

Ascent: Part Five
God's Self-Revelation and Our Response
Exodus 24.1-7

June 5

Lead-In to Message: Children and Scripture Memory

Harrison and Charity White	Colossians 3.23
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Message

How do you view this book?

If you were to sum up what is to be found in its pages in one word, what would you say?

And if you were to sum up what we are supposed to do with it in one word, what would you say?

We're in a sermon series about intimacy with God called Ascent.

The focus of the series is the fascinating story of God's encounter with his people at Mt Sinai after he rescued them from Egypt.

It's not just the story of a chance encounter. It's the story, as we've been discovering, of God's *initiative* –

his initiative in bringing his people to himself, drawing them near, and then inviting them to approach him,
his initiative in revealing himself, giving them glimpses of his holy character, his transcendent nature, and his loving heart,
and his initiative in making provision for them to approach him in spite of the moral gap between them and God.

This morning we explore another dimension of God's initiative that comes through in this story: his initiative in giving his people His word.

To explore this theme we're going to go back and take another look at Exodus 24.1-12, which we looked at last Sunday.

A quick reminder: everything that happens in Exodus 24 is about God's *covenant* with his people.

In its simplest form, a covenant is a *commitment* in the context of a *relationship*.

There were two different kinds of covenants in the ancient world.

The first kind of covenant is a deal between two equal partners, like two business associates.

The second kind of covenant is a treaty between two utterly unequal parties, between a conquering king and a vanquished foe. That's the kind of covenant God makes with his people at Mt Sinai.

In this kind of covenant, the King promises to himself *and* to his subjects that he will protect them, and provide for them, and be present and available to them, at cost to himself, and all his subjects need to do is respond to him with gratitude by accepting his gracious provision and giving him their complete allegiance.

And you may remember that whenever a covenant was agreed upon, the same elements were always present. Notice how many of these have to do with things being written down and preserved.

Here are the five elements of an ancient treaty between a king and his subjects:

- the history of the relationship between the two parties is recorded,
- the expectations that are to be met by both parties are written down and read,
- the benefits of keeping the covenant and the costs of failing to keep it are listed out,
- a copy of the covenant is made for both parties.
- then the covenant agreement is sealed by eating a covenant meal together.

So here's Exodus 24 again:

This time through I'd like you to listen specifically to all the different references to God's Word.

I had a friend thirty years ago who used to say "Word!" every time he wanted to say, "That's so true!"

How about if you all call out "word" every time you hear God's Word mentioned in this passage in some form – his laws, his commands, his book, and so on.

Exodus 24.1-12

¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance,

² but Moses alone is to approach the LORD; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him.”

³ When Moses went and told the people all the LORD’s **words** and **laws**, they responded with one voice, “**Everything the LORD has said we will do.**” ⁴ Moses then wrote down **everything the LORD had said**.

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. ⁶ Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar.

⁷ Then he took **the Book of the Covenant** and read it to the people. They responded, “**We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.**”

⁸ Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of **the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.**”

⁹ Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up ¹⁰ and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. ¹¹ But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

¹² The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with **the law and commandments I have written** for their instruction.”

Did you notice all the references to God’s word?

“Word” and “law” are both used in 24.3.

“**Word**” is used in Exodus 20.1 to refer to the Ten Commandments, which were given in the rest of chapter 20 (20.2-17).

And “**Law**” is the word used for the other rules and requirements that were given in chapters 21-23 (21.1-23.33). You see that word at the start of that section, in 21.1.

In 24.3, 24.4, and again in 24.7 the expression “**everything the Lord has said.**”

In 24.7 the writer refers to “**the Book of the Covenant.**”

In 24.8 Moses refers to “the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with **all these words.**”

And in 24.12 the Lord speaks of all the “**laws and commandments**” – two new words – “which he wrote for their instruction.”

What’s between these covers?

If we take our cues from Exodus 24, we’d probably say that the word of God is God’s list of expectations, and what we are supposed to do with them is obey them.

There are lots of things that reinforce that way of thinking about the Bible as a list of rules and regulations we are supposed to obey.

For example, informed by this passage, and this way of thinking about the Bible as primarily a collection of rules to be followed, Jewish rabbis who studied the Old Testament over the centuries – wanting to be faithful to obey everything that God commanded – set out to identify and list every one of its commandments.

They eventually arrived at a list of 613 rules, regulations, restrictions, and requirements in the Old Testament.

Here’s a copy of that list. Timmy Pierce, could you please come up and help me for a moment?

Is this how you think of the Bible? A list of hundreds and hundreds of laws and commands? All the stuff I’m supposed to do?

Now, to be fair, only a few of these are the big things like loving God and praying and not stealing and not murdering.

A lot of them are repeats.

Many of them are rules about religious rituals, like command number 347, which prohibits burning yeast or honey on the altar, and command 319, which forbids priests from wearing torn robes.

And a lot of them are very specific and practical things, like command number 494, which requires you to put up guardrails if you plan to spend time on your roof, and command number 185, which makes it a rule that you can’t eat maggots . . . which doesn’t seem like it would require a rule from God.

