

Sermon File # 661

Scripture Text: Exodus 19:1-25

Sermon Title: *People of the Covenant*

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At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning 3 July 2011.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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People of the Covenant

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to our text, as we resume our series from Exodus after our Sundays in Acts 1&2 during the Ascension/Pentecost Season. You might recall that some weeks ago we left off with Exodus 18, describing how Moses was visited by his father-in-law Jethro, who gave him some important advice on sharing his ministry with fellow elders and servant-leaders, both for the benefit of Moses and the good of the entire nation of Israelites.

Today in Chapter 19 we will see that the Lord's promise to Moses in Exodus 3:12, that he would lead the Children of Israel back to this same Mt Sinai, was fulfilled. Sinai was an important destination for the Israelites, the place where they would receive the law of God by which he would bless them. Sinai was also the location where they would receive instructions for building the tabernacle, preparing them to resume nearly a year later their pilgrimage through the wilderness and on to the Promised Land 40 years later. This Mt Sinai has been best identified as Jabel Musa, a mountain dramatically rising 7,363 feet above the desert floor, which is described as an impressive sight (Kaiser, 415). With imposing granite formations and rocky

cliffs, Mt Sinai was a fitting setting for a dramatic display of God's almighty power (Ryken, 492).

In our text, the Lord sets forth conditions for his covenant with the people, and the terms of his blessing them. Follow as I read...

Exodus 19:1-25.

Have there ever been as many places of political unrest throughout the world as there are today? Throughout North Africa and the Middle East, and even here in Europe, the masses are expressing their unhappiness with their governments, and in some cases, as in Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Greece, the people are willing to risk their lives in protest against dictatorships or corrupt governments and in favor of new freedoms, which, it is hoped, will bring equal opportunities and prosperity. Our concern as followers of Christ should be that these places of unrest and suffering might have new governments and just leaders who will bring an opportunity for prosperity and freedom of religion for all. We pray for peace and prosperity for our brothers and sisters, and especially for the cause of the Gospel of Christ.

But no matter how efficient, just and fair are these and any governments, they are part of the kingdom of this world and will necessarily fall short of the ideal kingdom and nation God is in the process of establishing on earth (Revelation 11:15). The Lord God called to himself a people and promised to make of them a great nation, under his divine rule, beginning with the sojourner Abraham. The first covenant, which was the "first installment" of God's nation building plan, began in Genesis 12 when God called Abram (later Abraham) to leave his pagan fatherland and ancestry and go to the Land of Promise. In our text for today we have the reaffirmation of this same covenant that was given about five hundred years before Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt to the foot of Mt Sinai (Enns, 387).

A covenant is a "solemn commitment guaranteeing promises or obligations by covenanting parties," and God's covenant with his people is "a major theological motif in the Pentateuch," the first five books of the Old Testament (Williamson, 139). The structure of the covenant that the Lord gives in this text is similar to suzerain treaties common in that time period. A suzerain, a Near Eastern dictator, would offer a treaty. "in a solemn assembly," to those he had conquered, setting forth the stipulations, which would be followed by certain blessings for compliance and obedience (Kaiser, 415).

As people of God, now under the new covenant we have in Christ Jesus, we are privileged to live under the authority and blessing of the Lord God, the perfectly wise, almighty and loving "suzerain," our sovereign Lord Jesus. We live under his perfect rule, and are called to be his people of a covenant that is offered to all the peoples of the world, including those who these days are engaged in protests against failed governments and armed rebellion against oppressive dictators.

We note from our text that as people of the covenant we, first of all...

Are chosen by God (Verses 1-6)

Exodus, as we have noted, is a book about God's deliverance, and we see throughout the first chapters his initiative and his great acts to deliver his people to experience his presence at Mt Sinai. "Yahweh is as eager for Moses and Israel to arrive at Sinai as they are to get there" (Durham, 261).

Like the Children of Israel, we too are people of the covenant...

By grace alone

Moses went up into the mountain to meet with God, who gave him the message in verses 4-6, which is the famous "Eagle's Wings Speech" (Durham, 260). God reminds his people in vivid imagery that he swept them up out of bondage in Egypt to carry them to safety at Sinai.

God's covenant is all of grace. The Israelites had already been "redeemed by the blood of the lamb" on the night of the Passover, and delivered through the "Sea of salvation." Just as the Israelites could not have delivered themselves, so we also are absolutely dependent on God's initiative and saving grace. Keeping the covenant was not a matter of the Israelites' climbing the ladder of merit by observing the law (Motyer, 191). The Israelites were saved by grace before being given the law. It was impossible for them to earn their salvation. They had been brought to faith and into a relationship with God, who carried them, as he carries us, on eagle's wings. God swooped down like an eagle rescuing her falling eglets (Deuteronomy 32:11), bringing them and us to safety and salvation by grace alone (Enns, 386).

