

**You Shall Know I AM:**  
**A Covenant with the LORD** (Exodus 23:20-24:18)  
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on March 10, 2019

## Introduction

- ❖ In the past few weeks, we've been knee deep in the Law of God. We have looked at the Ten Commandments in chapter 20. Then we studied a long list of seemingly random case laws in chapters 21-23. Taken together, they're known as **the Book of the Covenant**. The Ten Commandments and these laws governing how Israel adjudicates criminal and civil cases – these are all the words that Moses was instructed to write down. In chapter 24:4, it says “*Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD*” and in v7, he takes what is now called “*the Book of the Covenant*” and he reads it in the hearing of the people.
  
- ❖ Now this morning, we're going to focus on that word “covenant” because it's so vital to understanding this section of Exodus. **Without a clear grasp of what a biblical covenant is and is not, we're prone to misreading and misapplying these verses.** If we see this as a contract – if we read this as the Book of the Contract – then we'll come away with a deep misunderstanding of the heart of God and the heart of the Christian message.
  - **If we see our relationship with God as based on a contract, we'll start treating him like a business partner.** Like we entered into a contractual relationship because it's mutually beneficial. He has goods and services that will benefit us, and for that, we're willing to compensate – by offering our devotion or time out of a busy week.
  
- ❖ But I shared before that this Book of the Covenant bears no resemblance to ancient contracts. Rather it adopts a similar pattern as ancient near eastern treaties. And not the kind of treaty that's agreed upon by two nations on equal footing. **The Book of the Covenant bears a striking resemblance to an ancient suzerain-vassal treaty.**
  - It's a type of treaty where a clear superior, the suzerain (typically a king), would make a treaty with a conquered people, the vassals. So there was no equal footing. It wasn't a contractual agreement between partners. **The suzerain is under no obligation.** He acts out of his own kindness, according to his own sovereign will. It's pure grace.
  
- ❖ **Now these treaties start off with the suzerain recounting what he's done for the vassals.** And we see that back in chapter 20:2 where the LORD reminds Israel that, “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*” Next, you'd expect to find **a list of stipulations** for how the vassals ought to respond in obedience to their new king. That's what we have in the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant.
  - And then these suzerain-vassal treaties typically end with **a list of blessings** if the vassal keeps the treaty and **a list of curses** if they don't (cf. Deut 28). And then there's usually a ceremony where the treaty is **ratified by blood**, which conveys the gravity in obeying versus disobeying.
  
- ❖ **But the most important feature of these suzerain-vassal treaties – is the way in which the suzerain establishes a relationship *before* he expects obedience to certain stipulations.** That's how God approaches it. Look back at chapter 19:4, “*4You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.* *5Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant.*”

- ❖ Notice what came first. **God compares himself to an eagle bearing Israel, carrying them on his back out of Egypt.** They didn't use their strength to fight their way out of Egypt. They didn't use their brains to devise a plan of escape. They didn't even walk out on their own. God says, "I had to carry you out."
  - **That means you contributed nothing to your rescue, nothing to your salvation. You had to be carried out.** So God says, "I already saved you. *Now therefore*, obey my voice and keep my covenant." So it's always: I delivered you. I bore you on my wings and brought you to myself. *Now therefore*, obey my laws.
  
- ❖ **Every other religion, every earthly expectation, every human intuition is going to think the opposite.** I need to obey. I need to prove my genuineness. And if I do, *now therefore*, I'm accepted. I'm delivered and brought near to God in relationship.
  - But that's not the Christian message. That's not the NT's message or the OT's. As we plainly see here in Exodus, the message is *not*: I obeyed and kept his covenant; therefore, I'm saved and brought near to God. **No, the message is: I was saved and brought near to God (all by his grace); therefore, I obey and keep his covenant.** Obedience flows out of our salvation. Not the other way around.
  
- ❖ That's the heart of the Christian message and the heart of this covenant that the LORD established with Israel. Now as we go into today's text – as we see this treaty or covenant confirmed – we'll see the blessing and the curses, the promises and the threats (what we'd expect). And we'll see the covenant ratified by blood.
  - And the big question is this: ***How does this covenant with Israel inform the new covenant that God made with the Church through a greater act of deliverance and sealed by a more precious blood? What can New Covenant believers learn from a text that deals so technically with a covenant that is no longer in effect?***
    - We'll walk through three points here: 1) The covenant promise of presence, 2) The covenant confirmed by blood, 3) The covenant hope to feast with God.

