

Prayer

It is my joy, Lord Jesus Christ, to love You who died for me;
It is my delight, Lord Jesus Christ, to live in the freedom of Your love;
It is my endeavour, Lord Jesus Christ, to work my every hour for You;
It is my desire, Lord Jesus Christ, to remain faithful all my life;
It is my clearest aim, Lord Jesus Christ, to love You;
Because You have loved me. Thank You.

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

As you make any major decisions today, make sure that you have run them by the Lord, through prayer and seeking the wisdom of the Lord

On-going prayers

- **Pray about the use of the Bible.** *Pray that Christians will grow to love God's Word with renewed zeal*
- *Pray for those who face each day without food, resources, or hope*
- *Give thanks to God for the visual arts, including painting and sculpture*

Meditation

We have a God who is active in the world
To take what is little, and make it much more!

He takes the innocence and charm of youth
To bring love and stability into the world!

He takes the prayers of the sick and infirm
To bless the world, and even to change it!

He takes the wisdom of people in later years
To empower and encourage all who will hear!

He takes the devotion and passion of parents
To be an example to all of real commitment!

He takes the trust and energy of a little child
To give everyone the truest example of faith!

We have a God who delights in His people
And grants all who will trust Him, His love.

Bible passage – Exodus 24:1-11

¹ Then He said to Moses, 'come up to the LORD you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; bow down in worship at a distance, ² for only Moses shall approach the LORD; they will not come near and the people shall not approach with him.

³ Moses came and reported to the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules, and all of them replied as one; 'We will do everything the Lord has said.' ⁴ Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he got up early in the morning and built an altar at the bottom of the mountain, together with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ He sent the youths of the children of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. ⁶ Moses took half the blood and put it in bowls, and he threw half the blood on the altar. ⁷ He then took and read the Book of the Covenant in the hearing of the

people, and they said, 'We will do everything that the Lord has said, and we will obey.'⁸ So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it over the people, and said, 'This is the blood of the Covenant that the Lord has made with you, according to these words.'

⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up,¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. Under His feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire, like the sky itself for clarity.¹¹ God did not lay His hand on the senior leaders of the children of Israel; they gazed at God, and they ate and drank.

Bible Study

Review

This is a remarkable Old Testament text, and concludes the giving of the law at Sinai. It describes firstly the worship of God's people at the foot of Mount Sinai, and its ratification in a meeting between God, Moses and representatives of the people. The very idea of such a meeting is extraordinary, but this is only one aspect of the passage worth exploring. We are told about a sacrificial meal, worship, the reading of the law, and covenant renewal (24:3-8) before the famous mystical meal shared on Sinai itself (24:9-11). In these remarkable events, earth and heaven come close so that God can meet with His people.

These are deeply spiritual and dramatic events, and the Old Testament describes the presence of God in such a powerful way that it seems to cross the boundaries of understanding. For despite all Israel's problems and disobedience (see Exodus 16,17), when they promised to keep the law, God overlooked their sins and accepted their worship! Then, in eating a meal with Moses and the elders of Israel, He allowed people to 'gaze' on Him (24:11), breaking all conventions surrounding His holiness, which said that no one could 'see God', and live! All this enthralled us because it anticipates God's grace in blessing His people through Jesus, and it identifies features of worship that are relevant for the renewal of our covenant with God. All this is extraordinary, but we will learn most from this text if we stick closely to its Old Testament context and study what this meant to Israel, at Sinai.

This passage describes the formal acceptance of the law as a form of covenant between God and His people. Now, in ancient times, covenants agreements (such as boundaries or marriage) were settled by setting up evidence of it and by sharing a meal. Here, God began the proceedings by identifying His nominated leaders of the people, firstly Moses, and then the priest Aaron with his sons Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel (24:1); but at first, only Moses was allowed to come close to the Lord (24:2). Moses reported '*all the words of the Lord and all the rules*' to the people for their acceptance, and by this he meant both the Ten Commandments (20:1-17) and the following regulations (20:18 – 23:33). After the people agreed this for a second time (24:7), Moses wrote down the words of the law as a covenant (24:4) and set up a visible 'testimony' to the Covenant in the form of an altar and twelve pillars (24:4). A sacrifice was prepared and its blood was separated into two halves (for another example of this, see Genesis 15:12-18), with God's half thrown over the altar, and the people's half sprinkled over them (24:8)!

