

## Constitution Day

Exodus 19:1-8

“We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

With those words, the legal foundation of our country was established. The rule of the land was established, for that Constitution is the law that governs us. It is the legal foundation for the operation of the government. And as we have seen in any number of countries around the world, the existence of a Constitution is what distinguishes a legitimate rule of government in a country from both anarchy on the one hand or the oppression of a dictator on the other. Our Constitution was signed on September 17, 1787, and therefore, for us, Constitution Day came eleven years after Independence Day. For Israel, it came just three months later.

The exodus out of Egypt was their Independence day, the birth of their nation. When they were delivered out of Egypt by the powerful hand of the Lord, the people of Israel became the nation of Israel. They became the nation of God’s people. They have been traveling, wandering, in the wilderness for three months. And in our text this afternoon they arrive at Mt. Sinai, and this new country ratified their constitution. So this is Constitution Day for the people of Israel. For the nation of Israel, that Constitution was called a Covenant. This definition of the relationship between God and his people is called a covenant. And that is our subject this afternoon.

This is a very crucial subject, and one with constant applications to our own lives today as God’s people. And one that is often terribly misunderstood. We are still appropriately called God’s covenant people today. And yet there is a lot of debate and disagreement upon the nature of that covenant relationship. Some Christians look at this covenant established between God and his people during the days of Moses and call it a covenant of works, something very much akin to the covenant relationship between God and Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the fall, a republication of that first covenant. They see the conditions of this covenant, and they conclude, therefore, that we, today, are no longer under that covenant. For the covenant of grace, they say, is without conditions, unconditional. The covenant with Moses doesn’t apply to us, they say.

But they are wrong. For this covenant with Moses is a vitally important aspect of the covenant of grace, it is one and the same covenant as that which governs our relationship with God today. As our Westminster Confession explains, “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same,” referring to both the time of the Old Testament before Christ and the New Testament after Christ. So it was that the gospel was preached in the Old Testament, to Abraham, as Paul writes to the Galatians. And Jesus said this about Moses to the unbelieving Jews of his day,

John 5:46 “If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me.”

So Moses wrote about Jesus! I hope that whets your appetite to study what Moses has to say to us in Exodus 19 about our constitution, our covenant in our relationship with our God. In an ultimate sense, Moses is writing about Jesus.

Let me begin where I must begin, where the covenant begins.

With the grace of God. The grace of God is not a New Testament concept somehow contradictory of the Old Testament concept of the wrath of God. There are not two gods, nor two plans of salvation—salvation by faith in the New Testament and salvation by works in the Old Testament. That’s false, that’s a grievous misunderstanding and dangerous error. There is not an Old Testament God of wrath and a New Testament God of love. Instead, there is one plan of salvation, which God determined “before the foundation of the world,... according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace.”

The covenant here established under the human leadership of Moses and Aaron, was nothing but an outworking of the one covenant of grace that has been in effect since God spoke to Adam and Eve after the fall. In this covenant of grace, as our Confession declares, God “freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved.”

So the covenant with Moses is a covenant with grace.

### **I. GOD ESTABLISHES THE COVENANT WITH HIS PEOPLE ACCORDING TO HIS OWN SOVEREIGN GRACE.**

Sovereign grace means that the moving impulse to show forth that grace was within God himself, so that all of this comes about, as I cannot say too often, according “to the praise of his glorious grace.”

We have seen that grace over and over again in the book of Exodus. God bestowing his blessings upon the people of Israel as a matter of his own goodness, not as a response to the goodness of the people. For, indeed, the people were not good! He saved them because He was good, not because they were good. That’s grace.

God’s grace as we’ve studied it for 18 chapters of this book of Exodus is summarized in the opening verses of chapter 19.

v.1-4

“You have seen what I did!” And what did he do? He saved his people by delivering them out of Egypt. God speaks to Moses and reminds them of that deliverance, as he will over and over again. And it is just true today as it was then in the history of Israel.

#### **A. God rescues and redeems his people by his own power.**

We have been studying that power for weeks on end, and not simply so that you can realize the extent of God’s power. We studied those ten plagues, that death of the firstborn so that you can see God’s power to redeem his people. We studied the drowning of Pharaoh’s armies in the Red Sea so that you see God’s power in rescuing his people from the oppression and slavery of their enemies.

Yet even in that, you will not recognize the grace of God at work in those things unless God, by his grace, enables you to see it! So we read in,

Deut. 29:2 “And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: “You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, 3 the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. 4 But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.”

So even the ability to see God’s hand at work is a work of his sovereign grace! And that is what is going on as this covenant is being established here in Exodus 19—God is giving them eyes to

see! He is telling them of his grace. He is reminding them of his power by which he brought them out of Egypt. And how he “brought them to himself, as we read at the end of verse 4, “I brought you to myself.”

