

KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS

Understanding the Mosaic Covenant | Thicker Than Water (Part 5)

Text: Exodus 19

Raise your hand if you like movies. So do I. If I had to list my top ten favorite movies, without a doubt one of them would be director Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 blockbuster, *The Ten Commandments*. Have you ever seen it? The movie starred Charlton Heston, Anne Baxter, Yul Brynner, Edward G. Robinson, Vincent Price and a long cast of other major celebrities of that day. In fact, sort of like George Clooney's *Ocean's* series or one of the other ensemble cast films of our day, Hollywood actors were fighting to get themselves into this movie. And for good reason. This was a big budget, huge theme project, shot on location in Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. *The Ten Commandments* grossed 1.15 billion in today's dollars during just its initial release. Sixty-five years later it is still among the top ten highest grossing films ever. It was nominated for awards in multiple categories. The Library of Congress put it in its National Film Registry. The American Film Institute still lists it in the Top Ten movies of all time in the Epic genre. Jeffrey Katzenberg of Disney fame confessed that the Dreamworks' movie, *Prince of Egypt*, was his attempt to reproduce *The Ten Commandments* in cartoon form for children everywhere.

But none of this would be true if it were not for the Story itself and the Author who wrote on the pages of history a drama so stunning and relevant that we are still fascinated by it, still inspired by it, even to this day. When we left the story last week, God had launched a new chapter in human history.

You may recall that in the beginning, God made a COVENANT with the first human beings, laying out a set of Life Lines for making the most of Eden. Adam and Eve, however, spurned this original grace. They violated the lines God had set up for everyone's benefit, and set in motion a cascade of consequences that were not good. Like a deadly virus or cancer, the not good spread out and created the very bad.

In a dramatic effort to save the Creation, God sends a flood to wash the world clean. In his mercy, God decides to preserve life through a figure named Noah and his family. As they emerge from the ark, God makes a SECOND COVENANT with humanity. He calls upon everyone to reverence life and promises to provide the common grace that will preserve life until an ultimate day of accounting somewhere out in the future.

When Noah and his descendants continue to struggle with even this kind arrangement, God initiates a massive, centuries-long Restoration Act designed to address the consequences of sin – which is the germ at the heart of people creating such havoc. He begins this work by coming to a childless, elderly couple named Abraham and Sarah and making a THIRD COVENANT, this one a covenant of commissioning grace. God promises to give them a great legacy of children, a great love relationship with him, and

a great land on which not only would their descendants be blessed but all people on earth would be blessed through them. What is this blessing that will one day reach into all the world? God doesn't say yet. He simply says to this couple, keep walking by faith.

And Abraham and Sarah do. Not close to perfectly. Who of us does? But they kept listening for God's voice and returned to the path when they wandered off, as you and I are called to do. And then, in a land that doesn't yet have a name, God one day gives Sarah and Abraham a child. They name him Isaac (which means "he laughs"). God will eventually change Isaac's name to Israel (which means "wrestles with God"). All of us do that, don't we? And then, the seemingly impossible multiplication process that God had promised the once-barren parents begins to take off in an almost Amazon like way.

The next many chapters of Genesis describe the generations of descendants that proceed from Isaac and his wife Rebekah. They give rise to Esau and Jacob, who with his wife Rachel have a set of twelve sons whose family trees will be known as the twelve tribes of Israel. One of those twelve kids is a particularly brash and bright boy named Joseph, whose brothers sell him into a slave train bound for Egypt. In a stunning story we did a sermon series on a few years ago, Joseph rises from slavery and prison to become one of the most important figures in Egypt.

When a terrible famine devastates all of North Africa and the Middle East, Joseph's family migrates to Egypt and Joseph is there to save them and millions of other people through his brilliant leadership of Egypt's food distribution system. We could use a Joseph in charge of the vaccine distribution right now! In the next years, the twelve tribes that had descended from Abraham now chain migrate to Egypt and swell in numbers there. However, as new Pharaoh's come along, the name of Joseph is forgotten and the Hebrew people (as the Israelites come to be known), lose standing in the society and eventually become enslaved. 400 years go by.

And, then, to a peasant Israelite named Jochebed, a child is born. A son is given. And what no one can see yet is that a new kind of government will be laid upon this humble child's shoulders – prefiguring an even greater Prince to come. Through a remarkable chain of events, Moses rises to become a Prince of Egypt. Being a Hebrew at heart, however, his outrage over the way his enslaved people are being treated leads him to slay an Egyptian overlord. Moses flees into the desert of Midian north of Egypt and spends decades there. His eventual wife Zipporah's family teaches the Prince how to be a shepherd. Hold that transition in your mind: A prince who becomes a shepherd, because next week we'll learn about a shepherd who becomes a king.

One day, as Moses is out in the wilderness watching over his flocks, his eye is caught by a very strange sight. A desert bush is on fire. As Moses draws closer, he is stunned by the reality that while the bush is burning, it is not being consumed. And, then, suddenly from within the apparition a Voice calls his name: **"Moses... Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is**

holy ground... I am the God of... Abraham... Isaac and... Jacob... 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. 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... So now, GO. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” (Exo 3:4-10)

Take note of that word “GO.” It is an important word in relation to fulfilling every one of the covenants that God sets up with people. It will prove to be an important word in the relationship Jesus has with his disciples. As I suggested last week, there are places God still wants you and me and our church to GO to accomplish his purposes. More about that in the future too.

