

The Law and the Land

Exodus 19-34

A sermon by Peter Budd

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We live on an incredible planet in an amazing universe.

As a scientist, I'm fascinated by the marvellous complexity of all that surrounds us.

But even more amazing is the idea that the God from whose imagination all this springs,
should take an interest in us; mere specks in space and time.

The Bible reveals God as one who interacts with humankind.

One who cares about individuals and nations.

One who desires a relationship with people.

One who makes promises and who seeks a response.

One who enters into formal agreements – contracts – covenants
with beings of his own creation.

God made covenants with Noah. (Gen. 6:18; 9:8-17)

A covenant under which Noah would build an ark, so he and his family would be safe.

And a covenant with a promise that never again would all life be destroyed by flood.

And God made a covenant with Abraham. (Gen. 15 and 17)

A covenant with two promises:

That Abraham would have many descendents.

As many as the stars in the sky.

And that his descendents would possess a particular land – the Promised Land.

By the time we get to Exodus, the first of these promises is fulfilled. Exodus 1:7.

The Israelites were fruitful ... so that the land – that's the land of Egypt – was filled with them.

And, through Moses, God brings all those people out of Egypt.

Bound for the Promised Land.

But they don't go the short way, near the coast.

That way was controlled by Egyptian troops.

They head into the wilderness.

A couple of months or so later, they come to the desert of Sinai and camp in front of the mountain.

Mount Sinai or Mount Horeb.

And from that mountain, God tells Moses He'll make a covenant with the Israelite people.

This is a formal, legal contract between God and the people.

Rather like a treaty between a powerful Emperor and a subject nation.

A legal framework for an ongoing relationship.

A treaty with a formal text, inscribed in stone.

A treaty ratified in a ceremony involving sacrifice and blood.

A treaty in which the people take an oath of allegiance, agreeing to certain conditions.

In return for certain privileges.

The essence of the covenant is summarised in Exodus ch. 19, vs. 5 and 6.

If the people obey God fully and keep His covenant.

Then they will be His special people.

Although the whole Earth is God's, they will be His treasured possession.

A kingdom of Priests.

A holy nation.

This is conditional. If they obey...

The people are quick to agree to this. Exodus 19:8

“We will do everything the LORD has said.”

Will they? Will they heck!

But it starts well.

They prepare themselves for an awesome event during which God speaks from the mountain.

Speaks so all can hear.

And God lays down the policy.

Ten stipulations to govern the relationship with God.

And relationships with each other.

Ten commandments.

Beginning with sole allegiance to God.

Not misrepresenting Him or allowing anything to take His place.

And not misusing His name.

Then specifying a healthy pattern of work and rest.

Six of work, one of rest.

Then laying down guidelines to ensure social coherence:

Respect for parents.

For life.

For marriage.

For property.

For truth.

And finally, a commandment about inner feelings and thoughts.

Not desiring what isn't yours.

A covenant with God isn't just about outward actions and words.

A relationship with God involves the whole self.

Complete commitment. Through and through.

Once the policy is established, then comes the fine print.

Instructions on how the policy is applied.

Detailed legislation about all sorts of things.

From how long to keep a slave.

To how not to cook a young goat.

Directions on how the people should behave.

And in return a promise from God.

Comfort and security in the Promised Land. (Exodus 23:25-28)

But this is conditional. Exodus 23:25

“Worship the LORD your God,
and his blessing will be on your food and water...”

And the people agree to all this. Exodus 24:3.

“Everything the LORD has said we will do.”

Will they? Will they heck!

Moses goes up the mountain again.

He’s up there forty days and forty nights (Exodus 24:18)

And the people can’t keep the covenant even for that long.

The second policy statement – the second commandment – is:

“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above
or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” (Exodus 20:4)

What do they do while Moses is away?

They pressure Aaron into making a golden idol in the shape of a calf. (Exodus 32:4)

And they sacrifice to it. (Exodus 32:8)

The covenant broken, even before Moses returns with the legal documentation.

With the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God. (Exodus 31:18)

The covenant broken . And that would have been the end of the Israelites.

But for Moses’ intercession. (Exodus 32:11-14)

Moses can’t excuse the people’s behaviour.

But he can call on God’s character.

And the promises made to Abraham.

And God gives the nation another chance.

A new contract to replace the broken contract. A renewed covenant.

But, of course, the people will break that covenant again and again and again.

That’s the story of the Israelites. That’s the story of all people. That’s our story.

We know what’s right.

We know what’s good for us.

But we go wrong.

We keep going wrong.

We simply can’t maintain a relationship with God by our own efforts.

If we’re relying on us always doing the right thing – we’re doomed.

If it weren’t for God’s willingness to forgive – we’re doomed.

That’s why we need a new covenant – a new contract – under which God himself deals with our wrongdoing.

The writer to the Hebrews puts it like this. Hebrews 9:15

“Christ is the mediator of a new covenant,
that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance –
now that he has died as a ransom to set them free
from the sins committed under the first covenant.”

A new covenant mediated by Christ.

A new covenant which looks forward to a Promised Land.

Not a mere patch of earth between a sea and a river.

But an eternal Land; an eternal inheritance.

A new covenant in which we're set free from our sins.

But where does that leave all the old laws? Are they redundant?

Jesus himself said (Matthew 5:17)

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;
I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.”

Jesus says what we have in the Old Testament is not redundant.

In fact, it all points to Him.

It's all important.

The question is: how do we apply all that old law?

Many of the religious leaders of Jesus' day – the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law – thought it was simply a matter of working out detailed rules and scrupulously following them.

A legalistic approach.

So, if the fourth commandment said that on the Sabbath you should “not do any work”.

Then you simply had to define exactly what was work, and not do it.

Those people were utterly scandalised when Jesus allowed his disciples to pick some corn on the Sabbath.

That was classified as work. That was forbidden.

But Jesus said (Mark 2:27)

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

In other words, we don't exist just to follow lots of rules.

God's Law is about God's loving provision for us.

A legalistic approach to the Old Testament is not Jesus' way.

So how did Jesus approach it?

Jesus looks beyond the words to discern the purpose.

God's purpose.

Jesus looks under the surface to understand the intention.

God's intention.

Thus, where the commandment says

“Do not murder.” (Exodus 20:13)

Jesus understands this as encompassing hatred, anger and insult. (Matthew 5:22)

Everything that spoils our relationships with each other.

God’s concern is for reconciliation. (Matthew 5:24)

And where the law lays down penalties

“life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth...” (Exodus 21:23-25)

Appropriate legal limits in the context in which they were given.

Jesus makes it clear this is not a mandate for personal revenge.

Instead, Jesus says (Matthew 5:39,40)

“If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.”

God wants us to put others before ourselves.

Seeing the law this way is hard.

Following it is harder still.

And the standard that Jesus applies? (Matthew 5:48)

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”

The standard is God himself.

We can’t achieve perfection on our own.

We can’t achieve it just by following rules.

That’s why we need a new covenant.

A new covenant in which we’re set free from our sins.

A new covenant in which God’s Spirit helps us to live in a new and better way.

Thus, as the Apostle Paul explained to the Romans (Romans 8:1,2)

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,
because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life
set me free from the law of sin and death.”

And (Romans 8:9)

“You ... are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit,
if the Spirit of God lives in you.”

We live on an incredible planet in an amazing universe.

Even more amazing is the idea that the God from whose imagination all this springs,
should desire a relationship with us.

But most amazing of all, is the lengths that God will go to, to make that relationship possible.

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