

6.

The Lord God's Covenant with Israel

The Lord had promised Abraham that, through his son Isaac, he would give birth to a great multitude, and so he did. A few generations later, Abraham's descendants would be described as "exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them" (Ex. 1:7). However, the second part of God's promise was yet to be fulfilled. This numerous people were not yet in a land they could call their own. In fact, they would find themselves as a great multitude within another nation, the nation of Egypt. Through Joseph, the Lord had led Isaac's descendants out of famine in Canaan, and into the plentiful land of Egypt. Initially they enjoyed much favor and peace within Egypt, but as time went on the attitude of the Egyptians toward the descendants of Isaac would change. The rapid numerical growth of the Israelites would cause the Egyptians to become anxious. So anxious, in fact, that Pharaoh devised a wicked plan to weaken them, through slavery and the systematic murder of their male infants.

The Lord's promise to Abraham had to be kept, so he sent a deliverer to the Israelites with God's power and authority; Moses. Moses was commissioned to lead Israel out of slavery and death and into the land that the Lord God had promised Abraham over two hundred years earlier. It was after this great and powerful deliverance, in which the Lord demonstrated His might in awe inspiring ways, that the Lord covenanted once again with His people. This time the Lord was not covenanting with two people as with Adam and Eve, nor with a single family as with Abraham, but now He was covenanting with a whole nation - a great multitude. We see this formal covenantal arrangement beginning in Exodus 19 at Mount Sinai. Moses was the messenger of the Lord for Israel, and He called Moses to Himself on the mountain, where He told Moses exactly what he was to say to the people. First, Moses was to remind Israel of the Lord's great faithfulness in delivering Israel out of an impossible situation through

profound miraculous power. “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you as on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself” (Ex. 19:4). Once again, as with Abraham and Adam, the Lord was encouraging them to have faith in Him by remembering His power and faithfulness.

Then, in light of this, the Lord God gave them their covenantal obligations. “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” (Ex. 19:5). What Israel must do is the same as what Adam was supposed to do, and what Abraham did. They were to “obey God fully.” They were to hear the Word of God and do it. Then the Lord attached a promise to the obligation by saying that if they obey the Lord God then they would be His “treasured possession - a holy nation.” Just like with Adam and Abraham, the promise was connected to the obligation. *If* Adam would not eat from the forbidden tree, *then* he would continue to live in fellowship with his Lord. *If* Abraham would be willing to leave Haran, circumcise himself and his children, and ultimately, to sacrifice his one and only son, *then* he would receive the promise. Now the same covenantal promise was made: *if* Israel obeyed the Lord, *then* Israel would be the Lord’s treasured possession. God is absolutely faithful because He will keep His covenantal promises. Covenantal history proves that this is not to be questioned. Now, in light of God’s faithfulness, Israel must prove to be faithful in return, just as Abraham proved to be faithful even in the most difficult circumstances.

How would Israel be able to keep the covenant? How would Israel be able to “fully obey” as Abraham did? If we protest at this point by objecting, “Well, no one is able to fully obey, because nobody is perfect,” then we have to deal with the Lord’s own opinion of Abraham when He says, “Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws” (Gen. 26:5). Israel was being commanded to be like Abraham, nothing more and nothing less. Now, anyone remotely familiar with Abraham’s life knows that Abraham was not perfect in the sense of being sinless. But Abraham, nevertheless kept the Lord’s covenantal requirements.

So it follows that the Lord does not command perfection in the sense of sinless perfection, which becomes clear with the Lord’s covenant with Israel. The Lord recognizes that men are sinful, and so He accounts for this within the covenant. The Lord dealt with the reality of sin with a “sin offering.” When the community or an individual “becomes aware” of their sin, they are to bring a sin

offering, a male goat without defect.⁵ The guilty person was to confess their particular transgression, and then lay their hands on the head of the goat and simultaneously slaughter it. This represented the guilt being passed from the person to the goat and the punishment passes with the slaughtering of the goat. “In this way the priest will make atonement for the man’s sin, and he will be forgiven” (Lev. 4:26). So it is possible to be someone who sins, and simultaneously “keeps the Lord God’s requirements.” In this way we see the graciousness of the Lord. This is why the Lord would proclaim about Himself to Moses, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Ex. 34:6, 7).

But we are now back to our original question. How would Israel be able to obey the Lord fully? They would be able to obey the Lord fully in the same way that Abraham was able to obey, Israel’s keeping of the Lord’s requirements would depend upon their faith in the Lord’s Word to them. They would need to trust in God’s faithfulness to keep His Word to be a merciful God. Would they believe God and then subsequently obey as Abraham did? Or would they fail to believe and consider God to be unreliable and miserly as Adam and Eve had? Just as Adam and Eve faced their testing, and just as Abraham received his great test, so the people of Israel would face their testings as well. Their faith or unbelief would be made known to the world by what they would do, by their obedience or lack thereof.

