

The Moses Covenant  
(Exodus 19, 24)

I think the most important truth is that people can have a relationship with God, the maker of heaven and earth. I suppose everyone has a relationship of some kind with God, even if they are ignoring him or rebelling against him.

What I mean is that people can have a good relationship with God, in which he loves them and hears their prayers, and they for their part trust him, and count on him, and pray to him, and live in his ways as much as they can.

That's the miracle at the center of our faith, is what Jesus came to make possible.

How does this relationship work? What does a relationship with the maker of heaven and earth look like? I have one kind of relationship with Marilyn my wife, a different kind of relationship with my children, different again with my friends, still different again with my supervisors at work, and so on. So, what does a relationship with God look like?

The OT often answers this question with stories. Exodus tells a collection of stories that show how God's relationship with Israel started. We can learn a lot about how it works between God and us by seeing how it worked between God and Israel.

Today we'll look at the covenant God made with Israel. It is a lot like a marriage. In Exodus 19 God proposes marriage, and Israel says "yes," so they become engaged. And in Exodus 24, after a brief engagement, they actually get married.

Exodus 19:1-4

<sup>1</sup> *On [the first day of] the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. <sup>2</sup> After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.*

<sup>3</sup> *Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: <sup>4</sup> 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*

Israel came out of Egypt, and crossed the Red Sea, and after two months of travel got to the bottom of Mt Sinai. Then God says this to Israel: *'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*

God tells them what has happened so far: he rescued them from Egypt and brought them to himself. This is how it starts: in some way, God brings us to himself.

*Carried you on eagles' wings.* When eagles court, when they select a mate, part of their ritual is that the female eagle carries a stick up high in her foot and drops it, and the male that's interested in her catches the stick on his back, and carries it for a while.

The reason for this is that eagles build their nests in high places, and if a baby eagle falls out of the nest too soon, it is very hard to rescue once it has landed on the ground. But if one of the adults can catch the baby on their back before it lands, it can be brought back.

This is God's picture of what's happened to Israel. He has rescued Israel from Egypt and brought Israel to a safe place the way an adult eagle would rescue a falling eaglet and bring it back to the nest.

And the nest is himself: *I brought you to myself.* Every single one of us, if we are here today, have this kind of story. A relationship with God always starts this way.

Exodus 19:5a *Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.*

*If you obey me fully and keep my covenant.* We sometimes think that the new covenant with Jesus is not like this, because this Moses covenant was based on works, and the new covenant with Jesus is based on faith. But let's not separate faith and works like that.

In the NT, part of faith is repenting. Repenting means we agree to turn away from sin.

Mark 1:4, 15 - *And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* <sup>15</sup> "The time has come," [Jesus] said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Luke 5:31-32 *Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."* <sup>32</sup> *I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*

Acts 2:37-39 *When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"* <sup>38</sup> *Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

When the NT says repent for the forgiveness of sins, repent and believe, I came to call sinners to repentance, repent and be baptized, it is not much different than *if you obey me fully and keep my covenant.* We're agreeing to live God's ways.

We don't come to Christ to become good people. We come to Christ to have a relationship with God, to become his children, to become his bride. And a part of this is that our daily lives will show we are his people, and we agree to that.

Right after the covenant is made in Exodus 24, God made plans to move in. He gave instructions to build the tabernacle, the small elaborate tent that He lived in. At the end of Exodus the tent was completed, and God moved in.

And right from the start of Leviticus, God describes different sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. That is such an important progression, and it will be the sermon next week, but we need to grasp this now.

People making the covenant agreed to obey God fully, but as soon as God moves into the middle of Israel, he shows them how to get forgiveness for their sins. People who genuinely want to obey God fully will still sin, regularly.

The Moses covenant assumed all of that, and God made a way for them to be forgiven. That was all a part of good healthy covenant life. It is like the Lord's prayer, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, which includes *forgive us our sins*.

The life of the faithful, the life of the righteous, includes regular sin and confession and forgiveness. That was true for this Moses covenant, and it true in the new covenant.

Exodus 19:5-6 - *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, <sup>6</sup> you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*'

God made everything, and everything is still his. But if Israel would agree to this covenant, they would be his treasure, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. These exact words are used of NT believers, more than once.

We'll not cover the specifics of treasured possession and kingdom of priests and holy nation, only this: people who agree to be God's people become very special to him. Remember what he did to Egypt, and remember the eagles' wings. That's why God began with those. That's how God treats his treasure.

Exodus 19:7-8 *So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. <sup>8</sup> The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.*

Israel said "yes." This is like God proposing marriage, and Israel agreed. Now they are engaged to be married. The actual wedding takes place in Exodus 24.

Courtship Between Exodus 19:8 and the formally making the covenant in Exodus 24, God introduces himself some more to Israel. He shows up on the top of that mountain where they are camped at the bottom.

But first, after 19:8, they spend 2 full days getting ready to meet God. I'm going to preach about this. When you come to worship with God's people on a Sunday morning, you at least should say this to yourself:

"Today I am going to meet with God. I am going to say important things to God, sing to him, thank him, ask for help; and he will speak to me though the Scripture, the prayers, and in other ways."

I know we come to church often needy and distracted, and so on. But none of you come naked. You all manage to get dressed. If you can get dressed, you can tell yourself that you are going to be before God, and you will say to him things that count, and he will speak to you.

We expect too much from our worship leaders. It is NOT their job to get us in the mood. That we should have done before we came in the door. We come in ready, and they lead us to the throne. Come ready to speak to God, and to hear from him.

