

The Covenant with Moses Part 1: Worship Service of a Holy Nation

Scripture Readings: Exodus 19:4-6; 24:1-11; 1 Peter 2:5, 9

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Dear Congregation of Christ: The word “liturgy” is taboo among evangelicals because they think it refers to the Roman Catholic Mass. But “liturgy” comes from the Greek word *leitourgia*, which simply means “service (Phil. 2:17, 30; 2 Cor. 9:12); or the official service of the priests (Num 8:22, 16:9, 18:4) and of Christ our great High Priest (Luke 1:23; Heb 9:21). Worship liturgy, therefore, is Christ’s service to us, and our service to Him. However, most churches today boast that they do not have a liturgy because their worship is “as the Spirit leads.” This aberrant belief about worship liturgy is exemplified by a quote from Social activist Shane Claiborne: “Liturgy and worship were never meant to be confined to the cathedrals and sanctuaries. Liturgy at its best can be performed like a circus or theater—making the Gospel visible as a witness to the world around us.” Worship is like a circus or theater! What blasphemy and tragedy!

However, every church has a liturgy, strict or loose, printed or not. Visit almost any church for a few Sundays, and you will find this liturgy pattern every time: sing a lot, pray a little, and here comes the preacher! The big question is not whether a church has a liturgy or not, but whether it is faithful to Scriptural liturgical pattern or not. From the Old Testament to the New Testament to the early church, the church has always worshipped in a liturgical way.

But why did God establish a liturgical pattern for worshipping him? One benefit of liturgy is it focuses the worshipers’ hearts and minds to the Triune God. Another benefit is that it shows us the unity of God’s redemption plan by connecting Old Testament promises to their New Testament fulfillment in Christ. Still another benefit in using a historical liturgical pattern also connects all believers in all times and places.

In God’s covenant with Moses as the covenant head of Israel, we find a pattern of worship. First, God called them to assemble for worship at Mount Sinai. Second, God commanded them to offer sacrifices for sin. Third, God proclaimed his word and commandments to the people. Fourth, the people vowed to obey God’s word. And fifth, the people ate and drank before God to confirm the covenant. This is the covenantal worship pattern that we follow in our worship service every Lord’s Day. But many churches today do not, arguing that this pattern is obsolete because it is Old Testament worship. However, next Sunday, we will study in Part 2 of God’s covenant with Moses that this basic pattern is also what the New Testament worship follows. The reason is obvious: New Testament worship pattern and elements continue the Old Testament worship pattern and elements because the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament. We will see this mainly in Revelation Chapters 4 and 5, Acts 2:42, and many other texts.

So, our theme today is, **“God’s Covenant with Moses: Worship Service of a Holy Nation Part 1,”** under five headings. (Not to worry, this sermon will not be much longer than usual.)

A Holy Nation Called to Worship

Before we look at our first text, we must ask, “Who does God call to worship?” Over a hundred years ago, the great 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon once preached these prophetic words, “A time will come when instead of shepherds feeding the sheep, the church will have clowns entertaining the goats.” Isn’t this what has happened to the church beginning in the early 20th century? Churches are so focused on success measured by an overflowing attendance and big budgets that most of their programs cater to the “unsaved” and unreached.”

However, the church’s worship service is a divine worship, a heavenly worship of the God who is our Creator and Redeemer. It is not—as Spurgeon lamented—entertainment for the “goats,” earthly unbelievers outside God’s heavenly church. Our culture, together with the rest of the world, is an entertainment culture of God-haters. If there are unbelievers who come, whether by accident or because of leading by the Holy Spirit, the worship service must remain the same. They must hear the word of God read, prayed and sung, and the true gospel preached in order that they may believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. This is why the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:17, “*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*” No one is saved by entertaining the goats, or as the Westminster Confession of Faith says, “according to the imaginations or devisings of men, or the suggestions of Satan, or under any visible representation, or any other way not commanded in Holy Scripture.”

