

LESSON FOUR
THE MOSAIC COVENANT
(For Group and Sunday School Leaders)

The Mosaic Covenant was made with the entire nation of Israel while they were encamped at Mount Sinai. This covenant formalized the relationship that God would have with His people. In keeping with the form of ancient treaties, the law laid out the type of relationship that a superior (God) would have with his subjects (the nation of Israel). This law was given as a gift of God's grace.

Through obedience to the law, God's people could live out their identity as a holy people in contrast to their pagan neighbors. They were the object of God's relentless love and had become his special treasure (Exodus 19:5). Through the law, they were given unique insight into the way God designed his people to function, relate to one another and approach Him. Their distinctive way of life would also serve to expose the surrounding nations to the glory of God. Other nations were meant to look at the nation of Israel and be drawn to know their God and desire Him.

In his video, Pastor Scott asks us to look at obedience through the life of Moses and the Israelites. We see Moses who began his quest with God, questioning his own abilities to do what God was asking him to do. "I can't" was his immediate response and demonstrated his insecurity in himself. Over time, however, as Moses came to know the magnitude and immense power and majesty of God, he became a leader of action – obedient action. But in contrast, the Israelites were quick to jump in with an attitude of assurance to God that they could do whatever God asked of them. They demonstrated immediate obedience, but they never understood the power and majesty of God, and as a result, when things became tough, they would grumble and take pity on themselves even to the point of disobedience. What a contrast, Moses became a mediator to God for a grumbling, disobedient nation who never grasped the concept of faith and grace. Through Moses we will see the scarlet thread that carries on toward the cross and then into eternity.

Read Exodus 19 and 20:18-21

Questions:

In Exodus 19: 23 we see that Mount Sinai is holy because God is holy. What exactly does it mean that God is holy?

Holiness means purity, but "purity" doesn't describe it well enough. Purity merely means that it is unmixed, with nothing else in it. But that isn't enough. We talk of moral excellency, but that isn't adequate. To be morally excellent is to exceed someone else in moral character. But when we say that God is morally excellent, who is it that He exceeds? The angels, the seraphim? Surely, He does—but that still isn't enough. We mean rectitude; we mean honor; we mean truth and righteousness; we mean all of these—uncreated and eternal.

God is not now any holier than He ever was. For He, being unchanging and unchangeable, can never become holier than He is. And He never was holier than He is, and He'll never be any holier than now. His moral excellence implies self-existence, for He did not get His holiness from anyone nor from anywhere. He did not go off into some vast, infinitely distant realm and there absorb His holiness; He is Himself the Holiness. He is the All-Holy, the Holy One; He is holiness itself, beyond the power of thought to grasp or of word to express, beyond the power of all praise. — A. W. Tozer and David E. Fessenden, *The Attributes of God: A Journey into the Father's Heart, vol. 1* (Camp Hill, PA: WingSpread, 2003—), 159–160.

Read for application. What are we to learn about our relationship with God from this story?

There is a reason the scene begins this way. God is setting the tone for how they will relate to Him. He's introducing Himself.

What is their reaction? 16 ... all the people in the camp trembled and (v. 9) they believed.

Here's the point I'm going to try and make today: God is a God that is so massively awesome that if you ever really see Him, you tremble with awe.

And here is going to be my question for you today: Does our response to God match His awesome immensity? I'm going to try and show you that, for most of us, it does not, and that's because we've never really seen Him. — J. D. Greear, "Awe: Exodus 19:10–20," in *J. D. Greear Sermon Archive* (Durham, NC: The Summit Church, 2017), Ex 19:10–20.

How is the God of Exodus 19 different from the God of the man on the street or the man in the pew?

On that day they saw God's awesome size, His untouchable holiness, and His tender mercy. That sight produced both a fear of God and faith in God. It was awe and wonder mingled with intimacy. The unapproachable God was also their tender Father. Awe combined with intimacy is the essence of Christian worship. And then they pledged to obey.

Really seeing those three things, God's awesome size, His untouchable holiness, and His tender mercy, is how we will change too.

In the thunder and earthquakes and lightning, they saw that He was the God who commanded the magnificent powers of creation.

There is something about awesome displays of nature that give you a glimpse of how big God is. He is so big that you literally cannot exaggerate Him. Awesome displays of nature—volcanoes, thunderstorms, sunsets, tornadoes, tsunamis—remind us of that.

The Israelites got a taste of that at the mountain.

I believe that most people today have lost a sense of God's awesome size. We reduce God to a domesticated, middle-class-sized deity that we can explain and control.

