



Ratifying the Relationship

Covenant at Sinai

Abraham Lincoln was the leader of our nation during one of its most troubled times. The armies of the North and South waged a fierce and brutal war that claimed the lives of more men than have died in any war since. Lincoln felt the tragedy of this war deeply, mourning the deaths of soldiers and spending long hours visiting the sick and wounded. The constant bloodshed was sometimes almost more than he could bear. In the midst of the war, his own son died bringing the President to his knees.

In the midst of his tragedy, Lincoln found refuge in church. Just after the death of his son, he and an aide attended worship. When the minister finished, the President stood quietly, straightened his coat, took his hat in hand and began to leave.

His aide asked, "What did you think of the sermon, Mr. President?"

Lincoln said, "I thought the sermon was carefully thought through, eloquently delivered."

The aide asked, "You thought it was a great sermon?"

Lincoln replied, "No I thought he failed. He did not ask something great of us."

When God speaks, you should expect Him to call you to something grand and lofty. You should expect God to challenge us and to call us to something higher than ourselves.

Today, in *The Story* – the Israelites are gathered near the base of Sinai to listen to a message from God. He had brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

- They know God crippled the Egyptians by sending the plagues.
- They know God drowned Egypt's mighty army in the Red Sea.
- They know God's power turned bitter waters sweet.
- They know God's miraculous provision of manna and quail.
- They know God can provide springs of water from a rock.

God said ...

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, 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 (Exodus 19:4-6 ESV).

The Hebrews were rootless nomads, slaves less than two months ago. They were nobodies. They had no influence and no political clout. Yet, God looked at them and said, "You are my special treasure."

He wants to make them:

- His holy nation
- His kingdom of priests
- His treasured possession

Notice the word “**IF**”: “... if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5). God was calling them to something great, **if** they were willing to accept what was offering. Why ask the Israelites to make a commitment to Him? This wasn’t a casual relationship God. God was calling Israel to a lifetime commitment.

Exodus 19:7-8

The response of the people is unanimous, if a little quick: "Everything the Lord has said we will do."

Vow

How do you convince someone your word is good?

- "Cross my heart hope to die."
- "Scouts honor."
- Have a lawyer draw up a contract.

Not that long ago many really believed a “man’s word was his bond.” When two people agreed on something, they gave their word and did it. I haven't heard that phrase very much lately. People routinely break promises. But when someone makes a vow, God expects them to keep it. Solomon warns:

It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Let not your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands (Ecclesiastes 5:5-6 ESV).

COVENANT

Imagine the scene on the third day after arriving at Sinai. The Israelites have their tents spread out in every direction on the hard rocky ground. Overshadowing them is Mt Sinai. A cloud descends and covers the top of the mountain. There is thunder and lightning and what looks like a great fire glows out of the cloud on top of the mountain. There is a deafening trumpet blast and the sound of God speaking from the cloud. In the midst of all this, God is calling them to renew the covenant he had made with Abraham 400 years before.

It is hard to imagine what that would have been like for the people of Israel. If they weren't scared stiff, there was something wrong with them. The picture is one of an awesome, unapproachable God – a consuming fire.

Yet, Moses is invited to climb the mountain and where God gives him *The Book of the Covenant* (Exodus 20-23).

Exodus 24:1-5

If a patient fails to keep an appointment, the doctor does not call the person to ask, "Where were you?" The doctor moves on to the next patient. However, the Lord asks:

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you. (Isaiah 49:15 ESV)

The covenant God offered Israel is more like the ties of a mother to her child. If a child fails to show up for dinner, the parent's obligation, unlike the doctor's, isn't canceled. God offered a covenant of unconditional commitment to love Israel. This has been God's way since Adam and Eve, the Abrahamic Covenant – in every covenant He has offered.

- **Ratified through Blood**

Exodus 24:5-8

The response of the people is unanimous: "Everything the Lord has said we will do." Yet, Moses had experience with these people. He rose early and built an altar surrounded by twelve stone pillars, representing each tribe of Israel.

Moses assembled the people and they offer sacrifices. He collected and divided the blood it in two. The first half he sprinkled on the altar. The second half he kept in a bowl while reading *The Book of the Covenant*. Moses read *The Book of the Covenant* to them, reinforcing the basis of the covenant.

For the third time, the people respond: "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." Whereupon, Moses sprinkled the remaining blood on the people as a sign that they have committed themselves to a binding oath, sealed in blood.

Moses said: "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exodus 24:8 ESV). Israel bound herself to their covenant with God. We know God will keep his end of the bargain, but will they?

