

Entering the Covenant

Exodus 24:1-18

Introduction

Terms: You know when you download a computer program, buy a cell phone, or any number of things in the modern world, and you have to “read and agree” to the **terms of service**? And we all “read” and agree *wink* (they could put whatever they want in there).

- The Paypal terms and conditions have more words than Shakespeare’s classic *Hamlet*.
- One mischievous UK online game seller snuck in a clause on April Fool’s Day for the buyer to “grant [them] a non-transferable option to claim, for now and forevermore, your immortal soul.” All 7,500 customers who purchased that day effectively sold their souls (100% success rate).

How many of us have actually read the “terms of service” for following Christ? (e.g., count the cost; “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” Jn 14:15; you can’t keep what you don’t know).

Covenant: Thankfully, our relationship with Christ is not a dry legal document. We should care **more** because it is something **more** significant: it is a **covenant**.

- Covenant is the backbone of the Biblical story.
 - Depending on how you look at it, there are either various covenants in the Bible or various stages in the covenant relationship of God with his people (e.g., Adam, Noah, Moses, David, etc.).
 - The terms Old Testament and New Testament (e.g., “will and testament”) literally come from the Biblical words for “covenant” (lit. “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant”).
- A **covenant** is more than a contract; it is a **chosen relationship in which two parties make binding promises to each other**; it is a personal relationship.
 - The better example of the covenant relationship is a **marriage**, because it not only involves promises and blessings and commitments to faithfulness but the mutual intimacy that is secured by the covenant.
 - The concept of covenant is central to the Biblical narrative because it represents the relationship between God and his people.

Ceremony: What we have in Exodus 24, then, are various discussions and representations of a covenant ratification ceremony between God and his people.

- We’ve walked through what Exodus has called the “Book of the Covenant” a section showing the “Ten Words” (i.e., Ten Commandments) as the foundational rules for God’s new nation, and subsequently how those rules applied in various ways, along with how the people should organize their schedules, rituals, and worship.
- In this chapter there is a pivotal moment showing the relationship between God’s holiness and humanity’s response.

Through the lens of of the Israelites we see the significance of the covenant relationship between God and his people. We see the role God plays and the role his people play, the gravity of the commitment, and the transformation an encounter with God produces. All of this points us to the covenant relationship we have with God through Christ.

¹ Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. ² Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.” ³ Moses came and 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.” ⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. ⁶ And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.” ⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹ And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank. ¹² The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³ So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴ And he said to the elders, “Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them.” ¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

1. The Divine Invitation (vv. 1-2)

Invitation: ¹ Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar.

- The scene is shifting from the “Book of the Covenant” to the guidelines for building the Tabernacle (come back in January). Here God is inviting the leaders of the people (Moses, Aaron, and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu) to worship.
- God initiates the relationship.
 - The story of the gospel is not us figuring God out, but God revealing himself to us. We’re not seeking him, he’s rescuing us. We’re not down here begging to be rescued, we’re running the opposite way (e.g., dock illustration).

- You don't just show up, God calls you. You wait your turn to be called.
 - During the reign of Queen Victoria in Britain (ca. 1837-1901; aka "Victorian Era"; she has her own era!). She was the longest reigning British monarch (63 years) until her great-great granddaughter, Elizabeth, beat her recently (70 years). Even at this late stage in history, when meeting Victoria, you were supposed to follow a strict dress code, bow or curtsy, do not touch, wait to be spoken to, address her properly ("your majesty"), etc. We can imagine a time when Kings and rulers could kill their subject capriciously for any perceived slight.
 - Even today, Iranian courts have given prison sentence for insulting the Supreme Leader. In Cambodia, insulting the monarchy is punishable with up to five years in prison (+ a hefty fine). In 2019 a Cambodian man was sentenced to three years in jail for Facebook posts.

Holy Boundaries: ² Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him."

- These elders are still commanded to worship from afar. The people must remain distant.
- God's holiness requires care. God is dangerous. He created all, he can *rightfully* destroy all. God can and will kill you (e.g., "good not safe," Aslan).
- His holiness is precisely why we need his invitation and we dare not approach him on our own (e.g., dress code at a fancy dinner of a king; don't just show up off the street; unless you're the king's grandchild).
- Do we approach God with casual familiarity or careful reverence? Is our attitude one of nonchalance intentional care (cf. "chalance").

