

Return of the King

Left Wanting

Exodus

Today we'll be continuing our series through the Old Testament tracking God's redemptive work, which will ultimately result in the coming of a promised king. We haven't quite made it to the king part, but we've been covering preceding parts of the story and are currently in the covenant section. So far, we've covered God's creation of a good world, the fall of that good world into chaos and violence as a result of man's sin, and two of the significant covenants God makes. In case the language of covenant is new to you, a covenant is simply a relational agreement. We've looked at two of those agreements so far.

The first being God's covenant with Noah in which He promises to never unleash the waters of chaos and destruction on the earth again. The second being His covenant with Abraham in which He promises to establish Abraham in a land of his own, to make him a great nation, and to be with him to bless him. Each of these covenants gets at God's big plan for His people, which is to dwell with them in a covenantal relationship of blessing. So, while we often talk of the various covenants as distinct, the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and so on, each is really just a development of this plan. And with each subsequent covenant that plan comes into greater definition.

Each covenant has three basic components: people, place, and presence. God promises to set a people apart for Himself. He promises to give them a place in which to dwell. And He promises to be with them for their good.

With Noah, these things were mostly implied. The people were presumably Noah's family, the place was the newly cleansed earth, and God's presence was found in the promise to not destroy the earth by flood again. You can see how the components are there, but they're fairly obscure.

But with Abraham, there's a lot more definition. The people were explicitly the descendants who would come from him, who would be as numerous as the stars, forming a great nation. The place promised was explicitly Canaan. God's presence, while still invisible, would be clearly shown by the blessing of Abraham and those who would bless him. So, we can see how the plan is taking clearer and clearer shape with each covenantal iteration. Today, we'll be looking at the Mosaic covenant, which further defines that plan.

You can open your Bibles to Exodus 19, as this will be the first passage we spend some time in, though we'll be jumping around quite a bit. While you're opening there, let me bridge the gap between where we left off last week, and where we'll pick things up this week. It's a journey from Mount Moriah to Mount Sinai.

After Isaac is delivered on Mt. Moriah, as we looked at last week, the promise of God's covenant with Abraham continues through him, and he ends up having two sons: Esau and Jacob. At this point in the story Isaac is living in the land and God is blessing him, but two sons are hardly a great nation. So, the question is still hanging out there: how and when is God going to multiply Abraham's descendants to equal the stars of heaven?

Well, with Jacob things seem to pick up a bit of steam, with him having twelve sons in total, but that's still well short of the number of stars in the sky. One of those sons, Joseph, ends up getting sold into Egyptian slavery by his own brothers, but God uses this unfortunate turn of events for the good of all. Joseph has the blessing of God upon his life and rises to positions of prominence wherever he finds himself, ultimately ending up as the second most powerful man in the land. He obtains this position by predicting a famine and outlining a way for Egypt to endure it.

This same famine hits Canaan and leads to Jacob sending his remaining sons to Egypt to get food. Instead of revenging himself on the brothers who betrayed him, Joseph ultimately forgives and blesses them, telling them to bring their families to Egypt to escape the famine. In this we have a picture of

Jesus who does not revenge Himself on the brothers who betrayed Him, but rather extends them salvation. In one of the great lines of Scripture, Joseph says to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...” And so, Abraham’s descendants end up in Egypt, as God said they would in Genesis 15.

The book of Exodus opens with them in Egypt and says this, “These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.”

We saw how with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob two-thirds of God’s promises were fulfilled, land and blessing, but not people. Now, it seems the people and blessing parts of the promise are fulfilled; the problem is they’re not in the right land. Not only that, but things turn quickly in the story of Exodus with the very next verses, “Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens.” Now it seems as though God is not blessing them as He promised. And it is this state of affairs that leads to the Exodus.

God hears the cry of His people groaning under their Egyptian oppression and raises up Moses to be His emissary to Pharaoh and lead His people out of captivity. In Exodus 3, we have the famous burning bush episode in which God reveals Himself to Moses and commissions him to be a part of His saving work, “Then the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the

Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites...I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

So, we see God reassert His promise to take His people out of slavery and to the land of blessing. Notice the end there: they will return to the mountain where Moses first meets with God, that is, Mt. Sinai, after they have been delivered. That deliverance comes in the form of 10 plagues, culminating in the Passover, when the angel of the Lord passes over the land of Egypt taking the lives of every firstborn not protected by the blood of a lamb. This final plague causes Pharaoh and all Egypt to beg Israel to leave, which they do.