Back in Exodus 7:16, God commanded Moses to say to Pharaoh, “*Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness.*” So the Lord freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt so they may worship him in the desert. After 50 days of their pilgrim journey, they reached Mount Sinai, where God called them to assemble before him to worship him. In Exodus 19:4-6, God reminded them how he freed them from the Egyptians and how he protected and provided for them in the wilderness up to that point in their pilgrimage. Then the Lord assured them that if they kept his covenant laws, they shall be his “*treasured possession among all peoples... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*” God called them to worship him on the mountain because he has established them as his own holy nation, not unbelieving and disobedient goats.

So in Exodus 19:11, the Lord commanded the Israelites to be ready by consecrating themselves for two days because on the third day, God will come down and meet them. Note that the people must assemble together on the third day. When did Jesus rise from the dead? It was on the third day after he was crucified, which was the first day of the week. This is why we assemble for worship on the first day of the week. Therefore, third day is one of the most significant days in Scripture, the Lord’s Day in which we assemble as God’s redeemed, holy nation to worship him. It is on this day that our Lord calls us to assemble together to worship as his holy nation, usually with a reading from the Psalms, such as this morning’s Psalm 96, “*Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!*” (verse 9)

A Holy Nation Confesses Its Sins

After God called the Israelites to assemble together, he warned them not to come near the mountain, or else they would die. Why? Because unclean sinners cannot come near, touch, or see

the holy, pure God without God's holiness striking them down (Exo 19:12-13, 21). Beginning with God's covenant with Adam, the penalty for even a single violation of God's covenant laws is death (Gen 2:17). Paul affirms this in Romans 6:23, "*For the wages of sin death.*" After Adam and Eve sinned, they knew they were naked, so God used the skin of animals he sacrificed to cover their nakedness, which is symbolic of their sinfulness (Rev 3:17).

After assembling them together for worship, in verse 5, Moses ordered young men to offer burnt offerings and peace offerings to the Lord. Then Moses poured half of the blood of the sacrificial animals into basins and half of the blood he threw against the altar of sacrifice (verse 6). The blood covers the altar with its 12 pillars to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. This act of throwing the blood of sacrificial animals against the altar is symbolic of God covering Israel's sinfulness by a bloody sacrifice. Therefore, they knew that they could not come before God "as they are": naked, sinful and unclean. They could only come near to God after they had been cleansed of their sins. If we, as many churches, teach, "come as we are" without first repenting of our sins and being forgiven by God, we heap sin upon sin on ourselves.

This part of Israel's worship is our Confession of Sin, "*for I know my transgressions*" (Psa 51:3), and Assurance of Pardon (1 Pet 1:3-5). And who is our bloody sacrifice who cleanses us from sin? It is our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, crucified on the cross for us (1 Pet 2:24). Then, and only then, are we able to understand God's word read and proclaimed.

A Holy Nation Hears the Word of God Proclaimed

In the first part of verse 7, we read, "*Then [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people.*" Here, we see that only after they had been cleansed of their sins that God proclaimed his word. The Book of the Covenant is the whole Law of Moses that includes the Ten Commandments and all the laws and regulations for worship and the civic life of national Israel.

The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17, which we read this morning, are a summary of God's moral laws. Our Lord summarized it into two great commandments: love God with all our hearts, soul and mind, and love our neighbor—brothers and sisters in Christ—in the same way as we love ourselves (Matt 22:37-40). God called Moses and gave him all the laws and commandments that he should read before all the people. From Chapters 20-23, God gave his moral laws for holy living and his laws for ordering the nation's civil society. Later, from Chapters 25-31, God gave his laws for worship in the tabernacle, including the building itself, the priesthood, and the ceremonies. First, he gave them a summary of his moral laws, the Ten Commandments (Exo 20:1-17). Then from Exodus Chapters 21-23, God gave his laws for the nation's civic life.

