

# THE SINAITIC COVENANT:

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## I. God's Covenant with the Minor Children Descended from Abraham

The covenant God made with Abraham contained a double promise. The greater promise stated that all peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham and his descendants. The lesser promise assured Abraham that his descendants would receive the land of Canaan as their earthly inheritance (Gn 12:7; 13:15; 15:18).

The "descendants" referred to in this latter promise are not Isaac and his son Jacob. God did designate Isaac as the one who would transmit the first covenant to Abraham's later descendants (Gn 18: 17-19). Genesis 25-50 documents in abundant detail how carefully God guided Isaac and his son Jacob. It was through them that the family of Abraham came to live in Egypt. In the covenant he made with Abraham God had given him this information about his physical offspring: "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions" (Gn 15:13f). As early as Exodus 3:8 God identified the land which the Israelites were to occupy as the land of Canaan, whose heathen occupants were ripe for judgment.

Now 430 years had elapsed since God had first made that promise to Abraham. The LORD had not forgotten his people. His people, however, had almost totally forgotten Yahweh, the God of Abraham. Despite God's harsh judgment in the plagues, Israel was so thoroughly steeped in the idolatry and vices of Egypt that, although they daily complained to the LORD about their misery, they could not bring themselves to abandon the sin of Egypt.

"God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them" (Ex 2:24f). He sent Moses to them to announce his impending judgment on Egypt and to lead "the children of Israel" to Canaan, the new homeland he had promised them, a land "flowing with milk and honey."

We take for granted that our readers are familiar with the details of the ensuing narrative: how God called and equipped Moses to be the leader of his people; how he dealt with Pharaoh, especially through the ten plagues; how he consecrated Israel to himself; how he demonstrated his might and his mercy to Israel as they wandered from Succoth to Rephidim in the Sinai Desert. One marvelous miracle of divine judgment which deserves special mention is the annihilation of Pharaoh and Egypt's military might at the Red Sea. To instruct God's people, Moses commemorated this event in song.

What did God hope to accomplish in his people with all of these and subsequent demonstrations of his power and his grace? *Through all of these God was seeking to train his people to trust him, as did Abraham.* The faith of these people had deteriorated through neglect, and they once again had to learn to trust the God of their fathers, the only true God, "Creator of heaven and earth" (Gn 14:22), and to turn away from pagan worship of false gods. Up to this point, however, all of God's miracles and all of Moses' words had not achieved God's purpose with the Israelites. The slightest inconvenience was enough to provoke their stubborn nature to find fault with Moses' leading, which was after all the LORD'S leading. Their complaining was so intense that it more than once pushed Moses to the brink of despair. As late as Rephidim—only one campsite away from Mount Sinai—Moses actually had to cry out to the LORD: "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me" (Ex 17:4). On that occasion God once again came to the aid of his people, but once again they failed to acknowledge it.

To strengthen Moses and to assure him that the work he had undertaken would ultimately be successful, God sent Jethro to him with some down-to-earth, godly advice. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, priest and prince

of Midian, had come to know and to believe in Israel's covenant God. He observed that Moses, as leader of the people, had overburdened himself and needed to limit his activity to dealing with the LORD, leaving to appointed leaders the details of governing the people. "Teach the people the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform," Jethro suggested (Ex 18:20).

Moses recognized that Jethro's advice was sound, and he followed it. Apparently already at Rephidim he organized the people and wrote down the decrees. These were regulations, binding on Israel during their desert wandering, which governed every phase of their life as a nation. We have these regulations (Heb. מְשֻׁפְּטִים) in Exodus 21ff. Although circumstances subsequently necessitated some revision, these decrees are referred to throughout the first four books of Moses.

At Mount Sinai a wise God showed that he knew how to train his people, whom he had been leading with painstaking care. He arranged for a formal and uncommonly impressive covenant ratification ceremony with the people who, although physically descended from Abraham, were now spiritually deformed and had given themselves over to the idolatry of Egypt.

