

The Sinai Covenant and the Nature and Character of God

Exodus 19:1-24:11

In this text, Moses has finally come full circle back to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God (3:1). The sign that God gave Moses to confirm that he had sent him was when he had brought the people out of Egypt, “You will serve God on this mountain” (3:12). Chapter 19 opens with Israel camped before the mountain of God, with Moses going up the mountain to meet with God.

The exodus came about because God remembered his covenant with Abraham (Ex 2:24 cf. Gen. 15:13-14). Also God had promised Abraham that he would “make of him a great nation” (Gen.12:2). The Sinai covenant established Israel as a nation. This is a huge moment in the Book of Exodus. It is the center piece of the Book of Exodus and of the Pentateuch. Israel will not leave Sinai for the remainder of the book of Exodus.

The Sinai covenant was not Israel’s salvation covenant, but a further revelation of the nature and character of God. Any Israelite who was spiritually redeemed was saved the same way Abraham was, by faith in the promise of God (Gen. 15:6). We know from the rest of the story that they will break the Sinai covenant before Moses gets off the mountain and that entire generation will die in the wilderness, save 2 people.

This begs the question, Why then the law? Why the Sinai covenant? Why even preach from the Pentateuch?

First, I want us to briefly look at the structure of the text. Chapter 19 is the introduction to the Sinai covenant. The law itself was given in Exodus 20-23. There are two parts to the law. The first part of the law is in chapter 20, referred to a “these words” (Ex. 20:1). They are referred to as the “ten words” in Ex. 34:28, Deut. 4:13 and 10:4, although the ESV translators rendered the phrase “ten commandments.” The “ten words” are generally in the second person singular. They are general commands that are not related to specific situations. No fines or punishments are specified.¹

The second part of the law is contained in chapters 21-23. The text calls these laws, “rules” or “judgments” (21:1; cf. 24:3). The “rules” are presented as case law. The “rules” are the “ten words” applied in specific cases. They are descriptive laws in that they impose fines and punishment.²

These two sections of the covenant are clearly referred to as the “words” and the “rules” (24:3). Moses wrote these down (24:4) creating a document called the “Book of the Covenant” (24:7).

Chapter 19 is the introduction to the law, chapters 20-23 are the “words” and “rules” or “Book of the Covenant,” and chapter 24:1-11 is the ratification of the covenant. Chapters 19 and 24 are the bookends of the “Book of the Covenant.”

So, how is the preacher to preach the Old Covenant itself, when it is obsolete? To preach this text, however, we must use the law lawfully (1 Tim. 1:3-11). The right use of the law has been a topic for the ages. In the early church, the Judaizers taught that to be saved one must come under the law of Moses and then place faith in Christ. The law was being used in New Covenant times in Old Covenant ways. The reformed and Dispensational traditions also have their Judaizing tendency as well. I have heard it preached like this: “Preach the law to bring about the knowledge and conviction of sin, direct men to place their faith in Christ, and then take them right back to that law for their sanctification.” Perhaps, the hope of such people is to produce holiness in God’s people.

The problem is there is no power in the commandment to produce holiness (Romans 5:20; 7:5,7,9-10). The law cannot and will not make you right with God. In the New Covenant, however, the Spirit God convicts men of sin, directs them to place their faith in Christ, and then takes up residence in their lives to sanctify them. We don’t need law to live the Christian life, we need power. We need the Holy Spirit to fill and flow through our lives (Rom. 5:5b).

Unlike the law, God administrates the New Covenant by faith. The goal of all Christian instruction is love. The right use of the law is to further the Christian Gospel and help us understand the outflowing of Christian love. The law points to our need of Christ, who alone is the fulfillment of the law.³ *For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.* (Rom.10:4).

As we approach a discussion of the law, we have to keep some things in mind.

--To divide the law into the categories of civil, ceremonial, and moral and add that Christ fulfilled the civil and ceremonial but the moral still applies is to misunderstand the law.

--The law is a further revelation of the character and nature of God. God has not changed. He is still righteous and holy.

--The law covenant created the nation of Israel; it is not a covenant that Gentile nations or the church is under.

--The Old Covenant was temporary, conditional, and thus breakable. As the Church, we are under the New Covenant which is unconditional, unbreakable, and permanent (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8).

As we approach the Sinai covenant, I want to focus on the proper application of the law.

1. The Sinai Covenant is a further revelation of God

The covenant at Sinai was given as a further revelation of the nature and character of God. Perhaps, we have a tendency to think of Israel in Egypt as a righteous, holy, God honoring people. It, however, was not Israel that remembered God's covenant with Abraham, but it was God who remembered his covenant and was moved by his own promise to create a people, a nation for his own possession.

