

# God's Covenant on God's Terms

Pastor Chris Baker //02.26.23 // Centralia FBC

## Introduction

Good morning, church! Our text today comes from Exodus 19, it can be found on page 63 of the black pew bibles in front of you.

Most Sundays, we dismiss our kindergarten through third graders right now for children's church. On the fourth Sunday we all stay together and I always like to take just a minute to talk about why.

Kids—we think a lot of you. You're not the church of tomorrow. You matter to God and to us right now. And we want you to know and to trust God's Word. One of the things I love so much about the Bible is that even though it's so deep that there are things in it you'll never fully understand no matter how old you are, it's still clear enough that any of you whether you're in high school or you're five years old you can understand God's Word enough to know how to live a life that glorifies Him.

So today, we're all going to open up God's Word together and see what it says. Kids, there are some sermon note sheets floating around. I encourage you to take one and write down some things as we go. If I say something you don't understand, write it down and ask your parents or your grandparents or whoever you came here with what it means after you leave, can you do that for me?

Ok, Let's read together from Exodus 19:7-15.

## Read

## Pray

## Introduction

This section of Exodus 19 mirrors a formal treaty agreement. Our God is a covenant-making God and this extended section of Scripture from Exodus 19 through Numbers 10 unfolds the terms of God's covenant for us.

We saw last week that the covenant begins with God and that it is a covenant of grace. What we see in today's text is that God Himself dictates the terms of the covenant.

God dictates what His relationship with Mankind will be and His terms are non-negotiable. God's covenant must be embraced, God's covenant must be honored, and God's covenant must be mediated. These are truths Israel learns and when we look back on them with the whole counsel of Scripture in mind—when we look back at them through the lens of Christ's finished work on the cross, we're going to see how these truths take on an even fuller meaning for you and I today.

First, God shows that His covenant must be embraced. Look with me at verse 7:

### **God's Covenant Must be Embraced (vv.7-9)**

*7 After Moses came back, he summoned the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. 8 Then all the people responded together, "We will do all that the Lord has spoken." So Moses brought the people's words back to the Lord.*

*9 The Lord said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear when I speak with you and will always believe you."*

Moses lives the life of a ping pong ball in this chapter. He goes up the mountain and hears from God and comes down the mountain to talk to Israel and he comes back down again. It takes about four hours to hike to the summit of Mt. Sinai from the spot where most think this part of Exodus takes place. In all that coming and going, we learn that God's covenant must be embraced both by responding and by believing.

In verses 1-6, God gave Moses the terms of the covenant. I carried you out of Egypt on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now, listen to me, keep my covenant and you will be my own special possession, even though all earth is mine, you will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

That's the framework for God's relationship with His people and we talked last week about how we should treat that covenant not like the terms and conditions when we download Candy Crush, but like something much heavier.

Moses laid out this summary of the covenant with Israel and then what happened? All the people responded together, "We're in." Let's do this. The first thing God's covenant requires a response.

God doesn't force people into covenant with Him. He didn't do it 3,500 years ago at Sinai and He doesn't do it today. Yes, God is sovereign over salvation. Yes, Hebrews 12 calls Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. A lot of us memorized that verse in the King James Version that calls Him the author and finisher of our faith. That's true.

It's also true that God doesn't bring about our salvation based on our goodness. Just like Israel had no power to earn their own freedom, our goodness neither earns nor sustains our salvation. In fact, the Bible teaches us that none of us are good enough to even seek out salvation on our own unless God acts. Paul writes:

Romans 3:10b-12

***There is no one righteous, not even one.***

***There is no one who understands;***

***there is no one who seeks God.***

***All have turned away;***

***all alike have become worthless.***

***There is no one who does what is good,***

***not even one.***

There is no element of salvation that is based on our goodness. I want to be really clear on that. God initiates our salvation. We learn in Ephesians 1 that He chose us in Him before foundation of the world and in Ephesians 2 that we are saved by grace through faith not from ourselves so that no one can boast. Those things are true and at the same time when God, through His Holy Spirit brings our dead heart to life we are responsible to respond.

Did God need Moses to go down the mountain to find out Israel's response? No. Did God need Moses to come back up the mountain to tell Him? No. God already knew. God knows everything—or as one pastor I know always puts it, 'did it ever occur to you that nothing ever occurred to God?'

God knew. Yet, God still required their response. God presented Israel with the terms of the covenant and expected them to respond. And they did.

Just like Israel had to respond to the covenant terms offered by God, you and I today are required to accept the terms of the covenant God offers to us. We're under a different covenant than they were. Theirs was meant to point to ours. Theirs was *symbolized* by the blood of a sacrificed animal, ours was *secured* by the blood of Jesus Christ Himself.

Our sin earns us death. But God, instead of giving us that death has promised to substitute Christ's death for our own if we'll repent.

***2 Peter 3:9 The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.***

Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change in behavior. It means to turn away. If we don't turn away from our sin and turn to God, then we will perish.

God's covenant must be embraced first by repentance, but also by belief. Look at what God tells Moses after he reports back the Israelites' response:

*I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear when I speak with you and will always believe you."*

I need to be as clear as I can be here, I've been praying that I can teach this passage without being confusing. You're saved, you belong to God, as soon as you repent of your sins and place your faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. But salvation is not a one-time transaction that stops right there.

