

The Formative Event – 11 Words – the Sinai Covenant

Read #807 together

A quick review—beginning with the 3 questions -- Shout out the answers

1. **What's the problem?** (Sin) – We defined it as loss of relationships between us and God, us and ourselves, us and others and between us and all creation. It matters how we define sin. If we define it too narrowly we tend to make it only between me and God. So how do we see sin creeping into today's text? The people are forgetting their calling to be a blessing to all nations.
2. **What is God doing to solve the problem?** (Called Abraham and his family to re-reveal himself to the world). Last week God began to solve the sin problem by getting the people out of Egypt, and today he begins to get the Egypt out of the people with the Sinai covenant.
3. **How faithfully are God's people cooperating?** Thumbs up or thumbs down? We are already seeing the ups and downs. God's got a lot of work to do. Sound familiar?

Think of your own story -- what is your earliest memory of something in your life that shaped you the most? [pause] This might be a positive or negative experience in your life. How did it change you? Why do you remember this particular story? Stories are the powerful shapers in our lives. Some we love, and some we'd rather forget, but they shape us in one way or another. How have your stories shaped you? Do they make you better or bitter? Can you identify a turning point in your life?

Well, today we learn that Israel's earliest memory was their deliverance from Egypt. The * on the timeline is to help us remember that this is the first big turning point in Israel's history. It is so important that whenever the children asked for a story, the parents and grandparents always went back to the Exodus because it was their new beginning. They always tell the rescue story and jump right into the covenant part. They can't separate the two. It was a story of rescue and reshaping. I like the way Rob Bell puts it – it taught them how to be human again. It reminded them that they are created in God's image, and that God chose them to be the people to bear his image to the world. They were God's flesh and bones, so to speak. God needed bodies to accomplish his reconciliation project.¹

So today we are on our way with Moses and the Israelites (always led by God), crossing the Sinai desert heading toward the Promised Land. This won't be easy. It makes me thirsty just to think about it, [take a sip of water] and we might need some trail mix for the journey.

¹ Rob Bell, Don Golden, *Jesus Wants to Save the Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2008), 31.

Let's look in on the story --

Something interesting to note at this point of the journey -- remember Moses and the burning bush story? It took place at Mt. Sinai, and now God is leading the Israelites and Moses back into the same desert, back to Sinai. Ah....Moses knew this area well, so why wouldn't God choose him to lead the Israelites back through the desert? Do you think Moses may have had an "ah-ha" moment? After trying every excuse in the book to get out of leading the people out of Egypt, it seems pretty clear now why it had to be him. Moses must have said – duh, now I get it.

As they head toward the land "flowing with milk and honey" it seems they should have been "happy campers" to be free from the ruthless rule of the Pharaoh. But as you read the story this week you will notice this isn't the case. It's not unlike taking small children on a trip, only to have them kicking the back seat in the car and groaning – "are we there yet?"

In a way the Israelites went kicking and screaming, especially when they were short on food. They reminisced about the good old days in Egypt when they had plenty of food and water (probably an exaggerated memory). They've already forgotten the days of misery; they've already forgotten their miraculous deliverance. It's not that the people were trying to be unfaithful – they just forgot their story. It's hard to believe, but we are reminded of our own grumbling and complaining when the going gets tough.

It took them about 3 months to get to Sinai. And while it may seem post-Exodus, I am asking us to be intentional about keeping their exit from Egypt (the Exodus) and their Mountain top experience (Covenant at Sinai) closely connected. Think of the Exodus/Sinai as the Birthday of the Old People of God just as Pentecost was the birthday of the New People of God – the church. The Exodus/Sinai was Israel's central memory – their common experience that bonded them together as God's missionary people. It took them from being a "mixed crowd,"² a group of slaves, to being a nation of people. By "mixed crowd" I mean that it was more than Jacob's family on the freedom trail to Canaan. Non-Israelite slaves and captives had also joined in with them. "Israel's freedom meant freedom for others."³ God's freedom was extended to the non-Israelite people too! *Woo Hoo!* Might this tell us something about God's bias for marginal people?

Now it's sad to say, but by the time we get to the Monarchy, they will forget that God's freedom is for all people. They will forget their story of deliverance. But that's getting ahead of today's story.

The Exodus/Sinai Event is a turning point for Israel. Their deliverance from Egypt was a corporate-physical event. God and Moses physically **got the people out of Egypt**. But that's

² Exodus 12:38

³ Terence E. Fretheim, *Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 222.

only half of the story! By the time they reach Mt. Sinai, God has already begun the process of getting the **Egypt out of the people** by providing for them along the way. At Sinai the people experience the individual- spiritual part of this life-changing event! At Sinai God speaks directly to the people saying “you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”⁴ And how do the people respond? They say, “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do!”⁵ This is where God makes a formal covenant with his people. This begins to shape them into his missionary, priestly kingdom. The covenant will give the people direction to carry out their missionary work – to re-reveal God to the whole world. God didn’t just free them from Egypt; he is also freeing them from their Egyptian thinking! It’s more than a “get out of jail free” card. God also gives them a gift – the covenant – trail mix – sustenance for the way!