Israel was a people who did not know God living among a people who did not know God. Into that chaotic world, God moved in creative power to multiply his people (1:7; cf. Gen. 1). He revealed himself in a way the patriarchs did not know him, "*I am the LORD*" (YHWH), the God who would redeem them from Egyptian bondage (6:1-8). He overthrew the gods of Egypt, the arbiters of oppression and all things chaotic (12:12), calling on the creative order to testify to his divine nature and attributes. All of this was so that not only Egypt (7:5) and Pharaoh (7:17, etc) and the nations (9:15-16) would know Him, but so that Israel would know him (4:5, 8-9).

The two questions towering over the book of Exodus are, "*What is your Name?*" (3:13), and "*Who is the LORD?*" (5:2). The answer is "*I am the LORD.*"

The very center of the Sinai covenant text once again echoes this refrain, "I am the LORD." Standing at the head of the Law code is God's self-revelation, "I am the LORD." Only for the first time is added the words, "*your God.*"⁴ "I am the LORD your God" shows unmistakably that the Covenant code is a further revelation of the righteous character of God. The basis for obeying the law is that it is the revelation of the Name and righteousness of God.

You see this again in the prologue to the “rules.” *“You have seen for yourselves that I talked with you from heaven. You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold”* (20:22-23). The revelation of God on the mountain (19:16; 20:18) is argument enough against idolatry. How can you make an idol of what you have just seen: thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud ... and a very loud trumpet? The revelation of God excludes idolatry.

This text is at pains to reveal God’s righteous and holy character. In 19:4, God instructs Moses to tell Israel, *“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”* The ensuing treks of Moses up and down the mountain relaying God’s instructions for the people coming into God’s presence shows the holy and righteous character of God (3a-8a; 8b-14a, 20b-25). The people had to be “consecrated” for God’s appearance on the Mountain on the “third day” (19:10-11,15). They had to keep their distance (19:12,21-25).

So the law reveals over and over the righteous character of God. The identity of God is the basis on which Idols are not to be made: “I the LORD you God and a jealous God” (20:5). The Sabbath is an imitation of God (20:11). The sojourner, widow and fatherless were to be cared for because “God will hear their cry and his wrath will burn and he will kill you” (22:21-24). A neighbor’s cloak taken in pledge is to be returned before the sun goes down because God is compassionate (22:25-26).

So the law reveals the righteous character of God. The law reveals the nature of the Lawgiver. The law is holy, just, and good (Romans 7:12) because it reflects the holiness, justice, and goodness of God. What then is the right use of the law? I understand sin as anything contrary to the nature and character of God.

2. The law magnifies sin

Paul said, “The law was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made...” (Gal. 3:19). The bookends of the law covenant have Israel making the same commitment. In 19:4-6, the LORD told Moses to remind Israel of their experience of Him in their deliverance from Egypt. *“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all people, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”* The people responded, *“All that the LORD has spoken we will do”* (19:8). After the

giving of the “words” and rules, the people gave the same response. In 24:3, “Moses 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.*’” Moses compiled all the LORD had spoken in the “Book of the Covenant” and read it to the people (24:4,7). The people responded again, “*All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient*” (24:7).

Israel obviously lacked comprehension. They way over-promised. It is easy to think, “Good grief, they experienced the sign, wonders, and miracles of the Exodus, the parting the Sea, the mana and the water in the wilderness, and the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud. They heard the very voice of God from heaven giving the law (19:9; 20:22). They saw the manifestation of the presence of God (19:16; 20:18a), and they were afraid and trembled (20:18b).

Now we understand why the law. The law doesn’t make you holy, it magnifies sin. Israel had to come to see themselves as in relation to the absolute perfection of God. They would find that they could not keep the law. They could not live up to their covenant commitment (24:8). They obviously did not think they were that bad. They had become so entrenched in pagan cosmology that they sought to approach God like a pagan. They were very religious. Paul said, “*They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness*” (Romans 10:3).

We are not measured by ourselves in comparison to ourselves or to others. We are measured by the absolute perfection of God. I find it interesting that the people were “afraid” (20:18) and didn’t want God to speak to them further, “lest they die” (20:19b). Moses responded, “*Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin*” (20:20).

The law came to make sin appear sinful (Rom. 7:5). The right use to the law then is teach me that righteousness is not some arbitrary standard that I achieve, but I am measured by the God who is righteousness and absolute perfection.

3. The Law points to our need of Christ

Immediately, we see that in the law covenant there is a distance between the people and God. Limits were set so that the people could not even

touch the edge of the mountain (19:12b). Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, along with seventy elders were allowed to worship from afar, but the people were not to come up the mountain (24:1-2; cf. 19:24). The tabernacle was built according to this pattern. The most holy place corresponds to Moses coming near to the Lord. The holy place corresponds to the place on the mountain that Aaron, his sons, and the elders occupied. The foot of the mountain where the people were allowed to stand corresponds to the outer court.