He is not. The infinite God staggers the mind. When we try to reduce God to someone we can explain and control, we actually cripple people's ability to believe in Him.

When we speak of God, we speak of One whose size and power and wisdom and might are far beyond our own. Perhaps one of the reasons we fail to treasure God is we have such a limited view of Him. God is a God of such massive size that our minds cease questioning when we see Him. We tremble and believe. — Timothy Keller and J. D. Greear, *Gospel: Recovering the Power That Made Christianity Revolutionary* (Nashville: B&H, 2011).

What problems come from not seeing God as He really is, but rather seeing Him as we imagine Him to be?

No one could touch the mountain, God said: "You cannot see my face . . . and live" (Exod. 33:20).

God is a God of such infinite perfection that not even the slightest sin in His presence can be tolerated. When Isaiah, the prophet of God, saw God upon His throne, he fell upon his face, terrified, and said, "Surely I am ruined, I have seen the Lord" (Isa. 6:5, author paraphrase). When Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant where God's Spirit dwelled, he was struck dead.

God is a God whose holiness and perfection is so complete that sin cannot exist in His presence. I hear people often speak glibly about "seeing God." If God ripped the roof off the place where you were

sitting right now and you saw His face, you'd immediately die. Standing in the presence of God with sin would be like a tissue paper touching the surface of the sun.

Seeing and sensing God's holiness made Israel tremble.

We often think we have done God a favor by down-playing the whole idea of His judgment. Our user-friendly God does not punish sin. He certainly doesn't send people to hell. But hell gives us a picture of the absolute perfection and beauty of God. Hell is what hell is because God is who God is. Hell is what hell is because that's what sin against an infinitely beautiful and glorious God deserves. Hell is not one degree hotter than our sin demands that it be. Hell should make our mouths stand agape at the righteous, just, holiness of God. — Timothy Keller and J. D. Greear, *Gospel: Recovering the Power That Made Christianity Revolutionary* (Nashville: B&H, 2011).

Exodus 20.18 – 26. What is God revealing about Himself in this passage?

“Where's the grace in that?” you ask. As unpleasant as that sounds, even God's terrifying glory was an expression of his grace. When the people trembled at the base of Mount Sinai, which rumbled and smoked and flashed in an awesome display of God's presence, Moses reassured them, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exod. 20:20).

Even this terrifying display of power was for the welfare of his people. The Israelites had no history with the personal or national consequence of disobedience. Like a child, Israel was naive. There was no way for them to grasp what sin could do to their infant nation. There was no way for them to understand the danger of intermarrying with the pagan nations that surrounded them. They couldn't appreciate the compounding danger of financial debt. This was all new territory. So, whereas God could not leverage their experience, he leveraged his overwhelming power to scare or terrify them into submission. Seem inappropriate to you? Not to me. When I was a kid, my dad put the fear of Dad in me on lots of occasions. I didn't fear the natural consequences of the forbidden activities. How could I? I was naive. But I sure as heck feared the paternal consequences. And that kept me out of a lot of trouble. Looking back, I would put that in the grace column. — Andy Stanley, *The Grace of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011).

Verse 18. Why so afraid?

One thing the Israelites feared was the law itself. God had just given them his righteous requirements in the form of the Ten Commandments. They could see that God was demanding their total allegiance in every aspect of life. He required them to worship him alone and to love one another in everything they did and said.

The Israelites probably didn't realize the full extent of God's law. Undoubtedly there were some things about the Ten Commandments that they didn't yet understand: how each commandment is both positive and negative, or how it governs inward attitudes as well as outward actions, or how it represents a whole category of sin and duty. But surely they understood that God was making an absolute claim on their worship, time, relationships, possessions, bodies, speech, and desires. So the first time they heard the Ten Commandments—even before they learned them all by heart—the Israelites knew that God was giving them one righteous standard for all of life. He wanted them to obey all of them, all the time, and this terrified them. Back in chapter 19 they had promised they would do whatever God said (v. 8), but as soon as they found out what was included, they panicked. They were frightened by the total demand of God's law.

The Israelites were also frightened by the threat of God's judgment, and perhaps this was the main reason they were afraid. Fire and smoke, thunder and lightning, the loud blast of a trumpet—whether the Israelites knew it or not, these signs will all reappear at the final judgment. The people had come

into the very presence of the great and terrible judge of all sin. They were guilty sinners before a holy God, and they could sense that this was a life-threatening encounter. Indeed, in the smoke on the mountain they caught a glimpse of the wrath to come. — Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 678–679.

