

THE STORY

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Chapter 5: New Commands and a New Covenant

Key Question: How do we fulfill the purpose to which God has called us?

Kingdom of Priests

Pages 59–61

Three months to the day after escaping Egyptian slavery, the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai.¹ God told Moses to explain that to which he was calling them.

1. (a) What had the Israelites seen, and what did this tell them about God (Exodus 19:4)? (b) God was about to offer to make a covenant—or contract—with the Israelites. What was the Israelites' part of the covenant (19:5a) (c) If they did that, what would they become (19:5b–6)?

God called the Israelites to obey his commands and be his treasured possession—a nation he cared for and blessed. They would be a kingdom of priests—a people set apart for God's service, making him known to all people groups, and teaching what was right and wrong in God's eyes. They would be a holy nation—a land set apart for God's purpose.

But to fulfill their calling, they had to obey God fully. Only then could other nations see the result and wisdom of God's laws.² Moses later explained it this way:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?³

¹ Mount Sinai is probably another name for Mount Horeb, where Moses had seen the burning bush.

² Jesus later told his disciples that if they held to his teaching (that is, obeyed him), then they would know the truth and the truth would set them free from slavery to sin (John 8:31–34).

³ Deuteronomy 4:5–8.

The New Testament tells us Christians are likewise “chosen...for obedience to Jesus Christ.”⁴ It says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

2. (a) God chose you for obedience to Jesus; how can you fulfill this purpose? (b) God calls you to be a royal priesthood. A priest’s duties are serving God, proclaiming God, teaching what is right and wrong according to God, and guiding others to the mercy of God. Briefly describe one way you’ve fulfilled that purpose. (c) God calls Christians to be a holy nation—a people set apart to serve God and experience his blessings. How are you fulfilling that purpose? (d) God calls you to belong to him; what does that mean to you? (e) What praises can you declare about God as a result of his calling you out of darkness and into light?

From the base of Mount Sinai, God spoke.

3. (a) What did the people see and hear as God spoke (Exodus 20:18)? (b) How did they react (20:18–19)? (c) Why do you think they feared they might die if they continued to hear God’s thunderous voice? (d) Moses told them not to fear dying then, for that wasn’t the purpose of these signs. What was the purpose (20:20)?

⁴ 1 Peter 1:2, 15.

A child might know her parent loves her and wants the best for her, and yet fear her loving parent's discipline if she does wrong; that fear keeps her safe from the consequences of wrongdoing when she doesn't yet understand the reason for her parent's commands. The Israelites had come from a land that neither knew nor followed God's laws, and they weren't going to understand God's reasoning behind all of them. They needed to understand that God's power to punish rebellion was real.

4. (a) Does fearing fire's ability to harm cause you to avoid it, or to handle it safely? Explain.
- (b) Similarly, how does fearing the consequences of disobeying God keep people from sin?
- (c) Should the fear of God cause us to avoid God or avoid sin? Explain. (d) As some Israelites grew to know God's love and to trust his intentions, how would their motivation not to sin change?

Moses had already chosen to obey God even when he didn't understand the reasons, and he had seen God act powerfully, benevolently, and faithfully. Consequently, he trusted God and didn't fear approaching him. Therefore, the people begged Moses to mediate between them and God as they "remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was."⁵

The Ten Commandments

Pages 61–62

God gave the terms of the covenant he offered.

5. (a) Who would be the parties to the covenant, and what was their relationship (Exodus 20:2)?
- (b) Why was it important for the Israelites to remember what God had already done for them?
- (c) When we are tempted to disobey God, why is it important to remember what God has already done for us?

⁵ Exodus 20:21.

God's last six commands told how the Israelites should relate to each other.

8. (a) How are the fifth through tenth commandments ways to love others (Exodus 20:12–17)?
(b) Pick two of the commands and briefly describe an incident for each where you or someone else didn't follow it and thereby hurt others⁸ (please don't give names if the incident is not public knowledge). (c) How might knowing the hurt that disobedience causes help us to choose obedience and trust God? (d) How can disobeying the tenth command lead to disobeying the other commands?

The Covenant

Pages 62–64

Along with the Ten Commandments, God gave Moses the Book of the Covenant.⁹ Moses repeated the Lord's commands and laws to the Israelites, and they agreed to obey them. He wrote everything down.

The next morning, Moses built an altar to God and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. He sacrificed animals and sprinkled half the blood on the altar.

9. (a) What did Moses do next (Exodus 24:7a)? (b) How did the people respond (24:7b)? (c) What did Moses do after that?

