

# God's Covenant: Blessings & Responsibilities

Pastor Chris Baker // 02.19.23 // Centralia FBC

## Introduction

Good morning, church! If you're in kindergarten through the third grade, you're dismissed to go to children's church at this time.

Our text for today is on page 63 of those black pew bibles in front of you. We're going to be in Exodus 19 reading verses 1-6.

## Read Exodus 19:1-6

## Pray

### Introduction - the God of Covenant

I finally gave up. It took almost six hours of sitting in a movie theatre mostly against my will, but I finally threw in the towel.

This is going to sound silly to you, but when I was in college it was important to me not to like the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Like many of you, I spent most of my late teens and early 20's with a medical condition called stupidity—but hear me out.

I was aware of the books. I was in high school when the first movie came out in 2001. The whole idea absolutely right up my alley. . . and therein lies the problem. Part of my diagnosed stupidity caused me to think I needed to appear to be cool. And I already loved all the nerdy stuff. Star Wars, Star Trek, comic books, Voltron, video games, I was into all of it. And so when Lord of the Rings got so popular, something in me caused me to resist. I already do all the nerdy stuff, I can't do this one, too.

The Return of the King came out when I was in college, that's the third movie in the trilogy for those of you who are still holdouts, and we had an opportunity that only people in college ever had.

Somebody knew somebody and so we were going to go watch a late showing of a movie I don't even remember. It was the last movie of the night, and then *after* the theatre closed, the worker was going to keep it open for our group of about 15-people and we were going to watch Return of the King. I'm sure Regal Cinemas had no idea this was happening, it probably wasn't legal, and none of that ever crossed my mind. I just went because most of my friends were going. I rather loudly lied about thinking the Lord of the Rings movies were dumb.

Return of the King runs for 3 hours and 20 minutes in case you were curious. Between the first movie, the time we spent waiting for the theatre to close, and then watching the second one we were there around

seven hours. But about an hour into Return of the King, I quit. I loved it and I only knew about 10% of what was going on.

This was the third movie in a series, so there were roughly 7 hours of things I didn't know about. Over the next few weeks I rented the first two movies and watched them and I thought the third one was even better after that. It made more sense when I had the context.

The beginning of Exodus 19 gives us the context for the Law. Understanding this chapter is vital for understanding the whole unfolding story of the Bible. The Bible is 66 books written by dozens of authors over about 1500 years, but it tells one story. The Law is a central piece in understanding that story. You can love the Bible and not fully grasp it. You can live as a Christian for a long time and only have a vague concept of what God's Law given at Mt. Sinai means. But once you understand it, you'll love God more and you'll understand how to lead a life that glorifies Him even more deeply.

Verse 1 parks us at basecamp. We talked about that last week. This is the spot where we're going to camp for 11 months, and these 11 months are a time period Israel will never forget.

The events of the Bible up until this point took about 2600 years and covered 58 chapters. Israel is going to wander the wilderness for 38 years on the other side of these 11 months. We're only told about a small portion of those 38 years. But these 11 months occupy the bulk of three entire books of the Bible. From Exodus 19 all through Leviticus to Numbers chapter 10 are spent right here.

Church, God is up to something big right here. He's entering into a covenant with the people of Israel. Here in chapter 19, He previews it and prepares His people to receive it.

A covenant is a promise and it was a very serious matter in the world of the Israelites. Today, when two countries sign a treaty they make a big deal out of it. It's a photo op, they use fancy pens, all that stuff. In Israel's world, it was a little more graphic. The custom would have been to take an animal, like a calf, kill it, cut it in half, and the parties entering into the covenant would walk between it. The idea is that if you break the covenant, you expect to end up like the animal. It's a more potent version of cross my heart and hope to die. You see it in Genesis 15 and Jeremiah 34, among other places.

Entering a covenant, especially a covenant with God Himself, is a serious matter. Yet, we find out very early that God is a God of covenant.

He enters a covenant with Adam. You have the garden, eat anything you want—just don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam breaks the covenant. God actually makes another covenant with Adam, Eve, and the serpent in Genesis 3. It's where God makes His first gospel promise in Genesis 3:15. Part of the covenant there is that God will fix what Adam and Eve just destroyed.

Later, God makes a covenant with Noah in Genesis 9. After the flood God promised that He would never again send a worldwide flood to destroy the earth as an act of His divine judgment for sin.

