the Covenant” because of the phrase in Exodus 24:7 that refers to them that way. Essentially, these *civil laws* are the outworking of the moral laws expressed in the Decalogue. The “cases” presented in the Book of the Covenant were written for Israel’s judges to settle civil suits (21:22; 22:8). As previously explained, the judges were intended to extrapolate the principles needed from these “cases” in order to pass judgment in situations that are not specified. While many of the situations addressed do not correlate to the cultures in which we live today, the principles of human rights and justice contained within them are timeless.
- ii. Slaves – 21:2-11
 1. *General Principles for Slaves/Workers*: Although the laws about slaves addressed in this passage refer specifically to an Israelite who indentures himself for service (six years was the limit to the length of a contract), its principles applied to other kinds of slaves. Other types included foreign prisoners of war, those born into a boss’ household who owed him living expenses until they chose to leave, and employees hired under various arrangements. The principles of fair treatment apply to all of these.
 2. *Meaning of the Term*: It is important to understand the meaning of the Hebrew term *‘ebed*, translated “slave” (or “servant”). When used in the Old Testament, it applied to a variety of arrangements. Some were more like employees. In the New American Commentary, Douglas Stuart explains:

...some of the misunderstanding of biblical laws on service/slavery arises from unconscious analogy to modern Western hemisphere slavery, which involved the stealing of people of a different race from their homelands, transporting them in chains to a new land, selling them to an owner who possessed them for life without obligation to any restrictions and who could resell them to someone else (although such did also occur in the ancient world). Whether one translates ‘ebed as “servant,” “slave,” “employee,” or “worker,” it is clear that the biblical law allowed for no such practices in Israel. Indeed, the law reflects the fact that when obediently practiced by “boss/employer/owner” and “servant/slave/employee/worker” alike, Israelite service could be so beneficial to a worker that he or she would choose to enlist for a lifetime with the same employer (21:5–6).^v

The Bible's laws of slavery were put in place to ensure that nothing like the slavery the Israelites experienced in Egypt could exist. The slave was to be treated fairly. Physical abuse was to result in the immediate release of the slave from further obligation (21:26-27). Nevertheless, because slaves were among those in the society who were most likely to be mistreated, the laws protecting them appear first.

3. *The Selling of a Daughter*: One's daughter being "sold" as a servant (21:7) actually referred to a marriage (evident in the verses that immediately follow verse 7). Some fathers thought it was better for their daughters to become the concubine or second wife of a wealthy man than the only wife of a man with less money. These laws protected such a daughter (turned wife) from later being cast aside and becoming destitute.^{vi}

iii. Injuries – 21:12-35

1. *Punishment Befitting the Crime*: Making restitution was the basic principle surrounding the laws concerning injuries. Compensation was to be *in kind*. 21:23 presents an important principle of justice ("an eye for an eye...") in order to prevent excessive punishment. This principle, sometimes known as the "Lex Talionis" (a Latin phrase meaning "law of compensation in kind"), ensured that the punishment given fit the crime.
2. *Deaths*: Injuries causing death were punishable by death. Because human life is sacred, to take a life was to have your own life surrendered. However, provision was made in the case that the death was unintentional. The person causing the fatal injury could flee to a safe refuge, in order to escape retaliation by angry relatives. Later, when the Israelites were ready to enter Canaan, the Lord designated certain cities for this purpose.

iv. Property – 22:1-15: The words "repay" or "make restitution" summarize these laws concerning damaged property.

- v. Social Issues – 22:16-31: Certain behaviors, such as bestiality and sorcery, were worthy of capital punishment (death). After all, as 22:31 reminded the Israelites, they were to be God's holy people. However, the prominent themes of this portion of the code are mercy and compassion: "do not mistreat an alien... for you were aliens in Egypt" (22:21), "do not take advantage of an orphan or widow..." (22:22), charge no interest (or no excessive interest) when lending to the needy (22:25), "when [the needy] cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate" (22:27).

vi. Justice and Mercy – 23:1-9: These laws required the Israelites to act in integrity and with justice, to be helpful, and to forsake corruption and oppression.

