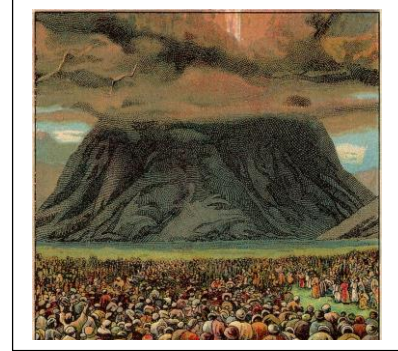


Remember Me?

The Prelude to the Moral Law

Dr. David G. Barker, 2015



Three months to the day, after leaving Egypt, Moses and the people of Israel arrive at the foot of Mt. Sinai – the place where Moses had seen the burning bush, the place where God promised Moses he would return. As they approached the mountain, God instructed Moses as to how to prepare the nation to meet with God. God called the people to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests (cf. Ex. 19).

They have come to Mt. Sinai for much, much more than only to receive the 10 Commandments – just to receive a list of “dos” and “don’ts”. They have come to the mountain of God because they must come to understand the holiness of God by witnessing it for themselves, and then, by becoming a holy nation before him – learning how to practice holiness in their own lives by hiding God’s law in their hearts that they might not sin against him.

For that purpose, God now equips them for this by giving to them a summary of his Word – which reflects his own holiness and gives the people the way they are to practice holiness in their lives. And the first thing he says to them are these words:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Ex. 20:2, ESV)

Even today, when the summary of God’s Moral Law is read in Christian worship services, this prelude is not overlooked but included. Have you ever wondered why that is the case? Obviously, it related to these Israelites. But that was for them, right?. Why should we hear these words today? What does the history of Israel have to do with us?

A History to the Story

The answer to that begins with our asking this question: Why was God giving the Israelites his law now? Why had he not just given this to the Egyptians? Was this the beginning of the story of the Israelites as God’s people? Was God simply saying “Now that you are my people, you must obey my law to be accepted by me”? No. God had chosen the people of Israel to be his own, peculiar people a long time ago. And because of that earlier claim, he had now freed them from Egypt.

But why had God chosen the Israelites? Who were they? Why had God rescued the Israelites from Egypt in the first place? Was it merely because the Egyptians had been bullies and had enslaved the Israelites and treated them cruelly? Was it only because they had cried out to God and God felt sorry for them and decided to do something nice for them? Was it because they had promised to follow and obey him if he rescued them from the Egyptians? No. In fact, there is precious little evidence that after 430 years of living in Egypt, the people of Israel remembered much at all about Yahweh, their God. The reason God freed the Israelites from slavery was because God remembered his promise.

God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

God delivered the Israelites because he had made a covenant with Abraham.

Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. (Gen. 15:13-14, ESV)

But why had God made such a promise to Abraham? Who was he? Was he someone who had always followed Yahweh all his life? Was he someone whose service was so good, God owed this to his children? No. When God called Abraham and gave him his promise, God called Abram away from his family, his country, even from his own idol-worship. God chose Abraham and called him to himself.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen. 12:1-3, ESV)

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Heb. 11:8-10, ESV)

But why would God choose and call someone such as Abram - who was not even following him in the first place, who was worshipping idols? Was it because God could see into the future and knew that Abram would have a change of heart and decide on his own to reject idol-worship and come to faith in the living God? No. In fact, Abraham's ancestors were among all the idol-worshippers who had deliberately fallen away from the one, true God after the great flood. Noah, along with his sons and their wives, were the only ones to survive the flood by building and residing in the ark while the rest of the world was being destroyed. In spite of this great act of mercy on God's part, Noah's descendants had fallen away from God and Abram was one of those descendants.

the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth." (Gen. 8:21a, ESV)

But if every intent of the thoughts of all men was only evil continually why did God allow Noah to survive the flood? Was it because God knew that Noah was not as bad as his neighbors? that if God gave to Noah a chance, Noah would obey God? No. God chose Noah in spite of Noah's own sinfulness and God gave to Noah his promise.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." (Gen. 9:8-11, ESV)

But if man had become so bad by the time of Noah why did God even bother with Noah? Why hadn't God just destroyed them all and started over? Was it because man was not really all that bad? Was it because man was still basically good and God did not want to destroy the good with the evil? No. All mankind since the fall of Adam and his wife in the garden have disobeyed God and rebelled against him and have deserved nothing but God's righteous wrath and judgment.

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ... for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth. (Gen. 6:11-13, ESV)

So if man continues to be absolutely sinful - the thoughts of his heart only wicked all time - and that has not changed even to this day - why is God now giving Moses his holy laws on Mt. Sinai? Clearly, it is not for anything worthy in the Israelites - past, present or future - for since the time of Adam's fall, nothing was left for man but judgment and death. The only thing that makes any difference at all is this: God chose differently - God chose life for man.

A Story to the History

But how did God do that? How did God provide for sinful man's redemption? That takes us all the way back to the garden of Eden, when the first man first sinned against God. It was there, right there,

that God first told us about his promise to redeem his people with the blood of his own son, Jesus Christ. God first established his covenant with man in these obscure words:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." (Gen. 3:15, ESV)

That is why - when you read the story of the fall, you are really seeing in it the hope of the covenant of God's grace in Christ.

So when you go on to read of the story of Noah being rescued from the flood, and you ask yourself: "What was so special about Noah?" - the answer is: 'nothing in and of himself', but in Noah, the promise of God in Christ was going to be kept - even though man was completely sinful and unworthy of redemption. God would keep his promise.

That is why Noah was given a measure of the Spirit of God even before the flood and proclaimed the true gospel to men (cf. 1 Peter 3:18-22). In the unfolding of God's covenant, Noah was a type of Christ. He preached and exemplified Christ.

And when you read about God's calling Abram - out of idol-worship and into a marvelous faith and righteousness - we know that God's promise to Abram was not merely to him but to his chosen descendants forever and ever - the promised offspring.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith, was only one descendent, Jesus himself. (Gal. 3:8-9, ESV)

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. (Gal. 3:16, ESV)

So, when we finally return to Moses at Mt. Sinai and see Moses standing ready to receive the Moral Law of God, we know that Moses was also a type of Christ and that the favor that this holy God was showing to him and to Israel was another unfolding of God's covenant of grace. The Moral Law, like all of God's covenant signs, points to Christ.

His Story is Our History

God is a God of history and of generations. By both, he builds his church and kingdom. The prelude to the 10 commandments not only reminded the Israelites of their immediate past but it also reminds us of what God done already for his people ever since the fall of Adam in the garden. It reminds us of God's will to yet bring about what he promised - not just to the Israelites, but much, much more to his whole church - that salvation is never by our mere outward obedience and effort to reflect the holiness of God. Rather, salvation is always by the grace of a holy God and the gift of his son, Jesus Christ. In that gift, God's very character is revealed, a way of salvation promised and made sure. Jesus Christ; in his own life and death, reflects the holiness of God perfectly for our sakes because he himself is both God and God's gift to us.

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