

The Grace of the Covenant

Have you ever witnessed someone make a vow – a promise –
that you knew they couldn't and wouldn't keep?

Let me say that again – in case your still just dialing in.

Have you ever witnessed someone make a vow – a promise –
that you knew they couldn't and wouldn't keep?

I officiated a beautiful wedding last Sunday afternoon – and, as
always, I found myself stunned by the **all-encompassing** nature of the
marriage vows – *to love, comfort, honor and keep, in sickness and in health,*
and, forsaking all others, be faithful to one another for as long as you both
shall live...

Or last Sunday **morning** – at the conclusion of worship – we
commissioned **Michael McMullen** and **Curtis Harder** as elders – and I
asked them:

*Will you give yourself wholeheartedly to your calling as an elder in this
community...?*

*Will you **keep watch** over yourself and all the flock of which the Holy
Spirit has made you an overseer?*

*Will you **shepherd** the people of God, which Christ has bought with
His own blood?*

And more – to which they both replied, "**I will**".

I'm sure in that moment, they both felt – as we all felt – that no one
could keep this vow **perfectly**.

But, we ask the question and we make vows – because we need to name what we are after and what we will seek to live... what we will lean into Christ for...

Because it matters, doesn't it?

In both of these cases, **the stakes are high.**

In marriage, *the stakes are **high!*** In leadership, *the stakes are **high!***

Well, in a similar manner, but with even more gravity – **higher stakes** – we come today – in our study in **the Book of Exodus – to the moment in** the story where the Israelites **finally** affirm and embrace God's **covenant.**

Where they finally say, "**We will**" to God's covenant...

And I say **finally** – because like with a wedding day – Exodus 24 is not a random and unexpected event.

Everything has been leading toward this.

And the stakes couldn't be higher.

For Israel. For God. And for the world, too!

Life and death hang on this.

And so, although it's not the shortest chapter, I think it's worth reading **Exodus 24** in its entirety – as it marks such a monumental moment in the story of Israel and their relationship with God.

So, let me read it for us - **Exodus 24 (NIV)**

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu [these are Aaron's sons], and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the

LORD; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him."

When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, [which is the 10 Commandments, literally, '10 **words**', and the Book of the Covenant – Exodus 20-23 – which we explored last Sunday] they responded with one voice, "**Everything the LORD has said we will do.**" Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.

He got up early the next morning and build an Altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. [So, the burnt offerings were exactly that – offerings placed completely on the fire and utterly consumed by the flames; whereas the fellowship offering was sacrificed – the blood drained – and set aside – and the meat cooked separately to be eaten as a holy meal by the participants]. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the Altar. **Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people.** They responded, "**We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.**" [the Hebrew word here "shema" means both 'listen' and 'obey'. In the Hebrew mind, one has not listened if one has not obeyed.]

(v.8) **Moses then took the blood, sprinkled** it on the people and said, "**This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.**"

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up **and saw the God of Israel.** [Don't ignore this – this is a startling moment of sheer grace – they "went up and saw the God of Israel".] Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli [often thought to be sapphire], as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; **they saw God, and they ate and drank.**

(v.12) **The LORD said to Moses,** "Come up to the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction."

Then Moses set out with Joshua his aide, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. He said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them." [Moses has finally learned to practice what he learned from Jethro – his father inlaw. He delegates authority to others. Way to go Moses!]

When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, **and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai.** [The Hebrew word for "settled" can also be translated, 'dwelt', or 'abode' or 'tabernacled'... It's the word we encounter in the coming chapters – "The glory of the LORD tabernacle on Mt Sinai..."] For six days the cloud covered the mountain, **and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud.**

*To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain. **Then Moses entered the cloud** as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.*

As they say in the Anglican tradition,

**"The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God."**

Let's pray.

As I said at the outset, the events of Exodus 24 have been in the works for some time. In truth, this has been what God has intended from the start. This is **the goal of the Exodus and the Law** – the goal of Israel's salvation – not just to rescue them from Egypt, but that they would become **God's covenant community** – *a people who will bear God's Name* – *a people who are alive and free in God's character and ways* – *for the sake of God's glory, and for the blessing of the world...*

In truth, the events of Exodus 24 have been in the works since **long before** the Exodus.

Listen to **God's word** to Abram in **Genesis 12**.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

*'I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;*

*I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.*

*I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;*

And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Through you... through this nation that will come from you.

This was God's plan from the beginning – from the Garden of Creation even – to form a people for Himself – ***a people who would know and worship Him – and whose lives and life together would consequently be a revelation of God's goodness and purposes for all creation.***

And the Israelites know this – ***God has told them*** – back in **Exodus 19** – when they arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

Exodus 19:3-6

*Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my **covenant**, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me **a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**'"*

And right there, in response to God's stated purpose – God's declaration of intent – to make a covenant with Israel – that ***He would be their God, and they would be His people*** – the Israelites responded together right away – (Ex 19:8), "**We will do everything the LORD has said.**"

Which **is admirable!**

They hadn't yet heard the terms of the covenant – they didn't yet know what all it would entail to enter into covenant with YAHWEH. God hadn't spoken the 10 Commandments yet or the Book of the Covenant.

