

The First Commandment

Chapter 2: The Giving of the Law

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Before we turn our attention to the Ten Commandments we should examine the unique circumstances in which the law was given. This will involve a brief consideration of Exodus 19. This chapter consists of two major sections. The first section tells of Israel's arrival at Sinai and God's covenant with Israel (19:1-9). The second section describes the God-given preparations for receiving the law (19:10-25). There are a number of reasons why an understanding of this narrative is important. (1) It tells us a great deal about the Mosaic covenant. This "covenant of law" has been grossly misunderstood by evangelicals. (2) It informs us about the relationship between grace and law. (3) It gives us important information about Israel's role as a covenant people in a pagan world. (4) The section on the preparation for receiving the law focuses our attention on the awesome, majestic holiness of Yahweh and His law.

1. The Law as a Covenant

In chapter 19 we have the beginning of the establishment of the Mosaic covenant or the covenant of law. There are a number of things to note regarding this covenant. First, note that the Mosaic covenant does not set aside or replace earlier covenants (e.g., the covenant of promise to Abraham) but rather builds upon their foundation.¹ The whole miraculous exodus experience and the covenant made at Sinai is founded upon Israel's prior status as God's covenant people. The story of Israel's deliverance begins with God hearing the groans of His oppressed people and remembering "His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (2:24). Indeed, there is an emphasis on Israel's special elect status throughout the book of Exodus. God identifies Israel as "My people" (3:7, 10; 5:1; 7:4, 16; 8:1, 20-22; 9:1, 13, 17; 10:3-4) and "My son, My firstborn" (4:22-23). Moreover, God repeatedly identifies Himself as the covenant God. Jehovah instructs Moses to say to "the children of Israel": "The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you" (3:15). Because God made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he is obligated to deliver their children from bondage in Egypt and restore them to the promised land (6:3-5). God's promise of deliverance is rooted in the phrase "I have remembered My covenant" (6:5). "This suggests that for Exodus the covenant at Sinai is a specific covenant within the context of the Abrahamic covenant. Other Old Testament texts also suggest that the covenant at Sinai...has been drawn into the same orbit as

¹The classical dispensational view is set forth in the old Scofield reference Bible (p. 20). C. I. Scofield writes, "The Dispensation of Promise ended when Israel rashly accepted the law Ex. xix. 8." Oswald T. Allis points out the absurdity of Scofield's position. He writes, "The word 'rashly' is startlingly significant. It implies either that Israel without due consideration forsook a more favorable for a less favorable status, or that, in accepting the more favorable one, the people did not weigh sufficiently the conditions attached to it, did not realize their utter inability to perform it" (*Prophecy and the Church* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed (1945, 47)], p. 32). He adds, "Scofield declares that the law 'was not imposed until it had been proposed and voluntarily accepted' (RB, p. 93). We cannot but wonder whether Dispensationalists seriously face this gracious offer of God on the ground—there was no other—that they did not wish to 'obey' His voice" (*Ibid.*, p. 293).

the covenant with Abraham, and hence it too has a fundamentally promissory character (32:13; Lev. 26:42-45; Dt. 4:31; 9:27; Jdg. 2:1; cf. 1 Sam. 12:22; Ps. 105:8-11; 106:45).”² “God renews an ancient commitment to his people by the covenant of Moses. The law serves only as a single mode of administering the covenant of redemption. Originally established under Adam, confirmed under Noah and Abraham, the covenantal relationship renewed under Moses cannot disturb God’s ongoing commitment by its emphasis on the legal dimension of the covenant relationship.”³

When we examine the gracious promises to Abraham and compare them to what God accomplished under Moses’ leadership at the beginning of the Mosaic covenant, it is clear that the covenant under Moses was a continuation and partial fulfillment (at least in an external provisional manner) of God’s covenant with Abraham. When the LORD ordered Abram to move to the land of Canaan, He promised, “I will make you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). It was in the wilderness that Israel did indeed become a great nation. This was due to the great increase in population during their sojourn in Egypt, the large number of Egyptians that joined themselves to the sons of Israel and Israel’s God, and their organization under Moses. At Sinai, Israel covenanted with Jehovah as a nation. God also promised Abraham all the land of Canaan (Gen. 17:8). Moses took the people to the border of the promised land and his successor Joshua took the nation into the land as a conquering army. But what about the promise that Abraham would be a blessing to all the nations (Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4)? This promise was also partially fulfilled in that: (a) The Mosaic laws set forth the religious antithesis between Israel and all other nations. (b) The Mosaic law order was to serve as a witness to all the nations (Dt. 4:6-8). (c) The ceremonial cultis set before the nations the necessity of a blood sacrifice for atonement. Jesus Christ was therefore exhibited in the Mosaic law. (d) The Mosaic covenant set the stage for the Davidic promise and the coming of the Messiah. (e) The deliverance of Israel from Egypt is the great redemptive event of the Old Testament and the type of Jesus’ redemption of His people. (f) Moses himself was the most significant type of the coming Savior (the prophet, priest and king). All of this proves that the Mosaic covenant was part of the Old Testament administration of the covenant of grace.

Much confusion has arisen regarding the Mosaic covenant because the “covenant of law” is sometimes mistakenly equated with the Jewish-rabbinical perversion of the law as a means to obtain eternal life. The old traditional form of dispensationalism held to a version of this false view. In addition, some professing Christians have confused the “covenant of works” with the “covenant of law.” The covenant of works refers to God’s requirement of a perfect obedience on the part of Adam in the garden before he could be granted eternal life. The “covenant of works” was a test given to man before the fall, before the guilt and pollution of sin. The “covenant of

²Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 209.

³O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), p. 172. Robertson adds: “Not only did the covenant of law not disannul the covenant of promise; more specifically, it did not offer a temporary alternative to the covenant of promise. This particular perspective is often overlooked. It is sometimes assumed that the covenant of law temporarily replaced the covenant of promise, or somehow ran alongside it as an alternative method of man’s salvation. The covenant of law often has been considered as a self-contained unit which served as another basis for determining the relation of Israel to God in the period between the Abrahamic covenant and the coming of Christ. In this scheme, the covenant of promise is treated as though it had been set aside or made secondary for a period, although not ‘disannulled.’ However, the covenant of promise made with Abraham always has been in effect from the day of its inauguration until the present. The coming of the law did not suspend the Abrahamic covenant. The principle enunciated in Genesis 15:6 concerning the justification of Abraham by faith never has experienced corruption. Throughout the Mosaic period of law-covenant, God considered as righteous everyone who believed in Him” (*Ibid.*, p. 174).

law” was given to man in a state of sin. Under the “covenant of law” man was *never* instructed that the path to eternal life lay in keeping the law or human achievement. This point is clearly evident in the fact that the sacrificial system (which is an integral aspect of the Mosaic law) pointed men to blood atonement, to a substitutionary sacrifice as the necessary means to eliminate sin. Obedience to the law never was a means to achieve justification before God. The law, however, was the divine standard for daily living (sanctification) and a godly social order.

