

**The Covenant of Law**  
**Exodus 19:1–6, 20:1-16, 24: 4-11, 34:27-28**

Brothers and sisters, if you think back to a kinder gentler time in American politics, back in 2015 B.T. (before Trump) you may remember Gov. Mike Huckabee causing a bit of stir when he said *"I can't just 'change' with the 'times' if it means deviating from 'biblical law,'" and asking him to accept same-sex marriage "would be like asking Jewish people to serve bacon-wrapped scallops in their delis..."*

TV personality Jon Stewart was quick to jump all over this statement by pointing out that Huckabee was inconsistent in obedience to other biblical laws - about wearing mixed fabric (Deut 22:11) and not trimming one's beard (Lev 19:27).

So Huckabee's objections to same sex marriage based on "biblical law" make no sense Stewart concludes – because you can't just obey some laws and disregard others.

And just like that friends, the focus of today's message: the Covenant of Law - leaps off the pages of scripture and is thrust into the public spotlight.

So if you are wondering how the Covenants connect to our daily lives beyond preparing us for Good Friday and Easter – well just think about that example...

Because it highlights the number one question that everyone has about the bible and the Covenant of Law, which is *"what parts of this biblical law still apply to our lives and how do we make sense of it?"*

And there's only one thing we can do with regards to this question. We need to focus, concentrate and to the challenging work of understanding Covenant, and how the scriptures must be understood in the context of the Covenant.

So what's the definition of a Covenant? A Bond, of life and death, sovereignly administered.

And let's do a quick review of how we've moved from the Covenant of Preservation last week, to talking about the Covenant of Law this week.

To do that we need a quick review of Abraham and the Covenant of Promise because it sets up what God is doing in making the Covenant of Law with Moses and Israel.

So the story of Abraham is all about him waiting for God to give him a son through his wife Sarah, as the starting point to fulfill the amazing promise that God would make him into great nation and give his descendants the Promised Land. Eventually Isaac is born, just as God promised, and God declares that He will inherit all the blessings of the Covenant.

Isaac grows up, gets married and has two sons – Jacob and Esau. Though it is usually the firstborn who receives the inheritance and blessings, in this case God determines He will continue the Covenant of Promise with the younger son Jacob.

Jacob eventually gets married, twice, and he has twelve sons – the family is starting to multiply... but jealousy and favoritism cause Jacobs sons to sell their brother Joseph into slavery.

Joseph eventually becomes ruler over all Egypt and brings his brothers and his father to live with him, to survive a famine.

So Jacob (Israel) leaves the Promised Land and lives out the remainder of his days down in Egypt reunited with Joseph, and God’s word to Abraham that “*your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there*” (Gen 15:13) came to pass.

And true enough, eventually the people of Israel became so numerous in Egypt that the Egyptians were afraid of them and forced them into slavery.

But God also said it would be for a limited time and eventually He would “*punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.*”

So God kept his promise to Abraham and sent Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land.

But, their first stop on the way to the Promised Land was at Mt. Sinai – because God wanted to establish, or re-established, His Covenant with the people of Israel.

Now when we think of the covenant between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai, we usually think about Moses going up the mountain and then dramatically coming down with the Ten Commandments.

But before God gives Moses the Ten Commands on tablets of stone He calls Moses up the mountain to explain why He is about to make a covenant with the people of Israel.

This is important to note because it explains why God makes the Law the distinctive administrative feature of this next phase of the Covenant.

God says he will make a Covenant with Israel because He has carried Israel out of Egypt and brought them to himself, and His intention for them is to be as a kingdom of Priests, a Holy nation. (Ex 19:4, 6)

Now here we must remember that God's promise to Abraham is only two thirds kept; his descendants are numerous, they are on the way to inherit the Promised Land; but God still needs to bless all the nations on earth through them...

So in by setting apart the nation of Israel for Himself - that's what a *Holy nation* means - he can instruct them and teach them and shape them so they can become a Kingdom of Priests who are mediating God's presence to the rest of humanity – that's what priests do.

God intends to bless the nations on earth by having the nation of Israel acts as His agent of Divine communication, blessings, guidance, and instruction and so on...

Now to be liberated from slavery, and chosen to become God's priests, this is a great honor which demonstrates God's grace and mercy – how should they respond to this, how do they show their gratitude and thankfulness for this?

Friends, maybe you can relate? Perhaps you've been in a situation where something good has happened but you have absolutely no idea how to say thank-you appropriately...

I mean you can say thank-you, but what happened was so amazing that something more significant is needed in response – but you don't know what to do? That's sort of what's going on here...

So, as further evidence of His grace and mercy God gives the people of Israel the Law – so that through their obedience they might properly show Him their gratitude, and also learn how to correctly function as a Kingdom of Priests.

Now friends, if there is only one thing that you remember from this message this morning; and do I hope there's more... but if you remember only one thing remember this...

***The Law was given for Israel to appropriately express their gratitude through obedience and to help them properly function as a kingdom of Priests!***

And this is important to remember friends because whenever someone tries to apply the idea of “biblical law” to an issue, others will dismiss this attempt by pointing out that we are inconsistent with which biblical laws we obey, so the debate goes back and forth...

