

Covenant: Promises Made, Part 5 - Moses

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[0 : 00] So over our time, we have begun back in the first chapters of Genesis, and we saw the covenant that God made with Adam and Eve at creation. Then we saw the covenant of preservation, God's promise to preserve life that he made with Noah.

Then for the last couple of weeks, we've been in the covenant with Abraham, both his call and those promises that were given. Abraham needing to learn to trust God's promises when God's timing didn't seem to match up to his expectations.

And now we find ourselves in the covenant that God established with Moses and with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. But law is the distinctive feature.

And I want us to spend a couple of weeks thinking about this covenant and thinking about the place of law within that covenant and within our own Christian lives. And to help us to do that, we need to realize that when you start reading around this subject, how we handle the law is one of the most controversial topics in the Christian church through its long history.

What are we supposed to do with the law? It made me think of that really cheesy 70s song, War, what is it good for? Absolutely nothing.

[1 : 18] Edwin Starr. We could replace the word war with law. And we recognize that different camps in the Christian tradition over time have had different attitudes.

So some would say the law, what's it good for? Absolutely nothing. We are now under grace. So law has no abiding relevance for us at all. So we may as well just skip over the Ten Commandments because we're not under law, we're under grace.

In fact, some people go so far as to say that when Moses went up on Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments, received the law, that Israel should have said, no, we don't want your law.

We want to stay under grace. So some people see this huge wedge between law and grace, say we don't want anything to do with the law. Other people, I would say, law, what's it good for?

Absolutely everything. Law is how you get into the kingdom. Law is how you earn your salvation. We keep the law as the way to receive God's blessing. If we were to speak to the Pharisees, that's exactly how they would have understood it at the time of Jesus.

[2 : 24] And then there's another stream of interpretation that would say, well, all the covenants that God makes are built on grace, except for this one. So they look at what happens with Moses and with Israel and think, well, here's God making a detour.

It started with grace, continues with grace through Noah and Abraham. And then it gets to Sinai. And all of a sudden, God decides that let's save people by law. So some people think there's a detour taking place here.

There's a temporary plan B in how God saves. And it's almost as if, well, the law doesn't work. So let's go back to covenant of grace with David and the new covenant.

So some people have really mixed views on this covenant and how law functions in the Christian life and how it functions even within the Old Testament.

So given the amount of ink that has been spilled on how we are to relate to the law, some of us might then have that song to sing. Law, what's it good for?

[3 : 25] Well, actually, I don't really know. It's quite confusing. So I hope as we spend two weeks here, hopefully it will become clear to us. Some of it will become clear to us.

First of all, that the covenant with Moses continues the covenant of grace. This is not a separate stream that emerges. So God's dealing with people on the basis of law. It's always on the basis of grace.

What we'll hopefully see very clearly is that the law represents God's will and God's way of life for a people who have already been redeemed. So it's not obey the law and you get into God's kingdom.

It's not God has rescued you in the kingdom and therefore here is God's will, here is God's law then for how to live. So it's addressed to people, in other words, who have been adopted, who are part of the new community of God.

And in a sense, it's like the family rules for how they are then to live out this new identity. To put it another way, I hope that we'll see that obedience has always been, was for Israel the goal of the covenant, not the means of entering into the covenant.

[4 : 31] It's really important to get that order right. And it's really important for us to recognize, and I think this is where sometimes we struggle as we look back on the Old Testament.

It's really important for us to understand that for both the Old Testament believer and the New Testament believer, for us in the 21st century, everybody has always been saved by grace alone, through faith alone, never ever saved by the law.

We spent a lot of time in Galatians, and that was the big theme that the center of Galatians took us towards. So this week, we're gonna concentrate our attention on noticing the extent to which attention is being drawn in the book of Exodus to the fact that the covenant with Moses is continuing this covenant of grace made with Abraham.

And we're also gonna notice that in the book of Exodus, which is the Old Testament book about redemption, we're gonna see that the pattern for redemption in the Old Testament is the same pattern that we'll see in the New Testament.

It's the same pattern that's true for us today. And then next week, we'll think about law in the context of grace, and we'll think about what's the purpose of the law in the context of a covenant of grace.

