

Hallmarks of a Covenant

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- [0 : 00] Well, if you have your Bibles, please turn to chapter 24 of Exodus, and we'll be looking at that a bit more later, shortly. But how about I pray as we begin.
- Father, thank you that you've given us your word, and as we've sung, please speak to us and help us to obey, to understand and obey, and for it to change our lives by your spirit.
- We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now let's begin with a little quiz. On the next slide will be a tune. I wonder, do you recognize this tune?
- Okay, how did you go? Some people had Pride and Prejudice. Some people had, what are the others? Bargain Hunters.
- No. The answer is, it's the theme song for the Antiques Roadshow. I'm sure many of you recognize it, even though many of you might not be fans of that show.
- [1 : 23] Now I'm showing my age probably, but I've grown to like this show, actually. You know, people bringing in really old stuff, and then they've been collecting it.
- It's been collecting dust at home for some time, and then some expert would examine it, and then tell you the exact date and location where it was made. And then lo and behold, they say, wow, it's worth a fortune.
- You know, you can probably sell it and buy a car with it or something. Now the thing that impresses me about this whole show is the knowledge of these experts. They know what to look for, those distinctive features, perhaps a stamp or a hallmark, like these ones here on the bottom of an antique Chinese vase, a couple of vases there.
- Or perhaps with a gold ring like this, there's a stamp inside. If you have a gold ring, you might want to check yours to make sure it's real as well. But all these are signatures, aren't they, that show us whether these objects are authentic or not.
- It helps us to identify the object as to its age, its value, and sometimes when it's really old, even as to its original use.
- [2 : 39] Now in today's passage, we find the same thing, the hallmarks of a covenant. And what we see here is a covenant-making ceremony between God and His people.
- Covenants are like commitments or contracts in a relationship. And just like vases and rings, God's covenants have distinctive features. We've seen a few already in the Bible, if you've been reading through it from Genesis.
- So chapter 9, God's covenant with Noah is the first one. Then Genesis 15 and 17, we see the one with Abraham. But here in Exodus 24, God makes one with an entire nation, the nation of Israel.
- But they all share common features or hallmarks. And today we're going to look closely at what they are. So if you look on the next slide, I've headed them as follows. First, the book or words of the covenant.
- Second, the blood of the covenant. And thirdly, the blessing of the covenant. So let's begin by looking at verse 1 of chapter 24, where it says, Then the Lord said to Moses, Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and 70 of the elders of Israel.

[3 : 51] 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 with you. When Moses went and told the people all the words and laws, they responded with one voice.

Everything the Lord has said we will do. Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said. Now in verse 1 and 2, God instructs representatives of Israel to come up to the mountain.

But before then, Moses reads God's word out to them. Here it says all the Lord's words and laws. But as Moses will then proceed to write them down, it becomes the book of the covenant in verse 7, as we see later.

So these are words made into a book, the book of the covenant. Now these laws are what were contained in chapters 22 to 23, which we've been looking at over the past few weeks.

And also the event here is closely connected with chapter 19. And you can compare them. Both 19 and here, Moses went up and down the mountain, conveying God's message to them.

[5 : 04] There the elders were summoned forward as well to represent the people. And crucially, Moses tells them God's words. And there the people all responded by saying, as I've got on the slide, we will do everything the Lord has said.

That promise is now repeated here twice, verse 4 and then later in verse 8. In chapter 19, they responded to God's offer in verse 4 to 6.

First, notice how God had already rescued them out of Egypt. You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

This act of mercy and grace precedes the covenant. But now, to enjoy the blessings of the covenant, they are to obey and keep the covenant. So, now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession.

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God promises to bless them, but they need to respond with their own promise to obey.

[6 : 19] It's rather like a marriage where at the core are the vows, a commitment to wholehearted faithfulness to one another. It's not as though in a marriage you enter it and then you just give it a try, you know.

Some days you commit and you reap the rewards of it, and then other days you choose not to. No, in marriage, the promise is given at a start to be faithful.

And so it is with Israel. God had made the promise, now they are to respond. And the words are so important that Moses even writes them down.

And God, when we look further in verse 12, goes even further, doesn't he? Giving it to them on stone tablets. That's where we get the phrase written in stone from.