And eventually someone tries to resolve the argument by saying something like “*but Jesus came to free us from having to obey all those rules and free us from the burden of trying to “be perfect” in order to go to heaven*”

But friends this isn't true. It wrongly assumes that God gave Israel the Law to demonstrate moral perfection through obedience and thus achieve salvation or go to heaven, yet we so often imply this as we explain the gospel...

Let me say it again - ***The Law was given for Israel to appropriately express their gratitude through obedience and to help them properly function as a kingdom of Priests!***

Friends the Law is good! Are you with me on this?

Now the majority of what constitutes the Law can be found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and if you read through these books you will see that the Covenant of Law gives God's people instruction and direction on a wide range of topics and situations and applications.

It covers the specific instruction of how to build the Tabernacle, what the High Priest should wear and how to offer sacrifices, what to do in case of an accidental death, dealing with mold and mildew in your home, and of course the more obscure laws about we spoke of earlier such as not mixing fabric or trimming the edges of your beard.

Now some of these laws seem to make sense – as they reflect laws we have in our society such as do not murder, do not steal... but laws about mixing fabric, or not cooking a young goat in its mother's milk? (Ex 34:20) What specific reason is there for such commands?

And how would obedience to these Laws show gratitude and help Israel mediate the Divine presence of Yahweh?

Well friends the question of "why?" is answered if we look at how these laws carry forward and develop some of the elements, aspects and emphases of prior covenant administrations... and especially how they help further God's plans to restore the Covenant of Creation.

Let's look at our Covenant diagram again to give us a visual representation of how this all fits together, and then we'll examine the Ten Commandments from a covenant context.

Because out of all the specific commands which make up the Law, these seem to have special significance, take note in Exodus 34:28 where it says "*he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the 10 Commands.*"

This verse implies that what the Ten Commandments express represents the essence of the Covenant of Law and since each successive phase of Covenant administration does not cancel the previous one but carries through and expands them...

The Ten Commandments actually summarize the whole of God's restorative purposes up to this point!

So look at how each command brings something from a prior covenant forward...

1) You shall have no other god's before me. This command brings the Covenant of Creation forward re-emphasizing the essence of God's prohibition to eat from any tree but the one. I am God, and neither you nor anything else I have made is like me – do not worship idols or images.

2) Do not take the name of the LORD God in vain – this has nothing to do with saying “O God or O Jesus” as a swear word – as disrespectful as that is. This is about Covenant faithfulness versus unfaithfulness. If you've taken Yahweh's name, His Covenant name, then you must be loyal and faithful to Him and not “misuse” that relationship.

This is true for all the Covenant administrations with Adam, Noah, Abraham – and now Moses and Israel... God is always requiring faithfulness and loyalty in His covenants.

3) Then comes “remember the Sabbath” - that so obviously brings forward the Covenant of Creation. God himself

references that Covenant here when He says *“for in six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth but on the seventh He rested...”* (Ex 20:11)

4) Next is honor your father and mother so that you may live long... (Ex 20:12)

Remember how it was the line of the Woman in Gen 5 that was noted for their exceptionally long life spans... which reflects and brings forward the Covenant of Commencement where the Woman was called “Eve” because she would become the mother of all the living

And Abraham is the father of the nation of Israel and the recipient of Covenant promises which are being fulfilled in what God is doing here with the nation of Israel...

So let me suggest that we need to begin to understand this commandment is about honoring the Covenantal Father Abraham by living and waiting with the same kind of faith for the Promise to come to its complete fulfillment, and honoring

the Covenantal Mother – Eve – as the mother of all the living by living in opposition to the serpent and his rebellious descendants. (*I will put enmity between you and the serpent between your offspring and his, Gen3:15*)

Furthermore, if we want our children to honor us – then we ought to be living examples of Abraham’s faith and Eve’s enmity of the serpent and instruct our children how to live this way as well, so that as our children live in this manner, they honor us as well.

And the second part of this command which refers to “the Land that Yahweh is giving to you” is obviously bringing forward the Covenant of Promise with Abraham.

Now the remaining five commands are; do not murder, or commit adultery, or steal, or bear false witness, or covet.

I’m hoping that you see the “preservative” nature in them, and how they bring forward the Covenant of Preservation and further expand the ways in which human sinfulness is curbed,

and human life is preserved - to allow humanity to multiply and fill the earth - and in this case to enable Abraham’s descendants to become as numerous as the stars in the sky...

So then, these are not just the Ten Words of the Covenant of Law but they are the Ten Words that represent how God is working to restore the Covenant of Creation through these successive administrations, (see Covenant diagram) and the same is true for the rest of the content in the Mosaic Law.

Take the Dietary Laws for example. They make complete sense if we understand them to be a covenantal test of sorts, not identical to the test of the Tree of the Knowledge which Adam faced, but similar in the fact that Israel was not to eat certain foods simply because God said so – would they obey God simply because He was God and they were not?

And what about those obscure laws; about not mixing fabrics, not planting two different kinds of seed, or not mating two different kinds of animals?