That’s grace. “I saved you.” And with that declaration, we see an image of marvelous care and affection,  
v.4 “...how I bore you on eagles’ wings.”

The image is of an eagle apparently carrying her young, a parent bearing up her fledgling and hovering so closely and with such encouragement as to give the appearance to our eyes that the baby bird is literally flying upon the back of the adult. “I bore you on eagles’ wings.”

Perhaps you might still remember the impressive image of the great space shuttle being carried piggyback back to Cape Canaveral in Florida at the conclusion of one space mission in the anticipation of another. That’s the image of God’s sovereign grace. And his mercy.

### **B. God protects and sustains his people by his own mercy.**

“I bore you on eagles’ wings.” Those wings would also protect the young birds from any dangers that might come to them on the high and inaccessible ledges upon which their nests are built. The fledglings could be protected from the heat of too much sun, or from the cold of a winter wind.

In Deuteronomy 32, this image of both protection and tender mercy is explicitly described. Speaking of God loving his people Israel, we read,

Deut. 32:10 “He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he

kept him as the apple of his eye.<sup>11</sup> Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, <sup>12</sup> the Lord alone guided him, no foreign god was with him. <sup>13</sup> He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he suckled him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock. <sup>14</sup> Curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs,rams of Bashan and goats, with the very finest of the wheat —and you drank foaming wine made from the blood of the grape.”

That’s what God does for those whom he has loved in accordance with his own grace. “I bore you on eagles’ wings.” And, “I brought you to myself.” That’s so personal. And so foundational to your faith. So simple and direct. I bore you on eagles wings. I brought you to myself.

And with those words, just look at how God describes his people,

v.5b “...you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. <sup>6</sup> And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

## **II. GOD PERSONALLY IDENTIFIES HIS COVENANT PEOPLE.**

There can be no doubt that those words refer to the New Testament church of Jesus Christ today as well as to the nation of Israel in that day, because Peter uses them in just that way. Turn with me please to,

<sup>1</sup> Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; <sup>10</sup> who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.”

And just so that you see the consistent language of the Old Testament people of Israel in the wilderness being used to describe the church of our day, consider,

1 Peter 2:11 “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.”

So who are we? What does it mean to be God’s covenant people? What is your status before God? Your identity? Your position? Your standing? Look back at our text, quoted by Peter. Exodus 19:5. First,

**A. God’s people become his own special treasure.**

Treasured possession, as it is sometimes translated, more special than all of his glorious creation. The whole earth belongs to God. It is all his possession. But we his people, we are singled out above everything else that it is his. We are special, or in the archaic language of the original KJV, peculiar. Not strange or eccentric, as that word is usually understood today, but standing apart, belonging distinctively to him.

And oh what a privilege that is. The idea is that, as God’s people, we are to him as my children are to me. And your children are to you. A treasured possession is one deeply loved. Consider, therefore, what Moses writes in,

Deut. 7:6 “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. 7 It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

We see those words repeatedly in the Old Testament.

Deut. 14:2 “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”

And also,

Deut. 26:18 “And 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, 19 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.”

Think about it, beloved. God “will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made.” And as you think about that, sing his praise!

Ps. 135:1 “Praise the LORD! Praise the name of the LORD; Praise Him, O you servants of the LORD! 2 You who stand in the house of the LORD, In the courts of the house of our God, 3 Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; Sing praises to His name, for it is pleasant. 4 For the LORD has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His special treasure.”

And just to reassure you that these words are consistently applied to the New Testament Israel of God, we read in,

Titus 2:11 “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, 12 teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, 13 looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.”

That's who you are, in Christ. God's treasured possession, his special treasure. And with that, according to verse 6 in our text, a kingdom of priests.

### **B. God's people become a kingdom of priests.**

And here is the importance of that, as one commentator writes, "that Israel has been brought into such close fellowship with God that their access to him is priestly." They are a kingdom not merely of subjects, not merely of citizens, but of priests. And the chief characteristic of the priests is their freedom of access before God, their boldness and confidence to enter the presence of God, something the average Israelite would never dream of doing.

That's who you are, beloved, you are a body of priests. All of you. Everyone of you who trusts in Christ alone for your salvation. You have the freedom to enter into the presence of God knowing that you are his treasured possession.

Again it is the freedom and blessing of a family relationship, the freedom my own beloved daughters enjoy with me as their father. We are a kingdom of priests. And the application and encouragement for us is quite obvious,

Heb. 10:19 "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

With all of that, we also see in our text that,

### **C. God's people become a holy nation.**

A body, set apart as holy before God. A holy people. A holy nation.

And why? Why has God done that? Why has God established the covenant with his people with all these great blessings included? Why has he given you this special identity?

All to the praise of his glorious grace.

Eph. 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace."

So what do we do? How do we respond to such grace?

Rom. 6:1 "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?"