### **The Covenant Promise of Presence**

- ❖ Let's begin in chapter 23:20. We're going to meet an angel of the LORD who will go before and lead the people and guard them until they settle into the Promised Land. **Now we need to talk more about the identity and function of this angel, but the point is that the very mention of him communicates the covenant promise of presence – of God's presence with his people.** I'll explain further, but let's start in v20, "<sup>20</sup>Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. <sup>21</sup>Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. <sup>22</sup>But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries."

  - Now we were introduced to this angel of the LORD earlier in the book. He first appeared in chapter 3:2 in a flame of fire out of the burning bush. He's there later in chapter 14:19-20 when Israel is hedged in with the Red Sea on one side and Pharaoh and his army on the other.

- ❖ It says the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel now moved behind them, and as he moved the pillar of cloud moved with him and shielded Israel from the approaching Egyptians, giving them time to cross the sea. So there in chapter 14, we see a close association between **the angel of the LORD** and **the glory cloud** that Israel continues to follow throughout their years in the wilderness (Ex 40:36-38).
  - Later in the book of Numbers, we see **the ark of the covenant** playing a similar role, going before the people, leading them into battle (Num 10:33-36). **So we have these three objects – the angel, the glory cloud, and the ark – all working in unison to do the same thing – to represent the presence of the LORD among his people as he lead them into their salvation rest, into the Promised Land.**
  
- ❖ It's widely recognized that the ark of the covenant represented the earthly presence of the LORD. The golden cover of the ark was known as the mercy seat of God, and the glory cloud would move and stop wherever the ark moved and stopped. **And that's why many would identify the angel in chapter 23:20 as a manifestation of the LORD himself.**
  - Just the way he's addressed would give you that impression. Look in v21. Israel has to obey the angel's voice, to not rebel against him, because he can pardon or not pardon sins. God's name is in him. And then in v22 notice how God says, "If you carefully obey *his voice* and do all that *I say*." **That tells me that there's not much of a distinction between the LORD and the angel of the LORD.**
  
- ❖ So what we have in our text is the LORD's covenant promise to be near and present with his people. And not just with them. He's not just telling Israel, "I'm going to be by your side. Where you go, I'll go. Where you move, I'll move." No, he's promising much more.
  - **The LORD is saying, "I will be with you to lead you. Where I go, you go. Where I move, you move. And I will make sure you get to your final destination."** I will fulfill my purposes for you (Ps 138:8). I will bring to completion the good work I began in you (Phil 1:6). You will not perish and no one will snatch you out of my hands (Jn 10:28). That's the strength of the promise that we read here.
  
- ❖ **Now in the remainder of chapter 23 (vv23-33), the LORD spells out in further detail what the promise of his presence will look like when they reach the land.** He promises to bless their crops, to bless their health, to bless their wombs, and give them long life in the land. Now I know those sound like health-wealth-and-prosperity promises, and I feel an urge to quickly explain them away. Because it's not like obedient Israelites never experienced a bad harvest or disease or miscarriages. And if an Israelite did, it's not necessarily because they were disobedient. You can't make those one-to-one correlations.
  - **But there is a general truth to be affirmed here – in that there is a blessing to be experienced when you obey the LORD.** When you're doing his will. We shouldn't limit it to material blessings or absolutize these particular promises. But we should affirm how blessed it is to obey and keep the word of God (Lk 11:28).

- ❖ Now if we keep reading in v27 and on, God promises to send his terror and his hornets (translators aren't sure if that's even the right word) to drive out the existing nations from the Promised Land. **And to be clear, the expulsion of these nations is *not* motivated by racial superiority but by religious fidelity to worship God alone.** Vv24 and 33 make it clear that God is concerned that the idolatry of the nations will be a snare to his people. So he plans on removing them. He'll do it incrementally over time, according to vv29-30, but the goal is to drive these false gods and false worship from the land.
  
- ❖ So God's going to do it, but then listen to what he tells Israel in v31, *“for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.”* **So there's still a role for the people to play. Their obedience still matters.** That's why – if you look back at vv21-22 – Israel is called to obey the voice of the angel and to do all that the LORD says. Obedience is still an expectation.
  - But remember its place within the covenant. **Obedience flows out of redemption and relationship.** God redeems Israel. He bears them out of Egypt and brings them to himself in relationship. Now therefore, he says, "Obey my voice."
  