- vii. Sabbath – 23:10-13: Every seventh year, the land was to remain unworked. This wise agricultural practice would have increased the land’s fertility, yet it required the farmer to trust God to provide enough to carry his household through the year of rest. What remained (or grew naturally) was to be made available to the poor and to wild animals; observing the year of Sabbath rest also provided an opportunity to show generosity to those in need. The Sabbath day was also to be observed each week for the purpose of providing refreshment to the entire household (23:12).
- viii. Festivals – 23:14-19: Three annual festivals were to be observed and attended by all adult males to remind the Israelites of God’s provision for them. The festivals involved sacrifices and offerings. Adding blood to the grain offerings, saving some of the fat, bringing a poor quality offering, and cooking a young goat in its mother’s milk (23:18-19) were pagan practices. The laws against these informed the Israelites that they were not to bring superstitious or pagan thinking into their worship and celebration of the Lord. (The Israelites’ annual festivals will be covered in more detail in a later lesson.)

D. God’s Promises - 23:20-33: Immediately after the giving of the Book of the Covenant, the Lord gave Israel promises to remind them that the covenant relationship was reciprocal.

- i. The Lord’s Angel: His Angel would go with them to guard them on their journey. They were warned not to rebel against His Angel but to listen carefully to all of His instructions. This Angel can only be the “Angel of the Lord,” a Christophany, for the Israelites were told He (the Angel) would not forgive rebellion against Him and that God’s name was “in Him” (23:21). Previously, this Angel had been identified with the pillar of cloud and fire that had guided them (13:21; 14:19).
- ii. Occupying Canaan: The Lord also promised to bring Israel safely into the land of the Canaanites (and other named people groups who also lived in Canaan at that time). The general boundaries of the land they were to possess were the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea and the desert to the Euphrates. The Lord promised His allegiance and blessing if Israel kept His commands. For Israel, this meant forsaking all other gods and their images, such as those worshipped in Canaan. The Canaanites were a very idolatrous people groups with perverse practices. To keep the covenant and represent God as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” it was imperative that Israel not be influenced by the practices of these people groups. For this reason, they were not to allow the Canaanites to live among them. Since Israel was still too small a nation to control all of Canaan, God said he would drive out the current residents “little by little,” until the Israelites increased enough to possess all of it (23:29-30).

Summary Statement: Israel was committing to be the Lord's representative and the Lord's laws taught her how to do so.

The Law was never intended to save anyone from the penalty of sin. On the contrary, the Law made people all the more aware of their inability to keep its high standard (Romans 5:20, 7:8; Galatians 3:19). Ultimately, Paul said that the Law was a "tutor" to lead people to their need for a Savior (Galatians 3:24). At the same time, it taught Israel a great deal about their God, the Law-Giver, and the kinds of lives they needed to live as His representatives.

The question often arises, "Are these laws relevant for us today?" There are several New Testament teachings about the Law that answer this. Jesus' completed work on the Cross and the sealing of believers with the Holy Spirit marked the beginning of a *new* covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-33). On the basis of Jesus' completed work, the New Testament abrogates the ceremonial laws of the old covenant regarding the priesthood and sacrifice system (these laws are covered in a later lesson). We no longer need to make animal sacrifices or need a human priest to approach God (Hebrews 4-10).

Nevertheless, the New Testament also affirms the Law's relevance for us today. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasized the importance of keeping the *principles* behind the laws. For example, He said that we break the law forbidding adultery by even looking at another person and thinking lustful thoughts (Matthew 5:28). Paul also affirmed the relevance of the Law's principles. For example, he explained that God's purpose in giving the command "do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (from Deuteronomy 25:4) was to teach the principle that those who sow and those who reap ought to share in the harvest. Paul then applied that principle to the right of a Christian worker to receive compensation for their service (1 Corinthians 9:9-12 and 1 Timothy 5:17-18).

What should be our attitude toward the laws of God? If we look at the Old Testament laws and say, "I do not have to do any of that," we miss the blessing of it! *Rather, we should ask, "What good principles do I need to apply in order to represent God better and in order that my life will be blessed?"*

Principle: *The principles of the Old Covenant have timeless relevance.*

Illustration: A boy and his father were driving down the road in a car. The boy, too small to see out the window, stood up in order to enjoy the view. His father, concerned for his son's safety, told him to sit down. The boy sat for a short time. When he stood again, the father repeated his command. After this happened several times, the father stopped his car, strapped his son into his seat so he could no longer stand, then resumed driving. After a long silence, the boy spoke up: "Dad, I am sitting down on the outside, but I am standing up on the inside!"

