

The Apostle Paul's Reference to the Mt. Sinai Covenant of Exodus 24

The Covenant-Making Ceremony

The Book of Exodus comes to a climax with the people of Israel gathered together in the presence of the LORD at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the mountain of God. The LORD has brought Israel out of Egypt in order to bring them to His holy mountain, intending for them to there enter into a covenant of peace and blessing with the LORD their God.

As the LORD describes it through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 2:1-2,) He wooed Israel out into the wilderness in order to make His proposal of covenantal commitment to her. The LORD reminds His people that out of love for Him, they willingly accompanied Him into the wilderness of Sinai.

Now in Exodus 24 the people of God are made to understand the terms of the covenant that the LORD their God is graciously offering to them. (We shall also have to look into the New Testament in order to understand how those terms are realized and fulfilled.) Just as He has pledged Himself to be wholly committed to them, so they must be wholly committed to Him.

As Exodus 24 opens, we find the LORD extending an invitation to the people of Israel to come into His presence for worship and fellowship. Moses, Aaron and seventy elders of Israel (as the representatives of the whole nation) are invited to ascend the mountain of God to worship the LORD and be received by Him (Ex. 24:1.) At the conclusion of this passage (Ex. 24:9-11,) we find Moses, Aaron and the seventy elders actually coming into the presence of the LORD. They saw the God of Israel in His glory: under His feet there was bright sapphire and the very clearness of heaven itself. God did not lay His hand upon them; on the contrary, they beheld God and held fellowship with Him.

Between the opening of this passage, (with the divine invitation to approach God,) and the conclusion, (where they actually experience life in the very presence of God,) there is described the great sacrifice that made this communion with God possible. With regard to the ratification of the covenant at Mt. Sinai, it is of utmost importance to note the order of events as well as the significance of the shed blood sprinkled upon the altar and upon the people.

First, Moses reported to the people the stipulations of the covenant (vs. 3a,) and the people responded by indicating their willingness to accept the terms of the covenant: *"We will do everything that Jehovah has spoken"* (vs. 3b.) Moses then proceeded to write all the words of the LORD; that is to say, he produced a written document of the covenant (vs. 4a.) Second, early the next morning Moses built an altar at the base of the mountain (i.e.; in God's presence) and twelve pillars, representing the twelve tribes of Israel (vs. 4b.) He then instructed the young men, who had been previously chosen, to now offer burnt offerings and sacrifice peace

offerings to the LORD (vs. 5.) The burnt offering symbolized complete devotion and dedication to the LORD on the part of the worshiper. Moses then took the blood of these sacrificed animals and sprinkled half of it on the altar (vs. 6.) The people now reaffirmed their acceptance of the covenant (vs. 7.) Moses then took the rest of the blood and sprinkled it upon the people, declaring, *"This is the blood of the covenant that Jehovah has made with you in accordance with all these words"* (vs. 7-8.)

At this point we must pause in order to rightly appreciate the meaning of the blood sprinkled upon the altar and then upon the people. When we have grasped the meaning of the sprinkled blood we can then appreciate the fact that the covenant of Mt. Sinai was enacted upon the principle of grace.

The Old Testament commentators Keil & Delitzsch provide the best explanation of the meaning of the sprinkled blood. We quote them as follows:

The only reason for dividing the sacrificial blood into two parts was the fact that the blood sprinkled upon the altar could not be taken off again and sprinkled upon the people. The two halves of the blood are to be regarded as one blood: first sprinkled upon the altar, then sprinkled upon the people. In the blood sprinkled upon the altar, the natural life of the people is portrayed as being given up to God. Then, by means of the blood being sprinkled upon the people, what is being portrayed is that same life being restored to the people as a life renewed by the grace of God. (C.F. Keil & Franz Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, Vol. 2, p. 158.)

We are now in a position to understand the significance of the order of events as they occurred at the foot of Mt. Sinai. First, the people consent to accept the LORD's terms of the covenant. But notice that they are not required to fulfill those terms in reliance upon their own strength. On the contrary, what immediately happens next is the sprinkling of the blood upon the altar. In light of Keil & Delitzsch's interpretation, this is actually intended to represent an act of faith whereby the people entrusted themselves to the LORD their God. In New Testament terms, it is the equivalent of being joined together by faith to Christ in His death (Rom. 6:3.) When the people reaffirm their intention of accepting the covenant as presented by the LORD, the remainder of the blood is then sprinkled upon them. As previously noted, the sprinkling of the blood upon the people is symbolizing (and provisionally procuring) the life renewed by the grace of God being bestowed upon the people. Again, in New Testament terms, it is the believer's participation with Christ in His resurrection life (Rom. 6:4,) a life lived unto God (Rom. 6:10-11) by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:13.)

