

"The LORD Did Not Make This Covenant With Our Fathers"

So here we are. We have finally gotten into the heart of the book. We've finally begun to start studying the law. The passage we just read is the introduction to the retelling of the Ten Commandments. Starting next week and for the next several weeks we'll be looking at a number of the Ten Commandments in depth before we head into the rest of the book. But for today I want us to think about law more generally. First we'll think about the general nature of the law as given in these Ten Commandments. Then I want us to think about how this law specifically relates to the covenants that God had made with his people. Both this covenant made at Mt Horeb, and the previous covenant he had made with Father Abraham. Finally, we'll think about how this all relates to the new covenant.

And so let's look first at the law in general. Notice how this passage introduces the law to us. That's how it starts off right in verse 44 of chapter 4. "This is the law." The Hebrew word for law there is *torah*. That's why the first five books of the Bible are often referred to as the Torah, because they are the books about the Law being given in the Old Covenant.

Verse 45 goes on to explain for us what is involved in this Torah, in this law. There are testimonies, statutes, and judgments. Chapter 5, verse 1, goes on to say something similar. "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your hearing today." All of this language is introduction to the law that Moses is giving the people. And so you can think of the law in two ways. You can think about it in summary terms, or in its complete fashion. In summary terms, you have the Ten Commandments. That's what this chapter lists. That's what's engraved on the two stone tablets. But Moses has been mentioning all sorts of laws; testimonies, statutes, judgments. The fuller Torah is all the different sorts of laws and commandments that Moses will share with the people after he reads the overall Ten Commandments. That's a total of some 613 unique commandments. And so the Ten Commandments reflect the summary of God's law, but the covenant actually had many more rules that expanded on this summary.

And yet when we look at the Ten Commandments, we generally recognize something unique about them. They are not just a summary of the *many* laws under the old covenant. They are really something more profound than that. They are really a summary of God's moral laws. There is a timelessness to these laws that transcends just the nation of Israel. Yes, even the Ten Commandments mention some things specific to the nation of Israel in them. But what's at the heart of these commandments is really the heart of God's enduring standard of righteousness.

In other words, these moral laws stand the test of time. They don't become outdated. They don't pass out of relevance just because times have changed or even that the nation of Israel as it existed back then no longer exists. This is important to note, because we can't say the same thing about all the many numerous laws in the old covenant. There are ceremonial laws in the old covenant that found their fulfillment in Jesus. We ought not to keep those any more. And there were civil laws that were unique to Israel as a nation under God that we are not called to exactly reinstate anymore, but we should certainly learn from their principles. But these Ten Commandments are a summary of God's moral laws. They never pass away or lose relevance or fall out of context. We can and should learn them and seek to keep them as Christians. A helpful contrast can be made just by thinking about the difference in how these were recorded. The many numerous laws would have been recorded on some sort of parchment or scroll. The Ten Commandments, however, were engraved on the stone tablets. Stone obviously has an enduring quality to it, just like the Ten Commandments.

And so just for clarity, let me repeat this point. In the old covenant, we'll find three types of laws. Moral, Ceremonial, and Civil. I know I've mentioned this a few times in the last few sermons, but I want to make sure we really get this point. And so there is the moral, ceremonial, and civil laws. Only the moral laws are directly binding upon us today. And the moral laws in the Old Covenant are very simply to be found summarized right here in the Ten Commandments. The rest of the many statutes and commands in the Mosaic Covenant are still very helpful for us. We can still learn from them. But God hasn't called us to keep those as he did the nation of Israel. They served a specific purpose at that time, and so we can learn from them. But the moral laws, we ought to always seek to keep, because we realize that they express God's standard of righteousness. They tell us what God says is righteous godly behavior.

Of course this is not to say that we only learn about God's standard of righteousness from the Ten Commandments. No, that's why I've tried to make clear that these Ten Commandments are a *summary* of God's moral law. A summary is not exhaustive, but it is hopefully comprehensive. Obviously if we turn to other places in Scripture we can find lots of other moral commands and principles. For example, look at all the New Testament letters. They basically all end with some set of commands and admonitions for Christians. Most of these commands are not word for word quotes of the Ten Commandments. And yet we can see that in some way on another every command elsewhere in Scripture can find its root in this summary of God's moral laws.