In verse 5 we have the big "if" in our text. Although we are saved by grace alone, the blessings of the covenant are contingent upon obedience and our compliance with the demands of the God of our salvation. There is no question that the Lord loves his people, indeed all people, unconditionally. There was no logical reason why God gave his covenant love to Israel. "The Lord loved you because he loved you," was his message of grace to his people. But the "if" is a bridge between what the Lord has done for us and what he promises us (Motyer, 198, 200)...

As his treasure

Only if we meet the conditions of obedience can we enjoy the blessings of being God's special treasure (5). "Treasured possession" is from the Hebrew "segulla," which was the king's favorite possession out of his entire royal treasury (Ryken, 497, Kelley, 95). There may be no intrinsic value in a segulla, but what makes it valuable is the value placed upon it by the king.

A grandchild is often a grandparent's "segulla." Nancy makes sure our kids take extra special care of their children, which are a precious and irreplaceable source of joy to her. She gets a little nervous if she thinks our kids take watchful eyes off our "segulla" grandkids for only a moment. And God holds us in his heart and keeps us in his sight with even greater love and care.

As God's people of his new covenant in Christ, we have the blessing of knowing we are his special prized possession, worth the cost of the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18f). Our lives would be radically transformed if we could come to grips with the truth that God delights in us and longs to bless us with his special, covenant love. Yes, he loves all people unconditionally. Yet those who respond to this big "if" and who respond to his grace with grateful obedience will have the assurance and awareness that we are God's special treasure.

God delights in and loves us simply because he loves us and wants us to enjoy the assurance of his love and delight in us. This big "if" also bridges us from God's electing grace to his promise that as God's special treasure we are chosen...

For his purpose

God saved Israel to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (6). This promised blessing was given before the official establishment of the Aaronic priesthood, which says that God intended for all of his people, in the old and new Covenants, to be his priests, who represent him to others and others to him, and who minister to God by serving his people.

God's kingdom, his holy nation, is not one run by politicians but by priests (Durham, 263). God chose his people to serve him as a bridge (pontiff is from the Latin for "bridge maker," and means priest or bishop). God called his people to serve his kingdom purpose of ministry to one another but also to make him known to other nations and peoples, leading others to know him as well. If we are saved by grace, we are given the blessing and responsibility of building bridges to help others come to faith and enter this covenant of grace.

One of life's great blessings is to have a purpose that is bigger than life, that transcends this mortal life. Whatever your station in life and your job or jobless condition, you as a follower of Christ have a calling, a vocation, which is to help others see Christ and to come to faith in him and become his followers.

As Peter makes clear, this is his purpose for his people in his new covenant in Christ, as he quotes these verses from our text:

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, *that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Peter 2:9, italics mine). God chose the Israelites and he has chosen us to be his "living advertisements" to a world that needs to see God and come to faith in him (Wiersbe, 123).

People of the Covenant are chosen by God, but yet, to meet the demands of a covenant relationship, must also...

Prepare to meet God (Verses 7-15)

As we see in verses 7 & 8, the people quickly responded, probably too quickly and impulsively, declaring their allegiance to the covenant conditions for God's blessings. Their rash declaration of faithfulness was mirrored in the new covenant by Simon Peter's rash promise that he would never deny the Lord Jesus (Matthew 26:35, Cole, 146). The Israelites were probably not insincere in their declaration, but in fact "simply didn't know the problem" of their moral and spiritual weakness (Oswalt, *CBC*, 430).

In verses 9ff, the Lord gives Moses his instructions for their preparation to meet him in a life-changing encounter. But as we know from the failure of the Children of Israel to live up to covenant agreement, the God of the Covenant would have to establish a new covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah (31:31-34) and quoted in Hebrews (8:7-13).

The Apostle Paul described the ongoing battle with our sinful nature as the futile life of trying to live by the law, which is powerless to change our character and behavior tied to our old, still-being-converted nature. Those of us in the new covenant, who have been saved by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus, and given a new nature in him, and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, are prepared to face his judgment and to live to please him and receive his blessings (Romans 7:11-8:4).

The only way to prepare to meet God is...

Through his word

The Israelites were to prepare to meet God by receiving and obeying God's words of instruction through Moses. This preparation foreshadows the coming of the Living Word. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God and the living Word of God (John 1:1-18) is the Deliverer who came 1500 years after this first covenant as the only one to perfectly fulfill the requirements of the law and the demands of the covenant. Christ is the High Priest of a new and better covenant who has made the old one obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). By faith in Jesus Christ we receive the benefits of his sacrificial death on the cross and his victorious resurrection.