[5 : 51] Hopefully, it will be helpful. I think it will be as we spend some time doing a bit of background to this covenant. So the first thing to recognize, the covenant with Moses is continuing God's story.

It's continuing God's covenant purposes. Some of us will no doubt have read books in a series or you've watched DVD box sets.

So maybe you've read Harry Potter, and maybe you're eager to read How to Train Your Dragon after hearing about it this morning. But whenever you read books in a series or you watch TV series that happen over a length of time, we're always on the lookout for certain links, certain connecting themes or characters that pop in and out and help the storyline to develop.

So we see that there is development, but we see also a story that continues. Well, when we look at the first five books of the Bible, all of them are written by Moses, and all of them are following a pattern.

And Exodus chapter one and two, in particular, as the book begins, gives us lots of clues about the fact that here is a story that is continuing. Moses is not something different.

[7 : 04] Moses is not plan B where we're adding law and we're forgetting about grace. And Moses continues and expands God's storyline of grace. So I want us to notice five things.

And I'm hoping that the boys and girls will be able to notice these five things with us as well. First thing, first clue, as it were, comes in Exodus chapter one and verses one to seven.

We didn't read it, but if you've been around, you'll have remembered that when God made covenant promises to Abraham, he said that Abraham would have a great big family, a family that would become a nation.

Now, boys and girls, if you look at chapter one and verse five, you'll see how big the family of Abraham has become. And do you see the number there?

It's the number 70. So that's a big family that's developing. So here is God keeping his promise. And then in verse seven, we get language that we've heard before.

[8 : 09] The Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous. Remember that the covenant that God made with Adam and Eve, told them to fill the earth and to multiply.

And he did it again with Noah. Here's that same phrase repeating to remind us that there's continuity here with the covenant made at creation.

There's also another clue that reminds us, this time, I guess, about the character of God. As chapter one continues, we see in a sense, Pharaoh versus God.

Pharaoh in a sense, versus the midwives. And we're discovering that when God has a plan, when God has a purpose, when God makes a promise, that cannot be stopped because he is the Lord Almighty.

So we discover that the Pharaoh in Egypt, the most powerful figure in the world, he is nervous about the nation of Israel that's developing.

[9 : 13] While they're slaves, there's more and more of them. And so Pharaoh begins to try and think, how can we minimize the threat? And eventually he decides, well, let's get rid of Hebrew baby boys at the point of birth.

So that's his plan. But what we discover is that God is sovereign. He is greater than Pharaoh. And we have two Hebrew women who are able to defy the most powerful man in the world.

And it clues us into the fact that the story of Exodus is going to be a story of a battle, a God conflict between the true God of Israel and Pharaoh who sets himself up as a son of God and all the false gods of Egypt.

And what we'll see is that there is no context. That God is all powerful. God is on the throne. God is working for his people. Now into chapter two, where we did read, verses 11 to 15, we are reminded of something really important, that people need God's deliverance.

And we see that negatively because we see Moses trying to act as deliverer on his own strength and failing. So we see him killing an Egyptian, hiding him in the sand.

[10 : 37] Word spreads about the murder and Moses has to run for his life. Just as Noah couldn't be God's means of saving humanity on his own strength, just as Abraham and Sarah couldn't have that great promised blessing by themselves, by their own plans, nor could Moses.

God needs to act to be the deliverer. God needs to show himself powerful and faithful. You might remember in Genesis chapter 17, when God's making the covenant with Abraham, he says to Abraham, your descendants will be slaves in Egypt for 430 years.

But after that point, I will deliver them. And what we see in the book of Exodus is God being faithful to that promise.

God acting as the deliverer, just as he said. The next clue, the really important clue that the covenant made with Moses is continuing, the covenant with Abraham, is in the end of chapter 2. Look at verses 24 and 25. So we discover a people, the Israelites, who are groaning in their slavery, and they're crying out.

[12 : 08] They're crying out because they're being worked to death by an evil king who wants to destroy them. They're under oppression from this evil power, from these false gods that are influencing the way that they think about God, or don't think about God, influencing them towards false religion.

So they're in slavery of a variety of kinds. But what happens next? Verse 24, God heard their groaning.

