

The Covenant of the Law Accepted by the People of Israel

Exodus 19

Exodus 19 – *“In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai. ² For they had departed from Rephidim, had come to the Wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness. So Israel camped there before the mountain.*

³ 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 children of Israel: ⁴ ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. ⁶ And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

⁷ So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the Lord commanded him. ⁸ Then all the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” So Moses brought back the words of the people to the Lord. ⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, “Behold, I come to you in the thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever.”

So Moses told the words of the people to the Lord. ¹⁰ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes. ¹¹ And let them be ready for the third day. For on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, ‘Take heed to yourselves that you do not go up to the mountain or touch its base. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. ¹³ Not a hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot with an arrow; whether man or beast, he shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds long, they shall come near the mountain.”

¹⁴ So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and sanctified the people, and they washed their clothes. ¹⁵ And he said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not come near your wives.” ¹⁶ Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and ¹⁹ the whole mountain quaked greatly. ¹⁹ And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice. ²⁰ Then the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

²¹ And the Lord said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to gaze at the Lord, and many of them perish. ²² Also let the priests who come near the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them.”

²³ But Moses said to the Lord, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for You warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds

around the mountain and consecrate it.”²⁴ Then the Lord said to him, “Away! Get down and then come up, you and Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break out against them.”²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.”

Background Notes

The events of Exodus 18 took place in the vicinity of Mt. Sinai. In chapter 19, exactly three months after their exodus from Egypt, Israel arrived at the base of the mountain. We can't be absolutely sure of the exact location of Mt. Sinai today, but the traditional site is a mountain called Jebel Musa in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. I've hiked this mountain a few times, and it's an awe-inspiring experience -- but of course that doesn't prove that it's the actual mountain! However, two points in favor of this being the tradition mountain are found right here in Exodus 19.

#1. Verse 2 says that the children of Israel camped “before the mountain.” There is a large desert plain at the base of one side of the traditional Mount Sinai. The area is large enough for a few million organized people to camp. This is not true of some of the other mountains that have been proposed as Mount Sinai.

#2. The granite rocks of Jebel Musa rise abruptly and steeply from the desert plain, so it could easily be roped off, as we read in verse 12, to prevent the people from even touching this well-defined mountain: *“Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, ‘Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death.’”* And furthermore, this layout would enable the death penalty of verse 13 to be carried out without the people touching either the mountain or the sinner, and without the sinner being able to escape into the mountain. The person who disobeyed God's command could be shot with bow and arrow or stoned to death against the steep granite wall of the mountain, with no way of escape.

The children of Israel camped at Mt. Sinai for almost a year. Here the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Mosaic Covenant were given. From Exodus 19 through the book of Leviticus, and for the first nine chapters of the book of Numbers, the children of Israel were encamped at the base of Mt Sinai. They did not leave Mount Sinai until the second half of Numbers 10: *“On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the Testimony. Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai.....”* (Numbers 10:11-12).

Doctrinal Points

1. Under the Law, Israel was to be a kingdom of priests.

The phrase “under the Law” means the period of time that the Mosaic Covenant was in effect. The Law, or Mosaic Covenant, was a “conditional covenant.” There were certain requirements for the people to keep. These were the “conditions” of the covenant. If the people failed to keep the requirements, the covenant between God and His people was broken.

Notice the **“IF”** clause of verses 5-6: *Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites” [emphasis added].*

God’s initially intended that all Israel would be a kingdom of priests. The whole nation was to act as mediators of God’s grace to the other nations of the world. However, because of Israel’s sin and disobedience, the nation failed to be the kingdom of priests that God intended. Thus, the line of Aaron from the tribe of Levi was chosen to be the priests among the children of Israel.

Because the Law was a conditional covenant, and because Israel broke the covenant, the Mosaic Covenant is no longer in effect today. Romans 10:4 says, *“Christ is the end of the Law...”* When Jesus Christ came, the time period of the Mosaic Covenant ended. Christ fulfilled The Law. We are no longer under the Law. The moral standards of the Law are still in effect, because God never changes His moral standards. However, the civil and ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic Covenant have ended. We don’t sacrifice lambs on the altar today. The sacrifices of the Law all pointed forward to Christ -- and Christ has come. In that way, Christ is the end of the Law.

All believers today are priests, and as priests we offer up our spiritual sacrifices of praise to God. I Peter 2:5 says, *“You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* The fact that believers in the Church are God’s priests today does **not** mean that the Church has replaced Israel in God’s sovereign plans. No! The Church is the body and bride of Christ – it is **not** the “new Israel.” The Bible does **not** teach so-called “Replacement Theology.” Even though the Mosaic Covenant has ended, God still has plans for the nation of Israel. These plans are based on the Abrahamic Covenant, God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants. The Abrahamic Covenant was not a conditional covenant – it is an unconditional covenant, and it has never been ended or replaced.

In Exodus 19 we see God’s initial intention for the nation of Israel. Under the Law, Israel was to be a kingdom of priests.

2. Under the Law, Israel was to be a holy nation.

In verse 6 we see that Israel was not only to be a kingdom of priests, but a holy nation as well: *“You will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (v6).* That is, they were to be a special people who were set apart for God. They were God’s treasured possession: *“If you will obey Me fully, you will be out of all nations you will be My treasured possession” (v5).* As a holy nation Israel was to reflect God’s holiness and purity. That is why in the second half of this chapter we have such rigid rules for purification, preparing for the Lord’s awesome display of His Holy Presence on Mt. Sinai. The thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, loud trumpet sounds, the mountain quaking and the voice of God speaking only with Moses all emphasize that God was a holy God. Sinful people could not just approach God in any way they chose or at any time they chose. Notice that the Lord had Moses and Aaron keep the people away from God’s presence. *“Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the Lord, or He will break out against them” (v24).*

What a difference there is for us now that Christ has come: Hebrews 10:19 - "...we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus.... What a great truth! In I Peter 2 we read that believers are to be priests -- a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. As God's holy priesthood, we should reflect that holiness in all that we do. I Peter 1:15-16 – *Just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written, 'Be holy because I Am holy.'*"

Israel was to reflect God's moral holiness in their physical separation from designated unclean foods and practices, and their ritualistic washings, as we see here and in the rest of the books of the Law. Under the Law, Israel was to be a Holy nation (14-25).

Practical Application

Have you experienced the blessing of "eagles' wings"?

Obviously that question isn't asking if you have sprouted some kind of huge wings! I'm referring to the application of verse 4: "*You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself.*" When young eagles learn to fly, the mother eagle flies under the young birds to catch them when they fall. So, in this verse we have the idea of God's care and protection for his people, as well as their faith and trust in the Lord. God brought the children of Israel to Himself. He had redeemed them out of Egypt, and He would continue to care for them and protect them in their wilderness travels. He wanted His people to trust Him for care and protection. He would be there for them like the mother eagle is there for her young.

What an application for us as believers! The Lord has redeemed us and brought us to Himself. Now He wants us to trust Him. He will care for us and protect us. He wants us to get out of the nest and fly by faith! He will catch us when we fall. But you can't have the experience of flying on eagles' wings if you are unwilling to get out of the nest! Let me ask you: Is the Lord calling you to take a step of faith in some area of your life as a believer? "*Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles...*" (Isaiah 40:31). Have you experienced the blessing of eagles' wings?