The people agreed to the covenant, but God goes on to tell Moses that He was going to reveal Himself to them in such a way that they would always believe.

Salvation is not a moment you remember, it's a relationship you live out for the rest of your days.

Moses is acting as God's ambassador to the people here and God says in verse 9 that He's going to come near to the people in a way He never has before, He says He's doing it so that they may believe. Folks, if Israel doesn't believe in God by this point I don't know what to do for them.

It's impossible that they don't believe God exists, but belief that God exists and belief that God is God are two different things. James writes that the demons even believe. So we're not going for belief that God exists, we're talking about something deeper. Something that effects every aspect of your life.

God's covenant must be embraced by believing in a way that causes change. The two types of belief can be illustrated by the way you treat your car...hear me out.

There are two types of people in this room today, and I really don't think there's an in-between when it comes to this. If you are driving and you notice the little orange 'check engine' light come on in your car. How do you respond? A. This is a problem and we're going straight to the mechanic right now. B. Eh, that just means there might be a problem down the road.

Letter A is belief that causes change. That's the kind of belief that John wrote a gospel to try and cause. John tells us why he wrote his gospel at the end of the book. John 20:30-31

**30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

The belief that is as sign of eternal life is a belief that changes the way you live your life right now and that forces the question, church, have you embraced the covenant God offers?

This is God's covenant on God's terms and it requires you to embrace by responding and that response leads to a life characterized by a belief that changes your actions, that changes your affections, that changes your attitudes.

One pastor put it this way *the gospel shouldn't just be a ticket to heaven but the core of our entire lives.* (JD Greear, *Gospel: Recovering the Power that Made Christianity Revolutionary*, p.21)

Most of you have heard the gospel before. One of my fears as a pastor is that coming from a good place where we desire to see people saved, we focus more on the decision than the dedication. According to the Bible, a response that doesn't lead to a life marked by belief isn't salvation at all.

How many testimonies have you heard of people who walked an aisle or spent their whole life in church week after week hearing the Bible taught but never believed in such a way that their life was changed. Church, that is a scary thing. Paul tells the church at Corinth in 1 Cor. 11 to examine themselves.

Church, do you believe in a way that leads to life?

Belief that leads to life is illustrated for us in verses 10-13 where we learn that God's covenant must be honored. God's covenant must be embraced and it must be honored.

### **God's Covenant Must be Honored (vv. 10-13)**

*10 and the Lord told Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. They must wash their clothes 11 and be prepared by the third day, for on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. 12 Put boundaries for the people all around the mountain and say: Be careful that you don't go up on the mountain or touch its base. Anyone who touches the mountain must be put to death. 13 No hand may touch him; instead he will be stoned or shot with arrows and not live, whether animal or human. When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may go up the mountain."*

Here we get a change in the way God is dealing with His people. He had been meeting with Moses, but now He's going to address the nation. Something big is happening, church. Moses has been going up and down the mountain, but now God says I'm coming down. Prepare yourself to be in the presence of the Lord. Consecrate in verse 10 means to set apart. Set yourself apart, get yourself ready, because God is coming to you and He gives instructions.

Verse 10, wash their clothes. Yes, kids. The Bible says to wash your own laundry and the sooner you learn, the more Godly everyone in your household will be. . . Ok, maybe that's not the point of the text.

But there is a point to the steps God tells them to take. Make yourself clean. Prepare for the third day, set boundaries around the mountain.

We've all scrambled because company is coming over, right? A lot of you have been in our home, we'd love to have more of you in our home. I'll be honest, we try to be pretty real with folks and our house usually isn't as clean as we'd like it to be. There are nine of us living in it, after all. Monika is incredibly organized, she's a fantastic housekeeper, but the rest of us often overwhelm her.

But if you do come over, and the house appears to be cleaner than you'd expect it to be just recognize that I cannot take responsibility for what happens to you if you open any closed doors. Because it's likely that we've taken everything and piled it in one room. And if you open that one door, you'll be consumed by an avalanche of legos, and ponytail holders and it'll be the worst way anyone has ever died.

That's not the type of cleanup God is after.

God isn't telling Israel to hide their junk. Something more significant is going on here. He's reminding them that, while He's intimate enough to be in relationship with them, He remains holy on a level they cannot comprehend. And that's a problem for Israel, because they are unclean.

God is holy that sinful humanity can't even fully come into His presence.

Here's a big-picture Biblical principle that this chapter illustrates for us again. Sin cannot stand in the presence of holiness.

If that which is holy comes into contact with anything that is unclean and alive, that living thing is going to die. God told Adam and Eve in the garden: *you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die.* (Genesis 2:17)

Adam and Eve would no longer be clean. Now, in God's grace they didn't die that day, but Romans 5 tells us sin entered the world that day and the penalty for sin is death.

So in Exodus 19, the people have to be clean in order to come into God's presence. It's a physical reminder of a spiritual truth. Nothing unclean, nothing sinful can come into God's presence. If it does, it dies. That's why no one can go up the mountain. If you go into God's presence with sin, you'll be destroyed. You won't be able to handle it. That's how holy God is.

