



Exodus 20-24 (24:1-8)
 Journey to Freedom: Exodus
 “The Covenant Confirmed”

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Today is our next-to-last sermon in our series on Exodus, as we explore material in chapters 20-24. That leaves 16 chapters for the final Sunday, so you should probably plan to be here a long time next week. 😊

Today’s passage that we just read, like last week’s, is kind of summarizing a few chapters, and continues some of the things we looked at last week. **These chapters here, from chapter 20 up through 24, are considered “The Book of the Covenant.”** They are the primary contents of the covenant God makes with Israel. You may recall from last week, that the covenant God was making with them was a conditional covenant. We see that in chapter 19, where God speaks to the people through Moses this message: “*If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then you will be my treasured possession and a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*” That’s the basic outline of the covenant, and there are very clearly two sides to it.

Then, in chapters 20-24 we get more detail about the covenant, particularly in regards to Israel’s side of it. It gets more detail in Leviticus and ultimately there are over 600 different “laws” - or “instructions” is another translation of it - that are given. We’ll talk more about that in a few minutes. There are a number of things that seem quite foreign to us – for instance, most of us don’t own oxen and donkeys and sheep (any of you?)...whereas in their day that was common. But the covenant fits in with their experience of life, and even is groundbreaking in positive ways as we’ll discuss in a moment. And the people are on board with it.

The people confirm the covenant, in a two-step process.¹ First, we read in verse 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.” So, Moses verbally tells them the terms, and they say, “Sounds good to us. We’re on board.” Notice, at this point, Moses hasn’t written down the covenant. That happens in the next verse. So at this point, it’s a verbal agreement. A handshake deal. And let’s be honest, when you’re making a

covenant with someone, you probably want it in writing, and you want to see or hear the exact words of that document.

This last week there was a covenant made between three collegiate athletic conferences and their universities, that did *not* get put in writing, and drew the attention of quite a number of people, in part for the very fact that nothing was put in writing. Let me just read for you a few brief excerpts from the article in the Seattle Times from this last week:

“On Tuesday, the Pac-12, Big Ten and ACC announced an inter-conference alliance....This collaboration...was unanimously supported by the presidents, chancellors and athletic directors at all 41 institutions....But scrape away the confetti, and there’s nothing concrete. Nothing scheduled. Nothing signed. Nothing to stop anyone from bolting....With the future of college athletics increasingly clouded, this alliance is held together by handshakes, eye contact and words supposedly stronger than oak.

“It’s about trust,” ACC commissioner Jim Phillips said in a 45-minute joint news conference. “It’s about, we’ve looked each other in the eye. We’ve made an agreement....”**“Our board chairs have looked each other in the eye and committed to the same level of support and connection to one another. Our athletic directors have done that. If (a legally binding contract) is what it takes to get something considerable done, then we’ve lost our way” [ACC Commissioner Jim Phillips].**

Considering that college football is a \$4 billion per year industry, and these 41 schools represent almost 1/3 of the schools at the top level of college football, there is significant money, power, influence, and more at stake in this agreement, even if the details are still to be worked out. And yet they haven’t put a thing in writing with any signatures attached to it. Personally, I found this refreshing. It’s rare today to see trust and commitment based on a person’s word and a handshake. Now, I would expect that they will eventually put something in writing, and they should. But for now they’re committing to each other to have this alliance, and they’ve all given their word to do that, and given their word that they’re not now using this for

leverage and looking for a better alliance with some other conference or group of conferences.

And: Initially, that's where the covenant between God and Israel stands, also: nothing was written down. So, that's the first step, as I said. But then we get the second step in affirming this covenant. In verse 4, we read, "Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said." After he did that, he got up early the next morning, set up an altar at the base of the mountain, with 12 stone pillars nearby as well to represent the 12 tribes of Israel, and then got some other guys involved to carry out a little worship service and offer sacrifices and praises to the Lord.

What's going on here is that: **The covenant is being cemented.** This is their version of a pinky promise with God, or a handshake and looking each other in the eye...but first drawing a little blood on the palm of one of your hands, and your covenant partner doing the same thing, and then shaking hands. Which, by the way, is not a smart thing to do health-wise, so I'm not suggesting you do that the next time you have an agreement with someone; but the point is that this covenant is sealed in blood through this little ceremony. Mostly, this is like a dated and notarized signature at the end of a document. And then Moses reads the written covenant, and all the people again affirm their desire to participate in this, and affirm their desire to be obedient to it.