Second, the “covenant of law” is founded upon God’s prior love and grace toward Israel. Before God asks Israel to “obey My voice and keep My covenant” He first reminds Israel of His divine acts of salvation in their behalf. “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles wings and brought you to Myself” (19:4).⁴ This point itself disproves all notions that the Mosaic covenant based salvation on an obedience to the law. Obedience to the law (i.e., to this new covenant which emphasizes God’s objective written standard) grows out of a prior relationship of grace already established by God. The law is to be obeyed as a response of gratitude to a loving, merciful Father who out of His own good pleasure saved an enslaved people. God initiates and He saves, then He expects obedience. Pink writes: “The very fact that it is the law *of God* should at once show us that it cannot contain anything inimical to man’s welfare. Like everything else that God has given, the Law is an expression of His love, a manifestation of His mercy, a provision of His grace. The Law of the Lord was *Christ’s* delight (Ps. 1:2); so also was it the apostle Paul’s (Rom. 7:22). In Rom. 7, the Holy Spirit has expressly affirmed, ‘Wherefore the law is *holy*, and the commandment holy, and just, and *good*’ (v. 12); yea more, He has declared ‘The Law is *spiritual*’ (v. 15). How terrible then for men to despise that Law and speak evil of it! What state of soul must they be in who *wish* to be *delivered from it!*”⁵ That the law is an expression of God’s love and grace is emphasized in the preamble to the ten commandments, “And God spoke all these words saying: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (20:1-2; cf. Dt. 33:2-3).

This order (grace then law) is also found in Deuteronomy where the Mosaic covenant is renewed before a new generation enters the promised land. After a section in which God’s great love of Israel is set forth (i.e., God uniquely chose, revealed Himself to and saved Israel, Dt. 4:32-39), Deuteronomy 4:40 says, “You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today.” In Deuteronomy 10:15-16 we read, “The LORD delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day. Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer” (see also 10:22-11:1; 11:7-8). When covenant children ask their fathers why they must keep God’s law (Dt. 6:20-24) the reason given is God’s mighty acts of deliverance from Egypt on behalf of Israel to give them their promised land. Salvation by grace does not set aside the moral law as a rule for life, but rather increases our responsibility to be faithful to what God has commanded.

This point raises a question. If all men are already required to obey God’s moral law by virtue of the fact that they are all creatures of God, then why does Scripture repeatedly appeal to salvation as an additional reason and motive for recognizing and obeying God’s precepts? One

⁴P. C. Craigie writes, “Thus the Exodus is the ‘gospel’ placed at the head of the law. In the language of treaty and covenant, his people had formerly been vassal subjects to the suzerain authority of the worldly power of the pharaoh; the liberation of the Exodus took them away from the subjection to the old suzerain authority, but introduced them to a new suzerain authority, God Himself. The new authority, however, had acted in love for the people and the obligations imposed upon them in the covenant reflected no less the love of God” (*The Book of Deuteronomy* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], p. 151).

⁵Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), pp. 156-157.

reason is that God's redemption brings people into a special covenant relationship with Him. All the Old Testament covenants (which are expressions of the covenant of grace) bring people under great blessing with great obligation. The covenants presuppose faith in God, and faith in God is manifested in this life by obedience. Yahweh's people are to be holy because He is holy (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16). The covenant people are bound in a spiritual vassal-union with God as Father (Dt. 32:6; Ps. 103:13) and as Husband (Is. 54:5).⁶ To violate God's law-word is spiritual adultery (Ez. 23:37). It brings down covenant sanctions and if not repented of is cause for divorce (Jer. 3:8-9), the covenantal death penalty. Therefore, for the believer, obedience to the law is not simply a matter of common sense, wisdom, pragmatic considerations or even a means of self-fulfillment. Obedience to God's law-word is an expression of covenant fidelity and a whole soul commitment of love to God. "The supreme test of love is the desire and effort to *please* the one loved, and this measured by conformity to his know wishes. Love to God is expressed by *obedience* to his will."⁷ Boston writes: "All true obedience to the ten commandments now must run in the channel of the covenant of grace, being directed to God as our God in that covenant, Deut. xxvii. 58. This is to fear that glorious and fearful name, THE LORD THY GOD. And so legal obedience is no obedience at all. This obedience is performed not for righteousness [i.e., human merit], but to testify our love to the Lord our Righteousness; not in our own strength, but in that of our Lord God and Redeemer; not to be accepted for its own worth, but for the sake of a Redeemer's merits; not out of fear of hell, or hope to purchase heaven, but out of love and gratitude to him who has delivered us from hell, and purchased heaven and everlasting happiness for us."⁸ Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (Jn. 14:15). "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 Jn. 5:2-3). Indeed, those who are backslidden are described as having "left your first love" (Rev. 2:4).

The tender loving protective care of Yahweh toward Israel is emphasized in Exodus 19. The covenant people's enemies are destroyed in a miraculous manner before their eyes. God protects and guides Israel by His special presence. The "eagle wings" metaphor indicates that God loves, protects and nurtures His people as a mother would care for her young and vulnerable

⁶The covenant with Israel is repeatedly compared in Scripture to a vow of marriage. In Hosea 2:14-23 God's restoration of Israel is compared to an adulterous wife who returns to a husband who allures, forgives and restores His wife with a new marriage. "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her. I will give her her vineyards from there, and the Valley of Achor as a door of hope; she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt.' 'And it shall be, in that day,' says the LORD, 'That you will call Me "My Husband," and no longer call Me "My Master," for I will take from her mouth the names of the Baals, and they shall be remembered by their name no more. In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, with the birds of the air, and with the creeping things of the ground. Bow and sword of battle I will shatter from the earth, to make them lie down safely. I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the LORD. It shall come to pass in that day That I will answer,' says the LORD; 'I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth. The earth shall answer with grain, with new wine, and with oil; they shall answer Jezreel. Then I will sow her for Myself in the earth, and I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; then I will say to those who were not My people, "You are My people!" And they shall say, "You are my God!"'" (Hos. 2:14-23). Note, that there is a specific reference to the time when Israel covenanted with Jehovah at Sinai (vs. 15). The language used in this passage reminds one of an older man reminiscing about the time he courted and first loved His betrothed.

⁷A. W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus*, p. 156.

⁸Thomas Boston, *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Water Revival Books, 1993 [1853], 2:90).

children. Yahweh carefully provided for Israel in the wilderness even though she was rebellious and undesiring of such love. Israel was totally dependent upon God's grace for her very existence. "Thus, in the Red Sea, the pillar of cloud and fire, the token of God's presence, interposed itself between the Israelites and their pursuers (lines of defense which could not be forced, a wall which could not be penetrated)."⁹ "He mentions the eagle rather than other birds, in my opinion, that He may magnify their difficulties, and thus command His grace...thus the people, as if carried above the clouds on the wings of God, had surmounted every obstacle, however great."¹⁰ Yahweh not only sets Israel free but brings them to Himself. Likewise, Christ sets us free from bondage to sin and slavery to Satan and brings us into covenant and communion with God. "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18).

The fact that God's law comes to His people in a covenant rooted in grace, love and concern means that His law is personal. The law is not an abstraction gleaned from some fictional realm of ideals as in ancient Greek thought. It rather is a reflection of God's own nature and character. It also is set before the people in the language of personal commitment, "Obey My voice and keep My covenant" (Ex. 19:5). God says, "I saved you, I protected you. I brought you to Myself. You have seen My love for you with your own eyes. Now obey Me. Love me will all your heart." When the Mosaic covenant is viewed in this context of love all the modern heretical notions of the law as harsh, negative, and as bondage melt away. Bondage comes when the law is misused as a system of works salvation. But when properly understood and used it is a charter of liberty. It is a marriage vow (of the old covenant church) taken after being liberated from a cruel slave master by a loving bridegroom.

