

Lesson 11: Exodus 19-24 God Cuts Covenant with Israel

Introduction

When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, he told Moses, “this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt you shall worship God at this mountain (3:12).” This seems to me a special sign just for Moses. He met God at this place. And God said, “You will meet me again at this place.” So, arriving again at Mount Sinai, Moses must have remembered God said this. I like to imagine what he might have thought, “Lord God. You worked it out exactly as you said you would work it out. You truly reign over the lives of men. Here I am back at Sinai at the exact spot where I told you four times, ‘Please send someone else.’ And you did not strike me down. You did not give up on me. You did get a bit angry at me. And I am glad, or I never would have gone back to Egypt. Even there, I was ready to give it all up when Pharaoh refused my request and put the people to harsher labor, beating them, making the work impossible. I was ready to give in then. What did I say? I remember. I said, ‘Why did you ever send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done harm to the people; and you have not delivered your people at all (5:23-24).’ Again, you did not give up on me. You encouraged me. Reminding me that this was a promise made long ago to Abraham. This is about your vision and these are your people. Still, I was afraid, and I said again, ‘Behold, I am unskilled in speech; how then will Pharaoh listen to me (6:30)!’ But you gave strength to my heart, and you gave me a voice through Aaron, and look where we are now! Look at the people. At the mountain last time it was just me and my sheep. There is an entire nation out here now. And here we are just as you said. Who could believe it?”

I am sure Moses would have said it better than that and had deeper thoughts than that. He is so interesting to think about as the reluctant leader. The one who believed he had nothing worth saying, and he did not know how to say it anyway. The one no one would follow; now he is standing at Mt. Sinai with thousands and thousands of Israelites, men, women, and children, set free and going home.

Moses is becoming the leader that God is making him to be. Here at Sinai he will take up the role of covenant mediator. He will be the go between, the one trusted by the great king to speak on his behalf and trusted by the people to speak on their behalf. God is ready to cut covenant, to establish a legal foundation for this new nation. Remember in our kingdom motif that we need a king, a people, a covenant, a mediator, a land, and a temple. That’s what we need to have kingdom. We have the king and the people. In Exodus 19-24, we are going to get a covenant communicated through a mediator. I am going to give special attention to the work of Moses as a mediator in chapter 19. Then an overview of chapters 20-23 will help us see the covenant form. And in chapter 24 we will consider the actual cutting of the covenant.

We start in chapter 19 where we see what it looks like to be a covenant mediator.

Covenant mediator (19)

Moses on the mountain, receiving the Ten Commandments is another one of those sections of Scripture that because I felt very familiar with through Sunday School stories and sermon references and movie depictions, I was surprised going through it myself by some of the details I did not remember or never noticed before. For example, how many times would you say that Moses went up on the mountain to speak to God? Once, twice, three times? It’s going to be five times in this section, 19-24, and another two times in chapters 33 and 34. We really see Moses playing a mediator role, going back and forth between God and the people. Scholars will say that a mediator was typical in the Ancient Near East when making a suzerain-vassal treaty. The suzerain or great king did not communicate directly to the vassal people. He appointed a spokesman on his behalf as a go between. He appointed a covenant mediator. Using biblical language, we could also call him a prophet, a covenant mediator prophet. And there are just a few of those in Scripture. They are not calling people back to covenant faithfulness of an already existing covenant. They are helping

mediate something new. So far, we have had Adam and Noah and Abraham performing this role, now Moses. Enacting the role of covenant mediator, Moses goes back and forth between God and the people three times in just chapter 19. Let's start with Exodus 19:3-6.

First mediation between God and the people

³ 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 sons of Israel: ⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and *how* I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. ⁵ Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, 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 that you shall speak to the sons of Israel."

Moses received these words from God for the people. This is the initial charge for Israel. Having experienced redemption from Egypt, as God says, "I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself," Israel is now invited into covenant relationship with a purpose. Exodus 19:6 is a key verse for Exodus. God is saying this is my purpose. This is why I brought you out to be a nation. This is why I am forming you. This is why I am bringing you into covenant relationship. This is your identity. This is your great commission. "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

We understand what it means to be a nation of priests based on what God said right before that, "you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine." The Ancient Near East placed gods in particular localities, lesser gods over towns and villages, greater gods over the capitals of nations or city states. Gods were attached to the cities where they resided in their temples. The Egyptians had their gods, and the Babylonians had their gods, and the Canaanites had their gods, the Hittites had their gods. God makes the claim that the whole earth and all peoples are his. By choosing out Israel, he is in no way to be seen as making himself a local god. And that is going to be a danger for Israel. And it is certainly the way other peoples see Yahweh. They see him as the god of Israel, meaning that he is just the god over that location. But as God's scope is global, so Israel's scope needs to be global. They are supposed to see their entire nation as a kingdom of priests. They will have in their nation a formal priesthood. Still, every Israelite should see himself or herself as a priest of Yahweh.