The promise for Israel was that they would be the Lord’s treasured possession, but we need to look at this promise a little more closely. Isn’t it true that Israel, Isaac’s descendants, by virtue of God’s covenant with Abraham, was *already* the Lord’s treasured possession? Doesn’t the fact the Lord saved them from Egypt in such a remarkable way demonstrate Israel’s present status as God’s people? Doesn’t the very fact that the Lord is revealing His will specifically and explicitly to Israel mark them out as already being God’s special people; His treasured possession, unlike all the other nations? The answer is yes.

In fact, Deuteronomy states, “But it was because the Lord *loved*

5 This includes sins done with volition such as the breaking of a moral law. We see this in Leviticus chapters 5 and 6. There such sins as the failure to speak truthfully, thoughtlessly taking oaths, deceiving or cheating your neighbor or stealing are mentioned. The covenantal response was confession and sacrifice, then forgiveness is promised. Clearly these would not be sins done in ignorance since they all serve as a breach of one of the Ten Commandments, in that sense they are “intentional.”

you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:8). The Lord already loves them! The fact that they are now His treasured possession is seen in His deliverance. Again, Deuteronomy, “For you *are* a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God *has chosen you* out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deut. 7:6). Clearly, the Israelites, at the time of making the covenant at Sinai, were *already* God’s “holy people,” His “treasured possession.” But this leads to a problem. If the Israelites were already God’s treasured possession, why is this status given as a promise of something future in Exodus 19:5? How can it be that Israel *is* the Lord’s treasured possession and at the same time they *will be* his treasured possession? The answer to this question is found in Exodus 20, in the Ten Commandments.

The Lord begins His covenantal statement by reminding His people of His past faithfulness, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” The Lord is *now* their God; He uniquely belongs to Israel. This is the great privilege of being a descendant of Abraham. Now the Lord lays out the covenantal obligations. “You shall have no other Gods, you shall not make idols, you shall not misuse the Lord’s name.” These are the first three commandments. The answer as to how Israel can already be the Lord’s treasured possession, and still look forward to being so, is found embedded in the third commandment.

Within the third commandment the Lord inserts promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. For those who sin and disregard these obligations the Lord promises punishment “to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me” (Ex. 20:5). But, He also promises “love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.” Notice, he promises love! But doesn’t He *already* love them? Yes, as we have seen, the Lord has loved Israel by choosing and delivering them. The point is that the covenant must be upheld or maintained. The Israelites must persevere in God’s love *by* continuing to love Him and keep His commands. The Israelites are now God’s treasured possession, but they must persevere in obeying God fully in order to *remain* His treasured possession. The necessity to persevere in covenant loyalty allows the Lord to speak of both present and future experience of God’s love. It is not as if the Israelites had to obtain something they didn’t have, but like Adam and Abraham, they must persevere to remain in the existing relationship with the Lord.

Once again, Deuteronomy states, “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, *keeping* his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands” (Deut. 7:9).

The covenant must be maintained, it must be kept in an on-going way. We can illustrate this once again through marriage. When a woman commits herself to a man, she is vowing her love for him for life. The vow speaks of the future, of a commitment to maintain fidelity and covenant loyalty “till death do us part.” This vow also incorporates times of hardship as a future possibility, “I love you now, but I will love you in the future even if I am tested by really hard things like sickness, disease and poverty.” The importance of a vow is the future aspect. It is one thing to express a present love for someone, but it is the future that requires assurances; and a husband is a faithful husband by his record of covenant loyalty that is lasting. You can’t be faithful for thirty years, then have an affair, and still be known as a faithful husband. Covenants by design require steadfastness. Covenants contain vows of allegiance. They speak of on-going relational fidelity. They only speak of the past as a way to provide assurances for the future.

The Lord reminds Israel about Egypt only to re-assure them that the land He promised Abraham is as good as theirs. But the covenant with the Lord is a gracious one, full of mercy. This would be similar to a situation when a woman marries a man knowing that he struggles with certain temptations. In light of this, the woman may have the man take an additional vow, “If you ever go astray, if you ever fall out of covenant loyalty, you must vow to come to me, weeping, repentant and hurting, for despising my love. And if you do, if your love for me is evident in your repentance, then I vow in return to keep you. You will remain mine and I will remain yours – not necessarily without repercussions and trials, but the covenant stands.” Likewise, the covenant made with Israel at Sinai was a gracious and merciful covenant as expressed to Moses, “forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Ex. 34:7). When there is repentance there is mercy and even those who have been unfaithful can now be spoken of as faithful.