Boys and girls, do you notice in verse 24 what he remembered? Doesn't say God remembered their cries. Doesn't say God remembered their groaning.

Says God remembered his covenant. God remembered his promise. And so the whole story of Exodus, the story of redemption and salvation, is rooted in God's commitment to Abraham and those promises that he made to Abraham and his family.

So God's going to end their slavery to be faithful to his promise. God's going to establish that Emmanuel principle of being their God and they being his people in answer to those promises.

[13 : 21] He's going to make them a people, give them a land, make them a blessing because of his grace, because of his faithfulness, because he remembers his covenant.

Now, why does this matter for us as we think about God's covenant? Well, it reminds us in the first place of God's absolute sovereignty. It's good for us to remember that we have a God that we can trust.

Whatever the circumstances of our lives, we have a God who is on the throne. He is building up the family of Abraham, establishing the nation of Israel, despite the best efforts of Pharaoh to destroy them.

Even through their 430 years of slavery and hard labor, God will work out his purposes and will set them free. God is showing himself to be stronger than Pharaoh.

The book of Exodus reminds us of that great theme in the Bible, that we have a God who is powerful and we have a God who cares for his people and a God who keeps his promises. So whenever we come to the covenant with Moses, we need to remember that as the background, to remember what brought the people from slavery to Mount Sinai to receive the law, to receive the covenant, was God's sovereign rule.

[14 : 42] And to remember that this God who is on the throne, who is almighty, is the king who saves. That the people are brought into the covenant by saving grace.

We also need to remember, and it becomes really clear, and we'll see it in a couple of minutes, that the promise of God and the grace of God absolutely come before the law of God.

So we'll see, Israel will see his powerful acts before the law in Egypt and in the wilderness. They will enjoy his powerful presence, the pillar of cloud, the pillar of fire.

They'll be shown grace despite their sin in the wilderness, and all of that before they receive the law. So it was never the law that made Israel the people of God.

It's never the law that makes anybody a child of God. It's always God's grace. For us, Jesus comes as God's great gift of grace to a broken and a sinful world.

[15 : 54] We are forgiven. We are adopted, not because of our merit, but because of God's grace to us, because of the righteousness of Christ that's credited to us. And it's always so important for us, it's in that context that we are then called to obey.

Just as Israel were set free to become the people of God, and then they were called to obey, so we obey as the children of God, not to become the children of God.

When we get that mixed up, we think of it as perhaps a duty. We can approach it with real reluctance, when actually we should approach obedience as a great delight for us, as people who have been made children of God.

So getting the order right really matters. So to help us to think about that a little bit more, we're going to think about how the covenant with Moses and the story of Exodus shows to us the pattern of salvation.

Why do we sometimes struggle to get the place of the law right? Why have certain groups throughout the history of the church missed the point? For example, the Pharisees, because it's when we get the order wrong.

[17 : 10] Or to think of it another way, it's if we forget the context behind the giving of the law. If we forget that the law is given in the context of grace, then we go wrong and we think, well, I need to obey in order to earn.

Context matters when we hear a story. So if I was to begin a story along these lines, the man plunged the knife into the man's chest, we might expect something awful, something terrible was happening.

But if in a wider context, we knew that the story was about a surgeon at work in an operating room performing heart surgery, well, that transforms our view of that situation.

For law, whenever we're thinking about the law, our context must always be, this is in the light of God's covenant promise. This is in the light of grace.

Grace always comes ahead of the law. And so we're gonna just very quickly scan through the book of Exodus, the first few chapters at least, to see all that takes place before the law, to make absolutely clear to us, hopefully that they are redeemed first and then they receive the law second.

[18 : 26] And that's really important for our Christian life, our understanding of the gospel. We can follow the pattern of redemption in the book of Exodus and we can see themes that emerge that are still equally true today.

First of all, the idea of deliverance from sin and slavery. A couple of verses up on our screen which are helpful in this regard.

Chapter three, verses seven and eight of Exodus. The Lord said, I've indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I've heard them crying out because of their slave drivers and I am concerned about their suffering.

So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

So we know this. We know that the situation for Israel was that they were under physical slavery. Pharaoh and his taskmasters working them to death.

