

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

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"The Covenants of Promise" (part 5)

THE OLD COVENANT

We continue our series on the Divine Covenants of Promise. We have already looked at the covenants God made with Adam, Noah, and Abraham. Today, we'll be looking at the covenant that is most talked about in the Old Testament. It is the covenant God made through Moses with the people of Israel. This is the covenant that is commonly referred to as the "Old Covenant" in the Bible and from which we get the term "Old Testament." It becomes the "old" covenant when the "new" covenant is revealed in Jesus Christ (cf. **2 Cor. 3:14**). And yet, even though it is referred to as "the old," it is still important, for it provides the foundation for understanding and appreciating the New Covenant. (Remember that a divine covenant includes the parties involved, a promise, usually an obligation and the fulfillment of the promise and obligation.)

So where do we find this "Old Covenant" first appearing in Scripture? Please turn with me to **Ex. 19:1-8**. We read, ***"In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt (after God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt), on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain. 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 sons of Israel (the house of Jacob and the sons of Israel refer to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob): You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians (the plagues of judgment), and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. (Everything God does flows from His love and faithfulness. Moses said in **Dt. 7:7-8**: The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt)***

"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; 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." So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. ⁸All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD."

We know the parties involved (God and the people of Israel). Did you catch the two promises?

THE PROMISES

God makes two promises in this covenant. First, Israel is to be ***"God's own possession among all the peoples."*** The people of Israel are here chosen to be God's witnesses, His ambassadors to the rest of the world. They will be responsible for demonstrating the light and love of God to the nations of the world. Recall God's promise to Abraham that ***"through his seed all the world would be blessed."*** Therefore, God did not choose Israel for their sake but for the world's sake. This is why Israel is called the chosen people of God.

Second, Israel was to be to God a *"kingdom of priest and a holy nation."* Israel was to have a special place before the Lord. Not only would they have a special purpose among the peoples of the earth, the people of Israel were to have a special position before God. They would show the world how one should worship and live before Yahweh. Thus, Israel would be responsible for offering up holy sacrifices to Yahweh, and be set apart as a holy people. In a world of evil and corruption, of violence, idolatry, and sexual immorality Israel was to be different among the peoples, she was to stand in holiness and righteousness before the Living God.

THE OBLIGATION

But now, what was the obligation? God said, *"if you obey my voice and keep my covenant."* When Moses came down from heaven and spoke to the people of Israel, they agreed, *"All that the Lord has spoken we will do."* And then two days later God spoke forth the Ten Commandments (**Ex. 20:1-17**). God gave Israel other civil and ritual ordinances and statutes (**cf. Ex. 21-23; Lev.17-21**) that were added to the Ten Commandments and flowed from their requirements. So obedience to the commandments was the way to keep this divine covenant. And so if they did not fulfill the law, they would forfeit the promise of being God's own possession, they would forfeit the promise to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And so the old covenant is a covenant of law, God's law, and obedience to this law is the obligation.

And when we talk about God's Law we need to ask the question, why was the Law given? Why this fourth covenant, especially if later it would be called "Old.?" There are four primary reasons. **First, the law reveals the true nature and character of God.** God is holy and pure. There is no evil or deceit in Him. There is no wickedness. He is first and foremost holy. You have heard me say it before, nowhere in Scripture does it say, "Love, love, love." But it does say, *"Holy, holy, holy"*

While God is a loving God, He cannot and will not overlook evil.

I am reminded of what the Lord said to Moses in **Ex. 34:6-7**: *"Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, who keeps loving kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished."*

God's law establishes God's will. The law shows what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. And man cannot know exactly what God wants unless God reveals it to him. Yes, we have a conscience but that conscience is tainted by original sin. So God gives us, His people, the law so that we can know the difference between God's way and the world's way.

And the second reason is similar to the first. If the Law was given so that God's people can know the difference. The Law was also given so the world *can see* the difference. And the only way the world can see the difference is if God's people are following and obeying His Law. It is no different today. The biggest detriment to the Gospel is not the world, but it is nominal Christians, people who say they are believers, but act otherwise.

