

"THE RATIFICATION OF THE SINAI COVENANT"

I. Introduction

- A. Even in our highly informal culture, there is still a place for ritual and ceremony.
 - 1. Marriages are solemnized in wedding ceremonies.
 - 2. Real estate transactions are finalized at "closings."
 - 3. Witnesses in courts of law have to swear that they will tell the truth.
 - 4. These rituals are important because they are public, official, legally binding rites.

- B. The same thing can be said about what takes place here in Exodus 24.
 - 1. In the preceding chapters, which are referred to in our text as 'the Book of the Covenant', the terms of the Sinai covenant were set forth.
 - 2. In this chapter, the Sinai covenant is ratified.
 - 3. As we study this text today, we will focus upon three elements of this ratification ceremony.
 - 4. First, we will consider the swearing of the covenant oath.
 - 5. Second, we will look at the idea of the blood of the covenant.
 - 6. And third, we will think about the goal of the covenant.

II. Swearing the Covenant Oath

- A. We begin by looking at the swearing of the covenant oath at Sinai.

1. A covenant is a formal arrangement that binds parties together.
 2. It typically involves the swearing of oaths and the setting forth of a sanctioning curse if the terms of the covenant are broken.
 3. Biblical covenants fall into two basic categories.
 4. One category has human works as its governing principle, while the other category has divine grace as its governing principle.
 5. In covenants governed by the works-principle, the covenant blessings depend upon the people's performance of what the covenant requires.
 6. In covenants governed by the grace-principle, the covenant blessings depend entirely on God's unilateral promise.
 7. The way to determine what type of covenant you are dealing with is to identify who promises to fulfill the conditions of the covenant.
 8. As we study a specific covenant, we need to ask, 'Who takes the ratification oath in this covenant?'
- B. When we look back at the ratification ceremony for the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15, we see that that covenant was ratified by divine oath alone.
1. This was symbolized by the fact that God, represented by the smoking fire pot and the flaming torch, walked through the cut-up animal pieces on his own.
 2. This ritual may seem strange to us, but it was a common feature of ancient Near Eastern treaties.
 3. In such treaties, both of the parties would walk through the pieces of the animals that had been slain.
 4. The fact that God alone took that walk in the ratification of the Abrahamic covenant tells us that God promised to fulfill all of the

conditions in that covenant.

5. In other words, the Abrahamic covenant was governed by the grace-principle.
- C. There is a sharp contrast between that ratification ceremony in Genesis 15 and the one that takes place in our text in Exodus.
1. Here it is not God but the people who take the ratification oath.
 2. They said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do."
 3. Because they swore that oath, the people of Israel were personally obligated to fulfill what God required in this covenant.
 4. The only way they would be able to inherit what was promised in the Sinai covenant was if they did all that God commanded in his law.
 5. In other words, the Sinai covenant was governed by the works-principle.
- D. This does not mean that the Sinai covenant taught that salvation could be obtained by works of the law.
1. We need to remember that the blessings of the Sinai covenant were physical and temporal in nature.
 2. If Israel kept this covenant, then God would establish them as his theocratic kingdom in the Promised Land and would cause them to flourish there.
 3. That conditional promise did not abolish the unconditional promise that God had previously given to Abraham.
 4. Paul explains this in Galatians 3 when he tells us that "the law, which came 430 years [after the promises were made to Abraham and his offspring], does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes

by law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise." (Gal. 3:17-18)

5. Paul then addresses the question of why God set up a conditional covenant at Sinai, telling us that "It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made... Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe... So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." (Gal. 3:19a, 21-22, 24)
 6. Paul is telling us that the Sinai covenant was set up as a works-based covenant in order to advance the grace-based covenant that had been revealed at an earlier point in redemptive history.
 7. It was a story within a story, like the play within the play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
 8. The Sinai covenant said that the people had to do what God commanded in order to obtain the promised inheritance.
 9. In setting forth such a requirement, God was making his people painfully aware of their inability to merit their salvation.
 10. He was showing them why they needed a grace-based covenant.
- E. The law of God functions in the same way for us today.
1. God's law sets forth his standard of righteousness and calls us to live up to that standard.
 2. The law teaches us what is good, what is right, what is pleasing to God.

3. The only problem is that none of us can live up to the law's perfect standard of righteousness.
4. When the law is published as a covenant governed by the works-principle, we realize that it is impossible for us to obtain God's blessing on the basis of our works.
5. This is why John Calvin said that "The specific office of the Law [is] to summon consciences to the judgment-seat of God... [and] to lead people step by step to Christ that they might seek pardon from him and the Spirit of regeneration." [cited in Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 678]

III. The Blood of the Covenant

- A. This brings us to the second thing we need to consider in this passage: the blood of the covenant.
 1. After Moses read the Book of the Covenant aloud and after the people responded by swearing the ratification oath, Moses took the blood of the animals that had been sacrificed and threw it on the people and said, "Behold, the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." (v. 8)
 2. This ritual served as confirmation of the oath that the people had just taken.
 3. In doing so, it also called their attention to their need for cleansing.
 4. If they did not keep their promise, if they failed to obey all that God had commanded in his law, then the curses of the covenant would fall upon them.
 5. Their only hope would be for the Lord to provide a sacrificial substitute to bear the curse in their place.
 6. That is what the blood of the covenant that Moses threw on the people signified.