Third, the salvation of Israel and her acceptance of and obedience to the covenant has a distinct purpose or goal in mind (note the "if...then" of verse 5). Israel is to be God's special possession and a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Ex.19:5-6). The covenant defines Israel's relationship with God and with her neighbors. "If Israel will obey God's will by being faithful to His covenant, then a special relationship is promised. Three terms spell out Israel's uniqueness: a special possession in distinction from all the peoples...a kingdom of priests...and a holy nation..."¹¹ Israel is Yahweh's special treasure. "The image presented is that of the unique and exclusive possession."¹² "The Lord emphasized His sovereign election: 'the whole earth is mine,' including all nations (cf. 9:29). It was therefore grace that moved God to make Israel His 'treasured possession' His people."¹³

As God's special nation Israel has a responsibility to be holy, separated, and pure as a showcase and example to the whole world (cf. Dt. 4:6-8). "This is a commitment to take on the responsibility of being a kingdom of priests. This, essentially, is the task of mediation, of obeying the law, not [merely] for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. It is a means by which the will of God can move toward realization in the entire earth."¹⁴ Israel was not to be a kingdom of politicians who wielded power and manipulated the masses, but a kingdom of servant priests who had faith in Yahweh, whose faith issued forth in obedience to God's law-word. As a covenanted holy nation they were God's kingdom. However, their power depended

⁹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, Co., no date), 1:354.

¹⁰John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:317.

¹¹Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1974), p. 367.

¹²John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), p. 262.

¹³W. H. Gispen, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 180.

¹⁴Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 213.

not on weapons but on their faithfulness to God.¹⁵ The law covenant was given to the elect nation with a wider universal purpose. Biblical law was a standard for Israel and a blueprint for dominion under God. This relationship between covenant revelation and dominion is found throughout the Bible. Rushdoony writes, “God called Adam to exercise dominion in terms of God’s revelation, God’s law (Gen. 1:26 ff.; 2:15-17). This same calling, after the fall, was required of the godly line, and in Noah it was formally renewed (Gen. 9:1-17). It was again renewed with Abraham, with Jacob, with Israel in the person of Moses, with Joshua, David, Solomon (whose Proverbs echo the law), with Hezekiah and Josiah, and finally with Jesus Christ. The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is the renewal of the covenant: ‘this is my blood of the new testament’ (or covenant), so that *the sacrament itself re-establishes the law*, this time with a new elect group (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 11:25), *The people of the law* are now the people of Christ, the believers redeemed by His atoning blood and called by His sovereign election.”¹⁶ The universalism of the Abrahamic covenant continues in the covenant of law and comes to fruition in the New Testament where the church is commanded to make disciples of all the nations (Mt. 28:20). The Jews failed to disciple the nations because they were unfaithful to God’s law and rejected their Messiah. The special covenantal kingdom status (articulated in the Mosaic covenant) was taken from the Jewish nation and given in its completed, superior New Testament form to the church. Note Peter’s description of Christians: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Isa. 61:1; Rev. 5:10).

The fact that both the Old and New Testaments emphasize the priesthood of all believers is significant for a number of reasons. First, it shows us that both the Old and New Covenants had a vision for a world wide redemptive kingdom. Some of the major differences between Israel and the church are: (a) The church of the Old Testament period from Sinai on was tied to a particular nation with a fixed Temple cultis in Jerusalem. During this period of history if pagans wanted to join the church they would have to move to Israel. After Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit the church is *sent out* to aggressively pursue the heathen. (b) Before the death of Christ under the Mosaic administration the world outside of Israel and the Gentiles themselves were unclean. Thus there was to be a radical separation with the world geographically, and culturally with special laws regarding food and clothing. Therefore, at this period of history Israel’s role as royal priests was primarily by *national example*. Being providentially situated at the crossroads of the ancient world, Israel was perfectly situated to be a showcase of the true God’s perfect justice and love. After the death of Christ the world is no longer defiled (Ac.10, 11). The church is to infiltrate the world to salt it (Mt. 5:13) and leaven it (Mt. 13:31-33). Once again, the power of Christ’s Spirit brings aggressiveness to the New Covenant priesthood. The New Testament church is to be in the world but not of the world.

Second, it refutes all unbiblical notions of “ecclesiocentrism.” The covenant law that Israel receives speaks to all areas of life. God wants His people to apply His law-word to science,

¹⁵The law of God is needed to minister to the nations and must be diligently learned, taught and obeyed for there to be covenant continuity. Hosea writes, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children” (4:6). The ten northern tribes instead of being priest-kings to the pagan nations by their covenant keeping (through obedience to God’s law-word) instead became gross idolaters and law-breakers like their pagan neighbors. The result was covenant sanctions. Both they and their children were cut off. “If the salt loses its flavor...It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot...” (Mt. 5:13).

¹⁶R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 8.

agriculture, politics, history, literature, music, the family—everything! When professing Christians restrict the Bible to the church, or to “spirituality,” or individual ethics they develop little Christian ghettos that have no positive salting effect on culture. Jordan writes: “The result of this is a *restricted priesthood*. Only churchmen are *really* able to read the Bible. If anyone else wants to read it, he should read it in a “devotional manner, seeking for an experience or some word of individual morality. But the ‘layman’ should never read the Bible with an eye to his profession. Doctors must not read the Bible for help in medicine. Lawyers must not read it for ideas about law. We have to repudiate this notion. The Bible is a book of life. It is for *all* of life, not only for sabbatical life (worship, the Church), but also for cultural life (work, business, family, government, medicine, etc.). We believe in *the priesthood of all believers*. A priest is a judge, and in whatsoever capacity he is to read the Bible. Doctors should read for Bible medical clues. Lawyers should consult biblical law. Historians should take the chronology of the Bible as their starting point. Geologists should consult the carefully recorded description of the Flood year. And so forth.”¹⁷ As priest-kings, believers are to apply the law to all of life and are to be conduits of God’s special redemptive grace to all the nations.

When churches reject the role of believers as priest-kings, they look inward and focus their attention on church programs (youth groups, men and women’s segregated social activities, basketball courts, health clubs, tennis courts, elaborate stage presentations, etc.). As a result churches lose their dynamism and become hedonistic, self-fulfilling, entertainment centers. Families are weakened by all the fluff and the state is left to the devil. God saved His people for service not escapism.

In Exodus 19:8, Israel gladly accepts the condition of the covenant which is obedience to God’s voice, His law-word (cf. 19:5). “Then all the people answered together and said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do.’” “Exodus 19:8 is then an *open-ended* commitment to God, to whatever God may have to say at any point in its history. This would include, for example, the Deuteronomic law.”¹⁸ “They readily agreed to the covenant proposed. They would oblige themselves to obey the voice of God, and take it as a great favour to be made a kingdom of priests to him.”¹⁹ Israel will shortly learn what God’s revealed will is (the stipulations of the covenant); first, by a summation of the whole moral law of God (the Ten Commandments) then by various other detailed laws that apply the decalogue to particular situations in life.

Given the theological confusion regarding the Mosaic covenant, it is important to emphasize that the condition, “if you will indeed obey My voice” is not new or unique to the covenant of law. Many modern evangelicals have been erroneously taught that the Mosaic covenant was conditional while the Abrahamic covenant was unconditional. In other words God required obedience under the Mosaic covenant but did not require obedience under the Abrahamic covenant. The truth regarding this matter is that God requires obedience in *all* the covenants that are part of the covenant of grace, including the New Covenant. People become confused because they equate the requirement of keeping the law with earning salvation by works. The requirement of obedience in the Mosaic covenant is not to earn salvation but to show forth and live out one’s faith in Yahweh. As Paul says, “We are created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph. 2:10). Remember, the law is given after redemption, not before. The people are to express their gratitude for their salvation by keeping covenant, by obeying God’s voice. There is

¹⁷James B. Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant: An Exposition of Exodus 21-23* (Tyler, TX: The Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), p. 9.

¹⁸Terrence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 212.

