

p 59 WEEK 8: COVENANT LAW AT SINAI

Exodus 19:1–24:18

The Place of the Passage

Now that God has delivered Israel from slavery and provided for them on their journey through the wilderness, the stage is set for him to solidify his covenant relationship with them at Mount Sinai. These chapters record the giving of the law at Sinai (Ex. 20:1–23:33), surrounded by narratives describing the people’s preparation for and confirmation of their covenant with God (19:1–25; 24:1–18). At both the beginning and the end, the Israelites commit themselves to living according to God’s word (19:8; 24:7), and God tells them that if they are faithful to him, he will richly bless them when they enter the Promised Land (23:23–33).

The Big Picture

God communicates his covenant law to Israel at Mount Sinai, and the people heartily embrace their renewed covenant relationship with him.

p 60 Reflection and Discussion

Read through the whole passage for this study, Exodus 19:1–24:18. Then review the shorter passages below and write your answers to the following questions. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, pages 174–183; also available online at www.esvbible.org.)

1. Covenant Preparation (19:1–25)

In prefacing the law, the first thing God does is remind Israel that when he rescued them from Egypt, he brought them *to himself* (19:4). Why might this be significant for understanding the laws and requirements that follow?

In Exodus 19:9–25, how is the physical relationship between God and the people presented? What does this imply about God? What does this imply about the people?

2. Covenant Law (20:1–23:33)

In introducing the Ten Commandments, God recalls what he has done for Israel (20:2) before calling them to obey him (20:3–17). Based on this, how should we understand the role of

obedience in Israel's relationship with God? p 61 How does this parallel the role of good works in relation to the good news of Jesus?

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment is, he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37–39; see Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). How are these two emphases—love for God and love for neighbor—reflected in the Ten Commandments?

The laws and statutes throughout these chapters are fundamentally concerned with the welfare of *others* as opposed to the welfare of *oneself* (see Ex. 20:12–17; 21:1–11, 33–36; 22:1–15, 21–27; 23:1–9). In the preceding narratives, what are some ways that Israel has been preoccupied with their own welfare, showing their need for this instruction? Inversely, how have God's actions in the preceding narratives provided examples of what it means to seek the welfare of others?

The word translated "rules" in 21:1 may also be translated "judgments." That is, the following chapters are not an exhaustive list of commands that cover every possible situation, but rather example judgments that are designed to serve as precedents and models for further legal decisions. In light of this, what p 62 quality did Israel's leaders need to govern God's people well? (For help, see 1 Kings 3:9.) How might this insight help those who lead God's people today?

Read through Exodus 21:2–11 and 22:21–23:9. How would you summarize the types of people that these laws are seeking to protect? In what ways does the concern for these types of people reflect God's heart in the gospel? (For help, see Matt. 5:3; 11:5; Luke 4:18).

The overriding concern in the laws prescribing capital punishment is respect for human life. Those who intentionally take life (Ex. 21:12–14, 18–25, 28–32) or disrespect those who gave them life (21:15, 17) are to be executed. How does Genesis 9:6 help us understand why respect for human life is so important to God? What is ultimately at issue here?

3. Covenant Confirmation (24:1–18)

The covenant is confirmed by the people promising to obey God's word (24:7), by Moses sprinkling "the blood of the covenant" on them (24:8), and by the leaders enjoying a fellowship meal in God's presence (24:9–11). How does each of p 63 these actions relate to what God says during the covenant preparation in Exodus 19:4–5?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to reflect on the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

GRACE BEFORE LAW. Throughout this section, God’s gracious acts on Israel’s behalf consistently precede his calls for them to keep his covenant law. Before communicating his legal requirements, God twice recounts his recent deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Ex. 19:4–5; 20:2). Furthermore, God promises that his angel will pave the way for Israel to enter the Promised Land before he exhorts them to obey (23:20–21). This pattern of grace preceding law reflects the gospel, as we are saved by faith in Christ solely by God’s unmerited grace, only after which, as a response to this, are we then called to obedience and good works (e.g., Eph. 2:8–10; Phil. 2:5–13).

