

Gospel Pictures: The Old Covenant and the Law of Moses

For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

The covenant that God made with ancient Israel has various names in Scripture. It is called the Old Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:14), the First Covenant (Hebrews 8:7), the Lord's Covenant (Numbers 14:44), and the Covenant of the Lord (Deuteronomy 4:23). In the New Testament it is called the First Covenant even though it is not the first covenant ever recorded in Scripture. Of the covenants recorded in Scripture, the Old or First Covenant is actually the third covenant chronologically. The first covenant chronologically is the covenant with Noah (Genesis 9) and the second covenant chronologically is the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12, 15, 17). The First Covenant is not the first covenant chronologically. One of the reasons why the New Testament calls it the First Covenant may be because it is the first covenant to begin the promise of redemptive history as revealed in the Abrahamic covenant. It is the first of two covenants contained within the Abrahamic covenant. Let me explain.

The covenant made with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-20, 17:1-22) was God's promise to create a people and bring them into a land. As human history unfolds, we see that this promise made to Abraham has two parts, or two halves. The first half is played out with Abraham's physical descendants through Isaac, eventuating in the Old Covenant nation of Israel. There, God created a physical nation, redeemed them from physical bondage, and brought them into a physical land, Canaan, giving them physical rest from their physical enemies (Joshua 21:44-45). This first half of the story of redemption promised to Abraham is played out for us in the Old Testament, specifically, the period of time from Mount Sinai and the giving of the Mosaic Law (Exodus 19) to the day of Pentecost in the New Testament in Acts 2. This first half of the Abrahamic Covenant involves the physical descendants of Abraham through the lineage of Isaac to the ancient nation of Israel. The second part is played out in the New Covenant with the true holy nation, the church, the true spiritual descendants of Abraham (Galatians 3:16, 26-29). Unlike the Old Covenant, which traced the history of Abraham's physical descendants, the New Covenant reveals Abraham's spiritual descendants, those in Christ. The covenant that God made with the Old Testament nation of Israel is what we will examine here. For more on the Abrahamic Covenant, please see [*The Abrahamic Covenant: God's Promise to Save a People and Bring Them into a Land.*](#)

The Old Covenant was a Legal Works Covenant

We can begin by saying that the Old Covenant was a legal, conditional covenant. By that, we mean that it was a works covenant that demanded perfect obedience in order to reap its benefits.

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, *if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant,*

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you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” (Exodus 19:1-6, Emphasis added)

Because it was a legal works covenant, the Old Covenant demanded perfect obedience – “*if you obey, you shall be...*” If the Israelites obeyed perfectly, fully, and completely, all of God’s commands under the Old Covenant, God would bless them:

And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 28:1-2, Emphasis added)

Because the blessings of the covenant were conditioned upon complete and perfect obedience, if the Israelites did not fully obey the demands of the Old Covenant, God promised to destroy them.

If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the Lord your God, then the Lord will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting. And he will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you. Every sickness also and every affliction that is not recorded in the book of this law, the Lord will bring upon you, until you are destroyed. Whereas you were as numerous as the stars of heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God. And as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it. (Deuteronomy 28:58-63, Emphasis added)

The Old Covenant was a legal, conditional, works covenant that demanded perfect obedience and the price paid for anything less than perfect obedience, was destruction. Although God was gracious in giving the Old Covenant, the covenant itself was not a gracious covenant. It was a legal covenant that required perfect obedience (if you obey fully, you will be blessed; if you do not obey fully, you will be cursed).

The Law of the Old Covenant

The law of the Old Covenant was the Mosaic Law, first given to Israel at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. The Mosaic Law was inseparably tied to the Old Covenant. It is called “*the Book of the Covenant*”:

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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.” 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. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. *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.” 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.” (Exodus 24:3-8, emphasis added, see also Deuteronomy 28:58)

The promised blessings for faithful obedience to everything in the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 28:1-14), along with the warnings of doom for failure to obey fully (Deuteronomy 28:15-68) are included in the Law of Moses along with the previous laws received at Mt. Sinai (Horeb). Collectively, they are called *the words of the covenant*, meaning that they comprise the law of the Old Covenant and they belong specifically to the Old Covenant.

These are *the words of the covenant* that the Lord commanded Moses to make with the people of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant that he had made with them at Horeb. (Deuteronomy 29:1, emphasis added.)

