

**TUTORIAL**  
**1.29**

# God's agreement to bless the Israelites if they obey Him

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: **Exodus 19:1-8.**

## Last time

God led the Israelites out of the inhabited communities of Egypt toward the Red Sea. When Pharaoh heard they seemed directionless, he set out with his army to recapture them. Trapped with their backs to the sea and their enemies thundering toward them in chariots, the Israelites had no escape unless God rescued them. God opened up the sea and, once they were safely through, allowed the water to crash back down, drowning the pursuing Egyptian army. He provided food and water for the Israelites as they pushed on into the wilderness.

## God leads the Israelites to Mount Sinai

Continuing to lead the Israelites by day and night, God brings them to the foot of Mount Sinai. (Exodus 19:1,2) They set up camp there in the wilderness with the mountain looming over them. God's "sign" to Moses way back during the burning bush conversation – that He would bring him and the Israelites back to this mountain to worship Him – has indeed come true. What takes place at Sinai is going to have massive implications for the Israelites and for the human race as a whole. The things God was to reveal about Himself there would echo down through history and have an enormous influence on many societies and cultures, including our own. But here in the immediate time frame of the Narrative, God had brought the Israelites there, as we'll see, to make an agreement with them as a people.

Another term for this agreement in English is *covenant*, which, correctly, gives the sense of it being more formal, and binding, contractual...the older English word that has fallen out of general use is *testament*. The fact that the first two thirds of the written record of God's Narrative is called the Old Testament reflects the pivotal role this covenant had in God's interaction with His people in particular, and humans in general.

## God puts forward a proposal to the people

Leaving the people camped below, Moses climbs the mountain to speak to God. (Exodus 19:3-8) The personal, relating Father, the Lord, speaks of having carried the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt on eagles' wings and having brought them to *Himself*. In light of all He's done for them and the mercy He's shown when they were so needy, He makes a proposal...He paints a picture for them to consider. On his part, He says, He will value them as His special, highly valued people on this planet, this earth that is all His. They will have access to Him and be understood to be set aside for Him, to be part of His purposes. For their part, they will need to obey Him implicitly in all that He's going to lay out for them. Moses takes this proposal, this agreement or covenant, to the people and puts it before them. What do they think? How will they respond to God?

The Narrative does not give the impression that this proposal was met with a lot of soul searching or careful consideration. It seems that with no hesitation at all the people unanimously give their confident response, "Whatever God commands we'll do it." In light of how quickly they had forgotten God's mercy after the Red Sea rescue, and given how shallow their faith in God had proved to be in the wilderness, their confidence in their ability to obey implicitly was clearly misplaced. Even without knowing all the specifics of His commandments, their consciences should have told them that they were not equal to the task. They should have remembered that even when not doing overt evil, their attitudes, values, thoughts, words and actions were always tainted by sin. An appropriate response would have been to humbly acknowledge the hold that sin and Satan had on their lives and to ask God to send the promised Deliverer to rescue them from their spiritual bondage...in much the same way He had already rescued them from their physical slavery in Egypt. But they had a lot yet to learn about God's perfect standards and about their own inability to live up to them.

## The Israelites prepare to receive God's Law

This is not going to be a light-hearted wilderness retreat. God is not going to throw out some mild suggestions about what the Israelites could possibly do to uphold their end of the covenant they'd so confidently agreed to. There will be no casual exchange with everyone offering opinions. Only Moses will be allowed to speak with God and function as His designated mouthpiece, His human storyteller to the people.

The people are to prepare themselves...the text uses the word "consecrate", to physically and mentally dedicate themselves to this one purpose of receiving God's laws. A boundary is to be set around the foot of the mountain. No one, not even their livestock, is to set foot beyond that. Anyone who does so is to be put to death. God is declaring this His holy place for this law-giving event.

He wants them – and all who would hear His Narrative – to get a glimpse of His unapproachable holiness and righteousness. They are sinners, with no inherent right to approach Him. The physical boundary and the terrain rising beyond it to the summit and God's presence represented death for them. This was the one with whom they were entering into a covenant. And then, on the morning of the third day, a dense cloud covers the upper parts of the peak. They can hear thunder crashing and see lightning flashing. The whole thing is smoking and the ground is shaking. Moses leads the terrified people right up to the boundary at the foot of the mountain, and then at God's command disappears up into the smoke and fire.

He will come back down with God's Law. He will tell the people what is involved in holding up their side of the bargain, the Covenant. And, it will be impossible! They will not be able to even come close to obeying. And that's the point God was making. It's the point He'd been making in every interaction with humans after the Fall. They were unable to please Him with their own efforts. Adam and Eve could do nothing to make themselves presentable in their shameful nakedness. Cain could not come with his own ideas about how to approach God. Noah and his family had only one door through which they could enter the safety of the boat God had told them to build. Isaac, bound and with the knife about to plunge had no hope except for God providing a substitute sacrifice. And the Israelites had no way to escape at the Red Sea without God providing them a way.

So now God is ramping up this message. A whole people group wants His blessing and protection. They are saying they want a special relationship with Him, and they're happy to sign the contract, as it were. But they still don't get it. They think they'll have no trouble earning His acceptance. God has graciously chosen them to be His people. They are to be the nation through which the promised Deliverer will come, through which all the families of the earth are to be blessed. But His holiness and righteousness is such that it cannot tolerate the sin-cursed efforts of Adam's race, no matter how devout or well intentioned.

So now, from out of the shaking, smoking, holy mountain they're going to receive His Commandments. This too is part of His Story to them and to mankind. And his purpose is that as they, as anyone, grasps the full import...the full *impossibility* of His Law, they'll realise their hopelessness, their total inability to completely fulfill even one of the commandments, much less the whole Law. And as they do, they'll turn to Him in humility, they'll agree with His view of them, they'll recognise their sinfulness and guilt and they'll throw themselves on His mercy, believing in the way that He alone provides for anyone to be acceptable and to have the relationship with Him they were created for.





## DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. God's Word paints a picture of Him leading and providing for His chosen people in the wilderness. What does this tell us about the relationship He desires to have with human beings, made in His image? Think of other instances in the Biblical narrative so far that highlight this intention. Reflect on how far the human race is in general from having this kind of relationship with its Creator today.
2. What has been your experience of how God's law has been presented? Have you heard direct teaching, or perhaps an underlying assumption, that we should try to obey God's law? Or, has it not come through clearly and consistently: i.e. why the law was given, and how it relates to us as believers? Give a brief synopsis of your current view of this issue.
3. Describe in your own words why you feel God chose to accompany the giving of His Law with thunder, lightning and with the threat of death hanging in the air? Do you think He was trying to intimidate them into obeying the commandments? What do you feel was His purpose?