

The God Who Commands (Part 5 of 5)

The Basics of Being God's People

Exodus 23:20-24:18

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“Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. “But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. “When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. None shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.” (Exodus 23:20–33, ESV)

Exodus 19-24 records the giving of the Law and the establishment of what is often called the Mosaic Covenant. It is called Mosaic because of its close association with Moses. And it is called a covenant because in it God lays the framework for the relationship between Israel and God. The Mosaic Covenant defines the nature of what it means to be the people of God.

This is the last message under the subtitle “The God Who Commands,” and next week we will begin a six week study of the tabernacle, the first worship facility for God’s people. Allow me to remind you what we have studied so far:

- **Chapter 19** – Israel was brought to Mt. Sinai, where they prepared to meet with God. Before God gave them the Law, He identified the supreme difference between Himself and His people. Remember: “He likes you; but He is not like you.”
- **Chapter 20** – God delivered the Ten Commandments, which serve as a summary of the Biblical ethic. These commands are like a constitution, identifying the basic way in which God’s people are to relate to God and to one another.

- **Chapters 21-23** – These chapters provide specific examples of how Israel is to live out the principles behind the Ten Commandments. We learned about God’s concern for compassion, justice, and fairness. God wants us to love our neighbor as ourselves. God wants us to be just like Him.

Our text today, the end of chapter 23 and all of chapter 24, brings closure to this covenant moment. After God identifies who He is, what He has done, and what He requires, He tells Israel what He is prepared to do for them if they keep His covenant. So there are wonderful blessings connected to this covenant. The grace of God is seen here in the fact that He not only rescued His people from slavery, but He intends to bless them in ways that are stunning.

What’s more, we see the people’s response to God’s covenant and a ceremonial meal that is shared by representatives of the nation. And in so doing, the covenant process is completed. God has delivered His people, revealed His sovereignty, identified His requirements, promised blessings, and the people have responded affirmatively.

A Crescendo of Covenants

So what do we have here? The Mosaic Covenant is part of the covenantal crescendo in the Old and New Testaments. The first covenant was the Noahic Covenant (Gen. 9:1-17), where God promised never to destroy the human race. Then there is the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 15, 17), where God chooses Abram and his descendants as His people, promising to bless the world through what will become the people of Israel. The next covenant is the Mosaic Covenant, which we are looking at today. Then there is the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7), where God promises that someone from David’s line will rule over the house of Israel forever. Finally, there is the New Covenant, as promised in Jeremiah 31, where God says the following:

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31:33-34, ESV)

This New Covenant is inaugurated by Christ and will ultimately be fulfilled in the New Heaven and the New Earth. We hear about this moment in Revelation 21:2-7:

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’ And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ And he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.’” (Revelation 21:2-7, ESV)

This is God's goal. It is a restoration of the violation and separation that took place in the Garden of Eden. The New Heaven and the New Earth, where God dwells again with His people, is what these covenants are pointing toward. And each covenant becomes part of the crescendo in building toward God's ultimate goal. Each covenant progressively reveals more and more about God and His grace.

Why is that important as we look at Exodus 23-24? It is vital that you see the specifics of what God is saying to the people of Israel, but you would miss the full beauty of what is in this text if you didn't make the connection with the bigger picture story. In other words, we can find themes and ideas expressed in this closing section on the Mosaic Covenant that point toward even great realities yet to come. Hebrews 8 tells us that these things "serve as a copy and shadow of heavenly things . . ."

We can see what is yet to come.

Being God's People

This section helps us to see some of the aspects of what it means to be God's people. As God talks to Israel about His relationship with them and the promises connected to this covenant, it isn't hard to see a redemptive pattern. And that really is the point of Exodus in the first place: to use the redemption of Israel as a revelatory moment for God. So let's learn about God's relationship with Israel – all the while looking for the crescendo.

There are five themes or ideas that are important to note:

1) The Angel of the Lord

God's intention is to bless His people, but the first blessing is the provision of the angel of the Lord who, according to verse 20, will "guard you on the way and bring you to the place that I have prepared for you." The people of God are going to make a journey to the Promised Land, but they are not going to go alone. God is going to lead them, and He is going to do it through His "angel."

But this angel is not just a leader for the purposes of traveling. Verse 21 tells us that the angel will provide instruction which Israel should heed and obey. Rebellion against the angel would be viewed as disobedience to God since the text says "my name is in him." The angel would carry the authority of God. Verse 22 makes the connection between Yahweh and the angel even closer. In motivating the people to obey the angel, God says the following: "if you carefully obey his voice and do **all that I say** . . ." {emphasis mine}. In other words, the angel communicates the very words of God.

