

The Covenant on Sinai
Exodus 19:1-6
August 9, 2026

Maybe you've wondered if I can't remember early June. Honestly, you're not *entirely* wrong. However, I *am* aware that David preached these *same* verses—all six of them—nine weeks ago.¹

But let me quickly tell you *why* we're repeating it. In part, it's because we took a two-month break from Exodus. But *also*, we repeat it because this particular passage actually functions in two ways—like the hinge on a door that can swing either direction. And by *that*, I mean this: the story of the Exodus moves both *toward* this moment on Sinai and it moves *away* from this moment.² Or to say it one *more* way, if we've been on a journey—as Israel has—Mount Sinai is both a destination to arrive at *and* a peak from which we might see something else.

So, when we considered this text in June, we might say it was from a particular vantage point. And David's emphasis was on the people of God's distinct identity. If I only had one sermon on this text, I probably would choose that same emphasis. But, since we have two, I hope to look at it today from a slightly different vantage point, considering how this moment at Sinai prepares us for what's ahead in the book. And I believe we're prepared by lingering a bit on a key word in verse 5: covenant.

We've not talked a *lot* about covenant in Exodus thus far. However, I'd say it's been implicit on every page. To make that point, do you recall what God “remembered” immediately *before* the burning bush? Exodus 2:24: **God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.** What happened next? Immediately *after* that, God reveals Himself to Moses, His name and His purposes. And there at Mount Horeb, or Sinai, He sent Moses to Egypt. For that reason, among others, we can say that every paragraph of Exodus has been *related* to the idea of covenant. Because the deliverance itself sprang from it.

But what *is* a covenant?³ The concept was a common one in the Ancient Near East, when international relations were governed by treaties—often called covenants—that detailed the binding relationship between two parties.⁴ While there are *some* similarities to the “contract” of our day, a *significant* difference is that *these* particular covenants were *not* necessarily made between equals. That is, the greater party didn't negotiate aspects of it with the lesser. The greater party—nation or ruler—offered their protection and blessing. The lesser pledged their loyalty.

So, thousands of years ago, when Moses wrote down the word “covenant,” *that* was what would come to mind for those reading it. We should also know that covenants in that day had a particular form—listing the parties involved, including a preamble that detailed what the greater party had done to deserve loyalty, followed by the stipulations of the covenant itself, and *then*—importantly—it would conclude with a list of blessings should the covenant be kept, and a list of curses should it be broken.⁵

¹ And he did so quite capably. See that sermon, entitled, “Distinct,” here:

https://cdn.subsplash.com/documents/JF89ZG/_source/cefb4100-3148-42f5-9412-e48e8937e525/document.pdf

² Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 37.

³ We did talk about this in Hebrews; but it's been a minute.

⁴ See Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*, 56ff.

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, 75. Now, we could say a good bit more—and we will in the months to come—but let me note one more important aspect of a covenant. In the Old Testament Scriptures, the covenant ritual almost always involved the shedding of blood. See O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 4ff.

If you want to know how *many* covenants are in the Bible, it depends on who you ask.⁶ If we were to list *particular* covenants, we might note the Adamic, the Noahic, the Abrahamic, or the Davidic. However, our concern today—and in the months ahead—will be the Mosaic covenant, or the covenant made at Sinai. And I’m convinced grasping something of it will help us grasp what’s ahead.

1. The Mountain and Mediator of the Mosaic Covenant (vv. 1-3a)

Back in Exodus 3, at Mount Horeb—or Sinai—the Lord told Moses a number of things. Since then, quite a bit has happened: Moses’s fear upon hearing his task, Aaron stepping in, Pharaoh’s cruelty, the piling of burdens upon the Hebrews, followed by rivers of blood, frogs, gnats, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, the firstborn, blood on the doorposts, Passover, the Red Sea, wilderness wanderings, manna, water from a rock, the Amalekites, Jethro. We’ve spent *months* considering all this. But today I remind us of something else the Lord said to Moses way back in Exodus 3—at Sinai: **This shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain** (Ex. 3:12).