Just think about how Jesus himself summarized God's moral law. When people asked him which was the greatest commandment, he gave them two. The first was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. And the second was to love your neighbor as yourself. Well, isn't that a summary of the Ten Commandments? Just look at them. Chapter 5, verses 6-15 contain the first four commandments. They all are about loving God; about our duties toward God. Verses 16-21 then contain the final six commandments. They are all about loving our neighbor; about our duties toward man.

Well, that's a basic introduction to the law. In the old covenant, there are three kinds of laws, moral, ceremonial, and civil. And the Ten Commandments are a summary of the moral law. And the moral law can be broken up into two parts: our duty toward God, and our duty toward man.

Let's turn now and think more about the relationship of the law to the old covenant. Notice first how God is emphasizing the fact that the covenant has been made with them specifically. Chapter 5, verse 1, contains a very formal summons by Moses. It says that all Israel is being called out to hear this retelling of the covenant law. Verse 2 specifically says that God had made a covenant with them at Mt Horeb. Verse 3 again specifically says that God made the covenant with all of them that were there and alive there that day. The next two verses, verses 4-5, really envision that these people were actually right there when the covenant was first made at Mount Sinai. Moses recalls the fire on the mountain. He recalls the very direct way God had spoke to the people. And so all these verses really emphasize that God had made a covenant specifically with these people who now stood here alive that day before Moses. The people who stood there on the edge of the Promised Land eager to finally get out of the wilderness and settle down into a new God-given home. Moses says that God had made this covenant with them.

But remember, Moses is telling all of this to the next generation after Mt. Horeb. Remember, God had made the covenant on Mount Horeb about forty years before. The men and women who had received that covenant then broke trust with God when they murmured against God; when they saw the giants of the Promised Land and accused God of hating them and bringing them to their death at the hand of the giants. But God brought judgment on that unbelieving generation. He sent them back into the wilderness and said that they would all die, and that it would be their children who would grow up in the wilderness that would finally take hold of the Promised Land.

And so realize, that the people who this day in our passage were now receiving the law and the covenant was this next generation. Many of them were probably not even born when the covenant was made at Mount Horeb. Pretty much the rest of them would have been too young to really understand what was going on at the time, but they would at least have been there. And yet Moses emphasizes that nonetheless the covenant had been made with them. Of course, this is how a covenant community works. They had been born into the covenant community. The laws and obligations of the covenant fell upon them as the next generation to keep. That shouldn't surprise us - just think of our nation as an analogy. What the U.S. Government does today, good or bad, obligates our children and their children. That's just a rough analogy of what's going on here with the covenant community. Moses can rightly say that the covenant was made with them, this next generation. In the same way in the new covenant, when we have children, they are right from the start being brought into the covenant community. That's why we baptize them into the covenant, much like circumcision was done in the old covenant. And it's why we encourage the covenant children to be in the worship service as much as they are able. Because what goes on here has as much to do about them, as it does for the adults. And so kids, listen up today, because what we are talking about here today is important for you too. And if you ever find some parts too hard to understand, then make sure you ask your Dad and Mom to explain them when you get home, and of course you can always ask me after the service as well.

And yet look at what verse 3 says. It says something pretty interesting. It says that this covenant was not made with their fathers. Scholars have discussed which fathers Moses is referring to here. Is he referring to the most previous generation, that fathers who died in the wilderness wandering under the hand of God's punishment on them? Or is he referring to their more distant fathers, the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Well, all things considered, I tend to think based on the immediate context that Moses is referring to the former; that he's referring to the previous generation that just died in the wilderness. And yet, I think this statement holds true for both sets of fathers. So, I'd like us to think about this for a moment. How this covenant was made for this generation and their descendants, and how it was not made with their fathers.

Well let's think first about the previous generation. Now true enough, that previous generation had received the covenant at Mount Horeb in one sense more than anyone. They were the adults at that time who physically witnessed the voice coming from the fire on Mount Horeb. They went through the motions there to ratify the covenant. But so quickly afterwards they broke it. What was the result? Death. They died wandering in the wilderness. That's was God's judgment upon them. But do you see the contrast in verse 3? It mentions that the next generation is the one *alive* here today. Moses says that effectively speaking, God therefore didn't make the covenant with the older generation. They aren't here alive today standing on the brink of the Promised Land just before God was going to bring the people in. The people who stood there alive today, finally to receive the Land; they were the ones that God had really made the covenant with. You see, the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant, was something intimately connected with the Promised Land. They were being given all these laws as part of the Mosaic covenant so that they would live well in the land. Since the previous generation didn't get to enter the land, the Mosaic covenant really wasn't made for them. It was made for their children and their grandchildren who *would* go in and live in the land.