¹⁹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:355.

not a shred of salvation law in the Mosaic covenant. Although in the Abrahamic covenant the requirement of obedience is not stated explicitly, it nevertheless is repeatedly implied in the Genesis narrative. Oswald T. Allis writes: “The claim which is often made that the Abrahamic covenant was unconditional while the Mosaic was conditioned on obedience, finds no support in Scripture. God’s first word to Abram was a Command: ‘Get thee out of thy country...into a land that I will show thee’ Gen. xii.1). Abram obeyed this command. The performance of the rite of circumcision was made an indispensable condition to covenant blessing (Gen. xvii). Abram performed it at once. The claim that the Abrahamic covenant was ‘unconditional’ has dangerous implications; for it suggests an antithesis between *faith* and *obedience* that is not warranted in Scripture. Paul joins the two together, when he speaks of the ‘obedience of faith’ (Rom. i. 5, xvi. 26). The condition, ‘if ye will obey my voice,’ is merely the echo, we may say, of Genesis ii. 16, ‘and the Lord God commanded the man.’ The reply of the people, ‘All that the Lord hath spoken we will do,’ was the oath of allegiance of a loyal people to its ruler or king. They did not realize all that it involved, nor how unable they were to keep the law of God. Their words may show self-confidence and self-righteousness. But God’s requirement has always been perfect obedience (Gen. iii. 11). And the law which so stresses this requirement also contains and unfolds that system of expiations by sacrifice by means of which the penitent sinner may find forgiveness and acceptance with his God.”²⁰ This same requirement—the obedience of faith—is set forth in the book of James. “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works....For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (2:17-18, 26). Covenant fidelity is always expressed in outward acts, in obedience. This point does not mean that man is saved by works but that true faith loves God and seeks to please Him.

The false understanding of the mosaic covenant by dispensationalists is very similar to the pharisaical perversion of the purpose of the law popular in the days of Christ and Paul. O. Palmer Robertson helps us understand why such a misapprehension is common. He writes: “It may be acknowledged that something in the form of law-administration lent itself to an easy misapprehension of its proper purpose in man’s redemption. The externalized, codified form of law readily came to be understood as offering a way of life other than the faith-principle crystallized under Abraham. It was possible to understand the law properly as a schoolmaster that would lead to Christ by increasing awareness of sin. Or was it possible to misunderstand law as a taskmaster that led away from Christ by diverting concentration from faith-righteousness to works-righteousness. It is this latter perspective that the apostle has in mind when he addresses himself to those who wish to be ‘under law.’ ‘Law’ in this context points to the misapprehension of the law’s purpose as reflected in Abraham’s misdirected efforts to provide a son for himself and in the Judaizer’s efforts to provide righteousness for themselves.”²¹ A proper understanding of the purpose of the Mosaic covenant and its relationship to the Abrahamic covenant is needed to understand faith’s role as the instrument which lays hold of Christ (in both Testaments) as well as the relationship of sanctification to justification. Men are *never* saved by keeping the law. However, once they are saved they are expected to keep the law. In other words, justification also leads to sanctification. Christ delivers from the guilt and penalty of sin as well as its power (Rom. 6).

The Mosaic covenant is characterized by the detailed revelation and enscripturation of

²⁰Oswald T. Allis, *God Spoke By Moses* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1951), p. 72.

²¹O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, p. 182.

God's law. The Ten Commandments are written on tablets of stone by God (Dt. 4:13; 9:9, 11). Moses writes down "all the words of the LORD" (Ex. 24:4). Indeed, Exodus 20 to 23 is even referred to as "the Book of the Covenant" (Ex. 24:7). God caused His law to be written comprehensively by Moses at this particular period of redemptive history. "The patriarchs certainly were aware of God's will in general terms. On occasion, they received direct revelation concerning specific aspects of the will of God. Under Moses, however, a full summary of God's will was made explicit through the physical enscripturation of the law. This external-to-man, formally ordered summation of God's will constitutes the distinctiveness of the Mosaic covenant."²² John Owen writes: "Heavenly teaching, the knowledge of God, had been gradually revealed and expanded on various occasions since the foundation of the universe, and now at length it was brought together and systematized into one general and stable method of worship and obedience, and presented to the church as body a of unified truth. These truths, down to this period, had been mostly preserved by *oral* transmission, and had suffered by being totally lost in some parts of the world while, in others, they were rendered useless by the mixture of superstitious and heretical opinions. Now, by the wonderful love of God for His church, and by His special provision, this was enshrined in written records. In this way theology was removed from the responsibility of mortal men and was protected from the results of human defilement or corruption, whatever the spiritual state of the theologians themselves. To that earlier body of revelations and institutions, now collected into a compact body, were added new revelations, and thus arrived that complete rule of right worship of God, and of living to His glory, which would suffice the Church, with no need of further new teachings until the advent of Him whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge were to dwell."²³ Thus the apostle Paul could write: "What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:1-2).

Why was an externalized, enscripturated, detailed objective standard of law necessary? Although man was created in the image of God and had the work of the law written upon the heart (Rom. 2:15), and the people of God through direct revelation had God's law in an unorganized incomplete manner prior to Moses (e.g., Gen. 9:6; Ex. 16:16ff., etc.), the covenant of law was necessary and was a progression over earlier covenants for a number of reasons. (1) As noted above, the law needed to be enscripturated and comprehensive because, as a sinful fallen being, man could not be depended upon to develop a godly law-order based on "natural law" and the small and possibly corrupt remnants of direct revelation from the distant past. Sin and the curse have rendered natural revelation and oral tradition (not in the Pharisaical sense but in the sense of orally transmitted past revelations) unreliable as a source for ethics. "The law of nature is defective, because natural judgment is thoroughly distorted and infatuated, so that it is ready to reckon evil good and good evil, light darkness and darkness light."²⁴

(2) At Sinai the families or tribes of Israel are established as a nation for the first time. As a nation (covenanted with Jehovah) Israel needed an externally codified law system. (Israel is first identified by God as a kingdom of priests in Exodus 19:6.) In God's unfolding plan of redemption of the whole world (Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Rom. 4:13), Israel is given a just body of laws not only for a righteous rule among her own people but also as an evangelistic example to the Gentile nations (Dt. 4:6-8). This body of laws (minus the ceremonial laws and the laws

²²*Ibid.* p. 172.

²³John Owen, *Biblical Theology* (Pittsburg: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994 [Latin edition first published 1661]), pp. 373-374.

²⁴Thomas Boston, *Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Water Revival Books, 1993 [1853]), 2:68.

unique to Israel, plus any New Testament alterations) is the blue print for all Gentile nations after the coming of Christ. When Jesus commanded the apostles to disciple the nations (Mt. 28:19), He did not have in mind some vague notion of natural law or the common rule of nations but the whole counsel of God including the whole moral law which includes the moral case laws of the Mosaic covenant.

(3) The comprehensive nature of the revelation at Sinai gives the people of God a far greater understanding of how to love and please Jehovah as well as how to love and serve one's neighbor. As a revelation of God's nature and character the law reflects the holiness of God. It tells the covenant community how to be holy, separate, sanctified and faithful to the covenant bridegroom. Certainly a people who love God want to know in exhaustive detail what pleases or displeases Him. As a loving wife would not like to remain ignorant in what pleases or displeases her husband, the church studies, memorizes and meditates on God's precepts to know His will, to love and cherish Him. "Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart! They also do no iniquity; they walk in His ways....With my whole heart I have sought You; oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:2-3, 10-11).

