

Lesson 52: Chapter 7: Overview of the Covenants: Part Four: The Mosaic Covenant

We come now to the Mosaic Covenant and the one that I think a lot of people get wrong. You get this covenant wrong and you get into all sorts of trouble. We are showing according to our confession that the CoG was given as a promise to Adam and Eve and that promise is the backbone of the bible which is worked out in progressive steps coming to its fulfillment in Christ, 'This covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament.' So far we have seen the CoW in the garden of Eden where the First Adam failed. God in His goodness did not destroy the human race but gave a promise which we call the CoG that He would finally provide a human Saviour to reverse the impact of sin. The rest of the Bible shows this promise being developed in the OT, and kept in the NT. We have demonstrated how the Noahic Covenant is necessary to this promise by preserving the world and the sinners in it from judgement day until that Saviour could arrive. Last week we looked at how the covenant made with Abraham is an important development of Gen. 3:15 where we see God picking out the bloodline from which the Saviour of the world would come. Today we want to look at the Mosaic Covenant as an important development as Abraham's seed becomes a nation, and God gives the law to this nation as a schoolmaster, teaching us all sorts of gospel principles, as a preparation of the One who will fulfil the law on our behalf.

Let's remind ourselves of the story of the promise working itself out. At the end of the book of Genesis we have a problem, God had promised Abraham and his offspring that they would inherit Canaan. But by the end of the book of Genesis the descendants of Abraham are in Egypt. The book of Exodus is not just a book about cool miracles and political emancipation, it is the story of God keeping His promise to Abraham. God raises up Moses as a deliverer and through the powerful working of God in the 10 plagues, and the passing of the Red Sea, God delivers His people from Egypt to fulfil the promise made to Abraham to bring the people into the promised land, the land promised to Abraham. Before taking them to Canaan He brings them to the foot of Mount Sinai and enters into a Covenant with them, what we call the Sinaitic or the Mosaic Covenant, what the author of Hebrews calls the old as opposed to the new covenant, 8:6-13.

How are we to understand this covenant? Why is it even necessary if the promise given to Abraham still stands and God is being faithful to it in bringing Israel into the land? Once again we are going to employ our hermeneutic of following the inspired apostle in helping us answer these questions and he does so in Gal. 3:16-19a, '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," who is Christ. ¹⁷ This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made....' Several things already stand out for us, the law does not annul the promise to Abraham; the law was added until the promised offspring of Gen. 3:15 comes; the law has a function of highlighting the sin problem we have until Christ comes to save us from sin; the law is preparatory in nature and temporary and will be put away when the fulfillment

comes. Even already we have answers for the Seventh Day Adventists; the theonomists, even the dispensationalists that want to see a revived law in the Millennium. But what we want to see with Paul is this contrast between law and promise, Abraham and Moses. This gives us an important lens to view the Mosaic Covenant.

If we think in terms of the categories of continuity and discontinuity. On the one hand there is obvious historical continuity between Abraham and Moses as Moses is raised up by God to lead the people into the land promised to Abraham. But on the other hand there is a substantive discontinuity as the law is added to the promise and will come to an end but the promise will not. This brings us to the central problem with the Mosaic Covenant, how do we account for the legal aspect of the Mosaic Covenant?

Now I will not burden you with the many different schools of thought, and the historical development of thought around this problem. But let me just say, that here we find an ocean of ink, a multiplicity of views, and differences between good men. I am going to give you the view that I think is correct. This is a view that is similar in structure to the Puritans Samuel Bolton and John Cameron of the Puritans who taught what is called a three-fold view, where the Mosaic Covenant has to be seen as a third type of covenant distinct from the CoG and the CoW, they called it the Subservient Covenant. It gets a bit complex here but here is how it goes. The CoG is the prevailing covenant that is in place, we are after the fall, the promise of Gen. 3:15 is in place, the Abraham Covenant has been made and God is presently working out His promises of this development of the CoG. Any person who gets saved, can only be saved by grace, through faith, in God's promised deliverer. But God wanting to put certain gospel realities on display then adds the law, as Paul puts it. The law echoes Eden and the CoW originally made with Adam so that we have a tension of the CoG being a foundation but then this law element is added to make certain gospel realities plain, Gal. 3:24. For this reason some speak of the Mosaic law as a republication of the CoW. This however can sound very misleading and it can sound like we are promoting the impossibility that Israel were put in a position where they could earn their salvation by their works. This is not what is meant. There have been some old school dispensationalists who taught such a thing, but that is a heresy. So we say that there is not a formal republication but a typological republication of the CoW added to the CoG. Let me demonstrate this.