All this can be readily understood, even though this is not how we might think it appropriate to celebrate a relationship with God today. However, what happened next goes beyond normal human understanding, just as other covenant rituals in the Old Testament include mystical experiences (see also Genesis 15:12-18). Unilaterally, God broke down the barriers of holiness between Himself and the people He had nominated, and He shared a Covenant meal not just with Moses, but with all the leaders of Israel, on Sinai! It was an extraordinary event. We are told that the leaders saw God, but later on, they were only able to report seeing his feet on a pavement of blue sapphire (24:10)! Surely, something powerful happened that could not be explained in any other way, and it touches the very edge of human perceptions of God. Some dismiss the story as fanciful, but God's people today accept it as part of Scripture, and the record of wondrous events by which God reveals His saving grace, and breaks down the barriers between earth and heaven.

Until the death of Christ, this Covenant of the Law stood as a testimony to the relationship between God and His people. We should not forget that redeeming work of Christ forges a new covenant relationship between God and His new people, who are the church of God. This new covenant is built on the old, and it testifies to the love of God through Christ that saves the world.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The people's agreement to the Covenant
- Moses' work in securing the Covenant

- The meaning of the pillars and the altar
- The blood of the Covenant
- The details of the vision of God

Notes on the text and translation

- V3** ***‘all the rules ...’** The Hebrew word here is ‘mishpat’, I have translated this ‘rules’ exactly as I did in the first verse of chapter 21. They are rules that derive from, explain or complement the Ten Commandments.*
- V7** ***‘we will obey’** This is a straightforward translation of this verse, but it is worth knowing that the word for ‘obey’ in Hebrew is taken directly from the verb ‘to hear’. So, by replying to God, ‘we have heard’, the Israelites accepted and consented to the law.*
- V11** ***‘the senior leaders ...’** This is a strange and rare term in Hebrew, possibly meaning ‘corner-pegs’ or some essential corner piece of a tent with which we are unfamiliar. It appears to refer to all those mentioned in the passage, as being the senior figures in the life of God’s people at that time.*
- V11** ***‘they gazed at God’** This famous verse is important. The sentence is mostly translated ‘they saw God’. However, the verb used here is the one that is sometimes translated ‘behold!’, and it means something more than mere ‘seeing’ (for which there is another word in Hebrew). One way of translating this would be to write ‘they stared at God’, because it has the sense of intense looking implied by the Hebrew. However, ‘gazed’ reads better in English.*

Going Deeper

The people’s agreement to the Covenant

It is worth going back to Exodus 19 to recall that in the chaotic scenes just prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments, Moses had spoken to the people and told them what God said to him the first time he went up the mountain. The general theme of this was that God had brought His people out of Egypt on ‘eagle’s wings’ (19:4) and called on them to accept a covenant relationship with Him and be a ‘priestly kingdom and a holy people’ (19:4-6). The people agreed to this (19:8) with the exact same words used twice here in this passage (24:3,7). This suggests that Israel’s threefold agreement to the covenant was indeed a formal response, as far as scripture is concerned.

The promise to do all that God said proved of course to be the very issue upon which the Israelites failed, as their historians and prophets in later times report (e.g. 1 Kings 17 and Amos 2:6-16). In addition, the failure of God’s people to keep the covenant led to Jesus’ death, but He dealt with this fundamental flaw in human nature by taking on Himself the burden for our sin so that it might no longer be an impediment to our relationship with God. It is no coincidence that the only other part that the people play in our passage today is to be sprinkled with the ‘blood of the covenant’ (24:8) as an eternal sign of their fateful promise. So when at ‘communion’ we drink what Jesus called the ‘blood of the covenant’ (Matt 26:28) in remembrance of Him, Jesus used these words knowing full well that they came from Israel’s first covenant as a nation, based on the Law revealed to Moses by God. It was a covenant He renewed by His death.

Moses’ work in securing the Covenant

Moses worked furiously throughout this passage to secure the covenant. In previous chapters, Moses has spoken the words of God, and here at the beginning of our passage today, it is possible that verse 3 summarises what Moses had been doing, by reporting to the people what God said, at their own specific request (see 20:19). The expression ‘words of the Lord’ (24:3) are reckoned to mean the actual Ten Commandments, because they were spoken by God’s voice alone, and ‘all the rules’ refers to everything else Moses reported from the Lord, as we have read in chapters 21 to 23.

After the people responded positively to the entire collection of ‘law’, we read the remarkable phrase ‘Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord’. This is the first place in Scripture where we see direct evidence of the writing of God’s Word, and it is worth noting that this passage, because of its inherent complexity, is commonly regarded as being very ancient indeed. The writing of the Covenant meant of course that it could be repeated and read again whenever needed, as we see in verse 7, where it is apparently read again, and the people again state their acceptance. Perhaps it was genuinely novel to have a ‘written’ document used to address the people in this way, and something very important for the future of God’s people. Moses was responsible for this work, and it is fascinating that the written work lasted far longer than the pillars of stone (see next), the grand monument that in its day would have seemed far more lasting than a fragile document!