For today, let me simply say that, like Noah and Abraham before him, and countless disciples after him, Moses went. You can read all about it in Exodus 3-18, or just watch *The Ten Commandments* today. God uses Moses to help deliver the Israelites from their slave-masters in Egypt. They cross the Red Sea and onto the Sinai peninsula. For the next 40 years they wander through the wilderness, being tested and tempered by God, as you may have been tested and tempered by God over this past year. It’s there in the wilderness, that God establishes the FOURTH major covenant we find in the Bible. It’s a picture of a way of living that still has a big message for you and me.

Exodus 19 describes the moment like this. **They entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.** When the text says THE mountain, we’re being told that this is not just any hill. We’re hearing about what people the world over now call “Mount Sinai” – the place Moses eventually climbs to the top of, is surrounded by a cloud and fire (symbolizing God’s mystery and power) and then comes down from with white hair, carrying the two stone tablets on which are inscribed what? THE TEN COMMANDMENTS. Read Exodus 20 for more on this, or, if you have more time, watch *The Ten Commandments*!

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said... “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now it’s good to pause here because this is very important. Before God gives instructions to Moses or any of the rest of us, He wants us to remember His heart. There are a lot of people we don’t want to take orders from. Why? We don’t trust their heart. But before God issues any commandments here, He reminds Moses that what he is about to say is not selfish. The orders he is about to give are not about control or anger or manipulation. They are about LOVE. *“Remember how I rescued you from your slave-masters AND how I carried you through the wilderness AND how I’ve sought to bring you to my breast.”* God is saying, in effect: *“Before you hear anything else I’m going to say to you, stop and ponder with what a great love you have been loved.”*

The commandments God gives you and me flow from a heart that loves us and wants the best for us and for others through us. With that idea as a foundation, God continues in his conversation with Moses. He defines what we now call the Mosaic Covenant. The first thing God does is say what He is asking Moses and his people to bring from their side: **Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant... (Exo 19:5)** In other words, I want you to obey the commandments I'm going to give you FULLY. Not like you're going through a buffet, picking this commandment you like and leaving that one behind. Not like "I'll only have a few little gods before you," or "I'll sometimes keep the Sabbath holy" or "I'll only covet that neighbor's things" or "I'll bear false witness only when I really need to protect or make myself look better." There is a word for doing what feels right and good to me and that word is "expedience." The word for doing what God says (because He IS right and good) is "obedience." How is the obedience vs. expedience thing going for us?

"If you obey me FULLY," says God **...then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession (Exo 19:5).** What is the benefit God promises if we obey him fully? "You're going to be my treasure," he says. Do you remember that scene in the movie *Titanic* when everybody on the ship finally gets that the boat is going down? Everyone is in a panic. They are all rushing around grabbing stuff to take with them. But the character Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) has only one thing in mind. He breaks through barriers to get to Kate Winslet's character. He swims under floods to find her. He gives his own life to save her. Why? Because Rose is his treasured possession.

We see this same orientation toward people in the teaching of Jesus – in his stories about the woman searching for the lost coin, the shepherd seeking after the lost sheep, the father scanning the horizon for his lost son. But not just in Christ's teaching do we see this heart. Jesus lays his life down on a cross for his treasured possession. Again, never forget with what a great love you have been loved.

When God says this about Moses and the children of Israel, however, He is not just talking about their intrinsic value to them; He is also saying something about the role He is asking His people to play in the world. **Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exo 19:5-6).** When the Bible uses the word "holy" to describe something or someone it often means, "set apart for a special purpose." We call our sacred book the "HOLY Bible" because it is set apart from other books to fulfill a special purpose – revealing God's character and intentions to us. In the Mosaic Covenant, God tells Moses and His people that He is setting them apart to be "**a kingdom of priests.**" Biblical scholar Christopher Wright points out that "*The function of priesthood in Israel itself was to stand between God and the rest of the people.*"¹ PRIESTS would (1) represent God to the people by the example of their character and their teaching about God AND they would (2) represent and bring people to God by their prayers and sacrifices.

Nowadays, we often slip into thinking that only the clergy are “priests.” But in the Mosaic Covenant, God says, in effect: *“I want ALL of you to think of yourselves as set apart for a special purpose. I want ALL of you to keep my commandments so that by the beauty and integrity of your example and self-giving sacrifice, you will help other people draw closer to me.”* Centuries later, the Apostle Peter would repeat these same instructions to the followers of Jesus. A lot of people have stopped obeying God’s commandments, he says, but please remember who YOU are. **You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:8-10)** Do you think of yourself and your role that way?

Here’s the takeaway for today: We no longer have the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. We do have the movie, but that’s not really the same. What the world does have, however, are these instructions recorded in the Bible and what St. Peter calls “living stones” (1 Peter 2:5) – people like you and me -- on whose hearts the Word of God can be written and through whom He still moves. I invite you to open up your Bible and read Exodus 20 today. Let the Ten Commandments imprint themselves upon your heart. And then let’s together GO and, by God’s grace, live them out as the royal priesthood, the holy nation, the treasured possession God calls us to be.

Let’s pray together...

¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*.