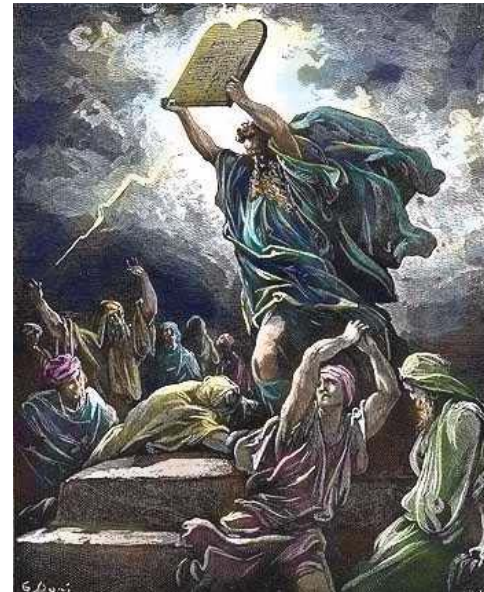


Advent Studies 2009

God's Covenant
with
Noah, Abraham, Moses and David.



Week 3: Moses

How to Use This Study

These study notes may be used by individuals for private study but will be found to be more effective when used in combination of private study and group discussion. The questions are designed to help you reflect on the text under discussion as you draw from your own personal experiences and listen to the reflections and experiences of others within your group.

Become familiar with the text

Each week there is a passage of Scripture associated with the Covenant that we will be reflecting on for that week. Make sure you have opportunities to read, re-read and reflect upon the text with the assistance of these questions (reproduced each week) before you move on to the commentary provided and the group discussion. The questions to be used for individual reflection are:

- What is the covenant being made?
- Who is the covenant between?
- What can we expect as a result of this covenant?

A Change away from the Sunday Gospel

With the Advent studies over the past few years the focus has been to concentrate on the Gospel for each of the Sundays in Advent. This has necessitated either preparing for the Gospel for the Sunday to come or looking back on the previous Sunday's Gospel.

The Culmination of the Advent season in the great Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord (Christmas) is in itself the celebration of the beginning of the bringing about of God's New Covenant which is sealed in the Death and Resurrection of Our Lord. A further study, for personal reflection or for use as a final group study is provided on this New Covenant.

The setting for the Study

There are no hard rules for this but it is important to ensure that a comfortable and welcoming approach is taken and that those attending are encouraged to bring others along. Notes about the setting and style from the previous Advent studies can be re-visited if you need help.

What is a 'Covenant'?

In Law: It is a contract drawn up by a deed; it can also mean a clause in a contract

In Theology: The word Covenant Speaks of an agreement that brings about a relationship of commitment between God and his people.

Central to the Jewish faith are the Biblical Covenants that God made with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. Alongside these, there is the centrality of the Ark of the Covenant, dating from the time of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, being carried about under King David and finally being placed in Solomon's great temple. It contained the tablets of the laws of the ancient Israelites. The phrase Old Covenant is used in Christian theology to describe the covenant between God and Israel as described in the Old Testament.

The phrase New Covenant is used in Christian theology to describe the covenant between God and all humankind made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In this series of studies we will look at some of the covenants God made with his people in the old Testament and then look at how these covenants find their fulfilment in Jesus and his church.

Prayer Before Discussion

Loving God,

We have been reminded of how you appeared to Moses and changed his countenance. Be present with us now in our discussions and reflections, that we may know your nearness and experience the liberation and leading that you bring to our lives.

This we ask through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to have God as our *go'el*? From what do you think we need redeeming? From what do we need saving? What consequences arise out of having God as our *go'el*?
2. What are the signs of God in our world today? Where are the theophanies? Some might say what we (we Christians) are the primary source of theophanies in the world of today. What might that mean?
3. How might God's laws be applied to our daily living? How does our relationship with God, for example, impact on how we might act at home, on the roads, at work, in the faith community, as an individual? How might the covenant relationship we have with God change the way I might act in different circumstances?
4. The Sinai Covenant tells us that we are incorporated into God's own family life. Share on how you understand this gift and what it might mean in the good times as well as in the difficult times of your life. How might this be proclaimed to the world as being a great and wonderful opportunity?