But they knew enough to already respond together – "*We will do everything the LORD has said.*"

"We will do everything the LORD has said."

It makes me think of a lot of our **conversion stories**.

In **Matthew 4:19**, Jesus approaches two fishermen on the shore of the Sea of Galilee – Simon and Andrew – and calls them to be his disciples – **"Come, follow me,"** he says. And **they leave their nets and go**.

They have **no idea** what this will ultimately mean for their lives, but they know enough to say "Yes". We read, **"At once they left their nets and followed him."** And **as they followed**, they came to truly understand who He was and what it meant to be His disciples.

Which, I think, is the case for most of us. *I know it was for me. I had very little understanding of what I was getting into at the start.*

In a way, this is **Israel** in **Exodus 19** – saying "Yes" to a life with God that they don't **yet** understand. But they know enough to know that this God was their Deliverer, the God who heard their cry, a God of compassion – in whose worship is freedom...

"We will do everything the LORD has said."

And with this declaration of intent (we'll call it), God lays out **the terms** of the Covenant – **Exodus 20-23** – the 10 Commandments and the Book of the Covenant – which we've spent the better part of the last 4 months studying.

Which bring us – finally – to **Exodus 24**.

Now, because of our historical and cultural distance, we tend to read or hear this chapter as **a collection of fascinating moments** – the reading of the Law, the people responding to God with a united "YES" (two times in this chapter); Moses builds an altar and gives a sacrifice; there's some gross and weird things that happen with the blood of the sacrifice; and then, after it all, Moses and a select group are summoned up the mountain to share a meal with God.

It's an **intriguing** chapter – but the more I've studied it, the more I've come to understand that it is all really **one coherent event** – each part **an essential component** of an **ancient near eastern covenant ceremony** – by which the Israelites embraced and confirmed their covenant with God.

By which the Israelites embraced and confirmed that YAHWEH would **be their God and they would be His people.**

This is the biblical **covenant** formula – "*I will be their God and they will be My people.*" (Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 31:33).

What a beautiful gift of grace into which Israel was invited.

And so this chapter gives us the account of the **covenant ceremony** – a ceremony that involved **4 essential parts – (1)** the reading of the Covenant **terms** = the Law, (2) the people's oath, (3) the sprinkling of the blood, and (4) a holy meal.

Each part an essential component of confirming the covenant.

Now, I'm sure we'd expected the first two parts – the reading of the covenant terms and the people's response – "**we will**".

The Israelites need to understand the terms of the covenant and they need to respond in agreement.

But beyond this, we need to linger on the latter two covenant components – because **they are less familiar**, but also because **the implications are staggering** [both pointing toward the gospel].

So, what's the deal with the **sprinkling of the blood**?

That's the part that probably bewilders most us. *I know it has for me.*

So, let me read it again for us. **Exodus 24:6-8**... Having built an altar and sacrificed a bull **or bulls – we read ...**

*Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half **he splashed against the altar**. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey."*

*Moses then took the blood, **sprinkled it on the people** and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."*

What's this about? Why the splattering of blood on the altar and on the people? (*Sounds disgusting. If we did this next Sunday morning during worship, I have a sneaking suspicion our numbers might go down!*)

So what's with the blood?

Well, first of all, as many of us know, for Jews, in accordance to the teaching of scripture, blood represents **life**.

As Leviticus 17 states, "*The life of a creature is in the blood.*"

Understandable, Jews avoided contact with blood at all costs.

But here, in the covenant ceremony, Moses sprinkles the blood of the sacrifice on both the **altar** (which represented God) and **on the people** – making this a "**blood covenant**" – a covenant that declared that Israel's life is bound up with God, and God with Israel.

Note the structure or order of the ceremony – **the blood of the sacrifice** is splashed on the altar (representing God) – then **God's words are read** and the people respond – after which the blood of the sacrifice **is sprinkled on** the people. Their words of covenant are ***sealed by the blood of the sacrifice.***

Which is to say, that by this, they are declaring that this covenant is a **matter of life or death.**

As one commentator explains (and many others confirm),

"**When the blood is divided into halves,** with one half being thrown on God (the altar) and the other half being thrown on the people, the two parties to the covenant are swearing in blood that they will keep the covenant and are calling down death on themselves if they default." (John Oswalt)

Do you hear that last part?

This is what was **meant** by this act of blood sprinkling in an **ancient near eastern covenant ceremony** – both parties were declaring that this covenant is so important to keep, that they are ***calling down death on themselves*** if they failed to keep it!

As v.8 reads, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

The implications of this are staggering!

But, before we go there, we need to touch on the **final** component of the covenant ceremony – the meal – **a holy meal** – shared between the two covenant parties.

We actually see this again and again in the Old Testament wherever a covenant is made. But it's not just the final act of the covenant. **It is itself a glimpse of the goal of this covenant** – not just a promise of obedience and requisite protection or blessing, but the enjoyment of God's intimacy, God's friendship and the bounty of creation – as good friends would share a meal together, or a husband and wife...