2. Covenant Ceremony (vv. 3-8)

Agreed: ³ Moses came and 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 relays everything God says (all the words and laws). E.g., 10 commandments, plus supplemental rules.
- They agree to **all of it**. The only way a covenant works is **all or nothing** (e.g., marriage is not a negotiation, at least not a healthy one; e.g., x days a week, etc.)
 - They signed up for it (e.g., dress code at my private school growing up -or- church membership, "you signed up for this," why are you surprised?).

Written Down: ⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Like any good covenant, the terms are written down (we see those terms in Scripture). This ensures the covenant terms are permanent and accurate.

- The Bible frequently records God's command to "write down" his words. God wrote his words on tables of stone (Ex 31:8). Moses was instructed to write down the words of the Law (Deut 31:24-26). Joshua copied the Torah as instructed by Moses (Josh 8:32-35). Jeremiah was instructed to write down all the words he spoke concerning Judah and the nations (Jer 36:2-4), etc.

- We are a people of the Word, including the written word.

Spoiler Alert: The promise of the Israelites will prove hollow *spoiler alert*. They are writing a check with their mouths that they can't keep with their lives. They are unable to keep the commands of God (e.g., Abraham "kept the law" and Moses didn't; Sailhamer; by faith).

- The law is given because of sin, to punish and protect and to guide the people. If there was no sin there would be no need for the law (Gal 3).

Poignant Ceremony: ^{4b} He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. ⁶ And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷ 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." ⁸ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

- The covenant is sealed through a symbolic and solemn ritual, involving altars, sacrifices, and the sprinkling of blood.
- Everyone is involved in this ceremony (12 pillars = 12 tribes; everyone)
- Moses builds an altar, and performs the sacrificial ceremony, signifying the binding agreement between God and His people.

Blood: Typically, a covenant ceremony involved an animal cut in half (symbolizing shared responsibility), then two parties walk between pieces and eat the meal as a sign of friendship and alliance.

- (1) Blood on the people (Party 1) - Need the sacrificial substitute.
 - ¹⁹ For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, ²⁰ saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you." ²¹ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²² Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins** (Heb 9:19-22).
 - For the wages of sin is **death**, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:23).
 - **Every sin costs someone something** (e.g., even forgiving someone you "bear" the cost of their sin). ^{30a} **But everyone shall die for his own iniquity** (Jer 31:30a).
 - Sin fractures our relationship with God (infinite holiness requires payment for every sin). All sin is not the same (e.g., murder vs. lying; temporal effect), but all sin equally separates us from God. However, in certain mathematical contexts, one might say that both. In "a" sense, the "distance" to infinity is the same for any finite positive number (the distance between "1" and infinity and "2" and infinity are both "infinitely" far).

- Either you pay for your sin or Jesus does (someone has to). The beauty of the gospel is not that your sins are ignored but they are paid for and forgiven by the sacrifice of Jesus.
- (2) Blood on the altar (Party 2) - Need the sacrificial payment.
 - It is *passé* in today's world to speak about the "wrath of God" needing to be satisfied. But it's undeniable from Scripture (and logic) that God's justice demands a response to human wrongdoing.
 - "Wrath is not an attribute of God. God is love. God is holy. God is just. God is not wrath. **God's wrath is the rightful expression of his holy love in the face of sin and evil.** Before the foundations of the earth, the triune God had perfect love, joy, holiness, and peace. There was no wrath because there was no sin. God's wrath arises from his holy love in opposition to wickedness. Wrath only exists where sin exists. Therefore, we should uphold the priority of God's love and the necessity of God's wrath to safeguard his love in a fallen world" (Treat).
 - God of Wrath vs. Mother Nature: During the Corona Virus pandemic: "I can't help but wonder if this virus is the clap back from Mother Nature we were waiting for. She wants us to stop moving and consuming and burning or she's going to f*ck [mess] us all up" (Jameela Jamil). But these are the same folks who are upset at the Christian God of wrath and judgment.
- The relationship is now set in stone as it were (pillars). Godward (God is satisfied); Peopleward (the people are covered).

3. A Glimpse of God's Glory (vv. 9-11)

See God: ⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹ And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.