All right, even so – even if we hang onto the entire list of all 613 commandments, that list of commands only makes up 2 ½ percent of the whole Old Testament! And even less of the whole Bible. In fact, when we get to the New Testament, Jesus boils down the entire law into just two commands: Love God, and love neighbor (Matthew 22.37-39).

So what's all the other stuff? If it is not just a collection of rules to obey, then what is it? And what am I supposed to do with it?

Well, in some ways, the question I asked about keeping track of all the times God's word is mentioned in Exodus 24 was a trick question.

Because even though the passage mentions God's word in six different places, *the whole thing* was his word. Not just the regulations, but the descriptions and conversations and the invitations. All of it is God's word.

Same thing as you step back and take a quick glance at this story we've been looking at in Exodus 19-34 about Moses and his people at Mt Sinai.

Yes, the story includes the covenant stipulations: a collection of commands and rules that God calls us to obey as his people.

But those sixteen chapters aren't just a list of rules.

We also have a record of how God redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt and drew them to himself at Mt Sinai.

And we are given an account of how God revealed himself to Moses and his people on Mt Sinai through miraculous displays of power and supernatural visions.

And we have a description of the giving of the covenant rules, and the receiving of them.

And we have an honest record of how God's people failed him, and made an idol for themselves.

And we are given an eyewitness account of how God passed before Moses on Mt Sinai and declared his heart towards his people – "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" – words quoted and echoed all through the Scriptures (Numbers 14.17-19, Nehemiah 9.17, Psalm 86.15, 103.8-13, 145.5-8, Joel 2.13, Jonah 4.2, John 1.14).

Yes, the Bible includes commands to obey. But so much more of it is made up of

- Wisdom shared
- Truths told
- Promises held out
- Examples held up
- Cautionary tales recounted
- Redemptive acts remembered
- Invitations to trust reiterated

Answers to prayer highlighted
 Prayers to pray and songs to sing provided
 Glimpses of God's nature and character recorded
 The essence of God's heart captured
 And God's promised Messiah introduced

All recorded and preserved for us at God's initiative.

So God's word is a completely reliable collection of everything God believes we need to know about him, and about us, in order that we might enter into the relationship God desires to have with us, the relationship for which we were made. That's what's between these covers.

And what are we supposed to do with it?

Many of you know Psalm 119 is a psalm written in celebration of God's word.

What's fascinating is to go through that psalm and look at the verbs that answer the question: what are we supposed to do with God's word?

Yes we are called to:

obey 8
 keep 2
 follow 14
 walk according to 1

But we are also invited to

Trust in 42
 Put hope in 43
 Believe 66
 Gain understanding through 130

Be strengthened by 28
 Be comforted by 52
 Be encouraged by 58
 Be preserved by 107
 Be sustained by 175

Seek out 94
 Meditate on 78
 Remember 83
 Hide in your heart 11

Delight in 16
 Find joy in 111
 Be in awe of 18

Treasure 72
Love 47

Ultimately, the Bible is not a list of rules to be obeyed. It is a portrait of God in which he makes himself known, given to us at his initiative, a gift to be received and responded to with joy.

What would we know about God and his heart if we didn't have the Bible?

Hardly anything, right? According to Paul in Romans 1, we would have a few intimations of God's existence and of his divine power . . . and that's about it.

Because God as Creator transcends the world He made, and because God as Spirit is invisible to the world He made, we can only know about God what He graciously chooses to reveal to us.

Everything we know about God is grounded in his revelation of himself in his word.

The Bible is God's love letter to his creation, by which he makes his heart known to us and invites us into relationship with himself, in which he says to us: I created you. I love you. I made you to be in relationship with me. Put your hope in me. Find your life in me. Give me your trust and your allegiance.

And most important of all, the word of God in written form is the way we come face to face with the Word of God in human form.

Jesus, the Word of God, the perfect expression of God's heart, who opens the way into the heart of the father – we learn of his life, his ministry, his teaching, his death, his resurrection and his ascension, and what those things mean for us when we give him our allegiance – we learn those things from the pages of Scripture.

Seeing the Bible as a list of rules to obey is not the path to life.

As Jesus says in John 5.39:

You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!

The word of God is not primarily God's expectations. It is God's invitations. Come! Draw near! Believe! Trust! Be made new!

That's why, all through the ages, the Christian saints have emphasized how crucial it is to know the Scriptures in order to grow in intimacy with God.

That's why we as a church spend such a big chunk of every Sunday morning teaching the Bible, seeking to faithfully interpret it and apply it to our lives.

And that's why we encourage every one of you, as part of God's call to love him with the whole of your mind and heart, to spend time reading the Bible every day in a time of personal worship.

What's between these covers? Not rules and regulations, not expectations, but invitation!

What are we to do with it? To say yes, to accept the invitation, to let it lead us straight to Jesus, who makes a way for us into God's presence, and then to put our feet on its path and allow it to lead us straight up the Mountain into ever deepening intimacy with God.

Closing Song: Waymaker

As his word makes clear, He is alive, he is here, bringing his light into our darkness,
moving in our midst