

Exodus 20:3-6, 7, 12

Introduction

We live in a very individualistic society – a society and culture that emphasizes the “*individual*.” Individual freedom, individual rights, individual autonomy, individual expression. This emphasis in our culture *can* be helpful when we open up our Bible and read about the reality of individual, personal accountability to God, and also of an individual, personal relationship with God. These are ideas that we’re very familiar with. But there’s also a problem with this cultural emphasis on the individual. This is a massive stumbling block and obstacle when we open up our Bibles and read about God’s covenants.

Way back when we first arrived at Mount Sinai (five weeks ago, now) we learned the importance of seeing that God’s Covenant is made with the offspring (*singular*). The Covenant is *not* made with various, random individuals, but *only* with the nation of Israel as a whole. (cf. Exod. 19:3-8; 24:3, 8) If God had entered into covenant with people on an individual basis, there would have to have been hundreds of thousands of separate covenants. But since God enters into covenant *only* with a corporate people—with a group—this explains why there’s only one covenant at Mount Sinai.

And so we see that the covenant God makes at Mount Sinai also includes people not yet even born. God’s covenant at Mount Sinai included every generation of Israel still yet to be born (as long as the covenant remained in effect). So listen to what Moses says to the next generation of Israel after everyone at Mount Sinai has already died.

- Deuteronomy 5:1–5 (cf. 1:43) — Hear, O Israel... The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. **Not with our fathers [only or by themselves] did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.**

But how can this be? How can God enter into covenant with people not yet born – with people who can’t “*agree*” to the covenant like that first generation of Israelites was able to do at Mount Sinai? Think of God’s covenant with Noah and his sons. When God made a covenant with Noah and his sons, this covenant included all the offspring that was “*contained*” within them – or potential in their seed. (cf. Gen. 9:8-13) When God made a covenant with Abraham, this covenant included all the promised offspring that was still “*contained*” in his body – that was still only potential in his seed. So long before Levi was born, or the Levites were ever set apart to the priesthood, we see the Levites actually doing something while they were still only “potential” in the loins of Abraham.

- Hebrews 7:9–10 — One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Notice how the priestly tribe of Levi was contained in the loins of Levi himself (Levi, the individual, never actually received tithes), while Levi, in turn, existed at one point only as a potential within the loins of his great-grandfather, Abraham. And so, now, when God makes this covenant with the generation of Israelites at Mount Sinai, He also makes it with the offspring

still only potential within their bodies. Likewise, the offspring not yet born are actually, in a sense, agreeing to enter into covenant with God because they are actually contained—or included *within*—their parents. This explains how future generations of Israelites can rightly be said to break a covenant that was made with them hundreds of years before they were ever born. This also explains why the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham (circumcision) was given to every male baby at eight days old long before he had any “individual say” in the matter. He had already entered into covenant with God while still in the loins of his distant ancestor. So, if I were a Jew living in the days of Moses, or King David, could I say that I, *personally and individually*, was in covenant with God? Yes! **But** this could only be true in so far as I was a *part* of the much larger, much bigger offspring singular (the **group**) *with whom* God had made the covenant. Understanding this concept is absolutely essential to a deeper and right understanding of the entire Bible, and even of our very salvation.

With all this in mind, we’re going to look this morning at the three (or four) commandments that have “reasons,” or “warnings,” or “promises attached to them.

I. Exodus 20:3–6 — [1st Commandment] You shall have no other gods before me. [2nd Commandment] You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, **for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation¹ of those who love me and keep my commandments.²**

Where we tend to get hung up here is on that part about “visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me.” Sometimes people will point out that the children, and grand-children, and great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren of the wicked father must also be wicked just like their father, and so they’re also suffering for their *own* sin. As true as this may be, it still doesn’t solve the problem that it’s the iniquity *of the fathers* that God visits *on the children*. And how are we to explain, “showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments”? Has there really ever been a time when a thousand generations all in a row all loved God and kept his commandments? Instead, the point here seems to be that this is the generation one thousand times removed from that first generation of those who loved God and kept His commandments. This thousandth generation is still experiencing Yahweh’s steadfast love precisely *because* of the faithfulness of that original generation that’s long since passed away.