It shows how important and critical the words were for the covenant. And it's the same for us as Christians. In Christ, God has established his covenant with his people, us, the Christians.

[7 : 19] Not to all humanity, although not just Jews now, Jews and Gentiles, but only to those who repent and commit to Christ.

Only those benefit from the covenant. And for us, God's words is the entire Bible. And if you read the rest of the Bible, throughout it, we're commanded to keep it.

Time and time again, Jesus himself gives an example in John 14 and verse 15, in reference to his own words. So on the next slide, If you love me, keep my commands.

And then in verse 21, he says, Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.

And so the first hallmark or key feature of God's covenant is that God keeps his word or promise, as I've got on the slide, and calls us to keep his word.

[8 : 23] He commands us to keep his word. It's non-negotiable. Even if we don't do it perfectly all at once, we're still to commit to it wholeheartedly.

If we say we love Jesus, then we promise to keep his words. So it's not like we get to pick and choose which bits we want to keep, or limit it to just some parts of our lives, but not all of our lives.

No, we are to commit to keep all of it. Now to the second hallmark, which is the blood of the covenant. Here, let us return to verse 4 again, 4b of chapter 24, and I'm going to keep reading.

He got up early, that's Moses, 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. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt sacrifice offerings, and sacrificed young bulls, as fellowship offerings to the Lord.

Moses took half of the blood, and put it in the bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it to the people. They responded, We will do everything the Lord has said.

[9 : 33] We will obey. Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you, in accordance with all these words.

Now there's no need to guess what's going on here, because if you look in the book of Hebrews, it's all explained for us, what the significance of all these actions are. So we read in Hebrews 9, verse 18, This is why even the first covenant, talking about the one here in Exodus, was not put into effect without blood.

When Moses had proclaimed every command of the Lord to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool, and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll, or the book, and all the people.

He said, This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep. And what's the reason for blood needing to be shed? Verse 22, on the next slide.

In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. So the blood is necessary, because God's people are sinful.

[10 : 47] They're rebellious or stiff-necked, as God calls them. Their very moral character is offensive to God. And so by themselves, they can't approach a holy God, much less be a holy nation that God wants them to be.

And such sinfulness is deserving of death. And the sprinkled blood signifies that someone had to die, or something, in the case of Exodus, had to die, to suffer on their behalf.

For Israel, these animals were sacrifices. But although God graciously provided for them, it didn't truly satisfy His righteous requirements.

And so the writer of Hebrews says, only in Jesus could there be a perfect atonement or sacrifice for human sin. And it's only after that that God is able to truly forgive sins in people.

And so we find Jesus picking up on this very event in Exodus 24 to explain His covenant, the new covenant, which was read for us in Matthew 26.

[11 : 57] For at the last supper, when He took the cup, this is what He said, didn't He, on the next slide, He gave it to them, saying, Drink from it, all of you. This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

This word, the blood of the covenant, clearly refers back to this event in Exodus. But forgiveness of sins is no longer now provided with bulls, but with His own death, His once-for-all death on the cross.

And so as Christians, we're sprinkled with the blood of Jesus. Not literally, of course, but figuratively by faith. And we sing of that, don't we, a lot of times at church, of being sprinkled and cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

So again, going back to Hebrews, the writer is able to say, Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings. In other words, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

And so, even though we don't often use this phrase, the blood of the new covenant in church, we are constantly reminding ourselves, aren't we, of Jesus' death.

[13 : 19] We do that when we sing in the lyrics of the songs, when we pray, when we did our confession today, we reminded ourselves that it was Jesus' death that allows us to be forgiven.

We do it as well with the Lord's Supper, as Jesus did in the Last Supper. And so, we mustn't tire of doing this. We mustn't give up the habit of it because it's actually a critical hallmark of God's covenant with us.

It is the very basis upon which we are able to enter God's presence. And so, the second point, which is on the slide, the only basis of our relationship with God is through the blood of Jesus by which we are forgiven with forgiveness through Jesus' blood.

And so, we have the second hallmark, the blood of the covenant, being Jesus' death. And when we have that in place, then, the next slide, we get to the third hallmark of God's covenant, which is the blessing of His covenant.

And this blessing is found in God's presence with His people, with us. So, let's get back to the passage again in chapter 24 and now we look at verse 9.