The comprehensiveness of the Mosaic law helps us as individuals. It identifies our sins so that we will not continue on a destructive path due to ignorance. We study the law for sanctification and self-government. The law gives us detailed instructions on how to love our neighbor and even our enemies (e.g., Ex. 23:4-5; Dt. 22:4). The law gives detailed instructions for families (e.g., covenant headship, childrearing, jealousy issues, sexual immorality, etc.), and for society. A detailed system of justice (including penalties) and instruction in righteousness is a great advancement over the earlier covenants. Individual, family and social justice is an incredible blessing to any people. One reason the comprehensive nature of biblical law is a great blessing is because men are sinful and need a detailed objective standard to restrain their depraved urge for autonomy. Jordan writes: "*Generalities leave a lot of room for man to think as he pleases and to do as he pleases. Specifics are humbling to the intellect and to pride. It is all right to say that God created the world, but surely one should not try to date creation by studying Genesis 5 and 11! It is true that stealing is wrong, but surely we don't need to start quoting an "Old Testament laws" about charging interest on a charity loan to a fellow believer, or about a six-year limit on charity loans. Generalities leave room for a word from man. The particularity of the Bible forces man to bow the knee.*"²⁵ Sadly many modern evangelicals take the opposite view that liberty from the details of the Old Testament moral case laws is a great blessing, an advancement over the Old Covenant. Many teach that God has set the New Testament believer free to follow "Spirit-directed" inner prompting. The opposite of God's law, however, is not freedom but slavery to the arbitrary ordinance of sinful man. The unbiblical aversion to the details of God's law has rendered modern evangelicalism for the most part salt-less to society.

(4) The Mosaic law is an advancement over earlier covenants in its ability to show men their inability to approach God on their own merits. Paul says "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). Regarding his own experience he writes, "I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, you shall not covet" (Rom. 7:7). The law revealed to the apostle his own sinfulness. Paul elaborates, "Has then what is good [i.e., the law, cf. 7:12, 14] become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful" (Rom. 7:13). Hendriksen writes: "Paul had

²⁵James Jordan, *The Law and the Covenant*, p. 21.

stated that the commandment brought death (verse 10). But how can something that is holy and righteous and good (verse 12) bring death? Paul answers, as it were, ‘It is not the commandment, operating by itself, that brings death. It is the transgression of the commandment that does this.’ In the final analysis, therefore, the real cause of death is *sin*. The serious character of sin became apparent in this very fact that, in order to expose the sinner, it makes use of something which in itself is perfect, namely, God’s holy law. The very *whiteness*—that is, moral-spiritual purity—of God’s commandments makes the *blackness* of sin stand out all the more sharply!”²⁶ After telling the Galatians “that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God” (Gal. 3:11), Paul asks and answers a crucial question. “What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, until the seed should come...” (Gal. 3:19). The law reveals sin (Rom. 3:20). It makes sin as a violation against God *explicit*, for “where there is no law there is no transgression” (Rom. 4:15). It lays our behavior out on the table and shines a bright light upon it. It shows us our sinful nature by revealing and provoking transgressions (Rom. 7:7ff., 13). “As a revealer of sin the law supplied a vital service to the Abrahamic covenant of promise. By exposing fully men’s inadequacy to establish righteousness by law-keeping, the Mosaic covenant has contributed to the cause of redemptive grace.”²⁷

(5) The covenant of law is an advancement over earlier covenants by its greater revelation of the Christ to come through its expansion (and greater detail) of the types and ceremonies. Paul says that the law is a tutor that leads to Christ (Gal. 3:24). The ceremonial laws were directed to the people of Israel to teach them about their own sinfulness, uncleanness and unworthiness and to instruct them of the absolute need for salvation through the atoning act of an unblemished, God-given substitute. John Owen writes: “The outer forms of sacrifice were carnal, imposed on the people of Israel by the free and gracious purpose of God, who required them to wait for the divine and sacred consummation which these things prefigured and showed forth in type. Those, therefore, who were instructed in this theology, although they were to submit to the yoke of external rites as presented to them by the legislator, still they knew and believed in faith that all spiritual good was concealed beneath the shadows of these legal ceremonies, and that all were summed up in eternal life through the Messiah yet to be revealed. So it is that Christ Himself affirms that Moses, and Moses’ interpreters the prophets, all gave testimony to *Him*, and to his work as *Mediator*. The Apostles also asserted that, by preaching the death and resurrection of Christ and the eternal life which flows therefrom, they were teaching nothing else but what had been written before in Moses and the prophets.”²⁸ The law of Moses was preaching Christ. It was instructing the people about the Messiah to come.

The ceremonial laws also helped the covenant people in their sanctification by teaching them about their religious, ethical and covenantal separation from the surrounding pagan nations. Jordan writes: “Because the Old Testament Church was relatively weaker than the New

²⁶William Hendriksen, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, 81), pp. 222-223.

²⁷O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, p. 188.

²⁸John Owen, *Biblical Theology*, p. 376. Geerhardus Vos adds: “The people of God of those days did not live and die under an unworkable, unredemptive system of religion, that could not give real access to and spiritual contact with God. Nor was this gospel-element contained exclusively in the revelation that preceded, accompanied, and followed the law; it is found *in the law itself*. That which we call ‘the legal system’ is shot through with strands of gospel and grace and faith. Especially the ritual law is rich in them. Every sacrifice and every illustration proclaimed the principle of grace. Had it been otherwise, then the idea of positive, vital continuity would have been abandoned. There would be conflict and opposition instead. Such is the Gnostic position, but it is not the view of either of the Old Testament itself, or of Paul, or of the Church theology.” (*Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], p. 129.

Testament Church, God made special provisions to protect the Church during her Old Testament infancy. This varied from period to period, and at some times we see very few such special provisions (as during Abraham's day). What we think of as the definitive expression of the Old Covenant, however, the Mosaic administration through the monarchy, does show such special provisions. During this time, God's protection took the form of tying the Church closely to a particular nation, with geographical boundaries, with a military force, with supernatural acts of protection and special supernatural guarantees. Moreover, since the people were to be holy, but since the Holy Spirit had not been poured out in power, God gave them many peculiar regulations as reminders of obedience. They were, for instance, to dress in a peculiar manner."²⁹

All of the points enumerated above explicate the great advantage of having a detailed enscripturated law code. The Mosaic covenant was an immense amplification of theological light for the covenant people. Indeed, the rest of the Old Testament is built upon the Mosaic covenant. The book of Proverbs sets forth a practical application of the law for daily living. The Psalter was in large part written from meditating on the Torah. The historical books tell us the consequences of keeping or not keeping the covenant. The prophetic books are largely covenant lawsuit documents. The prophets told the people the dire consequences of breaking God's law-covenant and repeatedly called the people to repentance—to obedience to what God had commanded to Moses. To ignore such a crucial part of God's word is foolishness. If Christians do not study and apply the details of God's moral law they will be ruled by relativistic, arbitrary tyrants.

2. The Advent of Yahweh at Sinai

After the conditions for the covenant have been set forth and accepted, God orders Moses to prepare the people for His descent upon Mount Sinai. The things that need to be done are: (1) Boundaries are to be placed at the bottom of the mountain (This task apparently is to be done by Moses, v 12); (2) The people are to wash their clothes (v. 14); (3) All sexual relations are to be avoided ("Do not come near your wives," v. 15). What is the purpose of these preparations? The main focus is upon the awesome majestic holiness of Yahweh as well as the people's need to be sanctified before receiving the law. Each preparation will be considered in turn.