But how is any of this “*fair*”? The answer is in a right understanding of the “offspring singular” – which is something we have a very hard time understanding because of our almost exclusive emphasis on the individual. This is a *huge* problem for Christians today!

Notice that the reason given for all we’ve seen so far is that Yahweh is a “*jealous*” God. So it’s the *jealousy* of God that brings judgment even on the great-great-grandchildren of those who

¹ Cf. ESV marginal note; NRSV; NET note: *Heb* “to thousands” or “to thousandth.” After “tenth,” Hebrew uses cardinal numbers for ordinals also. This statement is the antithesis of the preceding line.

² Cf. Exod. 34:7; Num. 14:18; Deut 5:9; Jer 32:18; Deut. 7:9

worship other gods or bow down to carved images.³ And it's also the *jealousy* of God that explains His steadfast love to the children one thousand generations removed from those who love Him and keep His commandments. Doesn't this sound just like what we might expect from a husband with his wife? (cf. Num. 5:14; Prov. 6:34; Song. 8:6) So we read in Ezekiel:

- Ezekiel 16:8, 15, 32, 35, 38, 42 (cf. Ezek. 23:22, 25, 36-37) — “When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love... I made my vow to you and **entered into a covenant with you [Israel]**, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine... But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore... **Adulterous wife**, who receives strangers instead of her husband! ... [Therefore] I will judge you as women who commit **adultery**... and bring upon you the blood of wrath and **jealousy**... So will I satisfy my wrath on you, and my **jealousy** shall depart from you.

The point here isn't just random individuals, but the “**group**” as a whole – the **offspring singular** that's **in covenant** with God. God didn't enter into multiple marriages at Mount Sinai, but only one. God didn't marry a bunch of separate individuals at Mount Sinai, but *only* the nation as a whole. And so it's this idea of the “group” – of the offspring singular – that lets us understand the iniquity of the fathers visited on the children to the third and fourth generation, as well as the righteousness of the fathers visited on the children all the way down to the thousandth generation. The primary point here is not individuals, but rather Yahweh's *wife*. And Yahweh's wife is Israel – the same wife in one generation as she is in the next; the same wife in one generation as she was a thousand generations before.

Are we getting uncomfortable yet? What happened to the individual? Why should *I* have to suffer for the sins of my fathers? It's not fair. Why should *he* get to benefit from the righteousness of someone else? Do we really hear what we're saying?

When Israel went into exile, they were ultimately suffering, not only for their own sins, but for the accumulated sins of all their fathers – for the accumulated sins of all their previous years as God's adulterous wife.

- Isaiah 65:6–7 (cf. Lev. 26:39; Jer. 16:10-13; Mat. 23:31-36) — I will not keep silent, but I will repay; I will indeed repay into their lap both your iniquities and your fathers' iniquities together, says the LORD.

But **even in the very midst** of this exile and judgment – **even at the very same time**, the principle of God's steadfast love to the thousandth generation was still at work. We see an earlier example of this in the book of Kings. When Solomon turned away from God and went after idols, God said that He would take the kingdom away from him, but with this qualification:

- 1 Kings 11:12–13, 34 (cf. 15:4-5; Gen. 26:2-5, 24) — However, I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of David my servant... I will make him ruler all the days of his life, for the sake of David my servant whom I chose, who kept my commandments and my statutes.

³ Every other place in the Old Testament that we hear about God's jealousy, it's always in the context of Israel worshipping (or potentially worshipping) false gods.

One hundred and fifty years later, when David's great-great-grandson led the entire nation into idolatry, this is what we read:

- 2 Kings 8:19 (cf. 19:34) — **Yet** the LORD was not willing to destroy Judah, for the sake of David his servant, since he promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons forever.