- ❖ **This angel of the LORD is not waiting, with hands on his hips, to see how you'll perform or how well you obey – before he's ready to commit himself to you.** No, this angel makes the first move. He drew near at the burning bush. He drew near at the Red Sea. And he draws near now at Sinai and will stay near until God's people are in the land.
  - **There are some who see a connection between the angel of the LORD and Christ.** They would say it's the pre-incarnate Son of God himself. They would point to **Jude 1:5** where Jude names Jesus as the one *"who saved a people out of the land of Egypt."* So there was an interpretive tradition where the Son of God was understood to be present in the wilderness, leading Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.
  
- ❖ **That means the presence of the angel in this text prefigures the eventual coming and presence of Christ among his people.** It makes sense when you consider how Jesus and his Incarnation is the most concrete manifestation of the presence of God.
  - And like the angel, Jesus doesn't stand back and wait to see how you'll perform or how you'll obey. No, Jesus makes the first move and draws near to you. He redeems you. Establishes a relationship with you. And then he calls you to obey his voice.

### **The Covenant Confirmed by Blood**

- ❖ That's what new covenant believers can learn from this old covenant. Obedience matters but it's an obedience that flows out of our salvation by grace alone. Let's keep going into our next point, and we'll see the covenant confirmed by blood.
  - If we keep reading in chapter 24, this suzerain-vassal treaty between the LORD and Israel is ratified in a public ceremony. It says in v3 that Moses went down and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And it says all the peoples agreed with what they heard and said, *"All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do."*

- ❖ **And so Moses sets up an altar, has sacrifices made, takes a basin of blood, and he's ready to seal the deal and ratify this treaty, to confirm this covenant.** Keep reading in v6, *"<sup>6</sup>And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. <sup>7</sup>Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." <sup>8</sup>And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."*
  
- ❖ Now this throwing of blood (some translations say "sprinkling") is done half on the altar Moses made and half on all the people. It must have been a pretty gruesome sight. **Imagine thousands of people standing together with splattered blood all over them.** It's like a scene from a horror movie. But that's what ancient sacrifices were like. We read about them throughout the Bible, but we rarely stop to think about how gory they must have been.
  - It makes you wonder why so much blood had to be involved. **Is there a reason why it had to be so bloody?** It's because the blood signified death – not just the death of the animal – but the death of the one who breaks the treaty. The bloody, slain animal can be pointed to as example of what will happen to those who break this treaty. **The shedding of blood is the penalty for covenant-breaking.**
  
- ❖ But when God makes a covenant with people, when he ratifies a treaty, he handles it in a different manner. **When the LORD makes a covenant, he's willing to take on the penalties of covenant-breaking.** To bear it himself.
  - The clearest demonstration of God's approach to covenants is seen in the original covenant that he made with Abraham, the patriarch of all Israel. Back in **Genesis 15**, the LORD initiates a covenant with Abraham, promising him offspring. Now when they get to ratifying the covenant, the LORD tells him to cut a number of sacrificial animals in half and lay them across from one another.
    - Typically, you would then expect the two parties to walk through the middle of the cut-up, bloody carcasses. **And essentially you're invoking a self-curse, as in, "Let the same bloody mess occur to me if I break covenant with you."** That's what you'd expect to happen in covenants like this.
  
- ❖ But what happens instead? It goes on to say, as the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abraham. He passed out. And in **Genesis 15:17**, it says, *"<sup>17</sup>When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. <sup>18</sup>On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram."*
  - So the LORD, represented by that smoking fire pot and flaming torch, passed between the bloody pieces – without Abraham. He slept through the whole thing. **By passing through those pieces alone, God was communicating his willingness to bear the entire penalty for covenant-breaking.** If Abraham or the offspring of Abraham break covenant, God is willing to bear the curse.

- ❖ My point is that this covenant being confirmed at Sinai falls under the same pattern – and the same heart of God. **The sprinkling of blood on the people is a way of invoking that same self-curse, but the sprinkling happening in our text ultimately prefigures the sprinkling of a more precious blood of a greater sacrifice.**
  - In Hebrews 10, the writer speaks of the confidence that we have to approach God by the blood of Jesus. A blood shed and sprinkled on the hearts of God’s people, cleansing us from within and making a way to draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith (Heb 10:19, 22).
    - **Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant whose sprinkled blood speaks a better word** (Heb 12:24). His sprinkled blood speaks a word of mercy as Jesus took the penalty for our covenant-breaking upon himself. And by his blood, secured forgiveness and acceptance. And out of this acceptance, this covenant relationship with God, he calls us to a life of faith and obedience.
  