Can you imagine being spattered with blood as were the Israelites? If you experienced it, I doubt you would ever forget it. And that was the point. Moses wanted the Israelites to forever remember they had promised loyalty to God and God had promised his loyalty to the Israelites. Blood sealed that promise.

- **The God of the Covenant**

- Exodus 24:9-10**

When Moses and the others ascend the mountain to speak with God, two amazing things happened.

First: They saw God. Moses does not describe God, except that under his feet was something like a pavement of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. Sapphire is next in hardness to the diamond. It often has a fine blue color, though it can be yellow, pink, purple, orange, green or white. The stones Moses saw are perfectly transparent. The splendor of heavenly is poured out upon them! Heaven is shining through. What a glorious appearance.

It was as if they could see through this pavement up to God himself. The effect is awe-inspiring majesty, far beyond mere human imagination. Amazingly, the seventy elders, who represented the whole congregation, were chosen to witness the manifestation of God. The elders looked on God and lived: *“And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God”* (Exodus 24:11 ESV).

Second: they ate and drank with the Lord.

Toronto-based hedge fund manager, Courtenay Wolfe, paid \$1.68 million to have lunch with billionaire, investor Warren Buffet. She spent on one lunch what it costs to buy 560,000 Happy Meals! How much would you pay to have lunch with a celebrity?

It was like they were being invited into God’s life for a brief moment. That's what it's like when we're invited to share a meal with someone. It's an invitation not just to fill our stomachs with something tasty, but to enter or build on a relationship. Eating together is a very important part of being a community. That's why we have events like the congregational meals and Wednesday’s Feed the Flock. The same significance applies to Exodus 24.

They ate and drank in the presence of the Lord as a sign of the new relationship they now have with him. God is awesome and unapproachable, yet he invites his people into his presence to eat and drink with him. He's a God of holiness and purity, yet he forgives our sinfulness and invites us to become part of his family.

- **Revelation Given on Mount Sinai**

Exodus 24:12-18

But the story doesn't end. Moses and the elders return to the base of the mountain. Moses is again called to go up to God where he received the stone tablets with the 10 commandments engraved on them. God's Word is not like the menu at Burger King. Perhaps one of Burger King's most famous tag lines was: "Have it your way; have it your way." If you don't want onions, just say so. Extra pickles, no problem. I guess about the only way you can't have it your way is if you ask to have it for free!

God's commands do not work that way. Ignore His command at your own peril. The reason God wants us to live on his terms is because it's what's best for us.

Moses left Aaron and Hur in charge and ascended to the top of the mountain, where he received instructions for the ordering Israel's worship. Here he received instructions about building a tabernacle, an altar, the Ark of the Covenant, the lampstand; instructions about priests and sacrifices and offerings. All of them aimed at helping the people remain in fellowship with the Lord.

Jealous

But it's one thing to promise obedience and quite another to actually be obedient isn't it? The Israelites found that to be true. The sad irony of this is that while God was revealing instructions about Israel's worship, Israel was worshiping a golden bull. Just 40 days after they promised obedience to the Lord, they broke the first commandments while prancing around in wild celebration (Exodus 32).

Three times the Israelites promised the Lord that they would do everything the Lord told them to do – both before and after they received the Law. Even so, it took only 40 days for the Israelites to break their promise.

It seems incredible at first glance to think that the Israelites would actually have a golden calf made and claim that it led them out of Israel (Exodus 32:1-5). How could they be so blind to the many miracles they saw? How could they deny the Lord so quickly? Were they that influenced by the Egyptian bull god Apis, even after the plagues? That is incredible. It seems Aaron tried to appease the Israelites by combining their religion with this calf god. By building the altar in front of the calf and proclaiming a festival to the Lord. Perhaps Aaron was trying to use this bull as a visual representation of the Lord.

Did it work? How did Jealous (Exodus 34:14) respond to their syncretism? The Lord said to Moses, "Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them"

(Exodus 32:10). God would not accept Israel's actions because, like it or not, He is a Jealous God.

Did you notice what the Lord said to Moses? "I will make you into a great nation." Moses could have said to himself, "yeah, God – I have been faithful to you. You want me to be the great nation; I like that a lot!" But Moses reminded God of two things: His reputation was at stake and His promise had already been given. He begged for God's patience (Exodus 32:11-13).

When Moses saw the calf and Israel's dancing, his anger burned. He threw the tablets, breaking them at the foot of the mountain. And he burned the calf, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it. He wanted everyone to know their action was not acceptable. Moses returned to the Lord and offered himself in their place! What concern Moses showed.

This, of course, brings us God's response. The answer is simple. The Lord would be the Lord. Who is the Lord? He described Himself to Moses as "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" (Exodus 34:6-7).

