

“Covenant Three: Moses and the Law”

Exodus 20:1-17 • Psalm 19 • 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 • John 2:13-22

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Third Sunday in Lent

In this season of Lent we have been talking about the great *covenants* in the Bible. A covenant is a solemn or binding promise between two parties, usually formal in nature, typically in writing, and often affirmed with some kind of visible sign or seal. There are three very important covenants in the Old Testament, and one *crucially* important covenant in the New. First there was the covenant with Noah, God’s promise to all of humanity that never again would God destroy the earth with a flood. The sign of that covenant is the rainbow, a reminder of God’s everlasting and unconditional promise. The second great covenant was the covenant with Abraham. God promised Abraham lots of descendants, “nations” and “kings” among his offspring, the land of Canaan as a “perpetual holding,” and the spiritual promise to be God to him and his offspring. In exchange, God asked one thing of Abraham: that he and all his male offspring be circumcised, as a constant reminder to Jewish boys and their moms, and Jewish men and their wives, that they are a special people, uniquely chosen by God out of all the families of the earth. Like the first covenant, the second covenant is *everlasting*. Unlike the first covenant, which was for *all* people, the second covenant was for *one* people: the people of Israel, the chosen people of God.

The third great covenant in the Bible is the covenant that God established with Moses and the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, in the book of Exodus. They had escaped from slavery in Egypt; they had experienced God’s salvation; they had been led by God to this rugged mountain near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. Today the mountain is called Jebel Musa, “Mount Moses.” Its summit rises 7,500 feet above sea level. At the base of the mountain, on a spot believed to be where Moses saw the burning bush, is St. Catherine’s monastery, built nearly 1500 years ago, the world’s oldest continuously inhabited Christian monastery. Some of the most important ancient manuscripts of the Bible were discovered in the vast library at St. Catherine’s. From St. Catherine’s you can climb the mountain, like Moses did, all the way up. There are two trails – an easier and smoother route, which takes about two and a half hours, and a shorter, steeper route up about 3,700 stone steps, called the “Steps of Penitence.” At the summit you will find a small chapel, maintained by the Greek Orthodox Church, and an Islamic mosque, for Muslims view Moses as a prophet. None of those buildings were there when the Israelites arrived, some thirteen centuries before Jesus; they were all built to commemorate what happened there.

What *did* happen there? Exodus 19 describes it like this: “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now all of Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would

speak and God would answer him in thunder.” Then God spoke those famous words, what we call “the Ten Commandments.” In Hebrew, they are called the “Ten Words.” You probably learned them in Sunday School when you were a kid, although these Ten Words were originally addressed to *adults*. We can, and we should, teach them to our children, but they are more for *us* than they are for *them*.

The Israelites spent a long time at Mount Sinai. When they left, nearly a year later, they took with them four important things: (1) the Ten Commandments, which God had chiseled onto two stone tablets; (2) many other commandments, including moral laws, social laws, food laws, purity laws, laws about annual festivals, laws about ritual sacrifices and offerings, instructions for the priests, and so on; (3) a portable temple, made out of linen curtains and wooden beams overlaid with gold; and (4) a special wooden chest, also overlaid with gold, carried on long poles and covered with an incredibly elaborate lid, called the “mercy seat,” on which was believed to reside the very presence of God. Into that chest went three objects: (1) a special staff used by Moses’s brother Aaron, the first Israelite High Priest, (2) a jar of manna, that divinely-given food that sustained the Israelites through their wilderness wanderings, and (3) the two stone tablets upon which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments. That chest is famous. It’s the chest that Harrison Ford went looking for in the classic movie by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. That chest was lost to the Israelites and to history when the Babylonians ransacked and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem six hundred years before Jesus. No one knows what happened to the chest. A very old Jewish legend says that the prophet Jeremiah buried it in a cave. A very old Christian church in Ethiopia claims to possess it. Other legends say it made its way to Rome, or Ireland, or Zimbabwe. Wherever it went, whatever happened to it, that chest had a name, which shows up more than 50 times in the Bible: *the ark of the covenant*. It was called that because the two stone tablets inside it were the cornerstone of God’s third great *covenant* in the Bible.