[14 : 33] And here it reads, 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 hands against these leaders of the Israelites. They saw God and they ate and drank. The Lord said to Moses, Come up to me on the mountain and stay here and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.

Then Moses set out with Joshua his aid and Moses went up on the mountain of God. He said to the elders, Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you and anyone involved in the dispute can come to you.

When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered 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 the mountain and he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

[15 : 43] Now I think there's a picture here with two very, very sharp contrasts. So on the one hand, we read that the elders see God and you can tell just how amazing this is because it then says God didn't raise his hands against them which implies that he should have.

Nowhere else in the Bible do we see this happen in the Old Testament. People seeing God and not being punished. In fact, later on, people die simply for touching the ark or entering the temple unlawfully.

But here, they even eat and drink at his presence. It's really a beautiful picture of what a relationship with God entails. We get that joy, don't we?

Which child enjoys the part of relating to their parents when they're told off for doing the wrong thing? Even I as a parent don't enjoy that. But when we're playing with them, you know, when we're eating our favorite ice cream together or we're watching our favorite movie together, that's what relationship is all about, isn't it?

Even though, I have to say, as a parent, and my daughters may be listening, the telling off bit is important as well. But here's what we get a glimpse of, true relationship.

[17 : 02] And it comes across as a rare privilege. Even just a brief taster of fellowship with God. Because no sooner that it happens, then it's gone again.

And so here's the contrast. This beautiful moment of intimacy with God is enveloped by an almost overwhelming gulf of the sinfulness of Israel and a holy God.

How do we see that? Well, I think it's in the description, firstly, that though they see God, it's not really His face, is it? It's only His feet or the pavement under them.

If you've seen some of these documentaries about icy lakes, and here's a picture of them, you might have seen them filming beneath the ice as people walk over it.

Well, I imagine it's probably a bit like that. Lapis Lazuli is actually like a sapphire-like stone, which is bright blue in colour. But they would have seen it from only afar, at the foot of the mountain, as it says, because in verse 4, that's where the altar is.

[18 : 09] Moses himself is cold to the top, but he instructs the elders to stay there until he returns. And so, even as they saw God's feet, it was from afar.

And even as they feasted in God's presence, it was from a distance. And even as God descended on the top of the mountain, we see, don't we, that His glory was shrouded in the clouds.

It's almost as though Moses himself had to be shielded from God's glory. And then finally, at the very end, what's that one phrase that's used to describe God's glory?

That of a consuming fire. Because that's the effect of God's holiness on sin. You can't come too close, or our sinfulness will cause God to have to bring His judgment down on us.

And so even then, when they had sprinkled blood on themselves, that was not enough, was it, to truly deal with their sin? And as I said earlier, that's because only Jesus can.

[19 : 18] But the thing is, even here, God goes to extraordinary lengths to try and overcome this gulf. Because we'll see this when we get to it next year, as we look further on in Exodus, the very reason Moses is now being summoned up to God, apart from getting those templates for the laws, was to be given instructions for the tabernacle, for the temple, for God's dwelling place with His people.

That was because God still wanted to be with His people, no matter how hard it was, no matter how sinful they were. He wants to keep His promise, don't you see? To bless them, even when their sin stood in the way.

Now as Christians, thankfully, we have God's presence in a much fuller and richer way because of Jesus. It's no longer shrouded anymore.

In fact, as we saw in Hebrews 10, verse 22, because of Jesus, we can now enter God's presence boldly. On the slide it says, drawing near to God in the most holy place.

Moreover, when Jesus walked this earth, the disciples ate and drank with God, didn't they? They saw His face and not just the sole of His feet. John talks here in his own Gospel of seeing the glory of the one and only Son.

[20 : 47] He talks about God or the Son tabernacling or dwelling with them. Peter himself in his letter spoke of being eyewitnesses of this majesty.

Now we don't have time to go through all the verses in the New Testament but again and again the New Testament writers see in Jesus the greater fulfillment of these blessings of the covenant, of this new covenant.

So the writer of Hebrews, just one example in chapter 12 says, he talks about coming not to Mount Sinai but to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem and then coming to Jesus, the mediator of a new or better covenant.

And of course, we mustn't forget too that we now have the gift of God's Spirit. That is, God dwells among us by His Spirit, does He not? Not in a physical building but in us, together as people of God, the spiritual temple or tabernacle of God.