Now most people think that the end result of the giving of the Law was the tablets of stone! These come later in the story (31:18), and it is right for us to be careful about what scripture says happens, and in what order. The Covenant comes first, before the tablets of stone; indeed, facts such as this enabled the prophet Jeremiah to talk about God's covenant in these words 'I will write it on their hearts' (Jer. 31:33). Although we read it as a prophecy of a 'new' covenant, Jeremiah never said the word 'new', so his prophecy was built upon good reason and good precedent to go beyond the idea of a covenant written on stone!

The meaning of the pillars and the altar

Moses continued to be involved in the process of establishing the covenant in two essential ways, firstly by setting up the physical evidence of the covenant in the form of an altar and pillars, and secondly in officiating in the sacrifices (next). We read about Moses setting up an altar and pillars in verse 4; and at first sight, all this appears somewhat strange. We have not come across altars and pillars before, so what do they mean? There is no problem with the setting up of an altar. This would have to be built according to the instructions given in Exodus 20:25, and made of earth with perhaps a few stones, but certainly no 'cut' stones (see notes on Exodus 20:22-26). It is worth bearing this in mind when we create our own mental picture of what an 'altar' was in the Old Testament.

What may surprise us is that Moses set up twelve pillars next to the altar, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. It does not say whether these were stone pillars or wooden tree trunks, but given the ban on chiselling stonework (20:25), it is more likely to have been timber. Now, earlier in the 'regulations' just given by Moses, he had conveyed the rule 'you shall not bow down to their gods ... you shall utterly destroy them and break their pillars in pieces!' (23:25)! It is well known throughout the Old Testament that Canaan was littered with 'high places' with altars and standing pillars to represent the Canaanite gods (often 'Ba'al' and his consort 'Asherah'), and these proved to be a trap to the people of Israel (see 1 Kings 17 again). These had to be destroyed! The point we should make however, is that God did not oppose the altars and the pillars themselves, He opposed only what they represented. Here, the altar was for the worship of God and the pillars were witnesses to the Covenant standing at the foot of Sinai. We need to remember that in God's eyes, the good or the evil of a thing rests not so much in what it is but in what we make of it.

The blood of the Covenant

After the setting of the pillars, Moses called 'young men' to organise the sacrifices and offer some young bulls in sacrificial worship to God; these would be the sacrifices for the Covenant. Firstly, the sacrifices offered were whole burnt offerings given as pure worship to God in the traditional way, and secondly, others were offered as 'fellowship offerings', the type of sacrifice in which only the fat and entrails were offered on the altar (see Leviticus 3f.), and the rest eaten by the people.

We have to remind ourselves that all this happened in the few days between the giving of the law and the ordination of Aaron and his sons (Nadab and Abihu – see 24:1,9) as priests. The large number of young bulls offered on this occasion was far more than could be handled by one family! It was an obvious choice to ask the young men of Israel to assist Aaron and Moses, who presided at the sacrifice.

To keep to convention for the formal presentation of a Covenant, the sacrifices had to be halved. Indeed, the word used in Hebrew for 'to make a covenant' originally meant, 'to cut a covenant'. Moses did not halve the animals and make the people walk through them (see the story of Abraham – Gen. 15:12f.). Instead, there may have been a different tradition whereby the blood of sacrifices (representing life) was taken and halved. In this case, God's half was poured out on the altar, and the other half 'sprinkled' over the people (possibly 'thrown' or 'splattered'). There is no known record of any such mass 'sprinkling' in other ancient texts, and it is thought that the blood could have been thrown over the twelve stone pillars representing the people; indeed, that would have given them some purpose in the ritual. However, Moses was not performing magic, but a real representation of God's relationship with His people; so he 'sprinkled' the blood on the people. It is an image that has remained with God's people ever since, representing Israel's 'life-commitment' to God and to the Law. Likewise, Jesus' remembrance the 'new covenant in my blood' in the wine of the 'Last Supper' (1 Cor 11:25) is the unforgettable commitment of God's new people to their Lord.

The details of the vision of God

The meal celebrated to complete the Covenant was representative (24-11), and in those few moments, God called the 'senior leaders' of Israel to Him. They included Moses, the seventy 'elders' (18:22), and also Aaron and his two sons Nadab and Abihu. The choice is instructive of God's concerns for the governance of His people. Clearly, the seventy elders each had a role to play in administering the law, and Moses would shortly establish a priestly tribe of Israel (Levi – see 32:25-29), and appoint Aaron as a 'High Priest' (Exodus 28f.). So the group who went up the mountain represented those who would govern the people. They would 'see God', and they would carry out His will.