Failure to obey the Law of Moses perfectly constituted breaking the Old Covenant (Leviticus 26:15).

The Ten Commandments were the representative summary of the Mosaic Law. While the Law consisted of many more obligations than the Ten Commandments contained, the Ten Commandments stood for the entire Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 4:13, 9:9-11).

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. *And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone.* And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess. (Deuteronomy 4:12-14, emphasis added.)

The Ten Commandments were historically time-bound to the Old Covenant Law of Moses. They were the words of the covenant and the tablets of the covenant. The Ten Commandments are inseparable from the Old Covenant.

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When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, *the tablets of the covenant* that the Lord made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water. And the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words that the Lord had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly. And at the end of forty days and forty nights the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone, *the tablets of the covenant*. (Deuteronomy 9:9-11, emphasis added.)

The entire Law of Moses was historically time-bound to the Old Covenant era which it served. The Law was in effect from Mt. Sinai until the coming of Christ and the era of the New Covenant, which replaced it.

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*. 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. 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*, (Galatians 3:16-19a, emphasis added.)

Now *before faith came*, we were held captive under the law, *imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed*. So then, the law was our guardian *until Christ came*, in order that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:23-24, emphasis added.)

In writing about the glory of the New Covenant in relation to the glory of the Old Covenant, Paul tells the Corinthians that the Old Covenant was temporary and the New Covenant is permanent:

Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. (2 Corinthians 3:10-11).

The Nature of the Old Covenant

There was something wrong with the Old Covenant (Hebrews 8:7). By design, it was powerless to transform a life and forgive sin. It was God’s intention that the Old Covenant and its laws would be weak and useless in their ability to produce a true people of God. An Israelite could not experience the forgiveness of sin by keeping the laws of the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant was a legal, works covenant that did not provide forgiveness of sin for those under it.

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For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “*Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.*” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “*The righteous shall live by faith.*” *But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”* (Galatians 3:10-12, emphasis added.)

Because it was works – “the one who does them shall live by them” – the Law could never forgive sin. It was completely powerless to provide pardon for sin and true forgiveness because it was not of faith, but works.

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:3-4)

Because it was part of a legal works covenant that could not save, the introduction of the Law into human history caused the Israelites to sin more (Romans 5:20) and those under the Old Covenant and its Law became slaves to sin.

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. *One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.* But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, “*Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.*” Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. (Galatians 4:21-28, emphasis added.)

Because the Old Covenant was a works covenant and the Law of Moses required perfect obedience, those under the Law who sought justification by what they did were cursed by the same Law they were attempting to obey (Galatians 3:10). The Old Covenant was a covenant of death and condemnation and was in opposition to the work of the Spirit and the forgiveness of sin under the New Covenant. The Old Covenant Law was a “ministry of death.”

And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new

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covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. *For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.* Now if *the ministry of death*, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in *the ministry of condemnation*, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. (2 Corinthians 3:3-11, emphasis added.)

Finally, we can say that the Mosaic Law of the Old Covenant was hostile to the formation of the true people of God, the church. Its existence stood opposed to the bringing together of Jew and Gentile into one new man, the church. This is Paul's meaning when he tells the Ephesians,

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. *For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.* And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:11-18, emphasis added.)

Gospel Pictures: The Purpose of the Old Covenant

If no one could be saved by keeping the demands of the Law, what was its purpose? Why would God give the Israelites a covenant that was designed to stir up sin and to produce a people enslaved to sin? We can summarize the purpose of the Old Covenant as follows:

- The Old Covenant anticipated through types and shadows, the sacrifice of the true Lamb of God, Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sin purchased on the cross (Hebrews 9:1-28).
- The Law of the Old Covenant provided a temporary picture of the forgiveness of sin that could never clear a person's conscience from sin's guilt. The Law was a constant reminder of sin. True forgiveness was only pictured in the Law (Romans 5:20, Hebrews 10:1-18).
- The Old Covenant historically illustrated the effects of God's law on an unbelieving heart. God's law on an unbelieving heart always results in condemnation. It takes a work of the Spirit, apart from works, to be accepted by God (Romans 7:1-6).

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- The Old Covenant produced the Messiah who would truly save his people from their sins (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:20-23, Romans 9:1-5).
- the Old Covenant was a temporary illustration that anticipated fulfillment under the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:7, 13)