Moses is required to set boundaries around the mountain and consecrate it (vv. 12, 23). Anyone who goes up on the mountain or even touches it "shall surely be put to death" (v. 12). The mountain will become holy only because God's special presence will descend upon it. Indeed, it will be so holy that persons who violate its space are to be executed at a distance by archers or stone throwers (possibly slingers, cf. Jdg. 20:16). If the people or even the priests (with the exception of Moses and Aaron—the high priest) "break through" the LORD Himself may break out against them (v. 24). The whole mountain is to be treated like the Holy of Holies. The people must be protected from God's special presence because Jehovah is infinitely holy while the people are sinful and impure. To approach such a God without a mediator would cause sudden death. Matthew Poole writes: "By symbolic injunction God designed, 1. To restrain men's curious and bold inquiries into the things of God. 2. To possess the Israelites then present, and all succeeding generations, with the dread reverence of the Divine Majesty, and of his holy law. 3. To prepare and inure the people to the obedience of God's commands, even when they discern not the reasons of them. 4. To make them sensible of their own impurity and infirmity,

²⁹James Jordan, *The Law and the Covenant*, p. 13.

and of their absolute need of a mediator, through whom they might have access to God. See Gal. iii. 19.”³⁰

In preparation for God’s presence the people are to sanctify themselves by washing their clothes and abstaining from sexual relations. “The holy God of the covenant demands as preparation a separation from those things which are normally permitted and good in themselves. The giving of the covenant is different from an ordinary event of everyday life. Israel is, therefore, to be prepared by a special act of separation.”³¹ The washing of clothes refers to a ritual purification (cf. Gen. 35:2). “Calvin points out that, although these external cleansings are no longer prescribed for us, their truth and essence remain necessary for us: if we want to be admitted to and participate in the heavenly doctrine, we must cleanse ourselves of all contamination of flesh and spirit (cf. Jude 23).”³² The external washing of clothes points to the need of the internal washing of the Holy Spirit before man can in faith, receive and handle God’s holy law.

The prohibition on sexual relations between a husband his wife has reference to the necessity of cultic purity. The emission of semen in the Old Testament made a person cultically impure (Lev. 15:16-18). Moses is to command the people to be ritually clean by the third day when Yahweh’s special presence is manifest. Another reason may be the Israelites need to focus all of their attention on the hearing of God’s law. Paul says that husbands and wives are only to abstain from lawful sexual relations during periods of prayer and fasting (1 Cor. 7:5). That is, during special seasons of close communication with God. Regarding all the preparations Calvin’s comments are excellent. He writes,

Before propounding His law, it is not unreasonable that God should command the people to be sanctified, lest he should cast pearls before swine, or give that which is holy unto dogs; for although by right of adoption they were holy, yet, as regarded themselves, the filthiness of their nature unfitted them for participating in so great a blessing. It was by no means right or just that the inestimable treasure should be polluted by foul and stinking vessels. Therefore, in the injunction that they should be sanctified, two things were pointed out,—that the sacred doctrine of God was not to be handled by unwashen hands, and that the whole human race is impure and polluted, and, consequently, that none can duly enter God’s school save those who are cleansed from their filthiness. And, doubtless, it is the just reward of their unworthy profanation that so many readers or hearers profit not by heavenly doctrine, because they rush in without fear or reverence, as to some ridiculous stage plays. This preparation, then, is seasonably commanded, to make ready God’s scholars and render them fit to be taught. But while the inward purity of the heart is chiefly demanded, this ceremony was not without its use to accustom an ignorant people to meditate upon true holiness. That they should wash their clothes and abstain from the nuptial bed were things of nought in themselves; but when external rites are referred to their proper end, viz., to be exercises unto spiritual worship, they are useful aids to piety; and we know that God, in considerations of the times, before Christ’s coming, employed such figures which now have no place under the brightness of the Gospel. But although the use of them be grown obsolete, yet the truth, which I spoke of, still remains, viz., that if we desire to be admitted to a participation in heavenly doctrine, we should “cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit.” (2 Cor. vii. 1.)³³

³⁰Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1962 [1865]), 1:156.

³¹Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 369.

³²W. H. Grippe, *Exodus*, p. 182.

³³John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:322-323.

After the preparations are completed Jehovah descends upon Mount Sinai the morning of the third day. The phenomena that accompany the theophany are awe-inspiring and terrifying to the people. There are thunderings and lightnings (v.16). There is the loud sound of “the trumpet” which grows louder and louder and causes the people to tremble (vv. 16, 19). God comes to the mountain in “the thick cloud” (v. 9) and the whole mountain is enveloped in smoke, “like the smoke of a furnace” (v. 18). The whole mountain quakes greatly with God’s presence (v. 19). The LORD descends upon the mountain in fire (v. 18). The climax of these events is that God speaks: first, once again to tell Moses to warn the people; then second, to speak the Ten Commandments directly to the covenant people.

What is the significance of the phenomenon that accompany Yahweh’s presence? The phenomena (thunder, lighting, a thick cloud, a loud trumpet blast and an earthquake) are often associated in Scripture with God’s special presence (e.g., the cloud, Ex. 13:21-22, 14:19-20, 24; 16:10; 24:15-18; 34:5; 40:34-36; Lev. 16:2; Nu. 9:15; Rev. 4:5; 11:9) and with hatred of sin and judgment (e.g., Ex. 9:23; 1 Sam. 2:10; 7:10; 12:17-18; 2 Sam. 22:14-15; Job 26:14; Ps. 18:13-14; 104:7; Rev. 8:5). These phenomena are often associated with God’s judgment of His enemies. In David’s song of deliverance we read, “In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry entered His ears. Then the *earth shook and trembled*; the foundations of heaven quaked and were shaken, because He was angry. *Smoke* went up from His nostrils, and *devouring fire* from His mouth; coals were kindled by it. He bowed the heavens also, and came down with darkness under His feet. He rode upon a cherub, and flew; and He was seen upon the wings of the wind. He made *darkness* canopies around Him, dark waters and *thick clouds* of the skies. From the brightness before Him coals of fire were kindled. The LORD *thundered* from heaven, and the Most High uttered His voice. He sent out arrows and scattered them; *lightning bolts*, and He vanquished them” (2 Sam. 22:7-15). This pattern of phenomena is associated with God’s presence and judgment in the book of Revelation. “And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings and voices” (4:5). After a song celebrating God’s power for deliverance and judgment is given we read, “And there was opened the temple of God that is in heaven; and there was seen in his temple the ark of the covenant; and there followed lightnings and voices, and thunders, and an earthquake, and great hail” (11:19 RSV). After the seventh bowl is poured out we read, “and there were noises and thunderings and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake...” (Rev. 16:18). The terrifying phenomena that exhibit God’s glorious presence are also signs of His infinite holiness. They especially accompany the giving of the law to set forth the wrath of God to those who break His holy law. Those who break the covenant will receive dreadful punishments.

In the Bible the trumpet blast is used to announce various things (e.g., gathering at the tabernacle, Nu. 10:3, 4; to sound an alarm, Nu. 10:9) and is used to increase drama and solemnity (e.g., trumpets were to be blown during the sacrifices, Nu. 10:10). In Revelation the sound of a trumpet is associated with the voice of the glorified Christ (Rev. 1:10) and is used to announce horrifying judgments (Rev. 8:2, 7, 8, 10, 12,; 9:1, 13; 11:15). The trumpet blast announces the descent of Jehovah upon the mount (Ex. 19:16-19) and the public spectacle of God Himself speaking the law to the people. The trumpet blast was very loud so as to startle and strike fear into the people. Jesus’ second coming (a very public and terrifying event) will also be announced by the trumpet of God (1 Th. 4:16).