Then, to really seal the deal, he takes some of the blood of the bulls that have been sacrificed and sprinkles all of *them* with blood as well. So: **There's blood on the altar, and on the people, binding them together around this covenant.** It seems a little odd and maybe even grotesque to us – can you imagine if we did such a thing in worship? But this is how they sealed the deal. This is the sign that this is a blood promise.

So, as we talked about last week, this is usually called the Mosaic Covenant, because it came through Moses. But it's God's covenant with Israel. It wasn't a covenant with one person or one family; it was with the nation of Israel. And as we mentioned last week, **Jesus comes along roughly 1300 years later and fulfills the human side of this covenant.** He says so himself, as

we looked at last week. And as a result, Jesus is now the key to being in a covenant relationship with God, precisely because he fulfills our side of the covenant since people keep dropping the ball. And Jesus seals it in blood as well. But rather than the blood of a bull or a lamb, it's his blood that is shed for us on the cross. He is the only sacrifice needed, and God provided it himself. And when we put our faith and our trust in Jesus, we enter into that new covenant that he has made.

So this raises the question: **Is the Old Covenant still relevant for Christians?** Between Jesus' verbal teaching and his lived teaching, the answer is not just a cut and dried "yes" or "no." Jesus clearly affirms the Law, or the teachings, of the Old Covenant. He says straight up that he hasn't come to abolish them. Also, much of Jesus' teaching is on the Law, or the Old Covenant; it's kind of like his textbook, and frequently he affirms it. In fact, he oftentimes raises the bar – such as in the Sermon on the Mount where he does that on several occasions. We looked at that this past spring over the course of a couple months or so, and talked about how Jesus raises the bar.

But then there are times when he clearly does away with aspects of the law – either what comes from these chapters in Exodus or the additions that come later in Leviticus or the others that were added on and not recorded in Scripture, but were practiced by Jewish legalists in Jesus' day. Jesus has quite a bit of conflict with the Pharisees around Jesus' cancelling of parts of the Old Covenant. For instance, where certain foods are forbidden to be eaten here in the original covenant and were said to defile them: **Jesus says that what you eat is not what defiles you, and declares all foods "clean" (Matthew 15:11, Mark 7:19, see also Acts 10:9-16).** That's clearly a change.

Additionally, Jesus affirms the Sabbath – "the Sabbath is made for people" Jesus teaches – but he does away with all the rules and regulations that had been built up around the Sabbath – many of which were just religious traditions developed over time, outside of Scripture. So, he doesn't cancel the Sabbath, but gives us freedom in how we approach it, bringing the emphasis back being a day set aside for glorifying God. That's why he healed people on the Sabbath even though Jewish legalists of the day said it was forbidden

because it constituted work. Jesus prioritized glorifying God and helping people over following a religious rule.

So, that leaves us wondering: **How do we know what parts of the Old Covenant still matter?** Essentially, when the New Testament affirms an Old Covenant rule or law, then it's something for us to uphold and live by. Many of these are the moral and ethical codes kinds of things, such as “don't steal, don't lie, don't murder” and so forth. Also, the New Testament affirms the priority and supremacy of the God of the Bible, but the rules about animal sacrifice, ritual purity, food purity, Festival observances, and so forth, are canceled because Jesus covers them.

So, let me highlight three specific things from the Old Covenant that Jesus and the New Testament affirm, and we can learn and apply to our lives from these chapters. **First, in these ordinances – in the Book of the Covenant – there is a concern for justice.** In these chapters we see commandments against inventing or spreading untrue stories about someone (23:1). In other words, don't spread fake news or misinformation. I mean, is that applicable today, or what? We are not to be biased by sentimentality toward the poor or partiality toward the rich, or just going with the crowd (23:2, 3, 6, 8). They are also to make sure that the innocent should not suffer, the wicked don't escape, and that foreigners get justice. Bribes are not to be accepted; false accusations are forbidden so a person's name isn't slandered even with false information that is proved wrong.

