

The Covenant

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[0 : 0 0] Well I wonder what important documents that you have signed in your life. I'm sure most of us have signed a document like a marriage certificate or a mortgage loan or the title deeds of a house or the lease of a flat or a last will and testament. I spoke to a girl this morning who had signed a contract for a football club but when we sign a contract or a covenant we make an agreement and two parties write their names and agree on something. Or maybe in a bigger scale there are signatures that can represent an entire nation so a treaty where an agreement is ratified between two countries. And so when we come to Exodus chapter 24 we've got the confirmation of God's covenant with his people Israel on Mount Sinai. And so if you're just joining us today we're looking at the book of Exodus giving it the title the God who saves because it's about how God saves his people and then sends his people out into the world to live for him to obey him.

And so we're at the stage where God has given his people the Ten Commandments. He's given them the laws that they are to obey and now God is confirming his covenant with them.

And covenant, this word covenant, is one of the most important themes in the Bible, if not the most important theme. Because covenant is not too hard for us to understand. And we might talk in terms of contracts today but a covenant is very similar. It is a binding agreement between two parties coming together. Now in the ancient world there was a certain type of covenant where a powerful nation would impose a set of rules on a weaker nation or a nation they had conquered and a treaty would be drawn up and both sides would agree to certain obligations with the weaker nation agreeing to the covenant set out by the stronger one. And so the stronger power, the stronger nation would promise protection if this lesser nation, lesser power, would agree to certain rules, pay certain taxes and be loyal and so on and so on. And so it was like a one-sided contract as opposed to a contract today which is like a two-sided agreement. And so when we read of covenant in the Bible what it is is a unilateral declaration by God to his people. In other words it's as if God gives his signature and he guarantees that he will do all that he has promised and then he calls his people to commit themselves to what he has said. And so a covenant is a special relationship. It's established by God where God belongs to his people and his people belong to him. And so you might wonder well what has all this got to do with us? You may have thought that as we had this passage read. Well essentially being a Christian means being in a covenant relationship with God and it happens through Jesus Christ. But if you're here this afternoon and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian then what Exodus chapter 24 does for us in a kind of pictorial manner it displays for us, it shows us what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be in a relationship with God, what it means to be in a covenant with God.

And so this passage essentially tells us that God wants an intimate and a personal relationship with his people. God wants to be in relationship with those he's made and that's you and that's me and that is the wonder of the Christian faith. It's all about people like us being in relationship with the God who made us. And so we're going to look at this under three headings this afternoon.

They're up on the screen. The first is we'll think about the terms of this relationship, the covenant relationship, the law of God. We'll think about the confirmation of the relationship and that's the blood of sacrifice and we'll think of the goal of this relationship and that's the presence of God. So the terms and the confirmation and the goal of this relationship. We see this here.

[4 : 30] So first of all, the terms of this relationship. So God had already established his covenant and now in Exodus chapter 24, the covenant is confirmed with Israel. And so this passage begins with God calling Moses up the mountain to worship him. And we can see this in verse 1 and 2.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and 70 of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance. But Moses alone is to approach the Lord. The others must not come near and the people may not come up with him. So notice that it is only Moses who is permitted to approach the Lord with the others having to stay at a distance. And then the rest of the people, they've got to stay even further away, they've got to remain at the foot of Mount Sinai. Well, why is this? It's simply because it is impossible for sinful human beings, and that's all of us, it is impossible for people like you and me to dwell in the presence of a holy God. And if we are to be in relationship with God and dwell in his presence and he dwells with us, then God has got to do something about it himself. We can't do anything about it. It only happens on God's terms. And so as we've already seen in the book of Exodus, Moses is the mediator of the people and for the people. So Moses alone has got this special access to God. And we saw this in chapter 19 of Exodus, which in actual fact is a parallel to chapter 24 of Exodus. So Exodus 19 emphasizes Moses going down the mountain. He's coming down from God to the people. And then Exodus chapter 24 is emphasizing Moses going up the mountain, up from the people to

God. And so Moses keeps ascending and descending Mount Sinai because he was representing God to Israel, and he was representing Israel to God. He's mediating between the people and God. And so after Moses approached God, he then went to the people to tell them what God had said, giving them the terms of the covenant. So verse 3 says, 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 these are the terms of the covenant.