Does this picture of God sound like a God of grace to you?

By now you are probably making the connection. What was true of Israel is equally true for you and me. God's law, as restated in the New Testament, is an extension of his grace to us. His commandments don't stand in contrast to grace. They were given because of his grace. God has provided his law to enable us to maintain our freedom from sin and its consequences. Isn't it true that your greatest regrets would have been avoided if you had opted to obey rather than disobey God's law? Isn't it true that you would be free from certain painful and shameful memories?

Looking back, it is pretty easy to see that God's law is at the center of his grace. It's in the moment of temptation that this powerful truth slips away. In that moment, like Adam and Eve and Israel, we embrace the lie that God is trying to keep something good from us. That he is against rather than for us. If, in those moments, we could see those prohibitions as expressions of God's liberating and protective grace, perhaps we would resist less and submit more. And in doing so, we would allow grace to do its work in us. And we would remain free! — Andy Stanley, *The Grace of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011).

Moses takes up a role that makes a thread all through Scripture, culminating in Jesus. Moses takes on the role of a *mediator*. What is a mediator?

One of the first things people do when they get into trouble with the law is to hire a lawyer. This is exactly what the Israelites did at Mount Sinai. As soon as they heard the demands of God's law, they asked Moses to be their legal advocate, their mediator. They said to him, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die" (Exod. 20:19). The Israelites were afraid to deal with God directly, for obvious reasons. They had heard the commandments of his law, they had seen the fire and the smoke of his glory, and it was all too much for them to bear. So they begged Moses to do the talking: "We don't want to talk to God; you talk to him!" And the "you" in verse 19 is emphatic: "You speak to us yourself."

The the Israelites were right to ask for a mediator. They needed one! A mediator is someone who stands in the gap to bring two parties together. And this is what the Israelites needed: someone to stand between Heaven and earth, to bridge the gap between God's deity and their humanity. They needed someone to represent them before God and to represent God before them. They needed someone to be God's spokesman because they could not bear the sound of God's voice. And even if they didn't realize it, what they needed most of all was someone to protect them from God's curse against their sin, the penalty of his law.

When the Israelites asked Moses to be their mediator, they were asking for something that God had already provided. God made Moses the mediator back at the burning bush, and the prophet had been speaking for God ever since. But when God revealed his law, the Israelites finally understood for themselves their need for a mediator. In their fear they begged Moses to be their go-between with God. — Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 679–680.

What does a mediator do? Why do we need a mediator?

No sooner had the Israelites made their request than Moses began to serve as their mediator, doing two things that a mediator is called to do. First, he spoke to them for God: “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning’ ” (v. 20). Later, when Moses looked back on this experience, he said, “At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain” (Deut. 5:5).

When Moses spoke to the people, it was partly to explain the purpose of God’s law. As we saw back in chapter 47 of this commentary, God’s law is a multi-use item. It has three primary purposes. One is to restrain our sin by threatening us with punishment. The law fulfills this function in human society. Its penalties act as a deterrent, keeping people away from sin. Another use of the law is to reveal our sin by proving that we cannot live up to God’s perfect standard. Later, after we have been saved by grace, the law shows us how to live in a way that brings glory to God. While continuing to restrain us from sin and to show us our need for grace, it also instructs us in righteousness.

When Moses explained the purpose of God’s law, which of its three main uses did he have in mind? At first, it may seem that Moses was talking about the civic use of the law, its ability to restrain sin in society. After all, he said to the Israelites, “the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exod. 20:20b). Certainly the Israelites were afraid, for they had heard God’s voice from the mountain. Thus it would make sense for Moses to say that this experience would help them not to sin. Whenever they were tempted to break any of God’s commandments, they would remember his terrible voice, and this would remind them not to break his law. Moses also described Israel’s encounter with God as a test. He said, “God has come to test you” (Exod. 20:20a). The Hebrew word for “test” (*nasa*) is used elsewhere in Exodus. God tested the Israelites by the bitter waters at Marah (Exod. 15:25). He tested them again by telling them not to gather more manna than they needed for each day (Exod. 16:4). In both cases, the test was a trial of Israelobedience. God gave his people another test at Mount Sinai. His law was a test of their obedience. Did they pass the test? No; they sinned against God. So there is at least a hint here of a second use of the law: Its function is to show God’s people their sin. — Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 680–681.

Here is a question that seems obvious, but actually trips a lot of people up. Why was the law given?

Romans 5:20–21 (NLT) God’s law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God’s wonderful grace became more abundant. So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God’s wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.