God descends upon the mountain in fire (Ex. 19:18). When Moses warns Israel not to break the covenant by committing idolatry he says, “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire,

a jealous God” (Dt. 4:24). God appears in fire; and He also destroys and eternally punishes by fire those who break His laws. “*The Lord descended in fire* for further terror to obstinate sinners. Hence this law is called a fiery law, Deut. xxxiii...”³⁴ When Jesus returns He will descend in flaming fire taking vengeance upon those who do not obey the gospel (2 Th. 1:8). “Such were the terrors of Sinai, the mount of God’s law, where because of their sinfulness the people were unable to draw near to God’s presence. How different are the circumstances of Zion, the mount of God’s grace, where, thanks to the perfect law-keeping and the all-sufficient sacrifice of himself offered by the incarnate Son in our stead, we are invited to draw near with boldness into the heavenly holy of holies (Heb. 10:19ff.)!”³⁵

The importance of God’s law is also evident from the fact that the Ten Commandments were spoken by God Himself *directly* to the people. Exodus 19 contains the only instance in the Old Testament where God spoke publicly to a gathering of people without speaking through a mediator, spokesman or prophet. (The next direct, audible, public statement will not occur for another fifteen hundred years when God the Father says at Jesus’ baptism, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” [Lk. 3:21-22]). Although the phenomena surrounding the theophany were terrifying, the voice of Yahweh made the strongest impression and inspired the greatest fear. After hearing God speak the people “begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore” (Heb. 12:19) “You speak with us and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Ex. 20:19). When a sinful people receive but a few rays of God’s glorious majesty and holiness they immediately draw back in fear and trembling.

The terrifying phenomena that accompany God’s presence on Sinai, the great fear caused by Jehovah’s voice, the necessity of strict boundaries around the mountain and the people’s need of consecrating themselves teach us a number of things regarding God and His law. First, it clearly is designed to set forth the importance of God’s moral law. The Ten Commandments are spoken directly to the people. They are written on tablets of stone by God Himself to signify their importance and perpetual nature (Ex. 24:12, 32:26). They are taken and placed with the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:16). “The ark was the cabinet in which He put the Ten Commandments, as ten jewels.”³⁶ On the day of atonement, sacrificial blood would be sprinkled on and before the mercy seat which rests on the ark, placing the blood of an innocent, spotless lamb between God’s special presence and His violated law (cf. Lev. 16:2, 15). When God delivered the Ten Commandments He did so in the midst of a multitude of angels (Dt. 33:2). The very throne room of God descended to glorify the law. “A parliament of angels was called, and God Himself was the speaker.”³⁷

All of Scripture is God’s word and therefore is authoritative and demands our utmost attention and obedience. The Ten Commandments, however, being spoken directly by God in spectacular circumstances are underlined and in bold capital letters. “The Scripture, as Chrysostom says, is a garden, and the moral law is the chief flower in it: it is a banquet, and the moral law is the chief dish in it.”³⁸ The law reveals God’s nature and character (Num. 23:19; Jn. 14:6; 2 Tim. 2:13), is perfect (Ps. 19:7), holy (Rom. 7:12), just (Rom. 7:12), good (Neh. 9:13; Rom. 7:12), spiritual (Rom. 7:14), leads the elect sinner to Christ (Gal. 3:24; Rom. 3:20), restrains the wicked (1 Tim. 1:9), is unalterable and remains in force to sanctify believers (Rom.

³⁴Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 1:157.

³⁵Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 543.

³⁶Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965 [1692]), p. 13.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 12.

13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; 19-21; Jn. 17:17; Ps. 119:9ff.). The law is something that Christians should treasure and delight in (Ps. 119:16; Rom. 7:22) and not ignore and treat with contempt as if God's perfect ethical standard is somehow dangerous and evil. Machen writes, "A new and more powerful proclamation of that law is perhaps the most pressing need of the hour; men would have little difficulty with the gospel if they had only learned the lesson of the law....So it always is: a low view of the law always brings legalism; a high view of the law makes a man a seeker after grace. Pray God that the high view may again prevail."³⁹

Second, the manner in which the law is given sets forth the importance of the fear of God. This point is emphasized in the covenant renewal preaching of Moses in Deuteronomy. "Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the LORD your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess, that you may fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged" (6:1-2). The events of Sinai strike fear in the people. God is to be approached and served with reverence and awe. Men are to study the law and be cautious regarding their behavior, avoiding sin and walking in His ways out of covenant love coupled with a fear of the LORD. "'Fear' is certainly a prominent element in OT religion; the 'fear of God' or Jeh, 'the fear of the Lord,' is indeed synonymous with [biblical] religion itself (Ps. 34 11; Prov.1 7; Isa. 11 2-3; Jer. 2 19; Eccl. 12 13, 'the whole duty on man,' RVm 'the duty of all men')."⁴⁰ "[T]he reason for the giving of these commandments is to awaken the fear of God, and that fear might prompt obedience. Because God is God, the absolute and law-giver, fear of God is the essence of sanity and common sense. To depart from a fear of God is to lack any sure sense of reality."⁴¹ "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7). Charles Bridges writes,

But what is the fear of the Lord? It is the affectionate reverence, by which the child of God submits himself humbly and carefully to his Father's law. God's wrath is so bitter, and his love so sweet; that there naturally arises an earnest desire to please Him. And also—in view of the danger of falling short because of his own weakness and temptations—a holy watchfulness and fear, so "that I may not sin against Thee." This enters into every thought and every activity of life. The most mature pupil in God's school wants to be more completely molded by His teaching. The godly parent trains up his family under the Word's influence. The Christian scholar honors it as the beginning, the most important part of all his knowledge. He sees that it gives meaning and purpose to learning, and saves him from all the treacherous temptations that accompany knowledge.⁴²

When a society mocks God's law and makes sport of biblical religion on television, in movies and in various publications, it reveals a mindset of apostasy and gross unbelief. When a people fear God they treat Him with respect by paying close attention to His law-word and by applying that word to their lives. "We must always have in our minds a reverence of God's

³⁹J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* As quoted in Ernest Kevan, *Moral Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991), p. ix.

⁴⁰W. L. Walker, "Fear" in James Orr, General Editor, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939 [1929]), 2:1102.

⁴¹Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 16.

⁴²Charles Bridges, revised by George F. Santa, *A Modern Study in the Book of Proverbs* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1978), p. 4.

majesty, a dread of his displeasure, and an obedient regard to his sovereign authority over us: this fear will quicken us to our duty and make us circumspect in our walking. Thus *stand in awe, and sin not*, Ps. 4:4.”⁴³

Third, the events at Sinai also set forth the necessity of a mediator between a thrice holy God and a sinful people. “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Ex. 20:19). Even the hard-hearted Israelites knew that they dare not approach such an awesome, all-powerful, holy God without a mediator. Throughout the Exodus narrative there is an emphasis on Moses as the redeemer of, intermediary and intercessor for Israel. All of this served to teach Israel of the need of the greater Moses—Jesus Christ. Geerhardus Vos informs us of the typological significance of Moses:

There was in his work such a close connection between revealing words and redeeming acts as can be paralleled only from the life of Christ. And the acts of Moses were to a high degree supernatural, miraculous acts. This typical relation of Moses to Christ can easily be traced in each of the three offices we are accustomed to distinguish in the soteric work of Christ. The ‘prophet’ of Deut. 18.15, reaching his culmination in the Messiah, is ‘like unto’ Moses. Moses fulfilled priestly functions at the inauguration of the Old *Berith*, before the Aaronic priesthood was instituted [Ex. 24.4-8]. Our Lord refers to this as a typical transaction, when inaugurating the New *Diatheke* at the institution of the supper [Lk. 22.20]. Moses intercedes for Israel after the commission of the sin of the golden calf, and that by offering his own person vicariously for bearing the punishment of the guilty [Ex. 32.30-33]. A royal figure, of course, Moses could not at that time be called, for Jehovah alone is King of Israel. None the less, through his legislative function Moses typified the royal office of Christ.