So the Lord's words, verse 3, refer to the Ten Commandments in chapter 20, and God spoke all these words. And then the laws refers back to the book of the covenant, which we looked at last week in chapter 21 to 23, where God said, these are the laws you're to set before them. So God required his people to obey all his words and laws. And then the people responded to this, we're told with one voice, everything the Lord has said we will do. As if to say, okay, get the pen, get the ink, we will sign this deal, we'll do it. That's what you want us to do, God. Okay, we obey. And then so we read in verse 4 that Moses wrote down everything the Lord had said, which actually tells us how the Bible came together in the very beginning, Moses writing down God's words. But let's just step back a bit and see how what is happening here fits into the overall picture of Exodus, the message of Exodus. Because by his grace, God had already delivered his people from their slavery in Egypt. And now through his law,

God demands that his people obey. They obey not to be saved because they already are saved, but they obey in order to enjoy the relationship with God that is already theirs. And so the people agree to this covenant relationship, they're ready to confirm it. Now a similar thing happens at a wedding where I've been at lots of weddings, I've married lots of people. I've got one wife, married one person, but I've conducted lots of weddings where I've married other people to other people. So don't pick that up the wrong way. But as a minister, the minister says a line at the beginning of the ceremony, really asking the bride and the groom to declare their intentions. So I would say something along the lines of, will you take this woman to be your wife? Or will you take this man to be your husband?

[9 : 32] And if they say, I will, what are they doing? Well, they're declaring their desire to enter into marriage, which is a covenant relationship. We call it marriage, but it's a covenant relationship.

And yet they're still not actually married because they haven't taken any vows. They haven't signed the register. I haven't signed the register to make it legal. So they're not technically married.

That still has to come. And so they'll say something to each other like, I, X, take you X to be my wife or to be my husband, to be with you, whatever life may bring and prosperity and hardship and health and sickness and sorrow and joy. I promise to love, protect and serve you as long as we both shall live. This I vow before God. And that's a promise being made saying, I will commit myself to you. And then it's reciprocated by the bride who says it to the groom.

And so the vows commit the man and the woman to each other. And then you get, of course, in the wedding ceremony, the giving and receiving of rings. And the rings are a sign or a symbol of this covenant relationship the man and woman are entering into. And so what we see happening here in Exodus is that God has already declared his intent. God has already spoken of his love for his people. Not only has he spoken of his love for his people, God has displayed his love for his people and saving them from their slavery in Egypt. And so Israel knew as they were entering into this covenant and confirming it, they knew that God was committed to them. And so now they must declare their commitment to him to take their vows or to agree to his terms, as it were. They had to indicate that they were serious about this relationship they were entering into with God, that they were willing to obey him. And so can you see how when it comes to a relationship with God, either here and all the way through the rest of the Bible, it is God who takes the initiative. We don't ever just wake up one morning and say, oh, wouldn't it be good if I could enter into a relationship with God? I wonder how I could do that. No, God is the one who takes the initiative with us. God saves us by his grace. And then he calls us to obey him. And so if we are going to enjoy a relationship with God, then we respond to his grace. We have seen in history what God has done for us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, how God has declared his intent to be in a relationship with us, how God has declared his love for us. And now it's us who have to respond to him and to what he has done. And so that's our first point, the terms of this relationship. The terms are the law of God. Secondly, the confirmation of the relationship. And here we see the blood of sacrifice. And so after these terms have been set out, from verse 4 to 8, the covenant is confirmed. And it's confirmed through the blood of sacrifice.