Chapter 19:1: **In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.** On that very day, they arrived at the wilderness surrounding that particular mountain.⁷ And *there* the Hebrews would pitch their tent. Verse 2: **When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness.** While we’re thinking about this setting, know that the Hebrews will stay here for almost a year.⁸ And know that their time in *this* place, while relatively brief, will be the setting for 59 chapters of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.⁹

That’s to think *broadly* about the place—to see it from 30,000 feet. But if we zoom *in* a little, we might note the precise location of the Hebrews’ camp at Sinai. Verse 2 goes on: **they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain.** So, they are not *on* the mountain, nor *up* it in any sense; instead, they are *in front* of it. That will be important to grasp in next week’s text, as well as in what follows. Throughout chapters 19–40, the location of the Israelite camp is repeatedly distinguished from the mountain itself.¹⁰

Except for one Hebrew spoken of in verse 3: **Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain.** One of the things I hope we notice in the chapters ahead is Moses’s role as mediator. A mediator is someone that stands *between* two parties, representing one to the other. In these chapters we’ll see that happen over and over again, as Moses traverses Sinai, up and down again, so that he might mediate between God and man. Further, as *part* of that role, Moses speaks for God *to* humanity. And that’s why verse 3 ends: **and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel.”**

2. The Parties and Prologue of the Mosaic Covenant (vv. 3-5a)

⁶ The covenant of works and the covenant of grace are *broad* categories theologians use, along with the old and new covenant.

⁷ Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 420.

⁸ 10 or 11 months, depending on who you ask. See Stuart, 420, or Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 355.

⁹ Alexander, 355.

¹⁰ Alexander, 363.

If this section concerns covenant—which verse 5 will assert in a moment—in *these* couple verses the parties of this covenant are identified.¹¹

First, note what God calls those people to whom Moses is to speak. In verse 3 they are, “The house of Jacob,” and the “sons of Israel.” Now, why begin with *these* terms concerning identity? While there are a number of things we might say, by emphasizing their origin, using names like *Jacob*, He’s at *least* reminding them of their history.¹² The *end* of Genesis told us how the Israelites ended up in Egypt. It was a story about Jacob’s house escaping a famine. And then the beginning of Exodus told us how the sons of Israel got *out* of Egypt. And it *too* was a story about the sons of Jacob, more specifically about God remembering the covenant He’d made with them.

And if we’re thinking in terms of covenant, be reminded that though they were made up of two parties, that did *not* necessarily mean two equal parties. In fact, the lesser party pledged loyalty to the greater because of who the greater party was *or* what the greater party had done.

In these ancient covenants, this was detailed in the preamble (or prologue). Verse 4 functions in a similar way. Having reminded them of all that preceded them—His working for their good for generations—He *then* reminds them of what He’d *just* done for them: **You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings.**

Whenever eagles are brought up in the Scriptures, it is often because of their swiftness, or because of the great heights they achieve in flight.¹³ Eagles picture both speed and power.¹⁴ I’m tempted to quote something about Mount Doom and a couple hobbits, but I probably should go to what Moses will write later. This is the lesser-known Song of Moses, where he sings: **For the Lord’s portion is His people; Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of a wilderness; He encircled him, He cared for him, He guarded him as the pupil of His eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that hovers over its young, He spread His wings and caught them, He carried them on His pinions. The LORD alone guided him** (Deut. 32:9–12).

As that later image makes clear, Israel’s role in the Exodus is *entirely* passive.¹⁵ What had the LORD done to earn and ensure the Hebrews’ loyalty? Only delivered them from oppressive generational slavery, and eventually from death, by conquering their enemy in totality.