- The kaleidoscopic vision of God. They couldn't have "literally" seen God.
 - Two words are used: "saw" (v. 10) and "beheld" (v. 11). *The latter is a word used for a "vision" (cf. Num 24:4,16).
 - Every time when God spoke they heard his voice but "saw no form" (Deut 4:12,15).
 - ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (Jn 1:18).
 - We know that if a sinner sees God they will die (e.g., Holy of Holies, Rabbinical source, rope).
- They saw (most likely), God's glory (v. 16), a vision of God.
 - The vision shows the limits of our ability to behold God. It was a true though partial and hard to fathom revelation of God (something *like* [as it were] sapphire asphalt, but sapphire so clear it was like heaven).
- **When you meet the heavenly king, your gaze dare not rise higher than his feet.**

4. Meeting with God (vv. 12-18)

Gift: ¹² The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³ So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴ And he said to the elders, “Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them.” ¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.

- God gives them the **gift** of his commandments. Only 10 commandments God wrote on stone (traditionally), cf. Deut 4:13, 5:22, 10:2-4. *Different from Mormon tablets; human language, reside in the ark, readable.* **God’s revelation is a mystery but not an unknowable mystery, a revealed mystery.**
- God’s commands are gift to protect and guide us, to keep us on his path, to punish evil and maintain righteousness. When you see God’s rules as a curse it proves you don’t understand the loving character of God.
 - A loving parent who cares deeply for their child gives them chores the house to teach responsibility, foster discipline, and create a harmonious home. Without understanding, the child might view the chores as a curse. They might grumble, complain, and see the rules as restrictive rather than as guidance for a well-ordered and happy family life. The problem isn’t the chores, it’s the child’s perception (or lack) of the parent’s character. The chores are an expression of love. The next time you find yourself grumbling about God’s rules, remember the loving intention behind them. He desires your well-being and a life aligned with His perfect love and wisdom.

Glory: ¹⁶ The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

- Glory = heavy (i.e., “weight”). The cloud serves as a physical reminder of the presence of God. It is described in totalizing terms (a devouring fire).
 - The 6 days of waiting to be called on the seventh are a reminder of creation (God is creating a people; 7th is for worship and rest).
- The 40 days and nights is repeated through Scripture (e.g., Moses, Elijah, Jesus).
 - The following chapters recount what God told him while on the mountain (e.g., tabernacle, dwelling with God, etc.).

Mediator: Moses has been the mediator between God and the Israelites throughout the wilderness journey. Moses stood between God and the people to deliver God’s word. He mediated the terrifying presence of God for the fearful people.

- But Moses is an imperfect mediator. We’ve seen his weakness (e.g., Amalekite arms) and shortcomings (e.g., Jethro judging). Moses had access to the throne of God, Jesus sits on the throne. Moses can ask the creator for an intervention, Jesus is the creator

who can intervene. ³ For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself (Heb 3:3). The shortcomings of Moses point to the fulfillment of Christ, our perfect mediator. He isn't the house, he built the house.

Conclusion

New Covenant: All of these divine interactions, the gravity of this covenantal relationship, and the glimpse of God's glory, point to a **greater covenant**.

- The covenant at Sinai is fulfilled in Christ. It is good and perfect but exists for a particular time and place (e.g., “built in obsolescence,” Sailhamer). It is a guide pointing us to a covenant that transforms us into a people fit for God's presence..
- “The Old Covenant temporal kingdom of Israel was a type or shadow of the redemptive kingdom of Christ, not the substance. Most misinterpretations of the OT (e.g., dispensationalism, paedobaptism, theonomy, etc.) are due to misunderstanding this reality” (Tom Hicks).
- ³¹ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer 31:31-34).

Eat and Drink: As Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the elders ascend the mountain, they witness a breathtaking vision of God's glory and partake in a covenant meal signifying an intimate connection with YHWH. This encounter foreshadows the eschatological feast and serves as a profound reminder that through Christ, we can **see** and **know** God without facing the consequence of death.

- ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (Jn 1:14, 16-18).
 - Seeing God is knowing Christ.
- ⁶ On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. ⁷ And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. ⁸ He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken (Is 25:6-8).

- ²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” ²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for **this is my blood of the covenant**, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matt 26:26-29).
 - Because of the sacrifice of Christ we can draw near to God, with no guilt hanging over our heads because they have been paid fully and finally by Christ (e.g., debt fully paid bill illustration). No longer live under the law, it is not our guardian and we do not face its curse
- **Without Christ we will one day see God and die. With Christ, we can see God and live.**