The global scope of all peoples is a normal theme of God's covenant commissions. He told Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28)." He told Abraham, "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:3)." Much later he told the disciples of Jesus, "Go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19)." The scope is global, and the people of God are his priests to all peoples.

What is the role of a priest? A priest worships his God and helps others enter into that worship, also. The role of a priest is to know God and make God known, making God known through words and through manner of life. The priest models the character of God in his own life and shares the knowledge of God with others. Adam and Eve were to be the image of God to the world, created in his image. That lived out character is essential to God's commission here. He says, "Obey my voice and keep my covenant." Every shepherd, every shopkeeper, every baker, every teacher, every homemaker, every vinedresser is to obey the voice of the Lord and to keep his commandments and so, image him in their everyday life. As a good priest, they are to develop their own relationship with God through prayer and the knowledge of his word and the fulfillment of his commands, and so also help others come into the same kind of relationship with God. They are to be a priesthood of all believers. Many things are new with the new covenant. This concept is not one of them. Just as God sees every member of the church, the body of Jesus Christ, as a priest who seeks to know God, live for God, and make him known. So also, the Israelites were supposed to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation to make God known. That is their commission. That is Exodus 19:6.

Moses then goes from God to the people in verses 7-8a. "So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do!'"

The people give an initial commitment to covenant. They show an eagerness to enter into formal relationship with God, though they have surely not yet counted the costs or considered their own ability to keep the covenant. Which, of course, is normal. When we get caught up in the emotion of the experience, we are ready to commit to anything. And this was some experience they were having. You can imagine. So, we are not surprised that initially they say, "We will obey! We will do it all!"

Verse 8b tells us, "Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD." And of course, God does not need Moses to tell him what the people said, because God heard it when they said it. But God has instructed Moses to fulfill the role of the mediator and that is what he is doing. He went from God to the people, and now he is going from the people back to God. And this completes our first back and forth. Now we consider the second. This is in 9-14.

Second mediation between God and the people

⁹ The LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD. ¹⁰ The LORD also said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; ¹¹ and let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. ¹³ No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." ¹⁴ So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments.

God intends to make a great impression on the people of Israel to confirm his word spoken through Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever." Here is another one of those details we might miss because we have heard this story retold so many times. How do the people of Israel first receive the Ten Commandments? Most people would say on stone tablets. And that is not what is going to happen. The stone tablets come quite a bit later. Moses is not going to bring those down off the mountain until chapter 32. First, God is going to speak the Ten Commandments. As he says here, he will come "in a thick cloud" and speak the word of his commands to impress on the Israelites that these words are coming not from Moses but from God. This is a reality we all need to experience. We need to come to God and experience his words for ourselves. He uses teachers and prophets and preachers, and this is good. But there is something missing when we cannot say for ourselves that I have read for myself, I have heard for myself, I see the word of the Lord, and I know it is from God. God decided at this moment to impress this truth on the whole nation. These are not merely the words of Moses. These are my words, the words of Yahweh.

God will reveal his glory to some degree, only partially and, yet still dangerously. We could say that the burning bush was a man-sized revelation of the glory of God. When Moses stepped up to that bush, he was instructed to take off his sandals because he walked on holy ground. For the nation of Israel God is going to light up a whole mountain in fire and smoke in a nation-sized revelation of his glory. The ground is also holy. God is holy and just and good, and his holiness is like the fire of the sun. It will burn up all that which is unholy. Israel is invited to draw near but not too near. It is a very serious business to enter into relationship with the living God.

The people are to consecrate themselves for two days, to wash and be clean and to abstain from sexual relationships. They are to ready their minds and bodies for the coming of the Lord on the third day, "for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people." Of

course, as a Christian it is hard to skip past that phrase “on the third day the LORD will come down,” since we know that at a different time on the third day the Lord rose up. I do not know if we are supposed to make that connection, but it is really hard not to.