Further, God didn’t *merely* show up to help Israel move out of the desert, so that He might then desert them.¹⁶ Verse 4 goes on: **You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself.** I didn’t mention this earlier, but the concept of covenant in the Scriptures is about *more* than impersonal treaties. In fact, covenants in the Bible center upon relationship.¹⁷ For example, when the Lord spoke to the prophet Jeremiah, telling him about a particular covenant, He made sure to emphasize this: **I will be their God, and they shall be My people** (Jer. 31:33).

This emphasis was also in the Psalm we considered just a couple weeks ago: **When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became His sanctuary, Israel His dominion** (Ps. 114). He didn’t deliver only to quickly abandon; He delivered His people *so that* He might dwell among them. The latter half of this book will be almost *entirely* devoted to this.

¹¹ Stuart, 422.

¹² Alexander, 365.

¹³ Jeffery Leonard, *A Preacher’s Hebrew Companion to Exodus 15:22–40:38*, 137.

¹⁴ Leland Ryken, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 223.

¹⁵ Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known*, 88.

¹⁶ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 321.

¹⁷ One definition of covenant is this: “a chosen relationship in which two parties make binding promises to one another” in Jason DeRouchie, *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 144.

In this covenant, there are *two* parties. One moved toward the other, in mercy and in power. Further, it's vital that we emphasize that His drawing near is for their good; He does so to advance and better them.¹⁸ And because of what He—the greater party—has done on their behalf, what's to come isn't something to be negotiated. Instead, in this covenant, He lays out the terms.

3. The Terms of the Mosaic Covenant (vv. 5-6)

Verse 5 begins: **Now then.** That's a crucial two-word phrase, the “turn,” we might say. Again, what came before—in verse 4 in particular—was something of a preamble. And that prologue detailed what had been done for the lesser party, the *why* behind their pledge of loyalty. Said another way: verse 4 is the *ground*—the basis—for what verse 5 will demand: **Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine.**

By the way, this is *always* the order. Grace precedes obedience. We'll see it *again* in Exodus 20. In the prologue to the Ten Commandments, God will remind the Israelites what He'd done. And it was *because* they'd been delivered that they were to follow the Law. Grace was first. That *same* order is throughout the New Testament. Here's what God has done. Now, in light of that, live.

In the *next* phrase, God *again* emphasizes who initiated all this. He calls this covenant **My covenant**. It's *His*. To understate the matter, *none* of this would have happened otherwise. In fact, you can *sort of* hear His gracious initiative in the final clause of verse 5: **you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine.** At first that can seem contradictory. But He's making clear that the Hebrews weren't the only people He'd made, nor was Sinai or Canaan the only place that belonged to Him. Every people group was formed and fashioned by Him; every place was His own. And yet, He'd graciously chosen a people. Or as one man said, “For this reason God chooses Israel: the whole earth belongs to Him; and He is taking it back.”¹⁹

We could *easily* trace this all the way back to Genesis,²⁰ when Abram was called out of Ur by God's gracious purpose alone. He moved toward Abram and made a promise, bound later by a covenant, that He would make of Him a great nation, a nation that would be blessed (Gen. 12:2). That is some of what is unfolding right here in Exodus 19. Out of the house of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God has called a people to Himself.

But *if* we recall more of Genesis 12, we remember that this nation was blessed in order that they might then *be* a blessing. The Lord told Abram, **I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing** (Gen. 12:2). In Exodus 19, God is separating a people *from* the world; but He does so for the good of the world. It is *through* them that He aims to work.

And it's with *that* in mind that we can rightly hear the terms of this covenant in Exodus 19:5: **if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples.** As we've already said, He calls them—not *merely* to deliver—but so that He might dwell among them. And, of course, the presence of a holy God demands certain things of them. So will what He teaches them. These are the terms of this covenant—*His* covenant.

However, *all* of this fits within the purposes just mentioned in Genesis 12. They were blessed in order that they might be a blessing. God had made Himself known *to* them. And now *through* them, He aimed to do so. We might say that God separates a people from the world so that the world might no longer be separated from Him.

¹⁸ Thanks to Daniel Thompson for this insight from Richard Barcellos and Nehemiah Coxé.