Underneath this desire for justice and fairness is the need for reconciliation and peace in our relationships. For instance, Exodus 23:4-5 says (emphasis added by me), “If you come across your *enemy's* ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it. If you see the donkey of *someone who hates you* fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help them with it.” Jesus absolutely affirms this and even tells us to pray for our enemies.

Imagine the reconciliation that could happen in your relationships, whether that's friend, foe, sibling, spouse, neighbor, co-worker...if we took these Exodus verses to heart. It may not be with ox and donkeys, but a broken-down car, a child who's lost or wants to root for the 49ers, or someone who's

making poor choices and straying from the ways of Jesus. So, a concern for justice and fairness – with a hint toward reconciliation – permeates much of the Old Covenant.

A second theme we see prevalent in these chapters is compassion for the poor and the oppressed. These chapters in Exodus, in a primitive society surrounded by other cultures that had other values...these chapters show compassion for the poor and the oppressed.

Even though there were slaves – and oftentimes people entered into that, or entered their kids into it, for economic purposes – but still, we would certainly wish there weren't any slavery, they were to be treated fairly. This covenant is more groundbreaking than we might give it credit for. For instance, in 21:2 we see that they were given the opportunity for freedom after 6 years of service. The poor are allowed to scavenge through fields to get grain and food for themselves. Exodus 23:6 reads, "Do not deny justice to the poor in their lawsuits." There's concern for the poor shown there. 23:9 reads, "Do not oppress a foreigner...for you were once foreigners in Egypt." That verse feels like a precursor to Jesus' repeated teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about not being hypocritical. So, sometimes the light in the Old Testament is a bit faint, but it's there, and it shines in these laws that though they seem inadequate to our ears, they were groundbreaking for them, in how to treat those who are poor and oppressed.

And, there can be no doubt that: **Jesus had compassion for the poor and the oppressed.** The marginalized and the disregarded people of his day – lepers, lame, Samaritans, prostitutes, tax collectors, and so forth – were welcomed by Jesus, and he ministered to them regularly. If that's you – if you feel on the margins, if you're the foreigner, or you feel like the odd one in society, Jesus is with you. And our church is as well. We Jesus-followers are called to have compassion on the poor and the oppressed, and it's a compassion that engages and serves the least of these. If that's not you, but you want to help reach people who are on the margins, then join with us in those efforts. We've got room for improvement and there's room for you and your ideas and passions. We want to be compassionate as Jesus was compassionate. And the roots of that are in these chapters.

Third and finally, there is a consecration (dedication to God) of oneself and one's resources. For instance, Exodus 22:29-31 reads, “Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats. You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day. You are to be my holy people.” “Giving” the first born doesn't mean abandoning, but dedicating, and it also doesn't mean the others weren't dedicated to the Lord. But it gets the ball rolling. It starts the tradition to make sure that children are brought up knowing God. So, we are to offer ourselves, our family, and our resources to God.

I wonder if we hold back some times? Like, financially? Do we give the first-fruits there? Do we give openhandedly? How about with our time? With our family - do we get our kids engaged in ministry and serving? Do we offer our property or our possessions as instruments to be used for ministry? Are we fully available to the Lord for all that He's calling us into – in our personal lives and together as a church? There's a challenge here in Exodus, that Jesus and the rest of the New Testament abundantly affirms, to make sure that all of who we are and all that we have is dedicated to the Lord...that it's all available to Him, just as he has given us all he has, from Creation to the cross to the empty tomb.

So, this is the Covenant that they confirmed. Jesus ushers in a New Covenant as he himself says (Luke 22:20, for example). It's built on the old one, but like all things Jesus gets involved with: it's transformed. It's made new. And: **Jesus invites us to participate in this new covenant through faith in him.** It's no longer a conditional covenant – other than the condition of faith, of trusting Jesus. We still carry on parts of the Old Covenant, but it's in response to God's grace and what he's done for us in Jesus. So, I hope you will confirm that covenant with Jesus – whether you've never done that before, or whether you have. And then let's bring him glory in all that we say and do. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ It's two steps in today's passage. Earlier in chapter 19 when Moses gives them the one-sentence synopsis of the covenant, they agree to it there, as well. So that's sort of the first step, with the two here in chapter 24 more like steps 2 and 3. Each time, the covenant is given more detail and information so they know what they're saying “yes” to.