So, Moses goes back down the mountain, and he tells the people to consecrate themselves and be ready for the third day, just like the Lord told him. And this is what happened next. This is 16-20.

¹⁶ So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who *were* in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai *was* all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. ¹⁹ When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. ²⁰ The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

I felt the tremors of an earthquake once that put cracks in our hotel wall, very unnerving. Have you stood outside in a lightning storm or seen the dark clouds of a tornado or hurricane approaching? Have you watched the waves pound against the rocks and the trees bow down in the wind and rain? How do you describe that feeling of raw natural power.

This is not natural. This is more than natural. This is supernatural. God almighty lets forth a infinitesimal degree of his power onto Mount Sinai, so that the Israelites might experience the God of all creation, the holy I Am. Ancient Near Eastern Gods like Baal, were identified with the thunder and lightening and dark clouds of the storm. This was an exceptional storm, the winds blowing so strongly over the crags of the mountain shrieked like trumpets. The very rocks shook. The great difference between God and the gods of the peoples is that those gods were thought to be the storm. The thunder and lightening and cloud was Baal. He was the phenomena. The god and the storm were one. Our God unleashes the storm. He is not the cloud. He is present in the midst of the cloud. And unlike idols of the peoples, he speaks with words that can be understand.

One more time God called Moses up to himself with words for the people. This is in 20-25.

Third mediation between God and the people

²⁰ ...the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. ²¹ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Go down, warn the people, so that they do not break through to the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. ²² Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, or else the LORD will break out against them.” ²³ Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.’ ” ²⁴ Then the LORD said to him, “Go down and come up *again*, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, or He will break forth upon them.” ²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and told them.

God has impressed the awesomeness of his power on the people of Israel. And he has affirmed Moses in his role as mediator prophet. He has invited Moses to come back up again with his brother Aaron to receive the words of the covenant. Before they come up God will speak to them the Ten Commandments. That is how chapter 20 starts, “Then God spoke all these words, saying...” After hearing the Ten Commandments, this is how the people respond. This is 20:18-21.

¹⁸ All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood at a distance. ¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die.” ²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.” ²¹ So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God *was*.

I have heard it taught that this request of the people shows a deficiency on their part, that they should not have asked for a mediator, that it is from a lack of faith or misunderstanding of God's character. And there may be some Scripture that supports that negative view of the Israelites here, but I cannot think of it. Nothing is coming to mind. And in fact, in Deuteronomy 5:28, God affirms the people concerning this request, saying, "They have done well in all they have spoken." God intended to overawe the people. He did not want them to come up to him. He wanted them to experience the magnificence of his holiness and the raw power at his fingertips.

Still, even as he impressed upon them the fear of the Lord, we see an interesting tension in the relationship between God and man. Do you hear the oddity in what Moses said in verse 20? "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin?" Did you catch that? Why is that odd? "Do not be afraid...God has come that the fear of Him may remain with you." That seems a bit contradictory. He is saying, "Don't be afraid." But the whole point of this is that fear might remain with you. How do we understand this relationship with God where his fear remains on us and at the same time we are not afraid?

This has to do with being drawn into real relationship with God. Real relationship in which we are loved by God and love God back drives out fear. When that relationship is achieved, we are not going to have to be afraid. So, how is that fear driven out? Somehow, we know we are secure in relationship with God. Somehow, we come to this knowledge that we are made acceptable. Somehow, we know that if we run into his arms, he will not strike us down. That is the removal of fear. And yet, his holiness is as the sun, consuming sin. And I am sinful. Shouldn't I be expected to be burned up? And if I do not burn up, it is not because I have become holy. I know I am not. It is because God has found some way to remove the effects of my sin in relationship with him. He has dealt decisively with the unholiness in me without consuming me.

I can approach God. But if I approach God without a sense of awe and fear then I do not really know God. By making himself knowable and approachable, he must mask his glory. But if he masks his glory then there is something about him that I do not know. If my father is a man of great influence and power, but I only know him as the guy who wears slippers, kicks a ball around, and tells great bedtime stories then do I know my father. Well, I know a side of him. And it might be a side of him that other people do not know. But I do not know him fully. To fully know him, I need to know of his power and his influence. To fully know God is to know the fear of the Lord and to also not be afraid.

