

Now we come to another important step in God 's plan of redemption for mankind.

- ◆ Last time we looked at the covenants God established with Noah and Abraham.
- ◆ Up to this point in the story God has been dealing with select individuals, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
- ◆ Now He chooses to expand His plan to include a nation.
- ◆ His choice of a nation is interesting, as it was not one of great power and influence, but rather an oppressed people living as slaves under the domination of one of the major powers of the time, Egypt.
- ◆ ***Exodus 3:7 The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.***
- ◆ God, as he promised to Abraham earlier, was going to make this poor oppressed nation into a mighty nation that reached its zenith during the later rule of King David and Solomon.
- ◆ But this verse also gives us another insight into God's character.
- ◆ What we see here is a God who hears the suffering of those who are oppressed (Psalms 9:9).
- ◆ He doesn't always intervene to stop this oppression as he did in this case. Rather He is a God who joins people in their suffering.
- ◆ It is faith in a God who suffers with them that has given hope to many oppressed people down through the ages.
- ◆ So we can take heart from the fact God does hear our cries and although He may not directly intervene to change a situation, He will join with us to help us cope with our distress.
- ◆ But there was also a dark side to Israel's nature, as Jesus would go on to say, both Nineveh, Sodom and Gomorrah would have repented in dust and ashes long ago if the same message had been performed in there cities (Matthew 12:41).
- ◆ God chose Israel despite their stiff-necked, recalcitrant and rebellious nature in order to demonstrate what He had planned for all humanity with His future covenant of love and grace.

God's choice to lead the rescue of His chosen nation was also an interesting decision.

- ◆ He chose an 80-year-old criminal on the run hiding in the desert.
- ◆ He had a promising career in Pharaoh's palace before he decided to kill an Egyptian who was beating up on a Hebrew slave.
- ◆ God's "Hall of Fame" is littered with dubious characters of similar background to Moses.
- ◆ Again this is testimony to God's mercy towards sinners and His ability to work with those who are willing to put their faith and trust in His hands.
- ◆ After some reluctance on Moses' part and God's concession to allow Moses' brother Aaron to accompany him, God sets about delivering His chosen people from the oppression of the Egyptians.
- ◆ ***Exodus 3:8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites***
- ◆ God unleashed a series of ten plagues on the Egyptians before Pharaoh allowed Moses to lead God's people out of Egypt.
- ◆ The use of supernatural plagues was indicative of the superstitious nature of peoples at that time.
- ◆ The fact that Egyptian magicians were able to imitate Aaron's miracles shows the forces of darkness were very much a part of pagan worship (Exodus 7:8-13).
- ◆ The Israelites were also infected with this obsession with the supernatural as was evident later by them demanding Aaron build them a golden calf (Exodus 32:1-4).
- ◆ It was because of this superstitious culture that God employed supernatural means to free his people.
- ◆ He wanted to demonstrate to both Israelites and Egyptians who really controls the spiritual realm.
- ◆ Finally after the death angel plague, Pharaoh relents and releases the Israelites.
- ◆ Moses then led them through the Red Sea and they arrive at Mt. Sinai.

God had planned a special event for the Israelite nation at this location.

- ◆ He would establish a covenant with them to guide them into becoming His special people.
- ◆ I mentioned in the introduction of this series we would spend some time looking in more detail at the Old and New Covenants.
- ◆ This emphasis is a result of my own church background.

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- ◆ I grew up in a church, which as a result of a failure to understand the vast spiritual differences between the Mosaic and the New Covenant, led to a distorted view of God and a legalistic approach to Christianity.
- ◆ We observed the seventh-day Sabbath as well as other aspects of the Mosaic Covenant such as clean and unclean foods.
- ◆ Fortunately due to the grace of God, and a change of leadership, our church suffered through an extended painful period as we were dragged kicking and screaming from our legalistic and self-righteous ways to enjoying the liberating freedom of the grace of God.
- ◆ Much of what follows about this section on the Covenants is in response to that painful journey with the hope others who may also be steeped in legalism will make the transition to grace.
- ◆ As an oppressed people in Egypt, the Israelites had no government structure, no codified laws, and no recognised form of worship.
- ◆ They were basically a rabble of an estimated 2-3 million people crossing a hostile environment.
- ◆ Some structure needed to be introduced in order to avoid the potential chaos.
- ◆ We witnessed what happened in Iraq after the coalition invaded and stripped the country of its infrastructure without having a replacement.
- ◆ This covenant was unique in that it allowed for the opportunity to install a structure where both the administrative and spiritual aspects of government were pulling in the same direction.
- ◆ It was a theocracy under the divine guidance of God with Moses as the mediator between God and the nation.
- ◆ There was no separation of church and state that we find in our western democracies.
- ◆ In this particular case, Moses headed up the administrative side (prophet) and Aaron the spiritual (priest), but in many respects the two branches worked together in a complementary fashion.
- ◆ A third foundation was added later with the establishment of a kingly line under King David in Jerusalem.
- ◆ The amount of detail that God provided that went into the establishment of the covenant also highlighted the lack of skills necessary for the normal functioning of a nation.
- ◆ They were not called the “children of Israel” for nothing. The use of the word “children” emphasised the level of maturity of the people in both administrative and spiritual matters.