We know this covenant as the Ten Commandments, but I am going to propose we call it the I I words and I will explain why in a minute, but first let us take a look at law in biblical times. We are most familiar with the covenant as the “law.” God gave the law to the people, yes, but maybe not in the way we think about law in this century.

So here’s a little background on biblical law. Legal documents have been found from the ancient Eastern cultures that suggest 2 systems of laws – Apodictic Law and Case Law.

Apodictic laws were treaties or covenants that required and/or prohibited a certain kind of behavior. **Case laws** were more about assigning penalties for breaking certain laws. The Ten Commandments are considered apodictic law or covenant laws. To be in covenant with another party means they must agree on certain behaviors. To be in covenant means both parties do their part. For example, in that culture, there were communities that required signed covenants for living together. One had to sign a covenant if they wanted to join or live in that community. In our culture, we might associate that with living by certain rules or behaving in a certain way to live on a college campus or within a gated community. We also enter into covenant relationship when we get married. Both parties agree to behave in a certain way.

Now of course there are consequences when laws are broken, and the chapters following Exodus 20 begin to assign penalties case by case. For example, one law states if someone leaves a pit open and an ox falls into it the owner of the pit makes restitution, giving money to the owner, but keeping the dead animal. That’s assigning the nitty gritty details for a specific case. But the Ten Commandments were primarily given so the Israelites would know how to behave as a community of shalom. They were given to teach Israel how to bear God’s image so they would be a blessing to all people, God’s main purpose for choosing them in the first place.

Now to explain the I I Words concept - Since these laws are more about behaviors than a legalistic set of rules, we need to look at the preamble. Exodus 20:2 begins with, “*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;*” this is the first word

⁴ Exodus 19:6

⁵ Exodus 19:8

describing God's act of Grace, followed by, "you shall have no other gods before me." It wasn't that God wanted to be first on the list of gods that were so prevalent in that culture.⁶ NO! God wanted to be their one and only God, and they were to be his one and only people. The law was a gift wrapped in GRACE.

These laws seem to address rules for an individual to follow, and it's true, these were given for the individual, but they are more than that – they stretch beyond one's private well-being or happiness. The focus here is to protect the health of the community made up of individuals who play very important roles within the community. The health and well-being of a community depends on healthy individuals.⁷ We really can't separate the two.

So God gives Israel a big gift. Each command is wrapped in the first word of grace.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery

Dump commands into the bowl of GRACE prefacing each one with the first word of grace.

These "laws" helped sustain the people and taught them what it meant to be human again. They were given a new identity, God's priestly kingdom, radically different than the surrounding pagan cultures who answered to many gods. A critical difference for the Israelites was that God held up his part of the covenant with his all-encompassing love and grace. The surrounding cultures lavished their pagan gods with appeasements; the God of Israel gave GRACE and love without demands and conditions. The God of Israel was concerned about protecting the health of the community with a heart of love and grace. The pagan gods had hearts of stone and anger. As God's image bearers we carry out his heart of love and grace to all people.

At Sinai, the people enthroned God as King, and accepted their calling with one voice, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." Then they shared a meal as Moses read the covenant to the people, to which they responded again – we will do everything God asks us to do! This act of sharing a meal, hearing the covenant read, the sprinkling of the blood on the people, and their response with one voice all signified their bond with God. These acts marked them as God's very own people and sealed their covenant with him. God will keep his side of the covenant; will the people keep their part?

This "law/grace mix" signifies God's gift of covenant relationship. They are ready for the journey to the Promised Land. The covenant is with them wherever they go. It is their "sustenance" for the journey ahead. No one part can be left out just because it is hard to follow. Just like picking through the trail mix for my favorites (chocolate) leaves less than complete mix for others, so too the Israelites must take every part of the covenant with them.

⁶ John H. Walton, et al, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary Old Testament* (Illinois: InterVarsity, 2000), 95.

⁷ Terence E. Fretheim, *Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Exodus*, 221.

No one part of the law/grace mix can be left out and still have shalom community. It's not just about the individual wants. It's about keeping the grace and law together so the motivation for following the law is clear – God delivered this mixed crowd – he got them out from under the Pharaoh's harsh, coercive rule, and into a loving relationship, filled with grace and love. God is now their king. They are armed with the covenant. They have their "grace/law trail mix" to help them journey through the wilderness toward the Promised Land as God's priestly kingdom. Will they be faithful?

Just as Israel was chosen and called into covenant relationship with God, so too are we called and chosen to be his royal priesthood. From I Peter 2:9-10:

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

*¹⁰ Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.*

Therefore, may we be imitators of God's image, bearing his likeness to the world as his chosen, royal priesthood.

May we live out our calling as God's delivered people, armed with the covenant, our sustenance for the journey. Amen!

Go forth as God's chosen royal priesthood, sustained by the new covenant wrapped in God's grace