There is a scene from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* in both the movie and the book, either one. It is an interaction between Gandalf and Bilbo. Gandalf does not show his power among the hobbits. He is happy for them to see him as a common magician and inventor of fancy fireworks. It is probably the only way for him to enter into relationship with them, Hobbits not being fond of mystery or adventure or change. So, by cloaking his glory, Gandalf is able to enter into personal relationship with Bilbo, but in doing so must hide part of his true self.

So, early in the story Gandalf just about succeeds in convincing Bilbo to give up, out of his own free will, the ring of power that has this hold on him, to give it up for his own good. But the ring distorts Gandalf's motives in Bilbo's heart, so Bilbo turns on Gandalf, questioning his motives (kind of like when we question God's motives for us). "'Well, if you want my ring yourself, say so!' cried Bilbo. 'But you won't get it. I won't give my precious away. I tell you.' His hand strayed to the hilt of his small sword.

"Gandalf's eyes flashed. 'It will be my turn to get angry soon,' he said. 'If you say that again, I shall. Then you will see Gandalf the Grey uncloaked.' He took a step towards the hobbit, and he seemed to grow tall and menacing; his shadow filled the little room (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Ballantine Books, 1965. 60.)."

In that one instance you are reminded that Gandalf is no mere human. He is a being of much greater power. I think we often forget with whom we speak when speaking to God. He has made himself personal. He has made us to feel his compassion. He has cloaked his glory that we might enter into

relationship with us. He speaks with us. He invites us to walk with him. He became the word in the flesh, lifting children onto his lap, walking with his disciples, comforting Martha, telling John to look after his mother. He is relatable and kind and generous. And he has invited us to not be afraid.

And so, we presume on him and on his motives. We forget that the lamb is also the lion. We forget that this man who can lift a child on his lap with great gentleness and compassion, created all things (John 1:3) and by the word of his power upholds all things (Hebrews 1:3). The disciples were shaken by this reality when he stood up in the boat and with one word stilled the wind and the waves. And that is nothing for him. By one word he brings galaxies into being. Or takes them out again. If the fear of God does not remain on our hearts, then we have forgotten who our God is.

On Mount Sinai God invited the Israelites to not be afraid while at the same time impressing on them the fear of his magnificence. How do I explain this? Right now, I am trying. Right now, as I am talking, my soul tingles. I am electrified, thinking of the awesome power of God. There is fear in my heart as I think about the fact that he could snap his fingers and everything ceases to exist, the fact that he is holy and pure and awesome. God is numinous. He is awe-inspiring. He is grand. He is fearful. And yet, at the same time, I have no sense that he has turned that fearfulness on me. He might rip out my sin, but he would not rip out me. He has made me acceptable. I am his. "Do not be afraid...but let the fear remain on you."

God, uncloaking the power of his glory in fire and smoke on Mount Sinai, communicated to Israel, "Moses is my mediator and these words are mine, not his." Let's turn now from our focus on Moses as covenant mediator to our focus on the covenant form.

Covenant form (20-23)

I am not going to read through the Ten Commandments now in chapter 20 or look at the detailed laws in chapters 21-23. I am going to wait and discuss the nature of the Mosaic laws when we get into Leviticus. And I will go deeper into the Ten Commandments when we come to the second version given in Deuteronomy. What I want to do here with Exodus 20-23 is consider how this text is modeled after a 2nd millennium suzerain-vassal treaty. God is communicating through a known form.

And remember from our past lessons that the 2nd millennium suzerain-vassal treaty contains these seven elements:

- 1 Title – the name or names of the great king and any titles he liked to go by.
 - 2 Historical Prologue – a statement about the king's historic relationship with this particular vassal people.
 - 3 Stipulations – these are commandments, the dos and don'ts of the agreement.
 - a. basic form
 - b. detailed form
 - 4 Deposition and regular reading – where the treaty should be kept and how often read.
 - 5 Witnesses – this was usually a long list of gods.
 - 6 Blessings – what the king will do if covenant is kept.
 - 7 Curses – what the king will do if covenant is broken.
- (This written covenant is then ratified by a cutting of covenant ceremony which includes a sacrifice and an oath by the vassal.)