We are blessed to have the written word of God, the Scriptures, contained in both the Old Covenant (Testament) and the New Covenant (Testament). We are born again "through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). God brings us to faith through the message about the Living Word, Christ, whom we know through the written word, the Scriptures. The word of God that came

to the Israelites was a severe warning about God's holiness, contrasting with the people's sinfulness. And now, with the new covenant, when the Scriptures are read and preached, the Spirit of God brings understanding, conviction of sin and saving faith in Christ (John 16:7-11).

The writer of Hebrews was warning newly converted Jews about the danger of falling away from the grace of God offered in the new covenant in Christ and reverting to the former, now "obsolete" old covenant, which was too weak to change hearts. Then he quotes Jeremiah's prophecy about the superior new covenant in which God would put his law in our minds and write his word on our hearts, hearts made new and brought into a personal relationship with him (Hebrews 8:7-13).

God's covenant people prepare to meet him through his word and...

By his cleansing

The death penalty for even touching the mountain where God was present was a clear message about the holiness of God and the necessity of his people to be made holy and consecrated through washing themselves and their clothing. Setting aside normal activities, such as sexual activity (15), enabled the people to focus on their meeting with God (Oswalt, *NLT*, 157).

We know that in the new covenant we are washed and made clean through the death of Christ and the washing of rebirth (Titus 3:5). The shed blood of Christ, symbolic of his sacrificial death, has the power to take away sin and give us God's complete forgiveness (Hebrews 9:11-22). When we turn from sin and trust in Christ, we are made clean, justified, before God (Isaiah 1:18), and the process of being made holy begins. Those under the first covenant found the law to be inadequate for complete forgiveness and a new heart to obey God. In Christ and the new covenant we receive the righteousness of Christ by faith (Romans 5:1f) and the power of the risen Christ to live a new life (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:1-10).

People of the covenant must also...

Experience God (Verses 16-25)

Just as was promised, the Lord appeared on the third day in a mighty demonstration of his presence that brought fear to the hearts of the people. Imagine the storm we had the other evening, with even greater bolts of lightning, louder thunder, fire and billowing smoke over the majestic, rugged mountain, accompanied by a trumpet blast that became louder and louder. This theophany was electric with the presence of the Almighty (Durham, 271).

When the writer of Hebrews recounts this theophany, he notes that even Moses trembled with fear (Hebrews 12:21). This was a fearful experience with God in the

first covenant, but in the new and better covenant, we are invited to experience God along with the thousands and thousands of angels in joyful assembly (12:22-24). As God's covenant people we are to experience God...

In awesome and joyful worship

In the new covenant as members of God's kingdom that cannot be shaken, we are to be thankful and "worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Hebrews 12:28f).

God's new covenant people are to worship him, to honor him personally, corporately in acts of worship, and to live before him in a spirit of ongoing worship. We are to balance our worship with a sense of awe in his majestic, holy presence with joy and confidence before him, knowing his delight in us and desire to draw us near to him.

As one has noted, finding a proper balance between God's awesome transcendence and his inviting nearness has always been a challenge. In the Middle Ages, huge and lavish cathedrals were constructed at a great cost in order to convey God's majesty and transcendence. I continue to be amazed by the huge cathedrals that stand in relatively small villages throughout Western Europe. And at the other extreme today's worship in "user-friendly" churches is often too familiar and chummy, bereft of any sense of God's majesty. The Lord is more like our pal than our mighty and holy God (Ryken, 501).

To quote the beaver in C S Lewis' "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," God is "not safe but good" (quoted by Enns, 408). We try to tame and domesticate God, making him a god who is at our disposal in times of need, but who otherwise will not bother us with his demands for serious discipleship and radical character transformation. When we truly worship God, we will, like Isaiah, encounter his transforming power that will call us to serious, life-changing and costly discipleship (Isaiah 6).

What's true in corporate worship is also applicable to our personal worship and prayer before God. We need to draw near to our "dear Father" (Abba), but remember he's also the majestic and holy Father in the heavens. Also we are to draw near to our Father in the heavens with sincere hearts, made right with God through the blood of Christ and made clean through the washing of the Spirit. Our worship must be with sincere hearts that desire to experience God and meet his demands and obey his will.

The verb in Verse 21 "to see" suggests seeing as a spectator, perhaps out of mere curiosity. How many times have you and I gone to church with an attitude of curiosity or with a spirit of criticism, or perhaps as a spectator expecting to be entertained? God is not honored by our curiosity about him but rather demands that we come before him in sincerity and with a wholehearted desire to do business with him. People of the covenant are to experience God...