There was a separation between God and the people because the law could not make them righteous. Paul said, *“If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law”* (Gal. 3:21b). The law clearly teaches we need a mediator to approach God. God told Moses, *“Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever”* (19:9). Then after they had heard the voice of God, they said to Moses, *“You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us lest we die”* (20:19; cf. Dt. 18:15-19; Acts 3:22).

At the end of the 10 “words,” in the prologue for the “rules,” we have a prescription for sacrifices and altars (20:23-26). In the ratification ceremony, Moses took the blood of burnt offerings and peace offering and threw half of the blood against the altar, and the other half he sprinkled on the people (24:6,8). It was then that Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders *“saw the God of Israel”* (24:9-11).

The law magnifies the transgressions, so it cannot open the way to God. The law necessitates a priesthood and a sacrifice. However, in the Old Covenant those sacrifices could not take away sin. They had to be offered again and again.

The law points to our need of Christ. The priests offered *“repeatedly, the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified”* (Heb. 10:11-14). So the right use of the law is say to people, “You need Jesus. You cannot approach God except through him.”

4. The law anticipates the New Covenant and the age of the Spirit

When you stand back from the book of the covenant and look at it as a whole, you can understand why Jesus said the two greatest

commandments are to love God and love your neighbor. He said, “*On these two commandments depend the whole law and prophets*” (Mt. 22:37-40). This why Paul said, “*Love is the fulfilling of the law*” (Rom. 13:10b; cf. Gal. 5:14).

The law of the old covenant summed up in love points us to the law of Christ. Paul writing to the Corinthians said, “*To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law*” (1 Cor. 9:21).

What then is the law of Christ? We have learned from studying 1John that the “new commandment” we heard from the beginning was “love one another.” Where would John get this idea of a new commandment? At Passover before Jesus’s death, he memorialized the New Covenant and gave his disciples a new commandment. “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*” (Jn. 13:34-35). This is the “law of Christ.”

The old covenant could not save, and it could not sanctify. Jeremiah (31:31-34; cf. Heb. 8:7-13) prophesied of a new covenant that would be unlike the Old Covenant that was broken. In the new covenant, the law would be written on our hearts.

Thus the connection between Sinai and Pentecost.⁵ In Exodus 23:14-17, three feasts are outlined: Unleavened bread, Harvest, and Ingathering. The Feast of Harvest, known as Pentecost in the NT, coming 50 days after Passover (cf. Ex. 19:1), celebrated the giving of the law. What happened at Pentecost in Acts 2 was the giving of the Spirit to the church.

Paul understanding the age of the Spirit in salvation history said, “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death*” (Rom. 8:1-2). In the New Covenant, the law of Moses on tablets of stone is replaced by the law of the Spirit written on our hearts.⁶

At the end of a sin list that would make one think we need the law to control and eliminate—“*Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers with inherit the kingdom of God*”—Paul said, “*An such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God*” (1 Cor. 6:9b-11).

We are sanctified by the Spirit of God. People seem to want a list of rules and regulations to live by. When I was in youth group as a teenager, a common question I heard was, “What can I do? I want to know where the line is?” The Christian life does not work that way, and no holiness will result in that kind of thinking. Paul said, *“If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law....But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law”* (Gal. 5:18,22-23). The Spirit produces in us what the law could neither legislate nor create in us.

As the church, we need the Spirit so that we may be the people of God in the world. When the Spirit came at Pentecost, he empowered the church to be witnesses in the world to God’s saving purpose in Christ. In obedience to Sinai covenant, Israel was to be God’s *“treasured possession, a kingdom of Priests, and a holy nation among all peoples for all the earth is the LORD’s”* (19:5-6). That was their mission in the midst of the nations.

The structure of this text is telling.

“You shall be my treasured possession

Among all peoples

For all the earth is mine

You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

The two outer lines assert God particular role for Israel. The last line, “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” clarifies the meaning of the first line, “my treasured possession.” The central lines show that Israel was redeemed for a purpose. God chose Israel with a view to the world.

In the New Covenant, Peter saw in the church the fulfillment of Israel. Now Israel is redefined as a mixed body of Jewish and Gentile believers chosen to *“proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are a people; once who had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy”* (1 Pet. 2:9-10). The missional identity which Israel received at Sinai is fulfilled in the church. The church is a chosen people who make God known in the world. It is the empowering of the church by the Spirit that makes our lives together distinct and our mission effective.

¹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenants*, 306.

² Ibid.

³ Leiter, *The Law of Christ*, 255ff.

⁴ Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*.

⁵ Timmis, *Exodus for You*.

⁶ *Ibid.*