The Ten Commandments start with this preface in Exodus 20:2, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." These are the first two elements of suzerain-vassal treaty, the title, "I am the LORD your God" ("I am Yahweh Elohim") and a very short historical prologue "who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." It is short, but it is quite important. When we think of the Pentateuch as a covenant, all of Genesis is a historical prologue, teaching us about the relationship between God and human beings, specifically between God and Israel. But this short prologue that I am Yahweh who brought you up out of Egypt,

out of slavery, will be a regular summary of that relationship through the Pentateuch. God established the Passover meal and the Feast of Booths in Jewish culture to teach the people to look back to the Exodus as a defining moment in what it means to be the people of God redeemed out of bondage. Similarly, in the New Covenant, we are given the Lord's supper teaching us to look back to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ as our defining moment, also redeemed from bondage. We look back to the cross. They looked back to the Exodus.

After the title and historical prologue in Exodus 20:2, we get a list of basic stipulations in Exodus 20:3-17. We know them as the 10 Commandments. These are the basic stipulations of the covenant. When Moses goes back up again on the mountain, he receives a more detailed list of stipulations. That's Exodus 21-23, covering a variety of topics from slavery to personal injury law to theft to the protection of the powerless to laws of justice to farming to feast days to conquest of the land. None of the subjects addressed are addressed comprehensively. We get just a few examples from many categories of law. There is more to come in Leviticus and in Numbers and in Deuteronomy. And that's one of the characteristics of Mosaic law. The laws are given in sections in the midst of narrative. The laws come with a lot of context. To know the law of Moses, a scribe cannot just memorize Leviticus. A scribe has to know each book of the Pentateuch. And he has to know the whole story and where the sections of law come in the story. Law is not given in one big abstract code book. Study of Mosaic law requires study of the narrative context in which the different sections of law are found. Law must be understood in the context of God's story with his people.

Witnesses are not called for in this covenant, which is not odd, since witnesses in ancient near eastern covenants consisted of gods and goddesses, and God would not call gods and goddesses as witnesses. We do have a reading of the law. Exodus 24:4 tells us, "Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord." Then in verse 7 we are told, "He took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people." We do not however have a deposition of the law because we do not yet have a temple in which to deposit the law. God does have that in mind and will instruct Moses in chapter 25 to make a special container called the ark of the covenant in which to deposit the covenant law. One point of interest that comes up here is the question about the two tablets that we are going to get later. Scholars have long wondered whether there was significance to why God gave Moses two tablets instead of just one or maybe three. Why two? The most common thought is that one tablet contains the first half of the Ten Commandments that focus on loving God, and the other tablet contains the half that focuses on loving your neighbor. That definitely works theologically. That is a good observation. Though the work of archaeology uncovered an interesting detail that suggests a different option. Suzerain-vassal treaties were always made in two copies, one for the suzerain and one for the vassal. So, the whole covenant is written on both. Both contain the whole thing. And one copy would go into the temple of the vassal's main god and the other into the temple of the suzerain's main god. So, though we still do not really know, I think the best-informed guess is that the two tablets each contained the whole covenant and since there is only one true God both copies were to be placed together into his temple.

So, we have covered all the elements except blessing and curse. We do not have separate sections for blessing and curse here in Exodus. Deuteronomy is much clearer about that. But we do have the idea of blessing and curse in 23:20-33 where stipulations are given about entering the land. For example, 23:25-27 gives us the idea of blessing,

²⁵ "But you shall serve the LORD your God, and He will bless your bread and your water; and I will remove sickness from your midst. ²⁶ There shall be no one miscarrying or barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. ²⁷ I will send My terror ahead of you, and throw into confusion all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn *their* backs to you."

And we could understand verse 32-33 as the curse.

³² “You shall make no covenant with them or with their gods. ³³ They shall not live in your land, because they will make you sin against Me; for *if* you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”

So, we now have a covenant more or less in the form of a suzerain-vassal treaty. To make the covenant formal we need to ratify it with a sacrifice and an oath. This happens in chapter 24. This is covenant ratification.

Covenant ratification (24)

Remember that the Hebrew does not say that God makes covenant but that God cuts covenant. The Hebrew verb used is cut. The ancients assumed that a covenant would be ratified by the sacrifice of an animal which symbolizes the curse that would come on the vassal if he broke covenant. So, walking through the animals in Genesis 15 was meant to symbolize, “Let my body be cut in two like these animals if I break covenant with you O great king.” The shocker in that case was God himself walked through the cut animals. And here we will have to see what adjustment Moses makes to the normal ceremony, since it is not just one person, but a whole nation that is asked to make the oath.