This boy missed the beauty and blessing of his father’s command. Similarly, the timeless principles of the Law are not only the right response to God’s grace in saving us; those principles make our lives work better. In fact, this is true of both God’s written laws and His natural laws, such as the law of gravity. Trying to break the law of gravity by jumping off a tall structure “only proves the law to be true and breaks instead the person who jumps!” Breaking God’s laws only hurts us, while proving His laws to be right.^{vii}

Application: What kind of an attitude do you have toward God’s laws? If our attitude is “how little can I do and still be considered obedient?” we are missing the beauty and the blessing of the Law! Have you taken this attitude with regard to honoring your parents or loving your neighbor as yourself? Old Testament and New Testament writers affirm the beauty and goodness of God’s laws (Deuteronomy 32:46-47; Psalm 119; James 1:25). Will you ask Him how to apply its principles to your daily life that you might declare with the Psalmist, “Open my eyes that I may see the wonderful things in your law” (Psalm 119:18) and with James, “Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do” (James 1:25)? The Law’s principles are relevant and right in every era, in every location, and for all people.

Transition: After the terms of the covenant were presented to Moses, it was time for the covenant ceremony.

III. Confirmation of the Covenant – Exodus 24

A. Instructions for the Concluding Meal – 24:1-2: Covenant ceremonies of the day typically concluded with the parties sharing a meal as an indication of friendship. 24:1-2 tell of God giving Moses instructions for the meal. The meal itself (verses 9-11) did not take place until after the ceremony (verses 3-8). When it was time for the meal, Aaron, Aaron’s two oldest sons, and the seventy elders of Israel were to accompany Moses up the mountain, while the people remained at the base. The leaders would participate as Israel’s representatives, going part way up the mountain, while Moses alone would approach the Lord.

B. Steps in the Ceremony – 24:3-11

- i. The reading of the Decalogue and Book of the Covenant (24:3): The ceremony began with Moses reading the covenant terms, as stated in the Decalogue and Book of the Covenant.
- ii. Agreement by the Israelites to fully obey the terms (24:3): As with any official agreement, breaking any one of the terms would result in breaking the agreement. The Israelites fully agreed to the terms.
- iii. The recording of the Covenant (24:4): Next, Moses recorded the terms.
- iv. Construction of an altar (24:4): An altar with twelve stones, representing Israel’s twelve tribes, was constructed.

- v. Offering of sacrifices (24:5): Verse 5 indicates that “young Israelite men” offered sacrifices. Although the Lord mentioned “priests” in His pre-ceremony consecration instructions (19:22, 24), the Aaronic priesthood had not yet been established. Thus, the reference must be to the young men Moses chose to offer these covenant sacrifices. Perhaps they were the firstborn sons, who were to be “given to the Lord” (Exodus 13:11-16) until the time at which the tribe of Levi took their place (Numbers 3:41).
- vi. Sprinkling of blood on the altar (24:6): Moses took half of the blood and sprinkled it on the altar. The other half was saved in bowls to be used in dedicating the people.
- vii. Rereading of the Law and Reaffirmation of the People (24:7): Moses then re-read the Book of the Covenant to the people, who reaffirmed their commitment. This second reading and affirmation denoted the seriousness of the oath.
- viii. Sprinkling of blood on the Israelites (24:8): Next, Moses sprinkled the people with the other half of the blood from the sacrifices. The sprinklings on the people and the altar were acts of dedication (consecration), symbolizing God’s forgiveness and His acceptance of the offering and the people’s binding oath of obedience.^{viii} This is the only time in the Bible where all the people were sprinkled with blood. The gruesome act certainly would have left a lasting impression that blood was the cost of their acceptance into the covenant relationship.
- ix. Ascension of Israel’s representatives for the covenant meal
 1. *A Picture of Peace and Fellowship*: Following covenant ratification, the leadership group accompanied Moses up the mountain for the meal, as planned (24:1-2). The meal is a beautiful picture of friendship and fellowship. Those who enter into a covenant relationship with God are called His children (John 1:12) and His friends (John 15:13-15).
 2. *They Saw God*: The scene described is awesome and speaks of Israel’s leaders “seeing God” (24:10-11). Isaiah (Isaiah 6) and John (Revelation 4) were also permitted such a view. However, Exodus 33:20 and John 1:18 clearly state, “No one has ever seen God.” It is helpful to note that in Exodus 24, after saying the leaders saw God, the description is limited to the beautiful, blue pavement beneath His feet. One writer suggests that perhaps Israel’s leaders were unable to lift their faces in order to actually see God.^{ix} Nevertheless, they certainly experienced His presence in a special way and whatever they saw was awe-inspiring.