So you see, we have now so much more to be thankful for because the spiritual blessings are all ours in Christ Jesus because of the blood of Jesus. The people at Mount Sinai only had a foretaste.

[22 : 06] We have a fuller and richer measure of God's presence with us. And yet, rich as they are, there's also a sense in which we ain't seen nothing yet.

Our blessings now are much better than what Israel had but the blessings that we will have when Jesus finally appears will be much, much better even than now.

John, in his letter, he writes like this, which is on the next slide. He says, Dear friends, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known.

But we will know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. I don't know what that verse does to you but what an amazing thing to be looking forward to, don't you think?

Jesus, even in that other reading at the Last Supper, He longed for that Himself, didn't He? He expressed a desire to drink the fruit of the vine with His disciples in My Father's kingdom.

[23 : 18] And that is, He wants to eat and drink with us on that day as well, physically. I see, I think I've been thinking about this and I see some parallels, I think, with the pandemic that we're going through right now.

You see, for example, that when it stopped us from eating and meeting together, some of us made do with Zoom dinners, didn't we? We still wanted to eat even though we couldn't taste each other's food.

And we're making do now with live streaming of church, aren't we? And we're doing a virtual choir to hear ourselves sing together. So please get on board.

It's not the same as the real thing, but it's better than nothing, isn't it? It's a foretaste, as it were. And it also helps us to keep going, doesn't it? Because then it keeps us longing for that real thing.

But again, we don't mistake it for the real thing, do we? We do want to come back together. We do want to sing together. We do want to eat together. But I have to say, even when we do come back together, our life on earth is but a foretaste, a shadow of the very thing that is to come in the new kingdom.

[24 : 32] And so we mustn't forget that, actually, that even when we gather as a church, that is not the ultimate reality. But actually, it is still, in one sense, pointing to that very ultimate reality when we will be together in God's kingdom, physically, gathered around Jesus.

there will be a day when we will actually see Him face to face. There will be a day when we will actually sit and eat with Him.

And actually, not just for a day, but for eternity. So, I want to probably finish then with a warning about experiences, and particularly about spiritual experiences.

Because sometimes, I think we can put too much store in the experience, can't we? Some churches make it their sole focus to create an experience of God's presence at their service.

You know, with the singing or with the emotions or the like. Sometimes you might feel that way when you go for a conference or on a mission trip. You experience a spiritual high, don't you? But I have to say, if you look back at this chapter, what happened to Israel's spiritual high of eating and drinking in God's presence?

[25 : 46] Did you know that in no more than 40 days, they would be building a golden calf to worship? We've been in isolation for 90.

Took them less time than that, half even, before they turned to idols. And yet, they saw God, didn't they? And ate and drank in His presence.

It didn't do them any lasting good, did it? So what is the one thing that brings lasting blessing from the covenant? Well, we go back to that very first hallmark, is to keep His laws and commands, to be faithful in our commitment to God.

That's how we truly love God. It's not too glamorous, I know, and yet, that's the mark of true spirituality, the hallmark, if you like, of keeping covenant with God.

Trusting in Jesus' blood and then keeping His words. So friends, even during this pandemic, even when the experience of church is somewhat lacking, there's no chicken and chips for example, I wish I had that, let's remember that God's presence is still with us, among us, and it is His blood, the blood of Jesus, that gives us access to the Father.

[27 : 13] And so we are to respond first and foremost by keeping His word. So, please do come, invite people over for church, sign up for Hospitality Sunday.

Those are all good things to do because they give us a taste of what church is like. But at the end of the day, even as we gather as a church, let us not forget about the real church, the ultimate church, the ultimate reality as it were, of being in God's presence.

We are in His presence now spiritually, but one day we will be in the presence of God for eternity, physically. Let's pray. Father, continue to sustain our walk with You at this time.

And for those of us who have not yet committed to Christ, give us faith to trust in Jesus so that we may be forgiven of our sins. thank You that because of Him we have many blessings to enjoy.

But even so, we do long for the day when we can meet together again physically in this world and then much more for that day when we can all gather in the presence of Your Son, Jesus, to feast with You and with Him at Your table forever and ever.

[28 : 29] Amen.