CONCERN FOR THE OUTCAST. A core concern of the Sinai legislation is special care for the marginalized and outcast of society. Several statutes outline the rights of slaves (Ex. 21:2–11) and sojourners (22:21; 23:9), as well as widows, the fatherless (22:22–24), and the poor (23:6, 11). Similarly, in his earthly ministry Jesus displays a special concern for the outcast. He heals lepers (Matt. 8:2–3; Luke 17:12–14) and a woman who was ceremonially unclean (Matt. 9:20–22), dines with tax collectors (Matt. 9:10–13; 11:19; Luke 19:1–10), and shows compassion to prostitutes (Luke 7:36–50) and adulteresses (John 8:1–11). Such care for the marginalized is a foretaste of the personal and social wholeness that will exist when Jesus’ kingdom comes in its fullness (Rev. 21:4).

THE BLOOD OF THE COVENANT. At the conclusion of the giving of the law, Moses confirms the covenant that God made with Israel by sprinkling “the blood of the covenant” on the people (Ex. 24:8). Moses, the priests, and the [p 64](#) elders then enjoy a fellowship meal with God (24:9–11). This event prefigures the Last Supper, another divine-human meal where Jesus says that the cup is “my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28; see also Mark 14:24).

Whole-Bible Connections

KINGDOM OF PRIESTS. God tells Israel that the whole earth belongs to him (Ex. 19:5), and that if they obey him and keep his covenant they will be for him “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:6). One of the main functions of priests was to teach people about God (see 2 Kings 17:27; 2 Chron. 15:3; Jer. 18:18). This suggests that for Israel to be a “kingdom of priests” meant that they would teach the nations about God by their faithfulness to his word. While this concept of an “international witness” is evident elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Deut. 4:5–8; Isa. 51:4), it takes full form in the church’s call to take the gospel to the nations. Alluding to Exodus 19:6, Peter says of the church, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

DIVINE COMMANDMENTS. Dominating this portion of the book is God’s communication of his commandments to Israel. At no point are these commandments portrayed as burdensome; rather, they are presented as clear parameters for enjoying the gracious privilege of living in relationship with a holy God. Throughout the rest of the Pentateuch God will continue to reveal

his will through commandments, and it was by keeping these commandments that Israel was to show their love for God (see Deut. 6:5–6; 11:1; 30:16). Although the psalmists later commend the wisdom of the law (Ps. 1:1–2; 19:7–11) and proclaim their love for it (Ps. 119:97, 113, 163), ultimately Israel’s unrepentant heart prohibited them from keeping it. When Jesus came, he affirmed the continual applicability of God’s commandments (Matt. 5:18–19), yet he graciously fulfilled them on our behalf (Matt. 5:17) so that we who are united to him through faith are credited with his righteousness (Rom. 5:17). Although Christians receive this righteousness solely by faith (Rom. 3:22), like Israel we too are called to show our love for God by seeking to keep his commandments (John 14:15; 1 John 5:3; 2 John 6).

Theological Soundings

THE CHARACTER OF GOD. The giving of the law at Sinai not only communicates God’s will to Israel but also reveals several aspects of his character. Israel’s arrival at “the mountain” (Ex. 19:2) fulfills God’s promise to Moses at his call [p 65](#) that he would “serve God on this mountain” (3:12), thereby showing God’s faithfulness. The various commands to put limits between the people and the mountain reflect God’s holiness (19:12, 14, 21–24). Two major concerns of the laws themselves are care for the outcast (as noted above) and the maintenance of justice within the community (e.g., in the laws prescribing punishments for causing injury [21:12–32] and restitution for loss of property [21:33–22:15]). These correlate respectively to the elements of mercy and justice that are central to God’s character. Therefore, in this section, Israel is not being called to follow these commandments as an arbitrary, legalistic framework, but rather to live in a manner that is consistent with the very heart and character of God himself.

THREE USES OF THE LAW. Historically, Protestant theologians have distinguished three different uses of the law. First, the *pedagogical* use teaches us about God’s righteousness and how we fall short of it. In this way the law functions to make us aware of our sin (Rom. 3:19–20). Second, the *civil* use restrains evil by prescribing punishments for wrongdoing (Deut. 13:6–11). Third, the *moral* use provides guidance for how we are to live in a way that pleases God (Matt. 5:19).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Exodus 19:1–24:18 for your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

[p 66](#) 3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 19:1–24:18

As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Exodus. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.