But of course, this covenant had not been made with their more distant fathers either, had it? Father Abraham, for example, did not have the Mosaic covenant, the covenant made at Mount Sinai. Now yes, God made a covenant with Abraham. But it was a different covenant. That's important to understand. The covenant God made with Abraham was different. Abraham was not under the Mosaic covenant. When we speak of the old covenant, we usually think about that in terms of the covenant God made with Moses at Mt Sinai. Abraham was not a part of that covenant.

The covenant God made with Abraham was in many ways much more simple. There weren't hundreds of laws and statutes to closely follow as a nation. He didn't get the Ten Commandments engraved in stone, though certainly God's moral laws still existed back then, if nothing else, then engraved on Abraham's heart. But the covenant that God made with Abraham was pretty simple. God made a very gracious promise to him that he would raise up a nation from his descendants, and that through his offspring, all the nations in the earth would be blessed. He also promised Abraham that he would bring his descendants into the Promised Land and give them that land as an inheritance. That was a promise, by the way, which Scripture tells us that Abraham realized held behind it a promise of a heavenly inheritance one day. But the point I'm making is that God's covenant with Abraham was a very gracious covenant and Abraham was told to have one primary response: faith. He was to believe and trust in God's promise. And Abraham did believe, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Do you see a bit of contrast between these two covenants? The covenant made with Abraham was quite a bit different than the one made with Moses and the Israelites on Mt Sinai. The primary difference was the emphasis on the law. The Abrahamic covenant really didn't talk about the law at all. It was a call to trust in God's good promises. The Mosaic covenant, on the other hand, has quite an emphasis on the law. The Apostle Paul would later in the letter to the Galatians bring out this contrast. He'd compare the graciousness of the Abrahamic covenant with the demands of the law.

Now this tension has sparked quite a bit of debate and discussions among theologians. Is the Mosaic covenant a covenant of grace, or a covenant of works? Now Reformed theologians agree that either way, it's founded on grace in one way or another. After the fall, anything short of God throwing man immediately into hell is grace. Certainly the Mosaic covenant had plenty of aspects of grace in it. It was founded on top of the Abrahamic covenant, which is clearly a covenant of grace. God's work in the Exodus and giving the Promised Land to the people was an expression of grace. All the sacrifices for sins legislated in the Mosaic covenant were an expression of grace. Other things like the Year of Jubilee, giving the land a Sabbath rest every seven years, etc, these were all expressions of grace in the Mosaic covenant. The Mosaic covenant had plenty of grace in it.

But you can't also ignore the reality of the law in the Mosaic covenant. They were being called to keep the law. The degree that they would keep it would have some immediate ramifications for them as a nation; blessings or curses. The Westminster Confession of Faith even goes as far to say that the law that God had given Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the principle of law from that Covenant of Works, was somehow redelivered at Mount Sinai, when the law was given.

And so there is a tension in the Mosaic covenant. There is a strong working of both law and grace in the covenant. Probably one of the most common Reformed answers to this tension is to say that the Mosaic covenant was a covenant of grace that was legally administered. In other words, it was not fundamentally a covenant of works. You would never be able to earn heaven through your law keeping under that covenant. But it did have a principle of works in it. That was the law. The role of the law in the old covenant was very exacting. It demanded perfect obedience, and it showed that we couldn't give that.

But that's of course how Paul solves the tension. In the book of Galatians when he contrasts the two covenants, he says that it's the strictness of the law that shows us the answer. He says that the law should point us to Christ. Galatians 3:24 says that the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ. Literally, the word for tutor there in the Greek is pedagogue, which was a specific type of slave. A slave whose job was basically to supervise the education of the children. He'd bring the kids to and from the school, looking after him, etc, so that his education would be complete. That's what Paul says the law was supposed to be in the Mosaic covenant. He likened it as a slave who brought kids to the school to learn. The law brought us to Christ.

The law which in many ways enslaved humans who were but infants in knowing God's grace, were brought to Jesus to learn God's grace.