Further, we find in verse 23 that the angel will go before the people of Israel, and the result will be the blotting out of Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. So the angel of the Lord will somehow be involved in doing battle for the people of God. The angel will fight for the people.

Putting this together, you see that God is the means of everything in their future, and His angel is the agent by which He will accomplish his work. God is, in effect, saying, "I will be with you, right there as you travel toward the promised land, right there as you begin the conquest, right there as

you fight, right there as you settle in.”¹ The people of God would be marked by a divine enablement and presence in everything that they did. Nothing about their lives could be attributed to their own power. Their lives depended solely upon their relationship with God, and that relationship was mediated through the angel of the Lord.

Now this is not the first time that we have heard this kind of reference to an angel with divine qualities. When Moses encountered the burning bush in Exodus 3, the angel of the Lord was present:

“And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.” (Exodus 3:2, ESV)

What’s more, the angel is called “LORD” and “God” in Exodus 3:4, and his presence is holy ground in 3:5. When we covered this passage in October (“I AM WHO I AM”), I suggested that the angel of the Lord was the pre-incarnate Christ. In other words, it is likely that the angel of the Lord in Exodus 3 and 23 is the Son of God before He took on human form. I also think that the Son of God shows up in Joshua 5, after the days of Moses and as the people of God are about to enter the promised land. This is Joshua’s “burning bush” moment:

“When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” And he said, “No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, “What does my lord say to his servant?” And the commander of the LORD’s army said to Joshua, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.” (Joshua 5:13–15, ESV)

When you put all of this together, it gives us a picture of how God works and what it means to be His people. Let me highlight a few things in the “crescendo” category:

- The coming of Jesus as the personal presence of God, the teacher of God’s ways, and the deliverer fits perfectly into this model.
- Think of the radical implications of God’s presence being defined in the New Covenant as the personal presence of the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit which dwells in the hearts of every person.
- Central to the identity and hope of God’s people is the promise that God is leading, guiding and fighting for them.

If you are a follower of Jesus and you understand the beauty of grace, then you cannot help but see Jesus in this text. We are able to see what is yet to come.

¹ Doug Stuart, *Exodus – The New American Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 543.

2) Land

The second theme we need to see here is the connection between the people of God and a place for them to live. The concept of land or Promised Land is directly linked to the covenant that God made with His people. So a relationship with God is not just spiritual; it is spiritual *in the physical*.

God created a planet upon which He placed a man and woman. God originally placed them in the Garden of Eden, a place where God, Adam, and Eve lived. When they sinned, God banished them from a real place. And when God made His covenant with Abraham, it involved a promise of land – a place of blessing.

“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.” (Genesis 12:1–2, ESV)

Exodus 23 tells us that God is going to incrementally give the people of Israel their new land:

“I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.” (Exodus 23:29–31, ESV)

The people of Israel were going to receive this land, a place of blessing, a place to live, and a place where God would dwell. This land would become a part of their identity as a people because of the linkage between the promise and the presence of God and the land in which they lived.

Don’t miss the significance of this concept, because it is foundational. Being part of God’s people and having a relationship with the creator had a very important physical component to it. There was a land – a real land – in which they lived. God’s people lived out their relationship with their creator in both the spiritual and the physical realms. A relationship with Yahweh was both.

When we move next week into our study of the Tabernacle, this idea becomes even more important. The creator God is going to inhabit a place – a worship center – that will teach people about the real presence of God.

Why is this important? Let me give you a few things to consider:

- Many people have a wrong notion of what “heaven” is going to be like. They think of it in terms of a spiritual, out-of-body existence. But the Bible very clearly tells us that the crescendo looks at a physical “new heavens and a new earth” (see 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1). The eternal state is a physical reality. It is the promised land for all believers.
- The beauty of the future is that the glory of God would not be limited to only the Promised Land given to Israel, but that there would be a global display of the beauty of God. This hope is expressed in Habakkuk 2:14 – *“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”*

- Finally, there is a reminder here that being a part of God's people means that there is an important connection between the physical and the spiritual. Otherwise, why would physical death be a part of the equation on the earth? Or why would Jesus have become a man? The point here is simply that what we do physically, both positively and negatively, really matters. Physical disobedience and physical righteousness really matter. God is not worshipped theoretically or just spiritually. So don't fall into the age-old trap of thinking that the physical world doesn't matter.

Being a part of God's people means that we have a relationship with our creator that is as real and as tangible as the actual land between the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea.