C. Preparation to Receive Further Revelation – 24:12-17: The covenant meal ends with 24:11 and with it, the ratification of the covenant. Moses, Aaron and the elders descended the mountain. Verse 12 indicates that the Lord called Moses back up the mountain yet again. The occasion of this next mountain experience is covered in our next lesson.

Summary Statement: The covenant ceremony included several steps. Before God and the Israelites could enter into a covenant relationship and enjoy their meal of friendship, blood had to be shed.

Principle: *The old and new covenants were both sealed by blood.*

Hebrews 9:19-22 says, “When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.’ ... In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

The Israelites became God’s covenant people on the basis of their obedience to a standard they could never keep. God made a provision for sinful people to enter into a covenant with Him: the death of a substitute. The principle of substitutionary atonement in animal sacrifice was clear enough: “For me to live, something must die in my place.”^x If we are to enter into a covenant with the Holy God and gain eternal life, atonement must first be made for our sins.

Old Testament animal sacrifices pointed ahead to the death of the Jesus, the Lamb of God. Only His sacrifice was actually effective in achieving forgiveness of sins and entrance into a relationship with God, because He was the only perfect sacrifice. Former animal sacrifices were dependent on His perfect sacrificial death for validity (Hebrews 10:4-10).

The blood sprinkled on the Israelites would have stained their clothing – a vivid, ongoing reminder of the solemnity of the covenant and its cost. For those who have put their faith in Jesus’ death on their behalf, the celebration of communion (the eucharist or the Lord’s Supper) serves as a reminder of the cost of entering into this covenant of peace and friendship with God. It is God’s covenant meal with us. 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 explains: “The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” Celebrating communion reminds us that Jesus’ death was the price God paid for us to enter a covenant relationship with Him (Luke 22:19) and become Christ’s bride.

Application: With what attitude and intention do you come to the Table of Communion? Has it become a precious and anticipated part of your worship experience? Does it remind you that your justification is at a great cost, that you now have peace with God, and that you are His friend?

Conclusion

God's people enter a relationship with Him on the basis of a covenant. Like a lover wooing His beloved, the Lord boldly displayed His love, power, and faithfulness to us at the cross. Having proven His worth, He has proposed that we enter a permanent relationship of peace and friendship with Him on the basis of a *new* covenant that is established on *better* promises (Hebrews 8:6). Unlike the former covenant, the conditions of the new covenant aren't dependent on us, and our ability, but on God, and what He has already done on our behalf. Unlike the former covenant, it is available to *all* people of *all* times in *all* places. A covenant is a promise. His covenant with us is His promise to us. It is His guarantee that those who enter have eternal friendship and peace with Him.

ⁱ Stuart, D. K. (2006). *Exodus* (Vol. 2, p. 420). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (1996). *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Vol. 1, p. 379). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stuart, D. K. (2006). *Exodus* (Vol. 2, p. 444). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

^{iv} Hannah, J. D. (1985). Exodus. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 141). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

^v Stuart, D. K. (2006). *Exodus* (Vol. 2, p. 475). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

^{vi} Hannah, J. D. (1985). Exodus. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 141). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

^{vii} Arnold, Bill T. and Beyer, Bryan E. (2008). *Encountering the Old Testament* (p. 113). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

^{viii} Kaiser, Walter Jr. (1994), Exodus. In K.L. Barker and J.R. Kohlenberger III (Eds.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Abridged Edition* (p. 108). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

^{ix} Kaiser, W. C., Jr., Davids, P. H., Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (p. 153). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

^x Stuart, D. K. (2006). *Exodus* (Vol. 2, p. 554). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.