- ❖ **There are some of you who feel very far from God.** You feel like your disobedience or disregard of his Law has accumulated and grown out of hand. You feel like, at this point, there’s little hope and little reason to make a change. Living God’s way. Doing his will. Obeying his Word. It feels so difficult, so tiring, so burdensome.
  - But I hope you’re starting to see how you’ve likely been approaching Law and obedience from the wrong direction. You’ve been thinking: I obey God’s Law; now therefore, I’m accepted. **But Scripture teaches: I’m accepted by God by grace; now therefore, I obey his Law.** This good news should be liberating for you. It should reframe the way you read and interpret and live out the Law of God.

### The Covenant Hope to Feast with God

- ❖ The last point to draw out is found in chapter 24:9-18. We’ve considered the covenant promise of presence and the covenant confirmed by blood. Lastly, let’s look at the covenant hope to feast with God. **This has to do with the kind of relationship we’ll have with God if we enter a covenant with him.** This is what covenantal life looks like in relation to God. In vv9-11, we’re told that Moses, Aaron, his two sons, and seventy elders are called up the mountain – **and they saw God!**
  - It’s no small thing since normally – based on other places in Scripture – you’d expect them to die. The LORD even says later on in **chapter 33:20**, when Moses asked to see his glory, God said, *“you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”* Which is probably why v11 takes note of the fact that God, *“did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.”*
  
- ❖ So how are they able to see God here in chapter 24? Well notice that their gaze didn’t rise very high. It didn’t rise higher than God’s feet. **So when it says they saw or behold God – it’s more like they saw and beheld his feet and what’s under them.** It says under his feet was *“a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.”* That was the best attempt to put into words something so sublime and inexplicable. Sapphire is typically opaque blue, which is perhaps a way of describing the heavens.

- ❖ **So the whole point is that the great benefit of being in a covenant relationship with God is *that* acceptance, that affords *that* access, that allows us to see God.** And not only to see him but to feast with him. It says they behold God and ate and drank. They shared table fellowship with the Almighty God of the Universe.
  - It's one thing for a ragged, dirty orphan on the streets to get a chance to see the great king of the land. To catch a glimpse of him. **But it's an entirely different thing for that same orphan to find himself seated at the king's table, dressed in royal robes, feasting with a new family as a newly adopted son.** That's the kind of benefit that comes with being in a covenant relationship with the King of kings and Lord of lords.
  
- ❖ **But it's worth nothing that – even with the great privilege afforded these men to “see” God – it was still only a partial vision.** They only saw his feet. That's probably why Moses is still asking, later on, for a glimpse of God's glory. But there in chapter 33:23, he's only shown God's backside. So apparently no one got a solid, frontal view of God, face to face.
  
- ❖ That is, until the day a star shown overhead, over the little town of Bethlehem. **From that day on, the face of God could be seen by man; for the One who existed at the Father's side has come.** John 1:18 says, *“No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”* **That means in the face of Jesus is the face of God.**
  - The apostles were eyewitnesses of his majesty (2 Pet 1:16). They saw his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (Jn 1:14). They ate and drank on a daily basis with God Incarnate. And at their last meal together, Jesus held up a cup of wine and called it, *“my blood of the covenant”* (Mt 26:28). He was making an OT reference to our text, to chapter 24:8 and *“the blood of the covenant”* thrown onto the altar and the people.
  
- ❖ What the apostles experienced sounds amazing. We wish we could've been there at that Supper. To behold God Incarnate. To eat and drink with him. But don't be too envious. Because that was just a foretaste. **That was just an appetizer. Jesus even made note that the real feast is yet to come.**
  - After breaking the bread and serving the wine, Jesus went on to say in **Matthew 26:29**, *“I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.”*
  
- ❖ He was referring to the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19. **It's where Christ and his Bride, the redeemed people of the covenant, will be wed.** It's when covenant hope will be complete. When we will finally feast and fully fellowship with the LORD our God.
  - **Friends, the good news is that everyone is invited to that marriage supper, to that future, end-times feast.** For those wanting to see God, wanting to be closer to him, the invitation stands. The blood of the covenant has been shed and the way has been made. Will you receive Jesus as your Lord? Will you trust and obey?