However, Pharaoh has another change of heart, gathers his army, and chases after Israel, leading to the miracle at the Red Sea. God protects Israel from the army, while creating a path for them through the waters. When the army tries to follow, they are swallowed in the sea. We see echoes of the preceding biblical story here: just as God divided the waters of chaos at creation to make a way for life and provided a way through the waters of destruction for Noah, here He divides the waters again to make a way to new life for Israel.

Also, like the stories of creation and the flood, things go downhill quickly with Israel turning into so many whining children three days after being delivered through the Red Sea. To be fair, it was three days with inadequate food and water, but after such a deliverance you would hope that they would have more trust that God would provide, which He does. God miraculously provides food and water for their journey through the wilderness, and brings them safely to Mount Sinai, as He told Moses He would.

And there, God establishes His covenant with Israel through Moses, beginning with Exodus 19:2-6, which reads, “There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the

mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

Here we have one of the key Mosaic developments of God’s covenant with Israel: Israel is to be a holy nation. In other words, keeping their covenant with God means Israel will be different. How exactly will Israel be different? Well, God has Moses gather the people near to the mountain, then descends on the mountain as fire to tell them.

“And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and

all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

“You shall not murder.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”

This is how Israel is to be different, otherwise known as the Ten Commandments. However, these are not the only ways Israel is supposed to be different, there are many more commands to come, these are just the only ones Israel could stand to hear. Look at verses 18-21.

“Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.” The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.”

Now, on the one hand, this reaction is completely understandable. After all, Moses hid his face in fear when God spoke to him from a burning bush; God is speaking to Israel with a voice of thunder from a burning, trembling mountain surrounded by smoke and lightning, so some fear is warranted. But it’s still problematic when it comes to God’s big plan. God wants to dwell with

His people. He wants to be near to them. But when He tries to come near, He overwhelms them with His holiness.

This is why God needs His people to be holy. It's not because God likes to make people jump through arbitrary hoops, it's because an unholy people cannot dwell in the presence of a holy God and survive. The Ten Commandments (and the rest of the laws) are not the vindictive rules of a cosmic killjoy, but the intrinsically necessary stipulations of a holy righteous God who desperately wants to draw near to His beloved but broken image bearers. God is a consuming fire, therefore, any who would draw near must be willing and prepared for all that is not consistent with His nature to be burned away.

Obviously, Israel is not quite ready for this, and so, something must be done to enable God to be near to His people, and, if we turn to Exodus 32, we see that, just as Abraham and Sarah did, Israel tries to "help God out", even though God already has a plan in mind. After the giving of the Ten Commandments, Moses goes up to God on the mountain and receives more of the Law with God Himself writing the Ten Commandments on stone slabs for Israel to have as a reminder of their encounter with God. Additionally, God tells Moses about His solution for the separation between Him and Israel: the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was an elaborate tent in which God's Spirit would dwell in the midst of Israel's encampment during their journey to the land God would give them. The Tabernacle would enable God to be near His people without overwhelming them. And Aaron's descendants would be priests, who would represent Israel before God in the service of the Tabernacle. While God is sharing all this with Moses, here's what's going on back at camp.

Exodus 32:1-6, "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the

people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.” And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.”

So, God is already working with Moses on a plan to bridge the gap between Him and His people, but His people decide they can solve that problem themselves. At first glance, this doesn't appear to us as anything other than brazen rebellion, but Israel was, in fact, trying to mediate their relationship with the Lord. The idol they have Aaron create is meant to represent the God who delivered them from Egypt, although they understood it to be “gods” plural. You have to remember that they have been living in a polytheistic society for centuries, and so really have no conception of a single God over all. In all its misguided nature, this is an attempt at relating to the God who had terrified them by His voice and presence at the mountain. Unfortunately, it is one of the prime examples on the endless list of examples of how wrong things go when man tries fix his relationship with God.

Understandably, God is angered by this blatant breaking of His newly minted commandments and informs Moses that He is going to wipe them out and make a new nation from him. Moses, however, intercedes for Israel before God, begging Him to remember His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel to multiply their offspring, and at this God relents from destroying them completely, and instead sends a plague among them as a lesser punishment. And so, at the beginning of chapter 33, God returns to the promise and tells them to go to the land He will give them, however, the separation between Him and Israel is pronounced.

In Exodus 33:3-7 God says, “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

“When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the Lord had said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.’” Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

“Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp.”