That third covenant encompasses all the *laws* that God gave to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, both moral and ceremonial. God had given some specific rules several times before, but never in as much detail. When Noah and his family came out of the ark at the end of the flood, there were only *seven* laws they had to remember. Now there were *hundreds*. Jewish tradition counts a total of 613 commandments in the first five books of the Bible, most of which were given at Mount Sinai. That’s a *lot* of commandments! Those commandments, together with some additional traditions that developed over time, came to be known as the “Jewish Law.” When you read the New Testament, anytime you come across the word “law,” always think: *Jewish* law. Not the laws of the Roman Empire, not the laws of the United States, but the *Jewish* law, which the Israelites had agreed to observe. “Moses went and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances, and all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.’” They sealed this covenant with blood, the blood of oxen that were offered as a holy sacrifice: “Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, ‘Here is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” That may sound gross to us today; in the ancient world blood was viewed as a symbol of *life*. This was a covenant sealed in blood. There would come another covenant, later on, *also* sealed with blood, one which we commemorate every time we celebrate communion – but that’s for next week.

This covenant that God made with Moses was *conditional*. When you read through Exodus and Deuteronomy you come upon a whole bunch of “if” clauses, like this: “if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples;” “if you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today ... then he will give the rain for your land in its

season;” “if you will diligently observe this entire commandment that I am commanding you, loving the Lord your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him, then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you.” God says: “I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known.” God is saying – clearly and unequivocally – that God’s *future* behavior towards *them* is *entirely* dependent on *their* behavior towards *him*. If they do God’s will, they will be blessed in a multitude of ways. If they do not, they will lose those blessings. Centuries later, when the Assyrians and the Babylonians invaded the land and the Jewish people were carted away, faithful Jews understood that to be God’s *punishment* upon them for failing to hold up *their* part of the bargain. They had sinned, time and again; they had failed to repent, time and again; God responded by *taking their homeland away from them*. Faithful Jews today are wise when they remember that history. God had told Abraham that they could have the land of Canaan as a “perpetual holding” – but that’s *not* what God told Moses. God told Moses it was *conditional* on their *behavior*.

The fact that this third covenant was *conditional* is what caused many Jews in the time of Jesus to be troubled by him. It looked to many Jews like Jesus was *disobeying* their sacred laws – working on the Sabbath, for example – or uttering blasphemy – like claiming that *he* had the authority to forgive sins. If they weren’t able to see *God* at work in him, what they saw was a man who was violating their sacred covenant with God – and thus *putting the Jewish people in jeopardy*. Many a faithful rabbi would want to make sure that the Jewish people *never again experienced* the judgment of God. They could avoid that, they believed, by *strict observance of the law*. Any Jew who didn’t observe the law, in their view, *needed* to be stopped, *for the public good*. Their hostility towards Jesus becomes understandable when seen in this light. *They were trying to protect and preserve their covenant with God*.

Early Christians had to figure out what to do. Do people who aren’t Jewish need to observe the Jewish law if they want to follow Jesus? That question generated a *lot* of debate! A summit was held in Jerusalem around the year 50, twenty years after the resurrection; that summit is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and Paul’s letter to the Galatians. The conclusion: non-Jews *do not have to observe the Jewish law*. The Jewish law is for the Jews, and Jews *alone*. You don’t have to become a Jew when you become a Christian. That was *radical*! All those commandments – even the Ten Commandments! – we *don’t have to follow any of them*. Now, we can *voluntarily choose* to follow the Ten Commandments, as a *response* to the grace we have received in Jesus Christ, but we are not under any *obligation* to do so. God’s grace is not something we *earn* based on our behavior. But we can adopt the Ten Commandments as a *guide* for our life, because they embody the values and principles that Jesus taught us. This is what John Calvin called the “third use of the law.” These Ten Commandments aren’t our *judge* – their purpose isn’t to *condemn* us. Nor are they a *fence* – their purpose isn’t to *restrain* us. No, for us Christians, the Ten Commandments are a *guide*. They are there to *teach* us. They help *point the way* – the way of *Jesus*.

So the third covenant was *conditional*. The previous two covenants did not *depend* upon the faithful obedience of the people. This one did. Subsequent books in the Old Testament describe, in vivid detail, how the Israelites failed to live up to their part of their agreement with God, and what happened to them as a result. But *that’s not the end of the story*. One more covenant was yet to come.

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