And so what Moses does is he wastes no time in getting everything sorted. Verse 4, he got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up 12 stone pillars representing the 12 tribes of Israel. So the altar represents God. These 12 stone tribes represent the 12 tribes of Israel. And then we read verse 5, then he sent young Israelite men and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it to the people and they responded, we will do everything the Lord has said, we will obey.

[13 : 50] And so we might be thinking, well, why is all this blood and sacrifice necessary? I mean, like, what does all of that have to do with anybody today? What is the significance of it? Well, the significance is that sinful people, people who have failed to live God's way to worship him and love him as we should. We can't enter into a relationship with a holy God. Remember, we're not talking here about two equal parties like a covenant or a contract today. What we're talking about is how our sin separates us from God and so we deserve God's punishment. And yet, God loves his people so much, his people here and us, that God wants an intimate relationship with us. And so how is that going to happen? Well, something has got to be done to remove the sin that separates us from him. There needs to be a way of paying for our sin. There needs to be a way of atoning for our failure to obey

God's law because with them. Because with them, it's impossible because their sin distances us from him. In other words, we need to be reconciled to God. And that's what's going on with all the blood and all the sacrifice. And so here's how it happened. Some animals were sacrificed. There were two different kinds of sacrifice, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. The burnt offerings were to atone for sin. The fellowship offerings were to express ongoing fellowship with God. And Moses divided the blood in two and the blood would seal the covenant. A bit like the way that two signatures in ink would seal a contract today. So first of all, Moses splashed half the blood on the altar, which represented God. And then Moses read the book of the covenant to the people. And then they responded, verse 7, we will do everything the Lord has said we will obey. And so then the other half of blood was sprinkled on the people. So it covered the altar, representing God, and then it covered the people. And then Moses said, verse 8, this is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words. And so the blood bound the people together in covenant relationship.

So just imagine the scene. So here are these people standing there, faces covered in blood, blood dripping down onto their clothes, clothes spattered with blood, the stink, the stench of animals that have been sacrificed and that are lying around, blood everywhere, mess everywhere, a gruesome scene. And here are the people. What are they to make of it? Well, they surely realized what God was doing here was to find a way of making it possible for them to relate to him.

Because what God is doing was making provision for people who wouldn't be able to keep covenant with him. Because when the people said enthusiastically, yes, we will do everything the Lord has said, we will obey. It's not as if they caught God out when a few days later they disobeyed and God said, oh, I just didn't see that coming. I never knew. They were so enthusiastic in their promise.

No, God knew they would fail. Not just that he wouldn't keep all of his covenant. He knew they wouldn't keep any of his covenant. And so God was finding or providing better. He was providing a way so that the people would be able to live in covenant relationship with him.

[18:02] And so the blood of sacrifice spoke of God's mercy for their failure. So the blood signified that God had accepted a sacrifice as a payment for their sin. The atonement had been made. And that was how they could remain in a relationship with him even after they'd sinned. Because they would. And so would we. So how can we still stay in a relationship with God? Well, it's through the blood of sacrifice.

Because here, the blood that made peace with God for these people, that blood also kept peace with God. It was God's way of keeping his covenant with a bunch of people who couldn't. And so although the covenant had a legal basis, it was and always has been a covenant of grace. It was in God's terms.

Verse 8, the covenant that the Lord has made with you. God took the initiative in this relationship. And so it was through the sealing with blood that the people were bound to keep God's law. But it was also through the blood that their sins could be forgiven when they failed to keep God's law.

And it all might seem very odd and strange to our ears, but this isn't just some strange story, some historical event that happened in the past. Because when you read the Bible, you see that blood has always been the basis of God's relationship with his people. And that's why the Israelites' experience here in Exodus helps us understand what it means and what it costs to have a relationship with God. Because we can only enter into a relationship with God through the blood of sacrifice.