He covenants with Abraham in Genesis 15. Part of that covenant stated that Abraham's descendants would become resident aliens for 400 years in a land that turned out to be Egypt. Then God would rescue them, so Moses and the Israelites arriving at Sinai in Exodus 19 to receive this new covenant are a direct result of God's covenant from Genesis 15.

God enters into a covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7. Then in Luke 22, Jesus talks about a new covenant established in His blood. We'll visibly remember that covenant together here in just a little bit.

God is a God of covenant, and Exodus 19 is set up specifically to prepare Israel to understand this covenant before they enter it.

There is no fine print in God's covenant. In 1996, Pepsi launched an ad campaign where their slogan was 'drink Pepsi, get stuff.' You'd collect points from the packaging and according to the commercial, you could redeem them for clothes, sunglasses, and stuff like that. But one commercial—that was intended to be a joke—stated that if you collected 7 million Pepsi points you'd get a \$37 million Harrier jump jet.

A man named John Leonard took them seriously. He spent \$700,008.50 to collect the points, turned them in to Pepsi, who promptly told him to buzz off. He sued, the case went all the way to the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, but Leonard lost. Apparently, there was some fine print in the Pepsi ad, either real or implied that he missed.

There's no fine print when it comes to God's covenant. These six verses give us a clear lens through which to interpret God's covenant and through that, the rest scripture.

The first thing we see is that God's covenant begins with grace.

### **God's Covenant Begins with Grace**

There are five truths that illustrate grace to us in verses three and four. *First* is that Moses goes up to God. God invites Moses to Him. We mentioned Adam & Eve earlier. They were kicked out of the presence of God. They had the most intimate relationship with God that any created being has ever had. They walked with God in the cool of the evening and yet their sin caused them to be separated from the presence of God.

Humanity will never have that kind of relationship with God again until eternity—yet we get these little glimpses, these little reminders of God calling us back. God calls Moses into His presence and that's going to be a theme. From chapter 19 through chapter 34, Moses goes up the mountain somewhere around a dozen times. Sometimes it's explicitly stated, others are just implied so you can't really get an exact count. But either way, Moses did some hiking.

God calls Moses into His presence and second, He gives Him a reminder.

"This is what you must say and explain", is what God tells Moses, but the information He gives isn't new. They had all lived through the things God describes. Reminders are important and they're present all over Scripture. God pauses to look back. We'll pause to look back at Jesus's sacrifice when we celebrate

the Lord's Supper later. We sang a reminder earlier when we sang I will trust my Savior Jesus. We can trust Him because He has proven trustworthy.

*I will trust my saviour Jesus*

*Trust Him when my strength is small*

*For I know the shield of Jesus*

*Is the safest place of all*

I'm thankful for that awesome Australian ministry CityAlight who published that song. They're the worship ministry in their local church over there and yet they're publishing hymns that are being sang all over the world. It's awesome to see.

God reminds Israel He's trustworthy.

Specifically, He reminds them of two things. The third and fourth truths we need to see in these two verses.

Third, look at it in verse 4: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. The Egyptians rejected God, they fought against Him, and He utterly destroyed them. God poured out plague-after-plague on them, He made them so miserable that they basically paid Israel to leave, and then He wiped out their army in the Red Sea.

This text is all about what God has done. God is the star of the story, that's the fourth truth. God is the author and the finisher, God is the hero, God is the one who wiped out Egypt and rescued Israel.

They needed this reminder and we do, too. Because there are a couple of ways we can misunderstand the covenant God is about to enter into, and if we misunderstand this covenant we can misunderstand the gospel.

The first one is to think we've earned it.

We've encountered two people groups so far in the Exodus account, right? The Egyptians on one hand. And the Israelites on the other. I'm going to describe one of them to you. . . tell me if you can guess who I'm describing.

This people group heard the word of the Lord as shared to them by Moses. They knew God warned them that things would go badly for them if they disobeyed. They saw that God had power over nature, over animals, and over life and death. They knew God was able to either provide food for them or cut off food so they'd live in famine. Yet, time-after-time they disobeyed Him.

Who's that? Both! When God says remember Egypt, He's not saying gosh you sure are better than those losers. You could say Israel was just as disobedient as Egypt! They constantly grumble against God.

Nowhere in this text does it celebrate how good Israel was. And church, we need to hear that. Israel did nothing to earn God's favor. God saved Israel despite their performance, not because of it.

