

## EASTER

### 16. Defining the Sinai Covenant (Exodus 18–20)

The covenant God made with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was a *collective* covenant, a covenant made with them as a nation. Called the Sinai Covenant, it was also a *conditional* covenant. Its blessings or privileges had to be earned according to the terms of the covenant they had agreed to. If they didn't keep the covenant's terms, plagues or curses would follow instead of blessings. The Sinai Covenant thus differed from the *individual* covenants God had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which were *unconditional* covenants, as mentioned previously. Their blessings and privileges were a free gift that continued down the generations.

God's covenanting with his people Israel and their accepting the covenant's terms occurred at Mount Sinai, a place symbolic of God's heavenly abode: "When Moses went up to God, the Lord called to him out of the mountain and said, 'Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and have brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, then shall you be a peculiar treasure to me above all peoples, for the whole earth is mine. And you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'" These are the words that you will speak to the people of Israel.' So Moses came and called for the elders of the people and in their presence presented all these words as the Lord had commanded him. And all the people responded as one and said, 'All that the Lord has spoken, we will do.' So Moses returned [and conveyed] the words of the people to the Lord" (Exodus 19:3–8).

At Israel's exodus out of Egypt, God had shown what he could or would do for his people if they were faithful to him. The exodus was a demonstration of God's power to act on their behalf. God revealed himself to Israel as an all-powerful and benevolent God, a God who would love them as he had loved their ancestors—that is, in the covenant sense of the term "love," which entailed keeping the terms of his covenants. So long as his people Israel "loved" God also—by keeping his commandments as Moses revealed them, all would go well. What God did for them at their exodus out of Egypt, however, was for their ancestors' sake as mentioned.

Once he covenanted with his people Israel independently, God would protect them for their own sake. The blessings of his covenant would be theirs directly. They, as a nation, would have control of their situation. In addition, they could go forward from there and attain the same privileges as their ancestors. As God had made unconditional covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so he could with Israel as a nation or with individuals within Israel. To that end, the Sinai Covenant served as a stepping-stone.

The advantages of the Sinai Covenant were obvious, but its terms would be difficult to keep as a nation. Israel's experience in the wilderness involved the constant weeding out of offenders. Nevertheless, all the generation of people that sinned against God eventually perished in the wilderness. God now had to abide by the terms of two different covenants he had made. He was obligated to inflict covenant curses on those who sinned in the wilderness, and yet he also had to preserve the posterity of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Because the promise of a land of inheritance, numerous offspring, and God's divine protection constituted the basic blessings of the Sinai Covenant just as they did of the Abrahamic Covenant, the *conditional* nature of the Sinai Covenant meant that those blessings stood in jeopardy of being lost at any time. Still, even when the Sinai Covenant was eventually broken—after Israel inherited the Promised Land and after that rebelled against God—the covenant itself was never annulled. The Sinai Covenant remains as valid today as it was in Moses' day based on God's revealed word. It is the basis on which any nation may become God's covenant people. Even now, it forms a stepping stone toward attaining the spiritual heights attained by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the enjoyment—as a nation—of the *unconditional* blessings and privileges those righteous progenitors enjoyed.

Although, to our current knowledge, no descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have yet attained the spiritual heights of their ancestors *as a nation*—walking and talking with God, playing host to heavenly companions, and so forth—Isaiah predicts that such will indeed occur at the end of the world. As a result of the mission of God's end-time servant David, a new nation of God's people called Zion that is “born in a day”—God's worldwide Day of Judgment—will respond to the servant's summons to return from dispersion (Isaiah 43:5–8; 49:5–22), gather in a new exodus to Zion (Isaiah 11:10–16; 51:9–11), and prepare for the coming of Israel's God Jehovah to reign on the earth (Isaiah 52:8–12; 59:18–20):

“Give ear and come unto me; pay heed, that your souls may live! And I will make with you an everlasting covenant: [my] loving fidelity toward David. See, I have appointed him as a witness to the nations, a prince and lawgiver of the peoples. You will summon a nation that you did not know; a nation that did not know you will hasten to you” (Isaiah 55:3–5); “Who has heard the like, or who has seen such things? Can the earth labor but a day and a nation be born at once? For as soon as she was in labor, Zion gave birth to her children” (Isaiah 66:8); “The mountains shall be removed and the hills collapse with shaking, but my charity toward you shall never be removed, nor my covenant of peace be shaken, says Jehovah, who has compassion on you” (Isaiah 54:10).