This is a huge moment, so God gives them time to prepare. He's not coming today, He's coming in three days. And over those three days, their focus was to be on God Himself—that's why there's a pause put on the husband and wife's intimate relationship in verse 15. He wants their focus solely on Him.

God's covenant is to be honored with our entire lives, church. Because God is intimate, we run the risk treating our relationship with Him entirely too flippantly.

God broke into human history and sacrificed His only begotten Son to win our salvation. He didn't do that to earn one hour a week out of your busy schedule. This three day period was a time for Israel to clean house, spiritually speaking. To prepare themselves to be in the presence of God.

Do you realize, church, that you get to be in the presence of God in a way that these people could only dream about? Mt. Sinai becomes a stand-in for the temple in the ensuing chapters. We see the first glimpse of that here and we'll unpack it more in the weeks ahead.

In the center of the temple Solomon will build later in the Old Testament was the Holy Place, the place where God's Spirit resided. It's where the high priest would go on the day of atonement once a year to offer a sacrifice for the forgiveness of Israel's sins. No one else could go in there, otherwise they'd die because their sin could not stand in the presence of a Holy God.

Church, you have the presence of God alive within you through His Holy Spirit. Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:16

***Don't you yourselves know that you are God's temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you?***

The temple of God isn't in Jerusalem. The temple of God isn't this building. I know some of us grew up calling this God's house and please, I don't mean this in as an affront, but please don't think this is God's house. God doesn't dwell in a house, God dwells in His people.

That truth has two implications we need to understand based on the passage we're studying. First, what a heartbreak it is when God's people, indwelt by His Holy Spirit fall into sin. Church, sin is serious. Israel had to clean up its spiritual house to get a visit from God. You have God living in you, so know that the sin you commit is in the presence of a Holy God.

Sinfulness reduces us to atheism, do you realize that? James tells us our own evil desire causes us to sin. We'd all like to think that none of us would give in to sin if God were in the room with us, wouldn't we? If we live like we can hide something from God, then we're living as functional atheists.

Church, if this passage causes us to do nothing else, let it cause us to resolve like Israel during these three days to eradicate the uncleanness in us. Puritan John Owen famously wrote, ***"Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you."***

How can you consciously kill the sin in your life this week?

The second thing this truth implies for us is that we can, even though we're sinful, come into the presence of God. If the Holy Spirit—God Himself—is alive in us, then it must mean we can somehow do what Israel couldn't. We can come into God's presence in some way.

That becomes a little clearer in verse 14:

### **God's Covenant Must be Mediated (vv. 14-15)**

*14 Then Moses came down from the mountain to the people and consecrated them, and they washed their clothes.*

Israel had Moses to stand in their place, to plead their case before God. We have one much better than Moses.

This is where we see the covenant must be mediated. Turn with me to Hebrews 12, it's on page 1069 in the black pew Bibles. The covenant must be mediated. Someone has to stand between God and His people. But the difference between you and I and the Israelites in Exodus 19 is that we have a better mediator. We have THE mediator, Jesus Christ.

*Look at what the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 12:18, 'For you have not come to what could be touched, to a blazing fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm, 19 to the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of words. Those who heard it begged that not another word be spoken to them, 20 for they could not bear what was commanded: If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned. 21 The appearance was so terrifying that Moses said, I am trembling with fear. 22 Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels, a festive gathering, 23 to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to a Judge, who is God of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect,*

We move from Mt. Sinai in Exodus to Mt. Zion, where we'll see Jesus standing as the triumphant Lamb over in Revelation 14, and where we read here in Hebrews that we'll stand along with the angels.



Think with me for a minute about what happens in the Bible when angels come to visit people? Somewhere along the line, we developed the idea that babies are half-naked angels with wings. The bible doesn't give us much of a description—but we do know they were fear-inducing. Generally, an angel's first words are don't be afraid. Humanity falls on its face in the presence of angels. . .but not in the vision the author of Hebrews is pointing us to.

No, you're there in the in party with them in the city of God. That's what verse 22 says.

What's the difference? Look at Verse 24, "and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the blood of Abel."

The difference between Sinai and Zion is that now you have been united to the Mediator. Moses the mediator failed all the time. He was a great man, but a sinner.

Our Mediator is Jesus Christ. He is perfect in every way. He never failed. And He stands in our place.

We had to have someone to be what we can't be. Because, remember, our sinfulness would cause us to be destroyed in the presence of God's holiness. But God no longer looks on our sinfulness, He looks at us and sees the righteousness of our mediator.

*2 Corinthians 5:21 - He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

When we read this Old Testament passage with New Covenant eyes, we see how Moses and Israel are acting out our salvation. God has dealt generously with us, church.

He has offered us a covenant. We don't define the terms of the covenant. He does that. And they're non-negotiable. You embrace that covenant by responding to it through repentance, honoring it with every part of your life, and looking to Jesus as your mediator who sustains you even in your failure.

When you do that, you'll be reminded everyday of God's covenant grace toward you. Let's pray.