But it won't take long after God gives the Law, the terms of this new covenant, in the ensuing chapters for Israel to reduce it to an achievement list. I do all these things, so I must be holy! I must deserve God's grace.

And church, those of us who sit in this room every week desperately need to hear that because we, too, are susceptible to thinking we've earned God's grace. Nothing we did before our salvation and nothing we have done since earn us anything in the sight of God. God did not foresee any goodness in us, He didn't choose us because He knew we'd choose Him, He chose us, He rescued us on eagles' wings according to the text, because He's good—not because we are.

It doesn't matter how much Scripture we memorize, how long we've taught a Sunday school class, how many hungry people we've fed, we don't earn God's grace. Those are good things, and we'll talk about their place in just a minute, but they don't earn us anything in God's eyes. God tells Moses, 'you have seen what I did.'

Church, the biggest problem Israel is going to face is keeping God's command outwardly without letting it take hold of their heart. They had a form of outward obedience without any heart change, so much so that when Jesus showed up He called the best among them whitewashed tombs. You look good on the outside, but you're rotten inside. The first danger of misunderstanding God's covenant is that we think it's a to-do list. It's not.

The second danger is the opposite. We don't think we're too good to need God's grace, we think we're so bad we're beyond it.

I can't state this often enough: no one under the sound of my voice is beyond God's redemption. As long as there is breath in your lungs, God is being patient with you. 2 Peter tell us that patience is because He does not want you to perish but to come to repentance.

Moses is exhibit A that you're not too far gone for God's grace. Moses is a murderer who left his people and ran from God for 40 years. When God called Moses, he didn't want to go. He wanted anyone else in the world. Take Jimmy Johnson, take Tommy Thompson, take my brother Aaron. Anyone but me. Moses did some awesome things, he led Israel out of Egypt—but Scripture is explicitly clear that Moses is a fatally flawed savior. He's inadequate. So inadequate, so flawed that he won't even get to go into the Promised Land.

I know some of you are here. You've heard the gospel. You know you need the gospel. But somewhere in the dark corners of your heart you're unconvinced that it will work for you. Everyone in your life has told you that you're not enough, so why would you be enough for God? Hear me today, I beg of you. God put you in a place right now to hear His gospel. He didn't do that on accident. He wants you, yes even you, to come to repentance. He wants you to have everlasting life.

Paul wrote in Romans 10:

***9 If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.***

I suspect we have folks in both camps here today who need to do just that. Some of you have been around church for a long time and you've tried to live your walk with God like it's a set of rules. You've probably fooled most of us. Maybe you've even fooled yourself. Or on the other side you're just realizing today, right now, that God truly will accept you despite your past.

All of us need rescue. We've all sinned against God and find ourselves in our own personal Egypt—slavery to sin.

The good news is that not only does God's covenant begin with grace, but he takes the first step. That's the fourth thing. Look at the end of verse 4: *I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*

This is the first time we see this eagles' wings imagery in Scripture. It shows up again in Deuteronomy 32; Isaiah 40; and in Revelation 12 and it's always a reminder that God does something we can't do. We can't swoop in and lift ourselves out of our sin.

God has to do that for us, and just as He did it through a miracle for the Israelites, He offers it to you and I. The fourth truth is that God does what we can't to bring about our rescue.

(GOSPEL)

We have sinned and fallen short of the glory of a righteous God. We've earned His wrath, but instead of pouring out His wrath on us here is what God did. He stood in our place.

Jesus Christ came from heaven as fully God and fully man. He died on the cross having lived a perfect sinless life, bore then in His body the full penalty of our sins, was raised from the dead. Those who repent of sin and place their faith in the perfect work of Christ can and will be saved. That is how God's people enter into covenant with Him today.

But that covenant is not a one-time transaction. It's an ongoing relationship. It was the same for Israel. Look at verse 5:

*5 Now if you will carefully listen to me and keep my covenant, you will be my own possession out of all the peoples, although the whole earth is mine, 6 and you will be my kingdom of priests and my holy nation.' These are the words that you are to say to the Israelites."*

God's covenant includes the blessing of responsibility.

### **God's Covenant Includes the Blessing of Responsibility**

God's law, what the next several dozen chapters of Scripture cover, is not a set of rules that the kindergarten teacher plasters on the wall. They're an expression of grace.