You see, what's the point of the contrast between the *third and fourth generation* of those who hate God and the *thousandth generation* of those who love God? It's not that a person's righteousness is more praiseworthy than a person's wickedness is blameworthy. The point is that God's steadfast love and faithfulness towards His unfaithful wife always prevails, in the end, over his wrath and judgement.

So all throughout the Bible, there's this massive emphasis on "covenant." And part and parcel with this emphasis on "covenant" is an **equal** emphasis on the "**group**" – an offspring singular in which even distantly separated generations are treated as one and the same thing. We see this, again, in the promise that's attached to the fifth commandment:

II. Exodus 20:12 — "Honor your father and your mother, **that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.**"

This isn't a promise to every individual child that if he honors his parents, he'll live until he's ninety. It's a generational promise. It's a promise to the offspring singular that as a people their stay in the land of Promise will be long, and not cut short by war, famine, plague, and exile. (cf. Deut. 4:40; 5:32-33; 6:1-3; Ezek. 22:7, 15)

Now, this is frustrating for us, isn't it? What we want to know is where's the individual in all of this? What about personal accountability? What about forgiveness and salvation for the individual who has faith? Well, let's go back now to the third commandment, which also has a *reason* and a *warning* attached to it:

III. Exodus 20:7 — "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."

Notice how this verse starts out with the "**group**" – "You [plural] shall not take the name of **Yahweh your God** in vain." You see, an individual in Israel might try to say that Yahweh was not *his* God, but he could never escape the reality that *he was part* of the offspring singular. And so, in so far as Yahweh was the covenant God of the group, so also Yahweh was his covenant God – whether he liked it or not. "You [plural] shall not take the name of **Yahweh your God** in vain."

But this time, when we move on to the reason/warning attached to the commandment, we'll find that here there's no hint of the offspring singular. There's no mention of "*generations*." This is **all about individual** accountability – "The Lord will not hold **him** guiltless who takes His name in vain. This is like what we read in Deuteronomy and Ezekiel:

- Deuteronomy 24:16 — “Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.
- Ezekiel 18:4 — Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.

In the midst of all God’s dealings with the offspring singular, God never forgot or overlooked the individual. Even if God’s judgment on His adulterous wife was often postponed, that doesn’t necessarily mean that it was postponed for the individual – or even that the fate of the individual was not far more ultimate than the fate of the nation (an eternal fate versus a temporal fate). Even as the “fortunes” of the nation rose and fell, God was still dealing with individuals. Consider the case of the righteous Daniel. He prays:

- Daniel 9:16 (cf. Jer. 45:1-5) — “O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, because for our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and your people have become a byword among all who are around us.

Daniel was a godly man. Daniel obeyed God’s commandments by faith. And so Daniel, as an individual, very clearly enjoyed God’s favor. And yet Daniel also suffered the horrible fate of exile because of the sins of *his* people, and the sins of *his* fathers (“for *our* sins, and for the iniquities of *our* fathers”). How many other righteous people were there, like Daniel, who suffered only because they were a *part* of the offspring singular – because they were a *part* of God’s adulterous wife? And yet, at the same time, these righteous people were still singled out by God for His ultimate favor and protection.

But now, we have a very, very serious problem. On what basis was God dealing with these righteous individuals, if not on the basis of the Covenant – if not as “card-carrying” members of His adulterous wife? How can God deal with them as **anything other** than **a part** of His adulterous wife? Where was the **faithful** wife of which they could be *a part* and *a member*? Where was the **faithful** wife, *inside of which* they could find true salvation?

What are we all saying now? Who cares? Is this our individualistic, and arrogant, and hopeless answer? The Bible teaches that salvation is found only inside of Covenant, and that God’s Covenant is made only with the “offspring singular.” But if the offspring singular have broken the Covenant, then how can any righteous individuals within that offspring singular possibly hope to be saved? Indeed, how can God deal with them as **anything other** than **a part** of His adulterous wife?

Conclusion

Remember what we read five weeks ago in Galatians:

- Galatians 3:16 — Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring [singular],” who is Christ.