⁸ One of the ways we come to know good and evil is by seeing what results from them, not just in our own lives, but in the lives of all we know.

⁹ The Book of the Covenant is Exodus 21:1–23:19.

In ancient times, covenant making involved oaths accompanied by blood sacrifice. The blood symbolized the parties' agreement that they deserved death if they broke the covenant. Thus the Lord God made a covenant¹⁰ with the Israelites and they became his people.

God called Moses up Mount Sinai where he remained forty days and forty nights while God showed him how to make a tabernacle, furnishings for worship, and the ark of the covenant. He also gave him instructions on the priesthood and how to worship him acceptably.

10. (a) When the Israelites had made everything, what would God do (Exodus 25:8)? (b) How were they to make the tabernacle and furnishings (25:9)?

The tabernacle was a copy of a real, heavenly tabernacle, and therefore Moses had to ensure the Israelites made it just as God had instructed.¹¹

When God finished speaking to Moses, he wrote the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets.

The Golden Calf

Pages 64–67

The Israelites weren't expecting Moses to be gone so long, and they began to doubt he would return. They told Aaron to make them a god to lead them.

11. (a) What did Aaron make with the people's gold jewelry (Exodus 32:4)? (b) What did they say about it? (c) How is this similar to someone promising to follow God if God delivers them from something, but after the deliverance reneges and claims the deliverance came from another source (such as luck or their own skill)? (d) How is this similar to someone receiving something prayed for, but attributing the answered prayer to something else?

¹⁰ Christians now call this the "Old Covenant."

¹¹ Hebrews 8:5.

Forty days after making their covenant with the Lord God, the Israelites broke it.

Moses descended the mountain and in disbelief beheld dancing and revelry and bowing before a golden calf. He hurled the stone tablets to the ground. They shattered, symbolizing the broken covenant. He cried out for any who were still for the Lord. The Levites ran to him. He told them God's judgment, and they put to the sword three thousand of those who had broken their oath to worship the Lord God alone and make no idols.

The next day Moses went before the Lord to intercede for the people.

12. (a) What did Moses ask God to do if he would not forgive the Israelites their sin (Exodus 32:32)?
- (b) Would God do this to Moses (32:33)?
- (c) Nonetheless, what consequences would come (32:34)?

The Lord kept a book with the names of those who were truly his—for not all descendants of Israel were such.¹²

God told Moses to lead the people to the Promised Land—he would not wipe them out. But he said he would not go with them.

The Glory of the Lord

Pages 67–70

Moses went into the tent where he regularly met with God to intercede for the people and ask God to go with them on their journey.

13. (a) What had God told Moses about their relationship (Exodus 33:12b)?
- (b) Why did Moses want God to teach him his ways (33:1)?
- (c) How does learning God's ways help us to know God and honor him?
- (d) How can we learn God's ways?
- (e) How did God respond (33:14)?
- (f) What does that teach us about intercessory prayer?

¹² Later God will reveal more about the book of life, for the Promised Land to which God was bringing the Israelites was a type of a heavenly dwelling promised to those whose names are written in the book of life. See Romans 9:6.

After this assurance, Moses asked to see God's glory. God told him to ascend to the top of Mount Sinai the next day with two more stone tablets to replace the broken ones. Moses did so.

14. (a) What did the Lord proclaim when he descended in a cloud (Exodus 34:5)? (b) When he passed Moses, how did he describe himself (34:6–7)? (c) What does this description tell you about your relationship with God? (d) The Lord repeated part of the fifth commandment: people were to honor their parents, but not by following them into sin.¹³ What would happen if people chose to repeat the sins of their parents or grandparents¹⁴ (34:7b)?

Moses worshipped God, and God wrote the Ten Commandments on the two new stone tablets. Moses stayed on Mount Sinai another forty days, pleading with God on behalf of the people.¹⁵ When he finally descended, his face was radiant.

He guided the people in making the tabernacle, furnishings, and ark of the covenant. When they finished, he placed the stone tablets in the ark and placed the ark in the holy of holies within the tabernacle.

15. When all was completed, what happened (Exodus 40:34–35)?

The Israelites were now ready to set off for the Promised Land where they could fulfill their purpose of being a kingdom of priests making the Lord God known to the world.

¹³ Exodus 20:5–6; Deuteronomy 5:9–10.

¹⁴ This verse does not mean the innocent will be punished for their ancestors' sins, but rather that those who choose to continue in their ancestors' sins will receive the same punishment as their ancestors (Deuteronomy 24:16). For more on this topic, see <http://jeanejones.net/2012/05/sins-of-the-fathers/>.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 9:25.