3) Blessing

The next aspect of being a part of God's people is the connection to the blessing of God. The covenantal promise that God makes with His people involves their obedience and His blessing. In fact, there is a direct connection between the two – obedience brings blessing.

On their part, the Israelites were to be faithful to God. Verse 24 is very clear: *"you shall now bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces."* Israel was going to live in a land filled with idolatry, and the worship of these gods was central to the Canaanite worldview. Israel was entering a land in which the people believed that wind, rain, and fertility were controlled by various gods. Worshipping those gods was not only a part of the culture; it was viewed as vital to survival.

Israel was to be different. They were to serve Yahweh alone, and He would bless them. They were to be a unique people, trusting in Yahweh alone:

"You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. None shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you."
(Exodus 23:25–28, ESV)

The faithfulness of God's people would result in the blessing of God. It would take enormous faith to trust that Yahweh was truly more powerful than the other so-called gods, but if they were faithful to God, He would bless them in surprising ways.

God motivates His children with blessing and reward, and this method of motivation did not terminate in the Old Testament. It is a frequent theme in the New Testament as well. Let me give you a few examples:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," (Ephesians 1:3, ESV)

"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32, ESV)

“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32, ESV)

“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:4, ESV)

So the beauty of being part of God’s people is the gracious blessings which God supplies. God motivates obedience by promising us more than what sin offers. Obedience brings blessing.

4) Blood

Chapter 24 continues the completion of the covenant by turning the attention toward the response of the people. God has laid out the terms. Now it is time for the people to respond. In Exodus 24:3 the text tells us that Moses *“told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules.”* When the people heard this, they responded with one voice: *“All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do”* (Ex. 24:3). After hearing this response, Moses wrote down all the words, erected twelve pillars, and built an altar at the base of the mountain (24:4). What follows was meant to be a covenant ratification ceremony.

The people sacrificed animals to the Lord. They offered burnt offerings and peace offerings to the Lord (Ex. 24:5). Moses then took the blood from the sacrifices, and half of it he threw against the altar, symbolizing God’s demand for justice, and then he took the rest of the blood and sprinkled it on the people, symbolizing their purification and cleansing. All of this was to make the clear connection between their acceptance before God and substitutionary death. In order to live, something else must die.

Once again the people affirmed their covenant with Yahweh: *“All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient”* (Ex. 24:7). And then Moses sealed the moment with an important statement: *“Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words”* (Ex. 24:8). To be part of the people of God meant that you were “blood-covered.” It meant that in order for you to have a relationship with your creator, something had to die in your place.

The parallels here to the New Testament and the gospel are so clear. I can think of no better way to summarize this than the words of Hebrews 9.

“But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” (Hebrews 9:11–14, ESV)

And it was Jesus, on the eve before His crucifixion, who said, *“This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins”* (Matt. 26:28). To be God’s people means that you have been ransomed by blood.

5) Presence

The Covenant confirmation ends with a fellowship meal where Yahweh and seventy representatives from the people of Israel meet. Verses 9-11 are incredible to read:

"Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank." (Exodus 24:9–11, ESV)

The description for God here uses terms that come as close as the human language can to the beauty of what they are beholding. The Apostle John faced a similar dilemma when he tried to describe the one who is seated on the throne as having the appearance of *"jasper and carnelian and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald"* (Rev. 4:3).

What's more, the book of Revelation identifies a "marriage supper" that takes place in heaven, a fellowship meal between God and church (Rev. 19:9). But the most glorious aspect of all of this is the simple fact that they were in the presence of God. This will become a major theme for us as Moses moves further up the mountain, as he is enshrined in the glory of God for 40 days, and as he receives instructions for the first worship center which God will inhabit – the tabernacle.

This is the goal of all the covenants – the presence of God among His people. We see it here, and we'll see it more in the tabernacle. But it is a part of the coming of Jesus – "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . ." (John 1:14). And it reaches its crescendo in Revelation 21, when the loud voice from the throne declares, *"Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God"* (Rev. 21:3).

The Angel of the Lord, Land, Blessing, Blood, and Presence are all part of the basics of being part of God's people. In Exodus we see this theme softly, in Christ we see it grow louder, and it reaches a crescendo in Revelation.

This text invites those of you who have never become a part of God's people to come to your creator today through the blood of Jesus. It means recognizing God's holiness and your sinfulness, and then putting your faith in Jesus for forgiveness. You become a part of God's people through a relationship with his Son Jesus.

And for those of us who know Christ as our Savior, this text, helps us see what is yet to come. And when you see it in a text like Exodus or Revelation, it should make you bow in humble worship that God would be so gracious to call us, rescue us, redeem us, and covenant with us as His people.

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