The Covenant at Sinai reminds the people that their life and all that happens in it is a free gift of their redeeming God and that in freeing them from slavery they were now free to live in a particular way: they were to be holy, worshipping God in all of the ways he demanded. And, a key part of this worship of God was the way they lived in community with others. It was not possible to worship God properly and oppress their brothers and sisters, or ignore those who were in need and were struggling. Justice and worship went hand in hand.

In the end, the people responded to this invitation with the cry: *All the words which the Lord has spoken, we will do!* (24:3). And that is crucial: the covenant has to be freely accepted by all parties. This is a wonderful dimension of the freedom given by God. They could have rejected it. They could have pursued other gods but they freely undertook to be the kind of people God wanted them to be.

Conclusion

For the covenant to make any sense it has to relate to the whole of the life of the people and this is made evident by the breadth of the laws that are spelled out as being the terms of the relationship with God. These have clearly been collected over the years as the people moved into Canaan and became farmers and city dwellers. But the point is that there is not a single area of human living that does not have some connection with God. In every dimension of daily human struggle, God has something to say. Everything they do as men and women in creation is an opportunity of revelation, an opportunity for making God known.

Of course they were not so faithful in their living out of these laws. The people quickly sinned (Exodus 32). Moses is delayed and the people become confused and anxious and call on Aaron to make them a god. They need a go'el and when it seems that Yahweh is distracted they set out to make one of their own.

Sin, forgiveness and a new beginning are central parts of the story of the covenant. It expresses what God wants and how he seeks to carry out his ongoing work of creation. It also sets out his expectations for his people. They are to be his and live in his ways. Throughout all of the ups and downs of the relationship, the people are reassured by the great song of joy by Moses:

*Yahweh, Yahweh, a merciful and gracious God,
slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity,
continuing his kindness for a thousand generations,
and forgiving wickedness and crime and sin;
yet not declaring the guilty guiltless,
but punishing children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation
for their father's wickedness (34:5-9).*

The Mosaic Covenant

Freedom from Slavery

When we read back through the story of the escape through the Red Sea (Exodus 15), we can note that the immediate response of the people to their deliverance is to sing and dance with joy. Exodus 15:21-22 is thought to be the oldest piece of tradition in the whole of the Bible and it is so important that it has become a part of our Easter celebrations:

Sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously triumphant;
Horse and chariot he has cast into the sea!

What is important in this passage is that it puts the people of God into the right context. They have no other role than to praise God. God is the giver of freedom and life. They are recipients of these free gifts and the only thing that they can offer in return is praise and worship. They sing and they dance, they celebrate well into the night for they are overcome with joy and relief.

Here we have the “right attitude” towards God that is going to become so much a part of the way the people are to live in the land. When the later prophets speak of the sins of the people, they will be sins that reflect a loss of this “right attitude”. The people will have become more important than God in determining the way they live. But here, as they are still conscious of what it meant to be a slave, they are doing as all are called to do: worship God.

God noises in the wilderness

Moving into the wilderness brought a whole raft of new problems for the Hebrews and each of these would be a test of their faith and the story of the Exodus is a spiritual account of how they explored what it meant to be God's sons and daughters in the face of the daily struggles and temptations of human communities.

For us, though, the key part of the story is what happened when they came to Mt Sinai (Exodus 19 – Numbers 10). There are three key parts to this story: (a) they had an experience of God. (b) They entered into a covenant with God and (c) they received the law.

The people had already experienced God's power in their miraculous escape from the Egyptians and the parting of the waters of the Red Sea. Now at Sinai they had another experience, this time expressed in the kind of language that was used by many of their neighbours – the language of the storm gods:

On the morning of the third day there were peals of thunder and lightning, and a heavy cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled...Mount Sinai was all wrapped in smoke, for the Lord came down upon it in fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently (19:16,18).