The fact is that obedience to God's law allows us to experience His blessing and goodness in many ways. **This is a third reason for the law.** It is so that we can truly live for God and experience His blessing and all the good he has for us. God's law is not just the Ten Commandments. It encompasses much more than that. It includes compassion and mercy, service and generosity,

forgiveness and mercy. And when we follow God's law we will experience His goodness, His blessing. When we follow God's law there is true freedom.

Anglican writer, CS Lewis, gave the example of the chess player. The chess player is only free to play chess by following the rules of the game. This is true for any game isn't it? You can't play the game unless you know the rules. And you can't play the game unless you abide by the rules, otherwise you will be disqualified and you will no longer be able to have the freedom to play. Life, my friends, is no different. We are free to enjoy all that God has intended for us when we obey His Law.

But there is also a problem - no one can fully keep God's law! Our first parents demonstrated this. They chose to rebel against God's law. God said, "*Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*" But they did, and death came into the human experience and death to the heart. This is the root of sin and it is in all of us. We struggle with it every day and it manifests itself in our failure to follow God's law.

And so the law was given not only to show us God's nature and to show us the key to living a life of blessing and goodness, but it also reveals that obedience to the law cannot save us. Why? Because we cannot keep it by ourselves! **This is the fourth reason, the law shows us that we are indeed, sinners, and in need of a savior.**

THE RATIFICATION AND SEAL

And so that brings us to the only remedy for this problem, the only answer. We see the seeds of this answer in what Moses did to the people shortly after they heard the Decalogue and the other ordinances and statutes. Please turn with me now to **Exodus 24:3-7**:

³Then 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!" 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. ⁵He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. ⁶Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. ⁷Then 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!" ⁸So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Do you remember how a covenant was always sealed and ratified in some way and how the first three covenants were all ratified in the blood of animal sacrifice? It is no different here. Moses builds an altar and sacrifices oxen bulls and then sprinkles the people with blood. By doing this God not only established the ritual ceremonies of animal sacrifice for the purification of the people but He also was setting the stage for the need that Israel and all people have for forgiveness.

The Israelites said they were going to obey. They said, "Oh yes, we will follow." Yet, we all know that "*The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*" And I am sure the Israelites were surprised that Moses would do such a thing so soon. But the fact is, in only a short time, many would be turning away from the Lord.

THE FULFILLMENT

The truth is Israel did not keep God's covenant. They didn't obey. They rebelled time and time again. They fell into the ways of their pagan neighbors. Even though the people promised to do all the words of the Lord, even though they had seen God work miracles on their behalf more than any other nation, even though they were miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt and granted special blessings of the land previously promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, even though God's laws were clearly set forth that none could fail to understand, they still rebelled!

Why? Israel did not have a heart to do the will of the Lord. While throughout Israel's history there were moments of repentance, revival and reform, by and large they failed. And this failure culminated in the rejection of Jesus as their Messiah.

Dt. 5:29. God said to Moses, "***Oh that they have a heart to fear me and keep all my commandments.***"

And yet, despite the disobedience, as we have seen so often before, God will *still* keep His covenant even if the people don't. And so we have this wonderful prophecy from **Jeremiah 11:31-34** : "***Behold, days are coming,***" declares the LORD, "***when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,***" declares the LORD.

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

"They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

And so with Israel's disobedience God moves out to call for Himself a people from all races and nations. The time will come for the revealing of the new Israel of God, for the unveiling of the new covenant of God! The salvation of the Jews *and* the Gentiles will come from the New Covenant. And it is our Lord Jesus Christ who establishes the New Covenant. His blood sprinkles us clean. By his death He takes our sin and guilt upon Himself and now His Spirit empowers us to live the Christian life.

All this, my friends, comes from a changed heart, a heart that loves God. For the heart that is changed, the heart that is transformed is the heart that keeps God's commandments. Thus, the greatest gift of the Law, the Old Covenant, is that it leads us to faith in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul summed it up this way in **Galatians 3:24-26**: "***Therefore, the law has become our tutor to leads us to Christ. That we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ.***" In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!