In reality, this is where the whole story of redemption is pointing – to what the Book of Revelation describes as "the Marriage Supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19) – where God's people will feast together **with God** in the abundance of a new creation – forever...

Not that all of eternity will be sitting at a table eating – but all of life – in eternity – will be experienced in the intimacy of God and the bounty of His good provision...

The Law was read. The people promised their obedience. A sacrifice was made and the blood of the covenant applied. And a meal was enjoyed.

The covenant between Israel and God was confirmed.

... **And 8 chapters later** – Exodus 32 – tired of waiting for Moses to return from meeting with YAHWEH, their covenant God, the Israelites gathered around Aaron and petitioned him to make them "*gods who would go before them*".

8 chapters later – they chose to worship idols.

Because Moses was taking too long and they were becoming impatient, they **broke** the covenant they had made with YAHWEH, the God who had rescued them.

They turned from the worship of their God for the familiarity and ease of idols they could control...

Now, we're not going to jump ahead to **Exodus 32** today. We'll let Tom Cowan take us there in a few weeks.

But, **this morning**, I want to simply linger on **the people's response** – this promise of perfect loyalty and utterly faithfulness to God.

Three times on the mountain, we hear the people say (some version of): **"We will do everything the LORD has said."**

And I don't know about you – but my response is always some version of "**REALLY?**" – "**Do you really think so?**"

And I don't think I'm the only one.

I think most of us have a sense, right away, that **they won't do it.**

And we know this, possibly because *we know the story* – but also, more so, ***because we know ourselves.***

We know **they couldn't do it** because we know ***we couldn't do it.***

It's just not possible. *Not for them. And not for us.*

Because we are, sadly, all **covenant-breakers...**

Because of sin, ***we are all covenant-breakers.***

As the old hymn says, we are "*prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.*"

Hence, my question at the start: ***"Have you ever witnessed someone make a vow – a promise – that you knew they couldn't and wouldn't keep?"***

This is how I feel when I read Exodus 24 and hear the Israelites profess their utter and unending loyalty to God in the covenant.

"We will do everything the LORD has said." – they say.

But they won't. And we know it. Because they – like us – are covenant-***breakers...***

But here's the thing: **God knows this!**

He knew it **then** – when He made the covenant with Israel – just as He knows it **now** – of us.

Truth is, ***He knows us better than we know ourselves.***

John Oswalt, an Exodus scholar whom I quoted earlier, wisely describes the Israelites – and us – this way. He says,

"If the people who crossed the sea did not know God, **neither did they know themselves.** They did not realize that ever since the events recorded in Genesis 3 [the Fall], there has been resident in us a settled hostility to God's will and way in our lives. They believed that to serve God only required an act of decision... They were not insincere in their declaration of their intention to obey God in everything. They simply did not know the problem...." (John Oswalt)

But thankfully, **God did** and **God does.**

And because of this, in the sovereign mercy and grace of God toward Israel and all – including us – this **very** covenant **confirmed with blood** – which Israel would, in short-order, break – actually points us toward a **new** and **better** covenant that God – **the Covenant-Keeper** – would ultimately make.

But **this time,** the covenant would be made **in God's own blood** – as God Himself, in Jesus, would become the sacrifice – **for us...** taking on Himself the **curse** of our covenant-breaking – *taking on Himself the death our covenant-breaking demands.*

Right? That's the implication of this covenant!

That the party who breaks the covenant must die.

But in the grace of God, the Covenant-Keeper – GOD Himself – has taken our place – died the death we deserve – so that now, in grace, we might be drawn into a new covenant – a better covenant – **open to all.**

Where, in the shocking, scandalous mercy and love of God, God

Himself **is** both the **Sacrifice**, the **Meal** AND the **Covenant-Keeper**...

Hear the gracious promise of God through the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 31:31f.

*"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make **a new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.*

It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, " declares the LORD.

*"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. **"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.***

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Do you hear the **layers** of **grace** in this?

A new covenant – for a covenant-breakers!

Forgiveness – for betrayers!

And with this – the **coming of God Himself** to keep the covenant **for us** and **in us**! *"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts - **by the Spirit** – as the New Testament ultimately reveals!*

All in the mercy and grace of **our Covenant-Keeping, Rescuing God!**

A grace we declare and celebrate every time we share the Lord's Supper – our **new covenant** meal – a covenant **made in God's blood**.

Hear again the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthian church.

1 Corinthian 11:23-26

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given

thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me'.

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

That by this covenant – a covenant made in grace – a covenant confirmed by Jesus' blood – GOD – the Covenant-Keeper – would keep us faithful.

So, what are we to do?

Well two things, I think.

One: Like Israel – we must say **YES** – to God and the life He calls us to – for this is the Way to LIFE and the Way that is LIFE.

Where else can we turn?

But with this, in this, what can we do but confess that in ourselves, we can't keep the covenant – and to let this knowledge lead us to lean into Christ – the Covenant-Keeper – again today... or maybe for the first time...

To embrace a posture of **repentance and faith** – confessing our sinfulness, rejoicing in the grace and faithfulness of Christ, and following Him in dependent faith for His grace to empower us to be faithful... as He is Faithful...

Come to Christ today – that He might make you faithful.