

The Covenant of Grace: Sinai

I. The Sinai covenant is God's first fulfillment of his promises to Abraham

- By "Sinai covenant" (or "old covenant"), I mean the covenant God made at Sinai (Exod 19–40; Leviticus), plus the additional laws given in the wilderness (Numbers), plus the renewal of the covenant on the plains of Moab just prior to their entering the land (Deuteronomy).
- This covenant is God's first fulfillment of his promises to Abraham (Exod 2:24):
 - *Offspring*: in Egypt they become as numerous as the stars of the heaven (Exod 1:7); the covenant is so that God might multiply them a thousand times more (Deut 1:10).
 - *Land*: they are receiving the land God promised (Deut 1:8; 4:1); the covenant shows them how to live in it.
 - *Covenant relationship*: the Sinai covenant is God's solemn marriage to his people. They are now his people, and he is their God (Exod 6:7; 29:45).
 - In Exod 40:34 God comes to dwell in the tabernacle at the center of his people as a sign of his covenant fellowship with them.
 - *Blessing to gentiles*: Deut 4:6: "Keep [the laws] and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'"
- Bavinck: "The covenant with Israel was essentially no other than that with Abraham. Just as God first freely and graciously gave himself as shield and reward to Abraham, apart from any merits of his, to be a God to him and his descendants after him, and on that basis called Abraham to a blameless walk before his face, so also it is God who chose the people of Israel, saved it out of Egypt, united himself with that people and obligated it to be holy and his own people. The covenant on Mount Sinai is and remains a covenant of grace ... The entire law, which the covenant of grace at Mount Sinai took into its service ... is but an explication of the one statement to Abraham: 'Walk before me and be blameless.'"

II. The Sinai covenant is part of the covenant of grace

- *Grace comes before law*: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2). This statement of grace *precedes* and undergirds the call to obey (the ten commandments follow).
- *The law is a gift* (Deut 4:8; Ps 19; 119); keeping it is Israel's glory: Deut 26:18–19: "the LORD has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised."
- *If they disobey, God provided sacrifices* for them to be restored to fellowship with him, including one great sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16).
- *Even when they utterly apostatize from it, God promises to be true*. He will restore them from exile (Lev 26:40–45; Deut 4:29–31; 30:1–10; 32:36).
- The religion of the old covenant is fundamentally the same as our religion now.
 - We are saved by faith in Christ, just like believers in the old covenant (Rom 4; Heb 11). They looked *forward* to Christ (through the old

- covenant symbols of the sacrifices, feasts, tabernacle, leaders, etc.); we look *back* on him, who is the substance of all these shadows (Col 2:17).
- WCF 7.5: “This covenant [of grace] was differently administered in the time of the law [the Sinai covenant], and in the time of the gospel [the new covenant]; under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.”
 - WCF 7.6 “... There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.”

III. The Sinai covenant could not overcome sin

- The law had a fatal weakness: it could not overcome sin (Rom 8:3, 8).
- Thus even at the very beginning, Moses knows the old covenant will fail:
 - Deut 30:1 “When all these things have come upon you, the blessing *and the curse ...*”
 - Deut 31:20–29: as soon as I die, I *know* you will disobey.
 - Josh 24:19, right after the people say that they will obey all that the LORD has commanded, Joshua says, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God.”
 - The entire book of Jeremiah is a sustained proof that Israel is constitutionally incapable of obedience (cf. Jer 5:23; 6:27–30; 18:12).
- Just like with Abraham, obedience was never a requirement in order to be redeemed, but obedience *was* necessary for the enjoyment of the covenant blessings (Deut 28:1–15). Because they cannot obey, the covenant curses must befall the people (Deut 28:16–68).
- Thus, if the people are ever to be blessed, the old covenant must pass away and be replaced by a new and better covenant that gives people the power to obey (Jer 24:7; 31:31–34; Ezek 36:26–27).
- The old covenant came to an end at the cross of Jesus, and the new covenant began at his resurrection (more later). Now we have the Spirit, who overcomes our sin and gives us power to obey (Rom 6; Eph 1).

IV. Implications

- We need a positive view of the old covenant as a wonderful gift of God’s grace!
- The old covenant is a revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The religion of the old covenant and our religion are fundamentally one. We should read our Old Testaments expecting to see tons of pointers to Jesus (1 Pet 1:10–12).
- The old covenant’s fatal weakness is deliberate on God’s part: he’s showing us the power of our sin so that we would see our need for Christ (Gal 3:24).