[19 : 37] But we also are told that they're under a spiritual slavery as well. That because of their long years in Egypt, they had forgotten by and large about the true God.

So Joshua chapter 24 says, throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped in Egypt and fear the Lord.

So even after they've been set free, even after they've wandered through the wilderness, even after they've received the law, some of them were still holding on to the worship that they'd been used to

in Egypt.

Here is a people who are in physical chains, but also in spiritual slavery. And so when Moses comes and says, God has heard your groans and he's going to set you free, they're asking the question, who is this God?

They genuinely seem to have lost sight of him over those long years. And so when God delivers, he delivers from sin and slavery.

[20 : 43] And that of course is a picture, an image that applies to all salvation. We still find people today in spiritual slavery.

We are by nature both unwilling and unable to choose God. That we construct for ourselves all kinds of modern day idols, things that we live for and value ahead of God.

That by nature, we are in rebellion against our creator. And we are heading towards judgment and death, just as the people without God's deliverance here would have been worked today.

Our only hope is for God to deliver us. And he does that through Jesus and by the cross. It's at the cross that Jesus destroys the power of sin, that he rescues us.

And a new master is established in our lives where it's not sin anymore. Now it's Jesus. So deliverance from sin and slavery is a reality in our salvation, just as it was at the time of Moses.

[22 : 01] Another reality true then and true now is that this happens with a display of divine power. So in Exodus 6 and verse 6, Moses is to give this message to the Israelites.

And what we discovered in the book of Exodus is that God sees their plight, God hears their groaning, and God acts decisively in power and in judgment through the plagues, through them being delivered through the Red Sea, and all of that in powerful grace.

We cannot be saved apart from the power of God. And that's the message of the New Testament as well. The New Testament will say, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

That it's Jesus and his death on the cross that's able to take us from that kingdom of darkness and bring us into the kingdom of light. And that's by his powerful grace.

In the book of Colossians, Paul talks about Jesus on the cross disarming the powers and the authorities, making a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them at the cross.

[23 : 39] So again, there is that decisive display of God's power that allows anybody to be saved. True for us, just as it was at the time of Moses.

Very much connected to that, there is this demonstration of sovereign grace. One of the things that you see as the plagues develop is that God wants to make it really clear to Pharaoh and to Egypt and to Israel that there is a distinction being drawn.

So in Exodus chapter eight and verse 22 and 23, he says this to do with the plague of flies. On that day, I will deal differently with the land of Goshen where my people live.

No swarms of flies will be there so that you will know that I, the Lord, am in this land. I will make a distinction between my people and your people.

Here's God speaking to Pharaoh. This miraculous sign will occur tomorrow. So the plagues function as a division between Egypt and Israel.

[24 : 46] Egypt under Pharaoh, refusing to let God's people go, they suffer the consequences while Goshen where Israel lives is free of these various plagues.

Now, it can be very easy for us to think, well, of course, because Egypt was the bad guys and Israel was the good guys. But remember what we just read in Joshua 24, where even after they've been delivered, they're told to throw away their foreign gods.

We need to remember that Israel, same as ourselves, saved by grace alone. Because they too were worshipping idols. We see all through the wilderness how quick they were to grumble, complain, rebel against God, to want the cucumbers and the melons of Egypt rather than freedom to become the people of God.

We remember them setting up the golden calf. We need a visible image to follow. They weren't saved because they were better. They were saved by grace.

God's sovereign grace. God elects to save them from the darkness in faithfulness to his covenant promise. One of the things that reminds us of is that as Christians, we ought to be humble.

[26 : 07] When we meet people who don't know anything about Christianity or people who disagree with us fundamentally about our faith, we need to take a position of humility and recognize that without God's grace, we would be just as ignorant of the truth.

We'd be just as hopeless without a savior, were it not for God's grace. So it should lead us towards humility. It should also lead us profoundly towards gratitude.

Sometimes, maybe if we've been Christians for a while, we can become complacent. We can start to think, well, it's because I know how to live. I know how to put it always on the basis of grace.

So humility and gratitude should be consequences as well as trusting in this God, this sovereign, almighty, powerful, covenant-keeping God.

