

Yahweh Covenants with Israel

Exodus 19 and 24

Turn to Exodus 19 please. In our Scripture today, we will see how Yahweh bound himself to Israel, and Israel bound herself to Yahweh. It was God's idea. He wanted Israel to be his special people. He offered them that, if they would agree to be loyal to him. They said "Yes, we want that, yes, we will be faithful to you." They sealed the covenant with the blood of sacrifices. Today we'll see how that happened.

This series on Exodus is called "Salvation and the Name." Salvation in Exodus has three parts. Being rescued from slavery in Egypt is only the first part. Salvation means Rescue plus Covenant, that's what we'll cover today. And it also includes Presence, God living with them in the tabernacle. Rescue plus Covenant plus Presence equals Salvation. And Presence is not complete until the last verse of Exodus.

Today, we're covering the middle part of Yahweh's Salvation, his covenant with Israel.

1 Yahweh Proposes Covenant – Exodus 19:1–6

On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all 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.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

Three times God tells Moses to say this to Israel. V3 *This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob* (that's once) *and what you are to tell the people of Israel*. That's twice. A third time at the end: *These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites*. This proposal absolutely must get to Israel. Moses must not fail to deliver this.

First God talks about the past, which Israel has already seen. God tells Israel, "You watched me plague the Egyptians and punish them because they would not let you go. You've seen what I do for you. *"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."*

Eagles' wings. Listen to what Moses says about eagle wings later in Deuteronomy 32:11 *Yahweh was like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft.*

Now, when God proposes covenant, he says, *“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.”* “I fought for you in Egypt, since then I have carried you as an eagle carries its young. And where did I take you? Right here, I brought you to myself. I brought you to myself.” Yahweh did not rescue Israel just to get her out of slavery. Yahweh rescued Israel to bring her to himself.

Then Yahweh tells Israel what she will do for him *“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant...”* God wants Israelites to obey him and be faithful to him. That's their part of the covenant.

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all 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. You will be my treasured possession. I have other possessions, but you will be the one I treasure.

A kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In this line, “priests” and “holy” mean much the same. Priests were people that God set apart for himself, to serve him directly. “Holy” refers to anything that is set apart for God. So “priests” and “holy” mean much the same thing. “Kingdom” and “nation” are also interchangeable.

God says, *you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.* If God had said, “you will be for me a holy kingdom and a nation of priests,” it would have meant the same thing.

All in all, this is a warm personal offer. Yahweh says, “You’ve already seen my loyalty to you and tenderness for you, you’ve seen how much I want you. If you will be faithful to me, you will be my one and only treasure. Out of all the earth you will be my own special people.” Yahweh really wants this nation.

2 Israel Accepts Yahweh's Offer – Exodus 19:7–8

So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, “We will do everything the Lord has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord.

The elders represent the people, and they respond with one voice that they want this. No ambiguity at all. Moses takes this answer back to God. So they have not yet actually covenanted. Yahweh has said, “I want to make a covenant with you,” and Israel has answered, “Yes we will covenant with you.” It is kind of like being engaged to be married.

3 On the Third Day, Yahweh Reveals his Glory – Exodus 19:10–11, 16–20

And Yahweh said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day Yahweh will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people....”

On the third day, Yahweh and Israel got as close to actually meeting as they could at this stage. It might sound in this paragraph as if God is angry, but he’s not at all. Israel needs a better grasp of what Yahweh is like. What follows is a natural consequence of Yahweh showing up on a mountain.

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

Thunder. Lightning. Thick cloud. Very loud trumpet blast. Every person trembled. The Lord descended in fire. The smoke poured up like smoke from a furnace. The whole mountain trembled violently. The trumpet got louder and louder. This is all just Yahweh showing up, without trying so hard to hide.

This is Yahweh, the God that so much yearns for Israel to be his treasure, his special people. This is the God to whom they will promise faithfulness. They need a taste of what their God is like.

The Israelites have now had two incredible experiences of Yahweh that shaped their view of God from then on. The first was what happened at the Red Sea. God parted the waters, the Israelites walked through, Pharaoh and his army followed them, and God closed up the water to destroy the army. No Egyptian soldier survived. The Israelites saw this first hand.

And now, within about eight weeks, all Israel gathers at the foot of the mountain, and every Israelite sees and hears and feels what happens to that mountain when Yahweh comes down to the top of it. Both those stories get told and retold, as is happening here today. Yahweh was introducing himself to Israel.

4 Yahweh Reveals His Covenant Requirements – Exodus 20–23

Now we will skip to Exodus chapter 24, where Yahweh and Israel covenant with each other. In Exodus 20–23, God shows Israel what obeying him actually looks like. First he gives Israel the ten commandments, in Exodus 20. They heard these directly from God. I cover these next Sunday. Then in chapters 21–23, Yahweh tells Moses other laws to explain and apply the ten commands.

The important thing to see is that Yahweh made sure Israel knew what they were getting into, so there would be no surprises. First he showed himself on the mountain, thunder and lightning and earthquake and fire and trumpet, so they had a better sense of who he was. And then in chapters 20–23 he showed them what obeying him actually meant. Now, let's go to Exodus 24, where they actually covenant.

5 Israel Agrees to Yahweh's Terms – Exodus 24:3–8

When Moses went and told the people all Yahweh's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything Yahweh has said we will do." Moses then wrote down everything Yahweh had said.

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to Yahweh. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything Yahweh has said; we will obey." Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that Yahweh has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Israel agrees three times to all Yahweh's words and laws. First, and this seems still to be on that 3rd day, Moses told them everything Yahweh had told him. Israel listened and said, "everything Yahweh has said we will do." Then Moses wrote down what he had just said to them.