Through life-changing worship

Corporate and personal worship, experiences whereby we encounter the awesome and loving Father, are to characterize our entire life. Daily offering ourselves to Christ in holiness is our “spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1). In the old covenant, only Moses and Aaron were allowed to “come up to the Lord” (24) to meet with him; but in the new covenant in Christ Jesus, we are invited to freely come into the presence of the holy Lord God through Christ Jesus our mediator and high priest (Hebrews 12:22-24). We are to live daily and throughout the day in an attitude of grateful worship, seeking to honor God in all we are, with all we have, and in all we do.

Even with this dramatic encounter with holy God the children of the first covenant remained basically unchanged. They failed miserably to keep their “end of the bargain,” their part of the covenant. The law was powerless to change them, from the inside out. But we who are in Christ, with Christ in us, have the power to live a new life that pleases God. The demands of God’s law have been met in Christ Jesus, the embodiment of the new covenant. God accepts us as righteous and has made us right with him and has given us grace to live rightly before him.

The Israelites in the old covenant had been “saved,” but the blessings of being his treasured possession, kingdom of priests and holy nation (5f) were conditional upon their keeping the covenant and remaining faithful to the Lord, which they were not. As one has said, they “failed to possess their possessions,” as we also may do (Motyer, 197). The Lord has saved us to receive the full measure of an abundant life, to experience the depth, height and breadth of his love for us, and to be a blessing to the nations, joining him in his kingdom work (John 10:10; Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; 1 Peter 2:9).

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the covenant, and is himself the “covenant for the people” (Isaiah 42:6; 49:8). Because we are in Christ and he is in us, we are able to fulfill the covenant demands for holiness and receive the blessings and spiritual riches he longs to give us. He also desires to use us to bear witness to the world around us, to be his missional people, declaring “the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). God has called us his covenant people to lead others into his kingdom of priests and holy nation, becoming also people of the covenant.

Conclusion:

We’re privileged to be people of the covenant, kept by the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the perfectly wise, almighty and loving suzerain, or sovereign. Our prayer and the yearning of our hearts should be that people throughout the world today who are in political turmoil and unrest, seeking to overthrow tyrannical rulers, desperately

desiring prosperity and purpose, will come to know Jesus as Lord. He alone can give true and lasting peace between individuals and nations and everlasting purpose that transcends this brief mortal life.

In a few moments we will observe the new covenant ordinance called the Lord's Supper, Communion. On the evening before his arrest, trial and crucifixion, Jesus prepared this observance to share with his disciples, and taking the cup of wine, he said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). Paul reflected on this saying when he noted that Jesus "took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood'" (1 Corinthians 11:25).

Those of us who belong to Christ through his new covenant will remember his sacrifice for us and also will renew our communion with him and with one another. We'll also renew our vow to respond to his saving grace with grateful obedience to his commands, that our lives might honor him and that we will receive the blessed, abundant life he desires to give us in his new covenant. Under his loving rule we have the delight and assurance that we are his treasured possession, the special objects of his unfathomable love.

Those of you outside of Christ, we urge you to come to trust and follow him as Lord and enter with us into this gracious new covenant. As we observe the Lord's Supper we will "proclaim the Lord's death" to you (1 Corinthians 11:26). Assisting me in serving you are our elders today, who, with the ordination of our two new elders, are declaring our commitment to serve you and the Lord faithfully within this local body of the new covenant.

Let's celebrate the glorious privilege of being people of the covenant.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. In verse 4 and Deuteronomy 32:11, how does the imagery of an eagle and the eaglets describe God and his actions toward his people?
2. Define the word "covenant." Who are the people of God's covenant, and how did they enter that covenant?
3. In verses 5 & 6, what blessings did God promise those who would remain faithful to his covenant?

4. In Hebrews 8:7-13 the writer compares the weakness of this old covenant with the new covenant in Christ. What is the new and better covenant and why was it necessary to replace the old one? (Paul also makes a similar comparison in Romans 7 & 8 between the old covenant law and the “law of the Spirit of life”).
5. Like the Israelites, we are saved by grace, but are blessed through obedience. What are some of the blessings of our obedience to the new covenant in Christ?
6. Describe the worship experience in verses 16-19 and worship in the new covenant in Hebrews 12:18-24. What do these verses say about the attitude of our corporate worship experiences in the church today?
7. How does your corporate and personal worship affect your daily life? How should it?
8. Read Mark 14:24 and 1 Corinthians 11:25. How is our observance of the Lord’s Supper a reminder of the new covenant? How should it encourage us to a life of obedience and seeking God’s blessings?

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