And that's what all of these sacrifices and all of this blood in the Old Testament is telling us. They're vivid pictures that point us to the ultimate blood sacrifice. Do you know what the ultimate blood sacrifice is? It is the death of Jesus on a cross and the shedding of his blood for our sins?

[20 : 23] That's what all of these other Old Testament sacrifices were pointing to. God's covenant with Israel was preparing the way for Jesus to come. Where God in Jesus showed the significance of every blood sacrifice when Jesus hung on the cross and he was sacrificed for our sin. In fact, Jesus even picks up on and repeats the words of Moses the night before he died. He said to his disciples as they celebrated the Lord's Supper, he said, this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus was saying that his own blood would establish a new covenant between God and his people. In fact, the rest of the New Testament frequently describes the saving work of Jesus in terms of blood.

And so we are saved and brought into a relationship with God through the blood of Jesus. Jesus. And it's staggering when you think about it because how did Israel come into a relationship with God? Well, animals were sacrificed. How do we come into a relationship with God? Well, the blood of God's own son was sacrificed. He was sacrificed. His blood was shed for us.

And the book of Hebrews in the New Testament picks up on this so well. In fact, Hebrews chapter 9 picks up on Exodus 24 where the writer of Hebrews says this, when Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves together with water, scarlet wool, branches of hyssop and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, this is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you to keep. In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood. And without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. And so the writer of the Hebrews is saying that through Christ's death, there's a permanent and a complete sacrifice for sins. All these other sacrifices could never do it fully until Christ came. And so in Hebrews 9, we read that Jesus, he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. So can you see how God has made a covenant with us? And it's confirmed and established in the blood of Jesus. Because the blood of Jesus shed on the crosses where we find atonement being made, where our sins are forgiven. And if all of this seems just difficult to grasp and complex, the implication is really rather simple. It is that we cannot enter into a relationship with God.

Without the sacrifice of God without the sacrifice of Jesus for our sin. In other words, there's no way for you or for me to make it up to God other than by going to Jesus to have our sins forgiven.

And it's so important because if we don't trust in Jesus to pay for our sin, then we will have to pay for our sin ourselves in hell and be separated from God forever.

[24 : 14] And so just as Moses was the mediator of this old covenant, still the covenant of grace, so Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant. Where it's his blood that pays for our sin and enables us to enjoy a relationship with God. So that's the second point, the confirmation of the relationship, the blood of sacrifice. So the terms, the confirmation, and then thirdly, the goal of the relationship. And that is the presence of God. And we see this in verse 9 to 18. So just after the covenant was confirmed, Moses and the leaders go up to see God. And then God invites Moses further up and further in to his presence. And as we'll see, the presence of God with his people is the goal of this covenant relationship. It's where Exodus, the story of Exodus ends up. Because God wants to dwell with his people. And so see what happens here, verse 9 to 11. Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and the 70 elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the

Israelites. They saw God and they ate and drank. We're told these men saw God. To what extent they saw God, the commentators debate about? Because later on in Exodus chapter 33, God says, you cannot see my face, for no one who sees me may see me and live. And the focus here seems to be on what is under God's feet. And so however much they saw of God, this was an exceptional experience for them. And the text highlights this by stating that they saw God but did not die. And so whatever they saw, it's clear that they were able to behold God. They were in his very presence. And what is more, we are told that they ate and drank. They had a meal, as if to seal the deal, which was and still is a common practice for parties who have entered into a covenant, isn't it? After a contract is signed, then the people, the two parties, go and celebrate over a meal together. And so this meal here expresses the special relationship that God has with his people. It points to their fellowship or their communion together. But of course, this meal foreshadows the fellowship with God that was to come through