But the covenant established through Moses with the children of Israel was much more than a structure of government.

- ◆ The main reason for this is captured in Exodus 6 at the beginning of the Exodus.
- ◆ ***Exodus 6:6-8 “Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.’ ⁷ I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. ⁸ And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.”***
- ◆ God has not deviated from His purpose of creating a holy people with whom He can come and dwell.
- ◆ Earlier we were talking about the superstitious nature of people at that time and it was common for people to believe in many gods.
- ◆ God was establishing with Israel the fact that He was going to be their special God and they were going to be his chosen people.
- ◆ Of course the Egyptians and surrounding nations had their own pagan gods that were peculiar to them but God through the plagues he unleashed on the Egyptians and what was to transpire in the Israelite’s trek to the Promised Land was to show there was no god as powerful as the God of Israel.

Despite the fact Israel was now God’s special nation, and He had revealed Himself to them as their God, this was the first step in the reconciliation process.

- ◆ As such the covenant was designed to maintain an arm’s length relationship between a holy God and His people.
- ◆ It is not until we get to the New Covenant that Jesus introduces concepts of God being a Father in the familial sense or uses the affectionate term, “Abba.”
- ◆ The term Father is only used of God 15 times in the entire Old Testament while it is used 165 times in just the four Gospels in the New Testament.

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- ◆ When Father is used in the Old Testament, its use is more in the corporate sense like the Father of the nation.
- ◆ So in a sense God is still at a distance from his people.
- ◆ He is more like “God above them” than “God with us” as in the case of Jesus (Emmanuel) in the New Testament and “God in us” as Christians born of the Holy Spirit.
- ◆ This arm’s length relationship was reaffirmed when God warned Moses to make sure the children of Israel were not to approach the mountain where God was to speak to them (Exodus 19:10-13) and the guidelines concerning the priesthood and the tabernacle.
- ◆ God was only to be approached by Moses or the priesthood – they became the mediators between God and man.
- ◆ Another one of those archetypes that was later to be replicated in the New Covenant era.
- ◆ But there was a reason for this arm’s length relationship.
- ◆ **Exodus 19:23 Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, ‘Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.’”**
- ◆ There was this huge gulf between a holy, righteous God and a sinful people and ne’er the twain would meet until the people were proclaimed holy.
- ◆ And then as if to remind the people of this great gulf, God delivers the Ten Commandments along with the other 603 commands that make up the Torah, as a code of behaviour to govern the Israelites in becoming His holy people.
- ◆ This is in line with God’s promise to, **“take you as my own people, and I will be your God”** to which He adds, **“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2).**
- ◆ In effect, this is just another way of reiterating His purpose to “make man in our image.”
- ◆ And in order to encourage them to obey his commandments He promises to bless them for obedience and curse them for disobedience (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28)
- ◆ Sometimes the words covenants and law are confused but the blessings and curses is another one of those areas that differentiate between covenants and laws.
- ◆ Laws only work as a negative motivation as a deterrent to crime while God’s covenant with Israel had the added positive aspect of rewarding obedient behaviour.

Now this was all fine in theory, but what was the problem with this covenant?

- ◆ What we see here is a repetition of the scenario that played out in the Garden of Eden.
- ◆ As mentioned earlier, faithfulness and allegiance is very important to God.
- ◆ Now, with the introduction of the Mosaic Covenant, the allegiance of a whole nation is being put to the test.
- ◆ But was mankind any better at obedience now than it was in the Garden of Eden?
- ◆ And was the law, which was part of the covenant capable of making people holy?
- ◆ We have to go to the New Testament to find the answer.
- ◆ **Romans 5:20 The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase.**
- ◆ No, it was introduced to magnify the vast gulf between a holy God and a sinful people.
- ◆ **Romans 3:20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.**
- ◆ The law was introduced to highlight sin and magnify our sinfulness.
- ◆ It is only when we acknowledge how sinful we really are, and our helplessness in becoming holy through our own means that we will look to the Saviour of sinners.
- ◆ **Galatians 3:23-25 (JB Phillips) Before the coming of faith we were all imprisoned under the power of the Law, with our only hope of deliverance the faith that was to be shown to us. Or, to change the metaphor, the Law was like a strict governess in charge of us until we went to the school of Christ and learned to be justified by faith in him. Once we had that faith we were completely free from the governess’s authority.**
- ◆ Just as today’s secular laws bring a certain amount of order to a society, so the Mosaic covenant did the same for Israel when they obeyed them.
- ◆ But just as our secular laws haven’t brought about a perfect society, so the Mosaic Law failed in bringing perfection, but as we just read, this was not its intention.
- ◆ It was simply a stopgap measure until the real way of achieving holiness was introduced that was to come later.

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- ◆ The answer to humanity's problems is not going to come about as a result of more laws, as laws are incapable of changing the heart and this is where the real problem lies.
- ◆ It will not be until the New Covenant is introduced that the heart problem is addressed.
- ◆ Next time we will look at the Mosaic Covenant in relation to the other covenants God instituted with man.