All this reflected itself in the peculiar relation the people were made to sustain toward Moses. This relation is even described as one of faith and of trust [Ex. 14.31; 19.9]. The resemblance of this relation of the Israelites towards Moses to the relation of the Christian towards Christ had not escaped the notice of Paul, who says that ‘our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea’ [I Cor. 10.1-3]. Just as in baptism an intimate relation is established between the believer and Christ, based on the saviourship of Christ, even so the mighty acts of divine deliverance wrought through Moses pledged Israel to faith in him. And, as during the ministry of Jesus faith and unbelief proved the two decisive factors, so during the wilderness journey a great drama of faith and unbelief was enacted, deciding the people’s fate [Heb. 3,4].⁴⁴

Indeed, there is not found a prophet like unto Moses who had such a continuous and direct access to God in the whole Old Testament. Moses, however, could only reflect the divine glory (Ex. 24:29ff.) while Jesus Christ radiated the divine glory from His own being (Mt. 17:1-2).

3. The Prologue to the Ten Commandments

The prologue serves as a covenant declaration or preface to all the commandments and thus is not exclusively tied to the first commandment. “And God spoke all these words saying: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage’ (Ex. 20:1-2; cf. Dt. 5:6). The preface to the law sets the Ten Commandments in their covenant

⁴³Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1:363.

⁴⁴Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, p. 104.

context. God first identifies Himself, as “the LORD” and then states his relationship to Israel as redeemer. The preface of the law gives very personal weighty reasons why the covenant people should obey His commands. Jehovah speaks to Israel as a Father to a son. There are four reasons within the prologue as to why God’s law must be diligently and sincerely obeyed.

(1) There is the historical observation of Moses (the preface to the preface) that “God spoke all these words.” As noted earlier the Ten Commandments are spoken directly to the people to emphasize their importance, to set them apart. The fact that they are given in the form of direct, unmediated communication is repeatedly set before Israel as a reason for attentiveness and obedience. “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: “You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make anything to be with Me—gods of silver or gods of gold...”’” (Ex. 20:22-23). Before the law is restricted in Deuteronomy the people are reminded of their unique experience at the foot of Sinai: “The LORD talked with you face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire” (5:4).

(2) There is the self-identification of God as the LORD or Yahweh.⁴⁵ “The promise of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt had been tied to Yahweh’s name in Exodus 3:14 and 6:2. Now that the promise had become a reality, he proclaims his name yet once again with the giving of the law.”⁴⁶ “The word for ‘Lord’ is ‘Jehovah,’ who is the Supreme, Eternal and Self-existent One, the force of which is (as it were) spelled out for us in ‘which was, and is, and is to come’ (Rev. 4:8).”⁴⁷ The word for LORD (*YHWH*) is related to the Hebrew verb *hayah*, “to be.” This point is evident from Exodus 3:14 where God identifies Himself as the absolute self-existent one, “I am who I am” (the gal. imperfect of *h-wâ*—“to be”). This divine name sets forth not only “permanence, but of permanence self-contained, and being a distinctive title, it denies such self-contained permanence to the others.”⁴⁸ This covenant name denotes God’s aseity, eternity and immutability that emphasize the eternality and immutability of Jehovah’s moral law as well as

⁴⁵The Hebrew tetragrammaton (four components) *YHWH* translated as LORD (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NIV, NASB, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Test), “Jehovah” (ASV), or “Yahweh” (Jerusalem Bible) is God’s most frequent designation in Scripture occurring 5,321 times. In the King James Version of the Bible the word God is used to translate *YHWH* where the title “Lord” also occurs. Sometimes the KJV will use the word Jehovah when God’s name is being emphasized (e.g., Ex. 6:3; Ps. 83:18; Isa. 12:2; 26:4), or when the divine name is combined with a word describing God’s character or action (e.g., Jehovah Jireh—“The LORD will provide,” (Gen. 22:14). Various cults have insisted that the KJV’s use of LORD instead of Jehovah or Yahweh is a sign of apostasy and part of a malevolent conspiracy. The truth regarding the various translations of the tetragrammaton is that while everyone knows the consonants *YHWH*, *no one* knows the vowels. Therefore, the true pronunciation of the word has been lost forever. The vowels chosen are merely educated guesses. Grispen writes, “Sometimes the name is also represented by Jehovah, but this based on a misunderstanding. Hebrew consists of consonants only; the vowels were never written. God’s name was *Jhwh*. In a literal application of the third commandment this name was never pronounced, but in reading was replaced by “Adonai” or “Lord,” another name for God. Most English versions translate both *Jahweh* and *Adonai* as “Lord,” but indicate the difference by using small capitals for *Jahweh* (“LORD”). When the vowel system that expressed vowels by means of dots and lines placed under and next to the consonants was developed, the vowels of *Adonai* (a, o, a; i=j and is thus a consonant) were placed under and next to the consonants of *Jhwh*. The purpose was to say: read her “Adonai.” But sometimes the vowels of *Adonai* are read together with the consonants of *Jhwh*, and thus we get Jehovah, which is actually nonsense. The correct vowels of *Jahweh* are not known, however, since the Jews did not pronounce the name. Most probable is *Jahweh* since the Samaritans appear to have pronounced the name of God that way. (*Exodus*, pp. 55-56). Modern scholars generally favor *Yahweh* based on the corresponding verbal form, the imperfect of *h-wâ* which in ancient times was *Yahweh*.

⁴⁶Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1983), p. 83.

⁴⁷A. W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments: A Guide for Living* (Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, n.d.), pp. 12-13.

⁴⁸W. Robertson Nicoll, editor, *The Expositor’s Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940), 1:135.

His covenant faithfulness and constancy as a Father and Husband to Israel. “Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God. And you shall keep My statutes, and perform them: I am the LORD who sanctifies you” (Lev. 20:7-8).

(3) The lawgiver identifies Himself as “the LORD *your God*.” Jehovah reminds Israel of their covenant relationship. The LORD has become their God by His gracious acts, by giving Himself to Israel. As noted earlier God speaks to Israel as a bridegroom does to his bride, or as a caring father does for his children. Matthew Henry writes: “He was their God, a God in covenant with them, their God by their own consent; and, if they would not keep his commandments, who would? He had laid himself under obligations to them by promise, and therefore might justly lay his obligations on them by precept. Though that covenant of peculiarity is now no more, yet there is another, by virtue of which all that are baptized are taken into relation to him as their God, and are therefore unjust, unfaithful, and very ungrateful, if they obey him not.”⁴⁹

(4) Finally God identifies Himself as the redeemer of Israel. Fretheim writes: “...God identifies *himself* in relation to a particular history. This ties the law back into the prior narrative (see 19:1). The activity of God in redeeming Israel *from bondage* means that the law and the service to God and world it entails is not understood to be another form of bondage. The law is a gift of a redeeming God, and a particular redemptive act is seen as undergirding and informing the law, not the other way around. Those who are given the law are already God’s people. Hence the law is not understood as a means of salvation but as instruction regarding the shape such a redeemed life is to take in one’s everyday affairs.”⁵⁰ The covenant people have been taken from the bondage of a satanic, oppressive law order and by grace have been given the liberty of God’s law. God’s enscripturated law is a great gift and blessing.

The preamble to the Ten Commandments teaches a very important principle: God’s people are saved for the purpose of obeying and serving God. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). “To grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life” (Lk. 1:74-75).

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⁴⁹Matthew Henry, *Commentary of the Whole Bible*, 1:359.

⁵⁰Terrence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, p. 224.