Well these “Separation Laws” make perfect sense if we understand them as object lessons that would teach Israel what it meant that they were set apart and different from the other nations – not just because they were Priests, but they were also from the Line of the Woman, not the Serpent. God had set enmity between these two lines and what God has separated... we should not mix!

And we can also see there are lots of “Civil laws” that expand the preservative aspect of the Covenant of Preservation by ordering society so human life is preserved and flourishes.

Take Deuteronomy 22:8 for example *“When you build a new house, build a fence around your flat roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof.”* Preserving human life through good rules.

And finally, if Israel is to be a Kingdom of Priests who function as a mediator between God and the rest of the nations... if they are to reflect the Image of the God... then they need to

be able to speak accurately and truly about God and understand what humanity really needs from Him.

So there are all sorts of Religious laws that are designed to teach the difference between Holy and unholy, pure and impure, God and humanity, what sin is, how sin can be atoned for and forgiven, what it means to worship and serve God, what to give to God and so on...

In being a Kingdom of Priests, Israel reflects the Image of God to the nations around them – which is why they are not to make any image of God – for God is re-making them into His Image – this is the focal point of His plan to restore of Covenant of Creation.

Do you see what a difference a Covenant perspective makes in understanding these laws?

But the bigger and more important difference is how this same dynamic works to inform our understanding of Jesus and what happens on Good Friday and Easter.



In the same way that specific elements and promises from the prior covenants are carried forward and given form in these laws, the covenants and their distinctive elements eventually give birth to Jesus and eventually lead him to die on the cross.

“But didn’t Mary gave birth to Jesus?” Yes... but is that not born out of the Covenant of Commencement where God pronounces that the offspring of the woman shall crush the head of the serpent...

And why does Good Friday have to be such a bloody affair? Couldn’t God restore His creation without having to put Jesus to death on a cross?

Well brothers and sisters – that question shows we don’t understand that the Covenant of Law with Israel was started and sealed in blood... to show that Covenant faithfulness with God was a life and death matter...

In our scripture reading this morning from Ex 24: 7-8 it says  
*“7 Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the*

*people. They responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”*

Sealing a Covenant with blood means that you agree to forfeit your life if you are unfaithful.

So the subsequent unfaithfulness of Israel in breaking the Law required their blood. Fortunately, God in his loving mercy had provided a substitute for them within the Law; they could offer an animal sacrifice instead of their own life.

Yet this only provides a substitutional payment of blood and the blood of an animal sacrifice does nothing to actually change the nature of person who has been unfaithful to the Covenant, to take away the propensity for unfaithfulness.

But Jesus was a faithful covenant partner with God – he had no propensity for unfaithfulness – he was perfect in this way.

Because He was born under the Covenant of Law, because He kept the Covenant Law, his blood can substitute for Israel's... and pay their covenant debt.

And simultaneously Jesus' blood begins a new, or a fulfilled Covenant between God and Jesus Christ that can never be broken because Jesus will never be unfaithful.

And because He perfectly fulfills all of God's desires for Israel to be a Priest to all nations and mediate God's presence to us... we Gentiles can look to Jesus – the one true Israel – and be blessed to become included in God's chosen people, and receive the covenant promises to Abraham as our own.

And we can trust that God includes us in His chosen people through Jesus because when Jesus' blood was shed on the cross – God also forgives and covers over our covenant unfaithfulness...

So this is why the good news of salvation is not

*“Jesus came to set us free from having to obey all those rules and trying to be perfect in order to go to heaven...”*

The Good news friends is that Christ saves us by transferring His covenant faithfulness to us – from each and every covenant - by the Holy Spirit. Jesus has kept and continues to keep the Covenant of Law for us - this is what we must trust and have faith in in...

That is what the blood of Jesus Christ that is shed on Good Friday guarantees for us.

Can you see why we must know and understand the Covenants as we prepare for Good Friday and Easter?

May the Holy Spirit prepare us to experience our faith in Jesus in new and more profound ways this Easter. Amen

Appendix: How do we apply the Law Fulfilled in Christ to Us

A helpful way to properly relate to “biblical law” as it is fulfilled in Christ, and as we live in Christ, and He lives in us, is to think of norm and form.

For example, the covenantal norm behind the law form of not wearing clothes of mixed fabrics is the enmity which separates of the line of the woman and the serpent.

In Christ, this separation is now achieved by having this covenantal norm written on our hearts internally, and through guidance of the Holy Spirit we have the freedom to express this norm in other appropriate forms, such as demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit in contrast to those who live according to their sinful nature – to borrow Paul’s words from Romans 8:5.

The same works for the dietary laws. The covenantal norm behind them is obedience to God regarding what will give life and what will bring death.

Since Christ is formed by the Covenants – he embodies this covenant norm and gives it a new form in His command that we eat his body and drink his blood in the Lord’s Supper.

So, what is the Covenant norm – and how does that shape Christ, how does Christ embody it, and how does that guide us to express that covenant norm in new appropriate form?

Friends this requires a bit of effort and work and thinking on our part, lots of openness to the Holy Spirit – however as the writer of Hebrews says *“Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity... and God permitting, we will do so.”*