When Moses and Israel finished all the work that God had commanded them, we read in Exodus 40:16, "*This Moses did; according to all that the LORD commanded him, so he did.*" In every detail of God's worship regulations, they strictly obeyed what God had commanded them.

This part of Israel's worship service continues in our Reading of God's Law (Exo 20:1-17), Scripture Readings before the Sermon, and the Sermon itself (Exo 24:7a). And how are we to respond to God's word?

A Holy Nation Promises to be Faithful and Obedient

Promising obedience to God's covenant laws is the response of God's people. In Chapter 24 verse 3, after Moses proclaimed to the people the rules regarding their worship at Mount Sinai, all the people responded by promising, *"All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do."* This was the people's covenant vow. Earlier in Exodus 19:5, God gave them his covenant vow, *"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples."* Like a wedding ceremony, there were mutual vows between God and man.

In verse 7, after sacrifices were offered, Moses read the whole Book of the Covenant before all the people. After the reading, the people vowed again, *"All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."* After the reading of each part of the covenant laws, the people responded with a vow to be faithful and obedient.

After this, Moses took the blood of the sacrificial animals and sprinkled it on the people. We read in Hebrews 9:19 that Moses used hyssop leaves to sprinkle the blood on both the Book of the Covenant and all the people. This ceremony represented the union between God and his covenant laws and his holy nation and people. If they violated their vows to be faithful and obedient, they would only be forgiven and cleansed of their sins by the blood of animal sacrifices. The sprinkling of blood and covenant vows confirmed God's covenant with his people.

This part of Israel's worship service is continued in our Songs of Thanksgiving (*"What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me... I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people,"* Psa 116:12, 14), and Consecration (*"Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise!"*, Psa 100:4). We give thanks to God for saving us and then vow to be faithful and obedient to him.

A Holy Nation Eats and Drinks Before God

Finally, in verses 9-11, God called Moses and the elders of Israel to come up the mountain, where they *"beheld God, and they ate and drank"* (verses 9-11). The eating and drinking confirmed and celebrated God's covenant with his people. Moses and the elders saw God's feet *"as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness."* It was as if God was standing on the blue skies of heaven. Whatever they saw of God's appearance, the chief men of Israel did not die. They must have been given by God the privilege of seeing him without being struck dead because of his pure holiness and their sinfulness.

Our Lord's Supper continues this part of Israel's worship of God. Eating and drinking usually follows a covenant or a treaty. When nations sign a treaty of peace or of economic cooperation, a reception follows. When a husband and wife are united in marriage, a wedding reception follows. Eating and drinking is a celebration. We see this in the culmination of history when our Lord takes us to heaven as his Bride and the "wedding" is celebrated with a "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19:6-9). We celebrate our union with our Lord in the Lord's Supper (Matt 26:26-28). In this feast, we remember our Savior's bloody sacrifice for all our sins and rejoice in his saving work for us (1 Cor 10:16).

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ: To summarize, our divine worship service is a fulfillment of the types and shadows and symbolism of Israel's worship service at Mount Sinai. As God's holy nation, we are called to assemble for worship every Lord's Day.

But before we come near to God, we confess and repent of our sins, and then hear God's words of forgiveness. We then show our thankfulness with our prayers and songs of thanksgiving, and also our offerings. Then we are ready to hear God's word, the gospel of our Lord, read and explained in the sermon. After hearing God's word, we sing a song of consecration as our promise to be faithful and obedient to his word. God responds to our vow with a word of blessing. And finally, we praise and glorify God with a song.

May this exposition of Old Testament worship of God always remind us that our Lord's Day worship services are not a mere, boring rote and ritual. Rather, it is grounded only in God's holy word, what he commanded us in his covenant of grace with us his holy nation. It is a covenantal dialogue between God and his holy nation: he speaks, and his people responds. Next Lord's Day, we will study how this heavenly pattern of worship continues in the New Testament because we also, as Peter says, are "*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession*" (1 Pet 2:9), the new "*Israel of God*" (Gal 6:16).