It's easy to read this and think there's a catch, right? God is not running an infomercial trying to sell you a sham wow. This is not, 'but wait, there's more.' I concede it can sound like that. At first glance, this can sound like an if then relationship. If you obey, then I'll be your God. If not, you're on your own.

But remember, we have to read this in its context. God just told Moses we can't save ourselves in verses 3-4. One preacher said it's impossible to interpret Moses saying the opposite in verse 5 unless you thinking Moses was the biggest dithering idiot of all time. (Ligon Duncan)

How then, do we read this? We need to recognize every covenant has responsibilities. There is no relationship in your life where you have no responsibility. Your spouse, your children, your neighbors, your boss, your employees. All relationships come with responsibilities.

And in God's economy, the way things work when God is ordering your life, responsibilities are blessings. Think about children. If you want a relationship where you get only joy and have no obligations, where it's all fun all the time and there is not stress—then don't have kids!

They're the absolute greatest blessing you're ever going to experience on this side of eternity. But there are responsibilities at every stage—trust me, we've got just about every stage living in our house right now.

Relationships come with responsibilities. God keeps His, so if we're truly in this covenant, He is going to empower us to keep ours.

Israel is called three things in these verses. God's special possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. God does the saving, that's the blessing. And the responsibilities that come alongside it are spelled out here, too.

God is not saying keep My law and in return I will make you these things. Church, He's declaring these things to be true of Israel *because* they are His, not because they are now good.

Remember everything that happened in these last few chapters? Israel has been a mess. God already saved them—and they're still a mess. Again, these aren't things Israel does to earn their salvation or to keep themselves saved. But this is their reality now that they are. God is shaping them to be a special possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. They already are those things, they're just growing into them.

I've gotten to coach our sixth grader's basketball team for the last three seasons and we ordered them new jerseys a couple of years ago. We knew we wanted them to last until middle school, so we ordered them kind of big. That first year, we looked like the Centralia Trash Panthers—they hung off some of these little girls like hefty bags. But they had their number and they had their name. Now, two years down the road, same kid, same jersey, and they've grown into themselves.

Israel is about to go on that same journey. How? How do they grow to be what God has already made them? That's everything we seen Exodus 20, Leviticus, and Numbers 1-10. The terms of the covenant written out for us right there.



Two big things we need to catch here—because these things are true of the church today. God’s people in the Old Testament are the Israelites who are saved by grace through faith. God’s people today are the Church—anyone of any tribe, tongue, or nation saved by grace through faith.

So if we belong to Him . . . then we belong to Him. We are a treasured possession, another translation puts it. He owns the whole earth, but we are His treasured possession.

God is saying everything in the world is mine, but I have chosen to rejoice over you, to love you, to delight in you in a special way. But not just a special possession, there’s a special purpose, too. We find that in those last two phrases.

We are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Old Testament priests were chosen by God, not self-appointed; and they were chosen for a purpose: to serve God with their lives by offering up sacrifices. The priests were a picture, a preview, of Jesus. His sacrifice rendered all other sacrifices useless.

Hebrews 4 explains it well:

**14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.**

We go directly to God through Jesus now with no other human standing in our place.

So if the entire nation is to be a priest, what does that mean. Well, a priest intercedes for people.

Church, this is the foundation for missions—the foundation for even the Great Commission—right here in the Old Testament prior to God giving the Law. Remember, 66 books, 1 story.

A whole kingdom of priests, a nation of priests, has to intercede for other nations. That’s the Biblical mandate for Missions.

Peter grabs hold of this idea on the New Testament, in fact, he quotes this passage.

1 Peter 2:9 **But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.**

What are we called into this covenant to do? To proclaim the praises of the God who saves us. The one who rescued us from slavery sin. Lifted us out of death on the wings of eagles, to use the imagery of the text.

The blessing of salvation comes with the responsibility to follow God’s law and proclaim His praises as a kingdom of priests.



Church, this chapter is crucial to understand the relationship between law and grace, between faith and works. I hope our time together helps you put those two ideas together in a clearer way this morning.

If you're here and you belong to Jesus—thank God that He saved you in spite of yourself. Thank God that He is gracious with you when you join Israel in grumbling. Thank God that He has graciously allowed you to enter into this relationship where you get to enjoy His blessings in your life and proclaim His goodness to others. And when you leave this place, get out there and do it.

Let's pray.