Let’s read the ceremony as it is recorded in Exodus 24:3-8.

³ Then Moses came and recounted to 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 which the LORD has spoken we will do!” ⁴ Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. ⁶ Moses took half of the blood and put *it* in basins, and the *other* half of the blood he sprinkled on 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 So Moses took the blood and sprinkled *it* on the people, and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has [cut] with you in accordance with all these words.”

Moses adjusts the ceremony by sprinkling the blood on the people of Israel instead of having them all walk through cut up animals. It sounds like a wise, time-saving change to the normal ritual. In response to the hearing of the covenant and on the basis of the sacrifice of the animals the people repeat what they first told Moses after his very first trip down from talking with God, “All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!” That is verse 3. They say it again in verse 7, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” The repetition of the oath stands out. Even with the blood of the covenant freshly sprinkled on them they do not hesitate. And remember, when the text says here, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has cut with you in accordance with all these words,” no one is thinking of atoning blood or the blood of redemption. This is the blood of the curse. “Let our blood be sprinkled out if we break covenant with you O LORD!” That’s what they are saying. The blood on them is their blood. And in the excitement of the moment we are tempted to believe them. Maybe they believe themselves that they are going to do everything that God says. In the next month, they are going to break this covenant in a spectacular way as a whole people. The law cannot be kept. No matter how willing the heart is, human flesh is too weak.

This is why the language “blood of the covenant” has taken on new meaning for us. Through the rest of the Old Testament this idea is developed. In Jesus Christ it has been made clear that he must take the curse for us to ensure our acceptance in covenant with God. We can strive to be obedient but only because the Lord does not require our success. He has found another way through the blood of the covenant. This truth, it is already present in Moses even if it is not the idea here in Exodus 24; God walking through the covenant in Genesis 15, taking the curse on himself, and the blood of the lamb already introduced in the yearly Passover which turns away God’s wrath. It is setting us up to understand the blood of the covenant is necessary to cover us, so that we might be acceptable

because we are never going to live out the covenant no matter how enthusiastically we promise to do everything God tells us to do.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion Moses heads up onto the mountain a fifth time in 24:9. Aaron and the elders go up with him. Incredibly, in 24:10-11 we are told, “they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. [And it reminds you of Ezekiel and Revelation.] Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they saw God, and they ate and drank.” And they entered into a fellowship meal with the Lord or before the Lord.

Moses goes up further with only his servant Joshua. And then Moses goes up even further alone by himself. Moses had already written down all the words of the covenant, but God wants to give him stone tablets with the law inscribed. And God plans to come and dwell in the midst of his covenant people. For that we need a temple. So, God is going to give Moses the pattern for a tabernacle, a mobile temple for a travelling people.

We will end this lesson now with Moses on the mountain and the Israelites gazing up, wondering what will become of him. Here are the last two verses of Exodus 24, verses 17-18, “And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the mountain top. Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.”

Reflection Questions

1. Read through Exodus 19. What stands out to you that you may have forgotten or may not have noticed before?
2. Imagine yourself as one of the Israelites standing in front of the mountain. You experienced the power of God unleashed on Egypt. There is smoke and fire on the mountain, lightening, thunder, earthquake and a sound like trumpets. You hear the rumble of a voice speak out the ten commandments. How might you have felt? You cannot know for sure. But you can imagine. Write a couple of sentences describing your possible emotion. What three or four adjectives would help describe your experience?
3. God spoke directly to the Israelites in order that they might know that Moses was not the author of these words. What convinces you that the Word of God really is his word and not the words of human authors like Moses and others?
4. How do you understand Moses command to the people in Exodus 20:21, “Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.”
 - a. Does “not being afraid while also fearing the Lord” make sense to you? How do you understand that from your own experience?
 - b. How does “not being afraid and fearing the Lord” enable you to not sin?
5. Read through Exodus 24. What stands out to you that you may have forgotten or may not have noticed before?
6. The people were caught up in the experience of the moment as they made their oath, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient (24:3 and 7).” Spiritual experience can have positive value. God himself chose for the Israelites to have this experience. And yet, we know they will sin with the golden calf and struggle to be obedient through years of wandering. Think of a few times that you made promises or commitment to God as a result of spiritual experience. If you can, think of a time where you general followed through with your commitment and of a time when you did not. What makes the difference? When does spiritual experience lead to commitment? When does failure lead to growth?