Back to Mt Sinai. There is thunder, and lightening, and a loud trumpet blast, and the whole mountain trembles, and the trumpet blast gets louder and louder.

Then God speaks the 10 commandments to them, and he speaks them with his own voice. Afterward they are cut into stone, but the first time Israel hears the 10 commandments it is not from Moses, but it is the voice of God himself, and it terrifies them.

And in Exodus 21:1, God says to Moses, *These are the laws you are to set before them*, and for three chapters, 21-23, God outlines to Moses how Israel is to live.

All of these are so Israel will get a taste of what it means to follow God. He is an awesome God, huge and powerful. Israel needed to experience this, and they needed to hear what obeying this God would actually look like.

Between the engagement and the wedding, God shows Israel what he's like, and what relationship to him will be like, so that they can decide if they really want to be his people, and if they really want to him to be their God.

Jesus did this, too. Jesus tells us up front what following him would mean for us, and what it would require of us, so that we will know what we're getting into.

So after God introduces himself in chapters 19-23, we'll go to Exodus 24. Remember that in 21-23 God gave Moses an outline of how Israel should life.

Exodus 24:3 - *When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do."*

Moses repeated to Israel what God had told him in Exodus 21-23, and they agreed.

Exodus 24:4-6 <sup>4</sup> *Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel.* <sup>5</sup> *Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD.* <sup>6</sup> *Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar.*

This is the next day: Moses took half the blood and splashed it against the altar. The altar here represents the presence of God. Moses should really have put half the blood right on God, but God is invisible, so the altar will do.

<sup>7</sup> *Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey."*

This is the second time Israel heard those laws. They heard it the previous day, when Moses told them from his memory. After they agreed, he wrote it down.

On this day, after he had poured half the blood on the altar, he read out to Israel what he told them for memory the day before and wrote down the day before.

That book of the law, Exodus 21-23, is mostly about how Israelites will treat each other, what are right and wrong ways of treating people in daily life.

This covenant is all about Israel's relationship with God. But their covenant duties were all about how they treated other people. It is the same for us.

The point of being a Christian is not to be good, not to be nice. The point is that God is our Father and we are his children. Everything we do to others and with others is first of all about our relationship with God. Our first interest is to be God's people.

Out of that, we live our daily lives in certain ways and not in other ways. But our first purpose is not to live good lives. Our first purpose is to be loyal and faithful to the God that rescued us from Egypt and carried us on eagles' wings. That's first.

So on this second day, Moses poured splashed half the blood on the altar, and then he read out the book of the law that he'd written the day before. And again all Israel said, "Yes, we will obey God."

Exodus 24:8 - *Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."*

"This is the blood of the covenant." Does that sound familiar to you? In Matthew 26:28, at the Last Supper, Jesus says, *This is my blood of the covenant, which is pour out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

In 1 Cor 11:25, the Scripture we usually read when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we read this: *In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This is the new covenant in my blood."*

*24:8 Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."*

In the ancient world, at least this part of it, when two people made a covenant, in other words when they made a solemn promise to each other, they killed an animal as part of the ceremony.

The logic of killing the animal seems to be this: they were saying to each other, "If I do not keep my part of this agreement, may I be slaughtered just as this animal."

In Jeremiah 34 (vv18-19) we read of a covenant in which people killed an animal and cut it into pieces, and then walked between the pieces.

Once you walked between the pieces, you had made the solemn promise. In Jeremiah 34, the people who had walked between the pieces had soon after broken the very promise they had made to God. God says of those people, *I will treat [them] like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces.*

That seems to be the logic of pouring half the blood on the altar, and sprinkling the other half on the Israelites. With the sprinkling of blood, the covenant is complete.

God offered to be their God if they would be his people, so the first half of the blood was poured on the altar. The people agreed to be his people, and he would be their God, so then the blood was sprinkled on them.

In the first covenant, the blood of the covenant was sprinkled on the people. When we have the Lord's Supper, the cup is the blood of the Lord, the new covenant in his blood. Instead of having the Lord's blood sprinkled on us, we drink from the cup.

Jesus, by his dying, was like those bulls that were slaughtered so the Moses covenant could be made. Jesus' death is the sacrifice that makes the new covenant possible. Moses said, *this is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you.* Jesus said, *This cup is the new covenant.* And so we drink from the cup at the Lord's Supper.

Exod 24 like the marriage ceremony. In Exod 19 God proposed, they accepted, so they became engaged. God showed himself some more, and in Exod 24 we have the wedding.

There is a glorious epilogue to this covenant, in the next three verses. Immediately after the covenant was made, the leaders of Israel went to God and had a meal in his Presence.

Exodus 24:9-11 *Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up<sup>10</sup> and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky.<sup>11</sup> But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.*

They saw God, and they ate and drank. They had a meal in the Presence of God. What God wanted from the start was to love a people and be loyal to them and to have them love him and be loyal to him. God wants closeness with people.

As soon as the covenant was made, he brought them into his Presence. That's what he wanted. In the very next chapter, God makes plans to move in with Israel, to live among them. The real miracle is not that our sins are forgiven, or that we are freed from bondage to sin. The real miracle is that we become bound to God, and he, bound to us.

<sup>38</sup> *Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

When we repent and are baptized, and our sins forgiven, we receive the Holy Spirit. That is the Presence of God, God moving into us. It's much the same, only, it's even better!