Of course not. When God establishes this covenant with us, he calls upon us to accept it. So,

### **III. GOD'S PEOPLE RATIFY THE COVENANT WHICH GOD HAS ESTABLISHED.**

That's what we have in our text. The Constitution was written. Now it is ratified by the commitment of the people.

v.7-8

Here is where so many Christians get confused and fall into error. They think, and they teach, that the covenant of grace,

because it is of grace, requires no commitment of obedience upon our part. And what is really disturbing to many people, which is why they relegate this covenant under Moses to the cancelled covenant of works which no longer applies to Christians of today is that single, small word found near the beginning of verse 5. The word “if.”

v.5

Does that mean, therefore, that everything we have just studied is conditional upon our own works of obedience? Does it mean that God’s grace as given to us in the covenant of grace is conditional upon our own works of obedience? Does it mean that we who are in this covenant of grace might at sometime reject the covenant, violate the conditions of the covenant, and be expelled?

I want to answer all those questions carefully and clearly. The answer is no. The conditions of the covenant, introduced by that word “if,” are not conditions for entering the covenant. God has chosen us in love to the praise of his glorious grace. That’s how we enter the covenant of grace. That’s how we gain this special identity we just studied. And with that, the curse of the covenant is removed, for the condemnation of covenant breakers was poured out upon Jesus, who said of his own blood, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

His blood was the blood of the covenant by which there is the forgiveness of sins. Nothing we do has any part in that work of atonement. There is no condition placed upon us by which we can earn or merit that covenant blessing. We are blessed with the riches of the covenant blessings, despite our sinful covenant-breaking. So do we make of that word “if” in verse 5. And the answer, I believe, is simply this,

### **A. The conditions of the covenant are defined in order to identify God’s people.**

In other words, we ratify what God has established. And if you don’t ratify the terms of the covenant, and will not “obey my voice and keep my covenant,” you cannot rightly claim that great identity of God’s covenant people.

Let me put in the language of the New Testament,

1 John 2:1 “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 3 And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. 4 Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, 5 but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: 6whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.”

There is the covenant of grace--we have an advocate, he is the propitiation who has satisfied the wrath and justice of God once and for all. And, in perfect consistency with that, “Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

If you will not ratify this covenant in the commitment of your own heart, if you will not accept the sovereign lordship of Jesus Christ over your life, if you will not commit yourself to walking in his ways, you cannot rightly claim to be among his beloved. Indeed, by your sins, your unrepentant sins, you show yourself to be his enemy.

So you are called to commitment! Just like the people of God

assembled at Mt. Sinai.

v.7-8

That was not a rejection of the covenant of grace in favor of the law-obedience regulated covenant of works. Rather, that was a commitment made in response to the grace of God. And so it must always be, and here is the crucial point to understand clearly in your mind.

**B. The commitments of the covenant are made in response to God's grace.**

We respond to God's grace with loving obedience, as a demonstration and a testimony of our gratitude. Not because you are trying to earn your status as God's own treasured possession, but rather secure in that status, you are thanking him for that glorious grace by which he redeemed you in the first place. And you thank him by loving him. And you love him by obeying him!

So the question is, "How shall you respond to God's grace?" What does the grace of God teach you? To obey.

Titus 2:11 "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age."

And so this Old Testament expression of the covenant commitments of God's covenant people is still valid today,

Deut. 10:12 "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? 14 Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. 15 Yet the Lord

set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. 16 Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn."

At this point perhaps the greatest demonstration of God's grace becomes evident. As we are called to respond to God's grace with the commitment of obedience, as you strive to obey God's law as the testimony of your gratitude, God will actually enable you to do so!

He commands you to circumcise you your heart, representing the commitment of obedience. But look at the renewal of this Mosaic covenant we are studying in,

Deut. 30:6 "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. 7 And the Lord your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you. 8 And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord and keep all his commandments that I command you today. 9 The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, 10 when you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul."

Beloved, what God commands you to do, God enables you to do. And so your covenant commitment of promised obedience is the testimony of your love and gratitude to the God who enables you to keep that very promise.

If you are unwilling to make that promise, if you are unwilling

to make that commitment of obedience to God in submission to his law, then you cannot claim the blessings that are promised to his covenant people. If there is no repentance of your sins, then there is no faith to trust in Jesus Christ for your salvation. That warning I will faithfully declare to you. And I will warn you not to take the Lord's Supper this morning.

But to those who recognize your sinfulness with grief and hatred, to those who acknowledge that you have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and who wish to obtain the forgiveness of your sins, let me declare to you that that forgiveness will never be obtained by your own efforts or good works. It is all of grace. The curse of the covenant is death, and Jesus' death alone is the ground upon which you can be forgiven. And so you must trust in him alone for your salvation as he is offered to you in the gospel.

Then and only then can your acceptance before God be made secure and your identity established. By grace alone.

With that identity, with that security, and with gratitude toward God, join your hearts and voices to those of the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai, and declare your love to God with these words, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do."