The next day he read it all to them, so they heard it all again. They answer twice: "We will do everything Yahweh has said. We will obey."

6 Blood of a Sacrifice Seals the Covenant – Exodus 24:3–8

There are a few places in the Old Testament besides Exodus 24 where a covenant was sealed by offering a sacrifice (Genesis 15:8–21; 31:44–54; Jeremiah 34:8–22). We're not sure what the significance was exactly, but it was sometimes a part of an important covenant.

Notice what happened with blood at this covenant. Moses had young men offer burnt offerings and sacrifice young bull fellowship offerings to Yahweh. Half of the blood Moses splashed against the altar, and the other half he kept in bowls. After he read the book of the covenant that he had written out the previous evening, the people said twice that they would obey God.

And then, Moses put his hand in the bowls and sprinkled that blood on the people. The blood splashed against the altar was the blood that's poured on Yahweh. Splashing it against the altar was the equivalent of Moses sprinkling the blood on Yahweh.

Now half the blood is on Yahweh, and the other half is on the people. Once the blood is on both Yahweh and on the Israelites, the covenant is sealed. That's what Moses announces: *This is the blood of the covenant that Yahweh has made with you.*

At the Last Supper in Matthew and in Mark, Jesus says, “*This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many.*” Jesus ties the cup of wine in his hand to the blood of those burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. We'll come back to that in a few minutes.

7 Then a Covenant Meal – Exodus 24:9–11

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

The seventy elders of Israel represent the whole nation. Remember at the beginning of Exodus, Jacob's sons and their families totalled 70 people. After the covenant was sealed, we have this brief description of a most amazing meal. God was above them, separated from them by some kind of blue transparent ceiling, which is God's floor. And they all ate and drank together in the presence of God.

That's just a little taste of where covenant goes. This meal is a symbol of what God wants from covenanting with his people, eating and drinking in the presence of God.

8 Then God's Presence – Exodus 25:8; 29:45–46

Right from the first verse of Exodus 25, Yahweh tells Moses how to build the tabernacle. The blood of the covenant hardly dry in Exodus 24 when God makes plans to move in to Israel, to dwell with Israel. *Have them make a sanctuary for me*, Yahweh tells Moses in 25:8, *and I will dwell among them.*

We'll not go any farther with Presence today. I just want you to get the big picture. Salvation in Exodus, the salvation of Yahweh, has three parts: rescue, covenant, and presence. God rescues us from the authority of darkness, he covenants with us by the blood of Christ, and then the church community becomes his dwelling place, his temple. Rescue, covenant, and presence.

9 Lord's Supper: This is My Blood of the Covenant – Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24

We have four accounts of the Last Supper: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. The only word of explanation that's in all four accounts is the word “covenant.” In two Jesus says, “do this in memory of me,” but the other two say nothing about remembrance. In all of them however Jesus uses the word covenant to describe the cup: either “this cup is my blood of the covenant” or “this cup is the new covenant in my blood.”

Moses sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice on the people. We take the blood of the sacrifice to ourselves in the cup. Moses sprinkled it on them, we drink it. That's how Jesus explained his death at the last supper. Jesus compared his sacrifice to those burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. This is what we read, every Sunday. These words don't use the word covenant, but that's what explains it.

Father, God of Israel, who led Jesus to the cross, and raised him from the dead.
You have said to us, 'If you will be my people, I will be your God.'
And we have said to You, 'You will be our God, and we will be your people.'
The blood of your Son Jesus, poured out for us for the forgiveness of sins,
binds us to You, our God.

Note especially the last sentence: "the blood of your Son Jesus binds us to you, our God." We could say, "the covenant blood of your Son Jesus binds us to you, our God."

10 Marriage

From this point on, the prophets speak of Israel as Yahweh's wife. When Israel worships idols, she is an adulterous wife, unfaithful to her husband. If we look at the sequence that we've covered today, it is a warm engagement and wedding story.

God rescues Israel from Egypt, and leads Israel through the wilderness up to Mt Sinai. Then he proposes. He says, "you've seen how I protected you and cared for you. Now if you will be my people, I will be your God." Israel says "yes, you will be our God, and we will be your people."

Then Yahweh gives Israel a clearer picture of who he is, and also of what he wants from them. Engagement is not binding. Marriage is binding, but not engagement. You get to know each other better, and sometimes you find out this is a bad idea. So Israel still has a chance to back out.

But Israel said "yes" to Yahweh, and sprinkled blood sealed the covenant. And right after that there was a fellowship meal, the seventy elders and Yahweh together. And right after that, God arranged to move in with Israel. He began to live in Israel's midst.

Human marriage is between two humans, and this covenant is between God and humans, so not all of this will fit human marriage. But there is no doubt that God created male and female so that human marriage would be modeled after how Yahweh treats his people and how they are faithful to him.

Summary

The main thing to see in this all is how much God longs for a community of people to be his treasure, his special possession. When God offered covenant to Israel, the benefit to Israel was how special she would be to God. “You’ll be my treasured possession, my kingdom of priests, my holy nation. Nothing will be as important to me as you. That’s what I’ll do for you.” That’s the core of what Israel gains from covenant with God.

We still worship that very same God. The details are different, but the big themes have not changed at all. We have a new covenant and new covenant blood, but it is with that same Yahweh. And that makes us the most fortunate people on earth. Amen.

PRAYER: Yahweh, we speak to the one who carried Israel on eagles’ wings. We speak to the Yahweh who came to Mt Sinai with thunder and lightning and smoke and fire. The people trembled, and the mountain trembled. And after the covenant was sealed, the leaders ate and drank together in your presence. We can hardly grasp these things. We are so glad that you brought us into your people, and that you have come to live in our midst. We praise you for your Son Jesus, who makes all this possible for us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, may that God of peace equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.