Of course the law did this by showing how we fall short of God's standard of righteousness. By realizing that we needed a savior. That we needed someone to keep it for us and to help us keep it. That was Jesus. That's why the law brought us to Jesus. That's the lesson the people under the old covenant needed to learn. It's the lesson we all need to know as well. We can't earn our way into heaven. We had that chance in the Garden of Eden and failed. We need a savior and a redeemer. He's come in Jesus. And we can have the salvation he brings by faith in him. By turning away from our sins and trusting in him as our Lord and Savior.

God was teaching a lesson under the Mosaic covenant. That's why there's the tension of grace and works in that covenant. God was always calling us to see our need for grace. And he used the unique situation of Israel in the Promised Land under the Mosaic covenant to teach them and us this important lesson. It was like a lesson for little children. Put in simple earthly lessons. Clear visible things with tangible results. An earthly Promised Land. Physical sacrifices to regularly offer. Things that we can easily see, all while teaching of better things to come, that for now we can't see with our physical eyes, but we can see with our eyes of faith. And what was the lesson? Part one of the lesson is that eternal life has to be earned. God's standard of righteousness is perfection. But part two of the lesson is that we couldn't earn it on our own, and so Jesus came to earn it on our behalf. That's the gospel.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, verse 3 tells us that this covenant with Israel was unique. God did not make the Mosaic covenant with their fathers. He made it with them. With Israel at that time, and their descendants. It was intimately connected with the new life they were about to embark on. Life in the Promised Land. The Mosaic covenant was a special, unique, thing given to that people to govern how they lived in the Promised Land. It was not given to their fathers. It was given to them.

And so let me make something abundantly clear. The Lord did not make this covenant with their fathers, and he did not make this covenant with you. We are not under the Mosaic covenant. This is the *old* covenant. That covenant was broken and eventually abrogated by the new covenant. Hebrews 8:13, referring to God's promise of a new covenant says this, "In speaking of a new covenant, he [God] makes the first one obsolete." And so, we do not belong to the old covenant, we belong to the new covenant.

Of course, this means that this limits and defines how we study the old covenant. We need to understand in what ways the context of the old covenant determines how we apply such passages to our lives. But just because we are not under this old covenant, doesn't mean that we can't learn from it. If the old covenant had valuable lessons to teach Israel, then there are valuable lessons that we can learn from it as well. Yes it means that we need to properly apply the lessons, but we can and should do this. This of course is where plenty of people go wrong when they read the Old Testament. They don't understand some of the unique context and they end up with some wrong applications, or they just end up dismissing a text altogether because they aren't sure how to apply it. So as we study Deuteronomy I'm going to try to keep helping you see how to interpret these passages in the context of the old covenant and then apply them to our context in the new covenant. In some sense, and in many passages, this distinction is pretty simple to draw. At other points, it requires a bit more discernment. But if this is new for you to think about the context in this way, don't be too intimidated. As we do this with Deuteronomy week in and week out, I hope that it will become very second nature for you to rightly read and understand these passages within their original context, and then apply them to your life. And please don't hesitate to ask me questions after service if any of the approach seems difficult ever.

Let me conclude our sermon today with this thought. When Israel is told here that God had made this covenant with them, it wasn't told to them as if it was bad news. I think we as those in the new covenant might tend to think that way. This was told to them as good news. They were getting something better than even their forefathers had received. They were receiving all these laws and statutes and judgments that were for their own good, so that they could live well in the Promised Land. This was to be an exciting time for them. Not only that, we said how these laws ultimately had a bigger lesson to teach them. A lesson to lead them to Christ. And so the Mosaic covenant was a good thing.

And yet, if you and I are not under this good thing, it's because we are under a *better* thing. The new covenant brings to fulfillment both the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants. We live by faith in God's grace given to us in Christ. Praise the Lord. And that means that as we live by grace, we have a new perspective on the moral law. It becomes our guide in life. Not as a covenant of works, no. We are not under law in that sense. But the law is now given to us to delight in it. To grow in living it out. And so in the words of Moses here, let's hear it. Let's learn it that we might keep it. This is our new relationship to the moral laws of God. Not as a covenant of works, but as a benefit of the covenant of grace - he makes us people more and more who love his laws. And so as we study the Ten Commandments over the next several weeks, let's get excited to learn and consider more and more of what godly living looks like. And let's pray that God would grow us in our godly living during this time.

Amen.

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