We are then struck by two phenomenal sentences, firstly verse 10 which begins, 'and they saw the God of Israel', and secondly, from verse 11, 'they gazed at God.' The first of these contains the plain Hebrew word

for 'seeing', and does not mean any form of 'sight' such as insight, only 'seeing with the eyes'. The second phrase is astonishing, because it means 'intense looking' (see notes above). The word challenges us to accept that these people really did 'see God and live'. The point is even emphasised; 'God did not lay His hand on the senior leaders of the children of Israel' (24:11). When this passage of Exodus was written, it is safe to say that people believed those who 'saw' God would die, and this event was for them an immense miracle. Rather than a miracle, we may now consider it as an extraordinary demonstration of the 'grace' of God, given long before the time of God's general grace poured out for all people through the life and death of Jesus.

People have argued for a long time about what the people saw. Clearly, they had a meal, but what did they see when they 'gazed' at God? All we know is that they saw God's feet standing on 'something like a pavement of sapphire, like the sky itself for clarity' (24:10). This enigmatic picture suggests two things. Firstly, the feet of God can be thought of as standing on the top of the mountain; a logical 'part' of God to see if He has human features! Of course, the top of the mountain was in the sky, and the vision of blue is thought to be related to ancient people's experience of 'lapis lazuli' the sapphire blue stone colouring utilised by the Egyptians. Any more than this is mere speculation, but the vision connects to the New Testament picture of the magnificent New Jerusalem in Revelation 21.

Secondly, although the people there knew they were in the presence of God, they did not see all of Him. Nevertheless, if this is all they saw of God, they had still 'seen' a part of Him. What they saw has been likened to the faith of Christian people today, as described so eloquently by Paul; 'Now we see in part, but then we will see face to face' (1 Cor 13:12). It is worth considering whether Paul had this incident in mind when he said this, and regarded it as a prophecy of things to come. A transitory experience for Israel has become the experience of all God's people in Christ, and one day, it will be complete!

Application

This whole passage reminds us that we have a Covenant relationship with God. He has saved us, but He has asked us to do certain things to honour this covenant, because of all that Jesus has done for us. It is not that the 'covenant' is some new or different feature of our faith, because to unpack the covenant will only reveal what we already know and speak about in different ways. On the one hand, God has saved us through Christ, and we should worship Him and live for Him as He directs. On the other hand, our response to this must be the total commitment we call 'faith', by which we place our complete trust in Him for our past, our present and our future; and I could go on. To speak of our covenant relationship with God is also a way of linking in to a vast range of scriptural texts, from this one here in Exodus, to Jeremiah's famous prophecy quoted in this study (Jer. 31:31-34), and Isaiah's prophecy, 'this is my covenant with them, says the Lord, My spirit which is upon you and my words which I have put in your mouth ...' (Is. 59:21).

This passage reminds us that the end objective of our faith, and of our covenant with God, is that He wants to share with us directly and simply, just like 'eating and drinking' (24:11). We have a sign of this now in the 'Lord's Supper' or 'Communion', but one day we will eat this meal with the Lord in heaven. On the way, there will be many trials and much work to be done, just as Moses had a great deal of work to do here in this passage to complete the formal agreement of the first covenant with Israel. But it is good to know that our objective is to be at peace with God.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss the worship in this passage. What does it mean, and how do we celebrate God's covenant today?
2. What forms a public demonstration of our faith in the world today, and is it effective?
3. What pictures have you had in your life of the presence of God, perhaps as a vision or a tangible experience?

Personal comments by author

Since my youth, I have been strongly influenced by the Methodist Covenant service, in which people seek to recommit their lives on an annual basis to God. It is a good practice, and Wesley's words and its more recent translations into modern English are helpful ways of expressing our on-going faith. I come across Christians who have never heard of anyone ever speaking about their faith as like a 'covenant', and because

they remain unfamiliar with the Bible despite using it on Sundays at church, they have hardly ever come across the large number of Old and New Testament texts that refer to our faith in this way. For many, it is a treasure still waiting to be found.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *What have you found out about a 'Covenant' relationship with God from this passage, and how does it relate to New Testament faith? Reflect on this thought and ask the Lord, prayerfully, to show you how you might benefit from understanding your faith as a 'covenant'.*
- *Pray about the use of the Bible by people today. There is strong evidence that people have the Bible but do not use it. Pray against the suppression of the Bible wherever this happens in the world.*

Final Prayer

As each day passes, dear Lord, we long to know more of You and feel the touch of Your hand on what we do and how we live. Guide us we pray, not merely through the mysteries of life and its coincidences and unfolding happenings, but through Your Word, Your touch and Your positive guidance. Thank You, Lord God: AMEN