Adam is called a son of God; Israel is called a son of God. Adam is placed in a land flowing with milk and honey; Israel is set in a land flowing with milk and honey. Adam as God's vice-regent is given the task of tending and keeping the garden, he was to drive out the serpent and anything that exalted itself against God's holiness and reign; Israel were a holy nation who were to tend and keep the land, driving out the seed of the serpent maintaining the holiness of the land. God walked in the garden with Adam; God was physically present with Israel in their midst in the pillar of fire and cloud and the shekinah glory resident in the tabernacle. Eden was a theocracy where the law of the land was the law of the Lord and God's son had the responsibility to enforce that law and apply the death penalty; Israel was a theocracy, God was in her midst and the law of the land was the law of the Lord and the sinner was to be put to death, God's son was to administer God's justice. In the Garden the Sabbath was a sign of the CoW, that if Adam worked he would gain the reward and enter into God's rest; Israel was given the Sabbath as a sign as well, Ex. 31:13, "'You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a

sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.’ Adam we know was in a CoW, that by his obedience or disobedience he would save or condemn the human race. Israel too was under not the exact same CoW, but a works principle added to the CoG to remind us of Adam’s failure and point us forward to Christ’s obedience.

Paul tells us that the Mosaic Covenant is different to the Abrahamic promise. This is because where God made Abraham fall asleep and walked through the pieces in a self-maledictory oath, the people of Israel made the oath. Remember whoever makes the promises determines what sort of covenant it is. If the promise is one sided like with Gen. 3:15; or the Noahic Covenant; or the Abrahamic, this is a unilateral covenant and is a grace based covenant. On the other hand when the parties both make promises or are both under obligation to keep it in order not to be subject to the curses of the covenant, then it is a bilateral covenant. Several times we see a very different situation to Abraham with the people of Israel. Ex. 19:7-8a, ‘So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. ⁸ All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Then God gave the 10 commandments. Ex. 24:3-8 records the confirmation ceremony of the covenant, ‘Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.” ⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. ⁶ And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” ⁸ And Moses took the blood 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.” Again after the wandering in the wilderness, Josh. 24:21-24, ‘And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the Lord.” ²² Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” ²³ He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel.” ²⁴ And the people said to Joshua, “The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.” Nehemiah talks about this covenant ceremony in terms of entering into the curse of the covenant when Israel reconsecrates itself to the Mosaic Covenant after the exile 10:28-29, ‘The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, ²⁹ join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his rules and his statutes.’

Just as Adam was under law for life or death; Israel is in a similar situation. However, it is clear from the blessings and cursings of the covenant that Israel could not inherit eternal life; but they could maintain their stay in the land and a blessed experience in the land by their obedience. Disobedience would yield curses and finally exile. Lev. 18:4-5, ‘You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. ⁵ You shall therefore keep my

statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord.' The life promised here is not eternal life but physical life and blessing. The physical life was a type of the eschatological life Adam failed to win for us; that sinners cannot win by anything they do; and which Christ alone has won for us by His obedience. This parallel of Adam and Israel is not an imposition but taught in the scripture itself, Hos. 6:7, 'But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.' This has led some to saying that hypothetically if you could keep the law, you could get into heaven. Though because of our fallen condition it would be impossible. Paul seems to say as much in Gal. 3:21-22, '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. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.'

What must be stressed is that Jesus was born under the law to keep the law for us. Gal. 4:4-5, 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.' You and I are redeemed, yet we were not born under the mosaic covenant needing to be redeemed from the Mosaic Covenant though. Here we need to recognize as Paul does that the Mosaic Law has enough correspondence with the original covenant of works that Jesus fulfilling the Mosaic law will serve to save not only Jews but all born under the curse of the covenant of works.

So what does this explanation of the Mosaic law as a typological CoW imposed on the CoG get us, what does it clarify?

Here is the take away:

The law of Moses was given to teach us and point us to Christ. Adam was put under a law to gain life by it and failed, Israel was put under the law and failed time and time again, suffering exile and the curses of the law. As we look at our own lives we see that the story of Adam and Israel is the story of every one of us. Israel is a microcosm of us all. We are under law, but we break it, we inevitably bring ourselves under the curse of the law. And this is where Christ comes into it. Gal. 3:13-14, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.' We were under the curse but He came and took that curse for us. We were under a covenant of works in Adam and the only way to life was perfect obedience, we could not render it but He did, and we now inherit the promise by His obedience. The law is what makes the fall of Adam and the obedience of Christ intelligible.

Secondly, it helps us to understand the law of Moses and the many instances of capital punishment. We see many things that we would only define as sins be treated as crimes and receive the death penalty. Picking up firewood on the Sabbath; striking ones parents; adultery; blasphemy, etc. one of the key hermeneutical principles we apply the various laws of Israel is eschatological intrusion. In other words, God was putting more of His judgement Day justice on display in the laws of Israel, illustrating through this civil administering of His justice against sin something of what will happen on judgement day.

Thirdly, this eschatological perspective gives us insight into understanding the cleansing of the land of the Canaanites. It helps us see that God is not racist but holy, and the armies of Israel were being used by God to put His judgement day standards on display.

Fourthly, when we do see promises of fertility for obedience; or health for obedience; or wealth for obedience, we recognize that this is not normative for us in the New Covenant. We can now see that instead of the usual way of common grace, there was a suspension of common grace in Israel.

Fifthly, when it comes to the civil laws of Israel, we recognize that there is a theocracy in place, just like in Eden, that this is not normative for this covenant but was a type that was pointing to our inheritance where all things will be in accordance with God's will, where everyone will be holy, and all sin driven out.

Sixthly, the land of Israel is not holy today, though it was holy when God was there then.