7. It pointed forward to the blood that Jesus would shed on the cross.
 8. The blood of the animals that were sacrificed that day did not secure forgiveness for anyone.
 9. Only the blood of Jesus avails for true spiritual cleansing.
 10. His death alone can redeem us from the transgressions that we committed under the law.
- B. This helps us to understand why Jesus alluded to Exodus 24 when he instituted the sacrament of the Lord's Supper on the night when he was betrayed.
1. The Gospel writers tell us that when Jesus held up the cup, he said "this is my blood of the covenant" and "this is the new covenant in my blood."
 2. Jesus was drawing a comparison between his sacrificial death on the cross and the ratification of the Sinai covenant.
 3. He was saying that his death ratified the new covenant, the covenant that was foretold by the prophet Jeremiah.
 4. The new covenant in Jesus' blood was new in relation to the Sinai covenant.
 5. Unlike the Sinai covenant, the new covenant was not based upon human performance but upon divine promise.
 6. Christ's blood ratified the new covenant because his blood was shed in order to redeem us from the transgressions committed under the first covenant, under the law.
 7. As Paul explains in Galatians, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." (Gal. 3:13)

- C. This passage provides us with a vivid picture of where we all stand under the law.
1. It is as if we were standing alongside the Israelites as they swore their oath and had blood thrown on them.
 2. As long as we are under the covenant of works, we too are obligated to obey God's law, and the only kind of obedience that is acceptable to God in that covenant is perfect obedience.
 3. There is no one here who measures up to that high standard, and this means every single one of us stands condemned under the law.
 4. We need a better covenant, one that is governed by the grace-principle.
 5. We need to be sprinkled by the blood that Christ shed when he was made a curse on the cross.
 6. If you have faith in Christ, then that blood was shed for you.
 7. You have been washed by the blood of the Lamb, and all of your transgressions of the law have been forgiven.

IV. The Goal of the Covenant

- A. We turn now to the last part of our passage, where the focus shifts to the goal of the covenant.
1. After the people took the ratification oath, Moses, Aaron, two of Aaron's sons, and seventy of Israel's elders ascended part way up the mountain and shared a fellowship meal in the presence of God.
 2. This shows us that the goal of the covenants that God sets up with his people is to bring us into communion with himself.
 3. When these representatives of the covenant people ascended the mountain they saw God.

4. Notice, however, that the only description given is what was under God's feet.
 5. They saw a pavement like sapphire, as clear as heaven.
 6. This reminds us of what happens later in Exodus when God passes by Moses.
 7. The Lord only permitted Moses to see his back, since no man can see the Lord and live.
 8. As we think about these descriptions of people "seeing" God, we should remember that God is invisible because he is a spirit.
 9. Nevertheless, God also made himself manifest to his people at key moments in redemptive history in order to assure them that they really were in his special presence.
 10. God wanted Israel's leaders to know that they had not merely had a subjective experience up on Mount Sinai.
 11. They really beheld the true and living God.
- B. We should also consider the way in which God manifested himself to these men.
1. It was as if they saw the base of God's heavenly throne resting upon a clear blue sky.
 2. This is significant because it stands in sharp contrast to how the Lord had manifested himself on Mount Sinai in the preceding chapters.
 3. Previously, the mountain was filled with thunder and lightning and trembling and smoke.
 4. Now all is peaceful and serene and clear.

5. And when the chief men of Israel went up the mountain, the Lord did not lay a hand on them.
 6. They ate the peace offering in God's presence, which signified that the Lord had accepted them.
 7. This is a picture of what we experience through Christ.
 8. As Paul says in Romans 5, "since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."
 9. That peace is signified and sealed to us every time we partake of the Lord's Supper together.
 10. God uses the sacrament to assure us that we really have been brought into fellowship with him through the blood of Christ.
- C. In the last part of our passage, the goal of the covenant is depicted in an even more powerful sense.
1. While the chief men of Israel worshipped the Lord from afar, Moses was summoned to enter into the glory cloud itself.
 2. This was strikingly similar to the way in which Israel's high priest would enter into the Most Holy Place once per year on the Day of Atonement.
 3. It was an awesome thing for Moses to enter into the glory cloud.
 4. It was the high point of the year when the high priest went into the innermost sanctuary.
 5. Yet in Christ we have something far greater than these things.
 6. Mount Sinai and Israel's earthly sanctuary were only representations of God's presence.
 7. Neither of them was the reality.

8. But Jesus has gone into the heavens, into the true sanctuary of God.
9. And those of us who have been washed with his blood have gained access into the holy places.
10. Through Christ we can draw near to God.

V. Conclusion

- A. As we ponder this account of the ratification of the Sinai covenant, we should be utterly amazed at what our God has done for us in his beloved Son.
- B. The glorious inheritance that we never could have obtained by our performance of the law has been given to us as a gift of God's free grace.
- C. Perhaps the best way to respond to this is simply to add our own "amen" to Martin Luther's final written statement: "We are beggars. That is true." [cited in Marty, 185]