Another thing that we see that's true of redemption in the Old Testament that's true for redemption today is that sacrifice is involved.

[27 : 13] In chapter 12, we find that the final plague, the plague on the firstborn, also causes God to introduce the Passover. So Exodus chapter 12, we can read verses 12 and 13.

It says, On that same night, I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn, both men and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt.

Exodus is a God conflict. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you.

No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. One of the things that we've seen as we've looked at the covenants is that covenants require blood.

Blood that ratifies an agreement, but blood is also shed as a reminder that forgiveness and washing is required.

[28 : 19] God needs to cleanse his people from sin if they are to be his own. And it's the same that's true here. The way to escape the judgment of the just and holy God is for them to sacrifice the lamb and to sprinkle the blood on the doorpost.

And of course, Jesus picks that up, doesn't he? He reinterprets the Passover to speak of the cross, that it's through him shedding his blood that is the basis for our sins being forgiven, that we are made holy through his sacrifice for us.

Another hugely important thing to recognize about salvation at the time of Moses that's true for us as well is that God redeems a people so that we might know him and enjoy him.

So when God was speaking to Moses in the burning bush back in chapter 3, and at verse 13, well, chapter 3, verse 13, Moses said to God, suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, the God of your fathers has sent me to you.

And they asked me, what is his name? Then what shall I tell them? God said to Moses, I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites.

[29 : 46] I am has sent me to you. Now there's lots that have been, that has been written and said about the name of God. But one thing at least we can say, God is saying to Moses to say to Israel, I am the king, I am independent, I am free to determine whatever happens.

I am who I am and nobody can interfere with my purposes. And as the story of Exodus goes on, we discover that here is God saying, as the totally free and independent God, I am free to save people by grace, to make them my own.

Why does God set the people free? Not just so they can have their own land, not just so that they don't have to be slaves anymore, but so they can become the people of God. So they can live in relationship with God.

So that their life literally can be centered around God being present with them. God saves them to make them his own. And of course that's what God does for us in the new covenant too.

We're saved to become God's people. We're saved to enjoy God's presence now with the expectation of enjoying God's presence forever in a world made perfect.

[31 : 09] And notice that all of this is true before God ever introduces the law. The whole Bible points to just one way of salvation and it's always the way of grace through faith, ultimately in Jesus Christ alone.

And so we see the whole plan of redemption being worked out in the early chapters of Exodus, one to 12, one to 15 perhaps.

And it's only after that, as the redeemed people of God, that they then receive the law. Here's how you are to live now that you are my people. Bear in mind too that within the law, there was always that recognition that people wouldn't be able to keep it perfect.

So within the law, there was provision for sacrifices, for forgiveness, for failure, because God's a God of grace. One person who came to understand this and it transformed him entirely was Martin Luther, the reformer.

If you read the story of Martin Luther, you discover a man who was a thoroughly miserable monk because he was spending all of his time working really hard to try and please God, to try and keep all these rules and regulations and laws and trying to make life miserable for himself as a way to earn God's favor.

[32 : 34] But he just found himself more and more being crushed by the demands of the law. And the more he tried, the worse he felt because he thought you had to keep the law in order to earn God's favor.

You had to obey before belonging. But his discovery of Romans chapter 1 and verse 17, where it says the righteous will live by faith, absolutely transformed his life to one of joy, a life that ultimately turned the world upside down as he came to discover that what we need is not to try and work really hard to please God.

Rather, by faith, we need to receive the perfect obedience, the perfect salvation offered to us through Jesus' life and death and resurrection. And so it's important for us.

And we'll think more about the law and the covenant next week, but it's important for us to get that order right. To see that the law is good, the law is good, it's like a mirror, it shows up the dirt of our sin, it ultimately shows us our needs of a savior.

So it's an act of grace because it drives us to Jesus, but it's also good in showing us God's will for how to live, but not how to live in order to be saved, how to live as those who have been saved by grace.

[34 : 05] So hopefully thinking about the pattern of redemption, hopefully thinking about that continuity, will help us to recognize that grace always comes first.

There was never a plan A of grace and a plan B of law. God has always and always will saved by grace and grace alone.

Let's pray together. Lord God, thank you for the way that you choose to say.