Jesus. And that's why the Lord's Supper celebrates the new covenant confirmed by Christ's blood shed on the cross. It's through Jesus that we enter into a relationship with God. So God brings us into his family. God adopts us as his children where we know God's presence with us. And so it's as if we can put our feet under the table, as it were. That's what this picture is saying to us. You can have a close, intimate relationship with God. And it's a fantastic picture because this meal here in Exodus 24 and the Lord's Supper, the meal that comes later, they anticipate the ultimate meal that comes at the end of our Bibles in the book of Revelation. It's what Revelation calls the wedding supper of the Lamb, that great banquet when God will welcome all his people, all those who have had their sins forgiven through the blood of Jesus shed on a cross, will all dwell together with God forever. And while we're waiting for God to say that the wedding supper is ready, what do we do? Well, we partake in the Lord's Supper now and proclaim the

Lord's death until he comes. And so all of this here is expressing the ultimate goal of the covenant where God wants an intimate personal relationship with his people. And it's drilled home further here as Moses is called up the mountain by God and further into God's presence. Verse 15 says, when Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai.

For six days, the cloud covered the mountain. And on the seventh day, the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites, the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went up on up the mountain and he stayed on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights. So can you see what's happening? Moses, a man, sinful man, entered God's presence.

[29 : 33] But there's more because this is setting the stage for all that is to follow. Because as the Bible story unfolds from Exodus onwards, it drives home the message again and again that God wants to dwell with his people. And so when we read in verse 16 that the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, the word settled is the word for dwelt or tabernacled. Simply means dwelling place. God was dwelling on the mountain with Moses. And what it anticipates is, of course, the tabernacle, which was that massive tent at the end of Exodus where the cloud would cover the tent and it was filled with the glory of God.

And it's all emphasizing God's desire to dwell with his people. With Moses here and then in the tabernacle and then in the temple and then in Jesus as he came to earth and then as God sent his Holy Spirit to dwell in his people's hearts. And then finally, when Jesus Christ returns and takes all God's people to dwell in his presence in the new creation. And so what happened to Moses here at the end of Exodus 24 is really the ultimate destiny of everyone who has a relationship with Jesus. It is the goal of the covenant relationship that God calls people into. That we experience God's presence with us now.

We enjoy a relationship with him in this life, but it gets better because there's more still to come and we will be in his presence. In Revelation 21 verse 3 it says, Luke, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. And so that's where this unique event in Exodus 24 is leading us. It's pointing us to a personal intimate relationship with God which begins in this life but goes on forever. The covenant in Exodus 24 shows us what it means to have a relationship with God.

It is a graphic picture if you like, a pop-up picture storybook to show us how we relate to God. For example, Moses and the leaders were at a distance from God and we are all separated from God because of our sin.

But God graciously invited Moses and the leaders up into his presence and he made it possible through the blood of sacrifice to atone for their sin.

[32 : 31] And so God invites all of us to come to him making it possible through the blood of Jesus on the cross shed for our sin. And so just as Moses and these leaders entered into God's presence to gaze upon him and then Moses entered into God's glory, so too God will welcome all his redeemed people into his presence and we will behold his glory and see him face to face.

Jesus came down to earth so we could be raised up to heaven. Christianity above every other religion tells us we can have a relationship with God.

We can know God, experiencing him now and we can be in his presence forever. And when we have this relationship with God, the great news is, it is all by grace.

God initiates it, he starts it, and he continues it. Because God will never break his promises to his people. He keeps his covenant.

He is faithful. And he's faithful even when we fail. Because he's provided a way to be just so that he can punish our sin without punishing us.

[33 : 58] So Jesus Christ has been put on the hook, as it were, so we could be let off the hook. And it's the best news we'll ever hear. And so the implication of this passage is this.

Do you have a relationship with God? If not, then you can have one. Because God has already declared his amazing love for you and for me by sending his son to die on a cross to take away our sin, which keeps us apart from him.

And so like a marriage ceremony, God has already said, I will. I will take you to be mine.

And so will you take him? Go to him. He will never leave you. He will never forsake you. Because he has promised.