Whatever of what actually happened on that day, what is clear is that the people had a profound and powerful experience of God. What we have here is the presentation of God as the *go'el* of Israel – the Redeemer of Israel. In the ancient world, the families and tribes had a strong sense of togetherness and a primary responsibility to help and protect each other in time of need. In Israel this presented itself in the person of the *go'el*, the redeemer, who, as next of kin, had the responsibility of protecting the integrity of the family.

If property was lost it was the duty of the *go'el* to recover it (Leviticus 25:25; Jeremiah 32:6-7). If someone from the family was sold into slavery, the *go'el* was responsible for finding ways to gain his freedom (Lev 25:47-49). If a man died childless it was the responsibility of the *go'el* to have children with the childless widow so that his name and his property would remain within the family (Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Genesis 38:8; Ruth 2:20; 3:12; 4:4).

If Yahweh as *go'el* of Israel (Exodus 6:6; 15:13) it meant that Israel and God formed one family and that Yahweh had taken it upon himself to free the people from all kinds of slavery. This is what the Sinai story is establishing. God the *go'el* of Israel had freed them and made them his own and that this God was establishing a relationship in power and might.

These experiences of God are called theophanies, which are literally God-noises. The idea was that if God was present, there would be signs of that divine presence. The ground would shake, there would be sounds and all kinds of wonders to be observed. God could not sneak in and nothing happen.

The Sinai Covenant

The world of the Old Testament was a world made up of relationships between clans, tribes and small city states. These relationships were of great importance, particularly between the more powerful states and the weaker, smaller groups. One of the ways stability and order was established in these circumstances was the making of covenants.

A covenant is simply an agreement between two parties, solemnly proclaimed in front of witnesses that was made binding through oaths and sometimes symbolic actions. There were often laws associated with these covenants that set out appropriate ways of behaving and living and the covenant established new relationships between the parties. The goal of the covenant was the establishment of peace.

At Sinai Israel acknowledged Yahweh as their kin and the covenant recorded there is an expression of that relationship. It is sealed with two significant rituals:

The blood ritual (Ex 24 6-8) may seem a bit bizarre to us but in the ancient world a relationship existed between blood and life (Lev 17:11). To share the same blood was to share the same life, to belong to the same family. When Moses sprinkles the blood on the altar and then on the people, he is uniting them into the one family. They become a part of the one and the same life. This, of course is the thinking that is behind the Last Supper: *this is the cup of my blood of the new and everlasting covenant.*

The meal ritual (24:11) taps into a powerful Eastern symbol. Sharing a meal meant bringing someone into the same family, sharing your life with them. No one would harm a person who had shared their table and coming to someone's family home to eat meant that a state of peace existed between them. Eating and drinking was normally a way of sealing the covenant. This is how they understood the meaning of the Covenant – a sharing of life with God.

The Covenant Law

Before ratifying the covenant with the blood ritual, Moses read out the ordinances that had been given to him by God. In accepting the offer of covenant the people had to be ready to commit themselves to a particular way of life. The covenant was a freely given gift but it came at a price. They would be obligating themselves to living in a particular way.

What is important is to see these laws as not being something that is added onto the end of the covenant but as a way of life that automatically flowed out of living with God in this way. Life was changed by the covenant and the people would naturally seek to live in this way. The covenant laws were an expression of the family life they shared with God.

These laws showed the way they were to live with God. Because God was their *go'el*, because he had freed them from slavery in Egypt, the whole of their lives were subject to him and his divine ways. They now had to live as his people, as his special possession (Ex 19:4-6). When they were given freedom by God, it was not just freedom from Egyptian slavery but it was also freedom to live lives that had God as their focus. They were given freedom so that they could live in a particular way – God's way. This is why the most serious of sins was the sin of idolatry. This was a sin which came about when God was not the primary ordering principle in the way the people lived.