

“Covenant”

*Exodus 19:4-9; Exodus 20:1-2; Exodus 32:7-8;
Exodus 34:5-9; Exodus 40:34-38*

The true story

After leading his people out of Egypt, God takes them to Mt. Sinai, where God and the Israelites enter into a covenant. God tells them how to align their society and their lives with God’s moral will (the Law) and also tells them how to build a suitable dwelling place for God to be near his people. Sadly, even in the midst of this covenant-making, the people rebel against God, making a golden idol and worshipping it. You might think God would abandon this project, but no, that would not be God, who is relentless and undeterred in his love. God reveals himself to be merciful and gracious, boundless in steadfast love.



Covenants

The notion of covenant is one of the central themes of the Bible. It isn’t a word we use much anymore, but it expresses the making and keeping of commitments and promises. An excellent example today is a marriage covenant.

Though there are several types of covenants in the Bible, they fall into two broad categories, (1) the covenant between God and his people and (2) the covenants among humans.

Covenants are used in the Bible to bind two persons legally and personally, as when Jonathan makes a covenant with David (1 Samuel 18:3-4), wherein their loving bond diminishes the legal aspects of the covenant. In other cases, such as the covenant between Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31:43-54), the legal power of the covenant is much more important because Laban and Jacob don’t trust each other. In most biblical covenants between humans, God is called on as the witness and guarantor.

When God is a participant in the covenant, such as God’s covenants with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) or Abraham (12:1-3) or Moses (in Exodus and Deuteronomy) or David (see 2 Samuel 7), the covenant takes on all the theological significance of a commitment between God the creator and his creation, between God the king and his people.

What does God want from his people above all else?

Jesus summed up all of the Law, God’s Covenant, in two teachings: love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love others (Leviticus 19:18). The first tablet speaks to our relationship with God. We are to have no other gods or take God’s name in vain and so on. The second tablet speaks to how we are to live with others. We are not to steal or give false testimony. We are to honor our parents and our marriages. We are to forsake murder and so on. All of it seeking to answer the question, “What would love do?”

If you took all of God’s teachings set forth in the Law of Moses, mixed them up in a pot, and boiled them down to their essence, love of God and others would be what is left. Think again of the two tablets – the first one focused on what it means to love God, the second on what it means to love others. If you will let this sink deep into your mind and heart, your understanding of Scripture will be revolutionized. You will come to know Jesus as you have not before.

Indeed, God created a people to live in love and fellowship and through whom God would rescue humanity. And when the community failed to love as they promised, God provided one faithful Jew who would and did—Jesus.

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what God's Law is really all about. When tested by the young lawyer, Jesus said that all the Law can be summed in the commandments to love God (the first tablet) and to love neighbor (the second tablet). All of the do's and don'ts one finds in the Old Testament are simply concrete expressions of those two commandments for an ancient people.

Any talk of the good life or making better choices or living ethically must first begin with God. It is God who is good. It is God who made this world. It is God who made us in his image (the imago Dei). Thus, it must be God who points us toward the better choices. It is God who establishes what a really smart choice is. It is God who takes away our blindness and enables us to see the life that we seek and the life that God desires for us. This is what the Law of Moses does for us, When we learn in Exodus 22:21-22 that "you shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien . . . you shall not abuse any widow or orphan," it speaks volumes to us about how to live and what God values, i.e., it tells us about the character of God—and remember, God is LOVE!