¹⁹ Goheen, 38.

²⁰ The Mosaic covenant advances God's purposes revealed in the promises to Abraham.

We see this further in the descriptors of verse 6: **and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**

4. The People of the Mosaic Covenant (vv. 5-8)

David talked about this in his sermon from June. That is, the people of God were delivered in order that they might be distinct. They were a “set apart” people. So, they’re not *only* a nation, but they are a **holy nation**. Not simply *better* in some sense than the pagan nations around them, but categorically different.²¹

And of course, with few exceptions, the word “holy” in Exodus is connected to the presence of God.²² They are holy *because* the Holy One is among them. And, further, because of what He reveals about Himself to them, a revelation that demands certain things of them.

They were to be a holy nation. But, also, as they obeyed His voice, they were to be a **kingdom of priests**. To grasp the significance of this image we would be wise to ask, “What is it that priests do?” Having access to God’s presence, priests *represent*. They are representatives, both from the Lord *to* humanity and from humanity *to* the Lord. And the best way I’ve heard this phrase—**kingdom of priests**—explained is that God’s people—His holy nation—were under His rule as King. But that kingdom was to be one with a priestly *function*. That is, in a similar way to how the priests represented the Lord to Israel, so Israel was to represent the Lord to the nations.²³

God tells them—His delivered people—that *this* is who they are. It’s their identity. And *because* that’s who they are, there are things they are supposed to do. Again, grace precedes obedience.

Nonetheless, they were to obey His voice. They were to keep His covenant. To return to Exodus 19, verse 6 ends: **These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.** And though these verses are in *next* week’s text, let’s briefly consider the response of the sons of Israel at Sinai. Verse 7: **So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!”**

Did they?

5. The Promise of a Better Covenant

Why emphasize covenant today? Again, because I think it prepares us for what’s ahead. But not *just* the Law, but also why God will respond to the golden calf as He will, and why Moses will have to mediate for Israel as he will.

However, I should also say that emphasizing “covenant” not *only* helps us understand Exodus, it helps us understand the entire Bible. Because through both Jeremiah and Ezekiel—much later—God will promise *another* covenant. I read some of it earlier. But, centuries after the Mosaic covenant was given, the Lord said this through Jeremiah: **Behold, days are coming . . . when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke** (Jer. 31:31–32).

The book of Hebrews quotes those exact verses. And then that author explains that God promised a new one, *not* because the first covenant was flawed, but because He found fault with

²¹ Blackburn, 94.

²² Blackburn, 94.

²³ Blackburn, 92.

Israel (Heb. 8:7). Shortly after our verses today, they will hear the Ten Commandments, but they won't even leave Sinai without bowing down to an idol.

Our text today tells us that they knew what the covenant demanded. The conditions were clear. But we *also* know that they did not—and ultimately *would* not—keep it.

So, yet again in mercy, God promised a better one. And it's not *merely* a renewal of the old, but one that's new. Further, it's one that *makes* His people new. Hebrews 8 quotes from the prophets on the nature of it: **For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts** (Heb. 8:10). Rather than laws on stones for stony hearts, He gives a new heart to a new people. That's *one* reason it's a better covenant.

But the primary reason is because of its better Mediator. As David reminded us back in June, it's no longer "if," but since. That is, *since* the better Mediator of the better covenant came (Heb. 8:6), and *since* He was born under the Law (Gal. 4:4), and *since* He fulfilled it (Matt. 5:17–18), and *since* He did so in the place of those who broke it (Rom. 8:3–4), and *since* He took upon Himself the curse of covenant-breakers (Gal. 3:13), and *since* He earned blessing, and then gave it to His people (Gal. 3:14). *Since* all of that is true, Peter can use the language of Exodus 19 to describe *us*: **you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession** (1 Peter 2).

Conclusion

God promised His people a new covenant, a better one. And what we're about to do is observe the meal of that covenant—where a people delivered, and made new, give thanks.