Christ, the son of Abraham, *is* the true and ideal offspring singular. He kept and fulfilled all the terms and conditions of the Covenant. And so Christ is the one God ultimately intended when He made His promise “to [Abraham] **and to [his] offspring after [him].**” When we understand this, we can love even more what we read in Isaiah chapter fifty-three:

- Isaiah 53:10–11 (cf. John 1:12-13) — It was the will of the LORD to crush [His Servant, the Messiah]; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, **he [Jesus] shall see HIS OFFSPRING**... Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

There’s a thought we don’t often consider. **The offspring of Jesus**, the son of Abraham! This is the true and spiritual offspring singular. And so(!!!), because this offspring of Jesus is a *spiritual* offspring, it can reach out to include not only people who have yet to be born, but even people who have already lived and died. In other words, the offspring of Jesus can even include all the “Daniels” under the Old Covenant. It can reach out to include not only Jews, but Gentiles! (cf. Gal. 3:26-29) On one level, Daniel was a part of God’s adulterous wife – the offspring singular with whom God had entered into covenant at Mount Sinai. And so to a certain extent, Daniel experienced the suffering of God’s judgment on His adulterous wife. But on a deeper, heart level, Daniel was already a member-in-waiting of God’s adulterous wife **restored, purified, washed, and cleansed** – no longer adulterous, but faithful. And **that** is what we are today, by God’s **grace**.

So maybe now we’re ready to understand this astonishing truth: When God “chose” His Servant—the suffering Messiah—He was also choosing the entire “**offspring**” of the Messiah who were already “**contained**” (as it were) **within Him**. (cf. Isa. 49:7; Eph. 1:4) What we’re witnessing now is the full display of the wondrous, glorious, saving wisdom of God – which surpasses all our comprehension! What we’re witnessing now is the sovereign, saving grace of God, who actually chose us (the offspring of Christ) for Covenant relationship with Himself long before we were even born, or had ever done anything either good or bad. (cf. Rom. 9:11; Gal. 3:26-29) So now maybe we can read these verses as though for the first time ever:

- Romans 5:12, 14-15, 17-19 — Sin came into the world through **one man**, and death through sin, and so death spread to **all men** because **all sinned [in Adam]**... But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if **many** died through **one man’s** trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that **one man** Jesus Christ abounded for **many [the offspring singular]**... For if, because of **one man’s** trespass, death reigned through that **one man**, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the **one man** Jesus Christ. Therefore, as **one trespass** led to condemnation for **all men**, so **one act** of righteousness leads to justification and life for **all men [the offspring singular]**⁴. For as by the **one man’s** disobedience the **many** were made sinners, so by the **one man’s** obedience the **many [the offspring singular]** will be made righteous.

⁴ This understanding of “all” is key to seeing how this text does not teach the idea of universalism (which teaching is everywhere else contradicted by the Scriptures).

- 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45, 47-49 — For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as **in Adam all die**, so also **in Christ shall all [the offspring singular] be made alive...**

You've heard of "groupthink"? "Groupthink" is a bad thing. But let me turn that around to say that we all desperately need to learn to "think group." Today, can I say that I, *personally and individually*, am in covenant relationship with the God of the universe? Without any doubt, the answer is "Yes!" **But** this is only possible in so far as I am a part of the "group" *with whom alone* God had made His saving covenant. The New Covenant in Christ's blood is no different from the Old in this sense: It was not made with various, random individuals; it was made **ONLY** with the **offspring singular** (the Church) – **and it was made with the offspring only in so far as this offspring was "contained," from all eternity, "in Christ."** (cf. Jer. 31:31–34; Isa. 59:21; Ezek. 11:17-21; 36:24-28; 37:11-14; Joel 2:28-29; Eph. 4:4-6; 5:24-27) As you begin to **think** in this way, what will this mean for your love and commitment to the local, visible representation of Christ's "offspring singular" here on earth? And what will this love and commitment mean, in turn, for your own **joy** as you experience the growing assurance that **you** are even personally and individually in Covenant relationship with the God of the universe – the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?