God cannot go with them, lest He consume them. The tent where He dwells must be set up far outside the camp. This is a profound problem for God’s plan, and the reason for it is best captured in God’s meeting with Moses in chapter 34. After God says He’s going to move forward with the plan, Moses begs God to show him His glory so that he can know who this God is who will help him lead such a difficult group of people, and so God tells Moses to come up Mt. Sinai again and He will show him a glimpse of His glory, which He does in verses 6-7 of chapter 34.

It reads, “The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

In my opinion, these two verses are perhaps the most important verses in the whole Bible when it comes to understanding the story of the Bible. This is God’s self-description, and in it is a profound, and seemingly irreconcilable tension: He is a God of mercy, grace, patience, love, faithfulness, and

forgiveness, but who cannot ignore sin. Do you see the problem? He can't just sweep iniquity, transgression, and sin under the rug, because that would be unjust and would allow evil to ravage the world unchecked. But He can't just annihilate humanity, because we are His image bearers whom He loves, with whom He desires relationship, and to whom He has made promises which He is bound to keep. So, how does He reconcile this tension? How can He dwell with His people?

Well, the rest of Exodus records the construction of the Tabernacle, reflecting a possible answer to this question; God can dwell in their midst in this way. But this is ultimately an unsatisfying solution, because the Tabernacle represents both the presence and distance of God. Yes, He dwells with Israel, but always in a tent, always behind the veil. Yes, they can enter His presence, but only through a single representative priest, once a year, and following a very specific protocol. God and Israel are together but separated. In fact, many of the Tabernacle's decorations draw from garden imagery. So, yes, God is dwelling in the midst of Israel, but He is doing so in a portable reminder that the way back into the Garden of Eden is still not fully reopened.

For as much of a blessing that the Mosaic covenant was to Israel, it leaves us wanting more. And this has really been the theme of the story all along. Genesis 3 included the promises that someone would come and destroy the enemy. And the story of the Old Testament provides a succession of characters that cause us to question: is this the one who was promised? And yet, each one falls short. Noah? No, he ends in drunken, cursed failure. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob? No, they all had their failings as well. Moses? No, he will ultimately fail to enter the Promised Land on account of a single act of disobedience. Eventually, David, Solomon, Nehemiah, and others will come, and each, for all the good they do, fall short of fulfilling the promise to truly and fully restore things. The Old Testament story is designed to produce tension, to cause us to wonder, "When will the true Redeemer come and set things right?" The story of Moses and the Mosaic covenant causes this tension in us, making us ask, "When will one come who will enable us to experience the full

presence of God without fear and destruction?” So, here’s our admittedly discouraging main idea: the Mosaic covenant, while a blessing and privilege for Israel, ultimately failed to provide true restoration for the relationship between God and man. It failed to provide the answer to the question of man’s separation from God. But here’s the good news, Jesus is the answer to that question.

Jesus resolves the tension of the Old Testament, filling up all that was lacking in the Mosaic covenant by coming as Emmanuel, God with us. He tore the veil that separated us from God, and open the way into the Father’s presence, as Hebrews 10:19-22.

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

Through Jesus, we no longer have to fear the presence of God, but can enter it with confidence. Through Jesus, we no longer have to be distant from God, but can draw near with full assurance. I mentioned that under the Mosaic covenant Israel could only enter God’s presence through a single representative once a year. That representative was the high priest, and the Day of Atonement was the one time he could enter the Holy of Holies, which is where God’s presence dwelt in the Tabernacle. Well, the language in these verses about sprinkling and washing are allusions to the process the high priest had to go through in order to enter on the Day of Atonement. So, the picture here is that through Jesus anyone can enjoy the privilege of that the high priest enjoyed on the Day of Atonement, not once a year, but anytime. Jesus did what Moses could not; He mediated a new covenant, a new relational agreement that truly restored our relationship to God.

Later Hebrews 12:18-21 reads, “For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” What’s the author reminding us of? When God terrified Israel on Mt. Sinai, but he says those who have come to God through Christ have come to something greater in verse 22-24.

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

Jesus is the mediator of the covenant of Mount Zion, the heavenly mountain in which God dwells, where angels and saints are gathered and perfected, and peace, shalom, is restored between God and man, so that we no longer need to hide on account of our sin, but we can dwell with Him. And He purchased this great reality for us by the giving of His body and His blood, Through His death Jesus satisfied God’s justice, so that anyone who trusts in Him can fearlessly draw near to God and experience His mercy, grace, patience, love, faithfulness, and forgiveness.