Now we must address the question, How can Paul identify the covenant made at Mt. Sinai as a covenant of grace in Romans 10:6-8, but in Galatians 3:15-18 (and again in Galatians 4:21-31) identify that same covenant as a covenant of works? The answer lies in the peoples' testimony recorded in verse 7. By their re-affirmation, *"They responded, 'We will do everything Jehovah has said; we will obey'"* (notice that they

add the emphatic assertion, *“we will obey,”*) they were expressing their intention to comply with the requirements of the covenant by taking upon themselves the covenant obligations, and thereby giving to the Mt. Sinai covenant the aspect of a covenant of works. But by the sprinkling of the remainder of the blood upon the people (vs. 7-8,) bearing in mind what that act represented, Moses once again reiterates the gracious character of the Mt. Sinai covenant.

Exodus 32 will record Israel’s breaking of the covenant by the making of the golden calf and worshipping it as a substitute for the LORD Himself. On that occasion the people were spared only because of the intercession made by Moses on their behalf (Ex. 32:30-32.)

The LORD spared the people—by Moses’ act of intercession—and in the course of time promised to establish a new covenant with them:

“The time is coming,” declares Jehovah, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² =It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt; because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares Jehovah. ³³“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares Jehovah. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know Jehovah,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares Jehovah, “for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer. 31:31-34)

The New Covenant (Jer. 33) does not replace the Mt. Sinai covenant as something of an altogether different nature; rather, the New Covenant replaced the Mt. Sinai Covenant in the sense that the Sinai Covenant was provisional and the New Covenant contains the promised substance and fulfillment of the covenant.

There is need for the New Covenant (Jer. 33) because the “old covenant” (Mt. Sinai, Ex. 24) with its ordinances was provisional; just as the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins (Heb. 10:4,) so neither could that blood sprinkled upon the people put to death and regenerate the old heart. (Note that the Psalmist prays for a new heart [Psl. 51:10] and the prophet Ezekiel foretells the divine giving of a new heart [Ezek. 36:26.]])

Because of the impossibility of actually fulfilling the requirements of the covenant by their own efforts, as the people erroneously undertook to do, (as seen by their confident declaration, *“All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient,”*) the worshipers would be driven to look forward to the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant and its requirements in the Messiah, and by so doing were redeemed by faith in the promised Messiah.

Thus the Mt. Sinai Covenant served a dual function: typologically it depicted the original covenant of grace and pointed forward to the fulfillment of that covenant in the atoning work of Christ. But, at the same time, it functioned as a covenant of works, due the peoples' initial intention of fulfilling the covenant by reliance upon their own efforts (Ex. 24:7.)

The New Testament Fulfillment

At the time He instituted the Lord's Supper, Jesus distributed the cup of wine and spoke these words, *"He said to them, 'This is [i.e.; this wine represents] my blood of the covenant, that is poured out for many'"* (Mk. 14:24.) Jesus' shed blood was fulfilling the demands of the old covenant. He offered His blood (His life) unto God the Father as a sacrifice of complete obedience, (which was the requirement of the covenant,) and at the same time, He offered His blood unto God as a sacrifice of atonement, bearing the punishment of disobedience that His people deserved (Isa. 53:5-6.)

Jesus' shed blood was at the same time establishing the new covenant. Referring to the night Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, the Apostle Paul writes, *"After supper Jesus offered the cup, saying, 'This cup represents the new covenant ratified by my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this in memory of me'"* (1 Cor. 11:25.) The new covenant, just like the old, requires the shedding of blood—representing death to self and the offering up of the life unto God in devotion and commitment to Him (cp. Rom. 6:10.) But this time it is the Lord Himself who sheds the blood and provides the necessary sacrifice: the Lord Jesus Christ is the one true "burnt offering" of which all the Old Testament burnt offerings were representative. He is the One who is wholly devoted unto God with a life of active obedience and a death of passive obedience to the Father's will.

In the old covenant ratified at Mt. Sinai, the people of Israel had provisionally surrender their lives unto the LORD, (as symbolized by the sprinkling of the blood upon the altar.) The New Testament informs us that what was provisionally accomplished by means of the Old Testament sacrifices is ultimately accomplished by means of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and the believer's union with Christ in His death and resurrection (Gal. 2:20; 6:14.) As Galatians 2:20 indicates, 1) depending on Christ's sacrificial death and 2) being joined to Christ in that death are in fact two inseparable dimensions of one great spiritual experience; namely, true saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Trusting Christ's death on our behalf and entrusting ourselves to Christ, allowing ourselves to enter into His death and resurrection, this is true faith in Christ.