We have the wording of God's covenant in Exodus 19:4-9. It came right out of the bright cloud (*Gnadenwolke*) from which the LORD communicated with Moses and gave him this command:

This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. *Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*"

"This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob," God had told Moses. Moses therefore summoned the elders whom he had appointed and relayed these words to them and to all the people. The people all responded as one man: "We will do everything the LORD has said." When Moses brought their answer back to the LORD, he encouraged Moses with the promise: "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you" (Ex 19:9).

After the people had consecrated themselves for three days, the LORD appeared personally on Mt. Sinai and gave them his law, with signs accompanying, as he had promised. While Moses and Aaron went up into the cloud which covered Mount Sinai, the people stood at the foot of the mountain trembling with fear. With their own ears the people now heard God speak the words: "I am the LORD your God," followed by the Ten Commandments (Heb. דְּבָרִים) in Exodus 20.

Before proceeding to consider the Sinaitic covenant in detail we need to digress in order to treat a matter essential to properly understanding God's message from Sinai. This matter concerns both the *content* and the *form* of God's Sinaitic covenant with Israel (Ex 19:19) in contrast to the covenant God had made with Abraham (Gn 15-23). We have previously noted that the unique quality of the covenant God made with Abraham is that it was *one-sided*. God did everything, while Abraham did nothing. That covenant consisted solely of *unconditional promises*, which could be accepted only in faith. But since these promises were God's word of grace, full of divine power, they *also created faith*. God's promises converted Abraham, sanctified him, and kept him in faith until his end, because they reached out far beyond Isaac to Christ himself (Jn 8:56). Through such faith—and only through such faith—sinners are justified before God and saved.

In the Sinaitic covenant, however, which God concluded with the spiritually depraved descendants of Abraham, God again offered precious promises (Ex 19:6), but he made them contingent on the people's obedience, on their keeping his covenant (v 5). The people confidently promised to do this (v 8) but failed to keep their promise. They soon violated God's covenant, first by worshiping the image of the golden calf and then by their repeated disobedience. This is the reason why most of the Israelites never even set foot in the land of Canaan, much less attained eternal blessedness with Abraham. *By means of the Sinaitic covenant no sinner will ever be saved because no one can keep it perfectly.* Whoever makes a *bilateral* covenant with the Lord of

the universe, a *two-sided* covenant whose fulfillment depends on his own performance, cannot be saved. The Scripture makes this clear when it says: "It is *by grace you have been saved, through faith*—and this *not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works*, so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8-9). The prophet Jeremiah emphasizes this same truth in chapters 11, 31, 32, and 33. This truth is the basis for our church's motto: *Sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide*.

We return now to the sequence of events that accompanied the giving of the law from Mount Sinai. God gave his people a double revelation. He first of all announced the Ten Commandments (Ex 20). The LORD spoke these with his own words from the cloud. Moses had ascended the mountain, together with Aaron. At the foot of the mountain the people, trembling with fear at the awesome signs and wonders, heard with their own ears everything God said.

There is no need here to explain the Commandments; among us every school child knows them. Nor need we concern ourselves with the view of modern unbelief—or, for that matter, of otherwise orthodox theology—which offers a rationalistic explanation for the development of all religion and which argues that the scriptural teaching of revelation was, even in Israel, only a manner of sharing information with immature children, whose undeveloped cultural level did not allow for any other method. We view God's revelation at Sinai from the perspective of the New Testament, of our Lord Jesus and of his inspired apostles. If their endorsement of what Moses and the prophets had to say—about creation, about sin, about Abraham, about the giving of the law on Sinai, about salvation in the cross of Christ—does not decide the matter for us, we may as well drop the subject.

At Mount Sinai the giving of the law took place as Moses described it, and exactly as Moses described it. At the very head stand the Ten Commandments. They are phrased in general terms and therefore are binding on every nation and every sinner on earth. They were binding also on the spiritually degenerate descendants of Abraham. Through Moses God had led them out of Egypt to Sinai in order to settle them in Canaan and (if during their desert wandering they had learned obedience) to save them through the faith of Abraham in the promised Savior of sinners. To train them and their children for this, God gave them first the moral law of the Ten Commandments (the דְּבָרִים), binding on all nations and people. In addition to the moral law God gave the Israelites a body of decrees and regulations (the מִשְׁפָּטִים). These had been suggested by Jethro and approved by the LORD, and were to remain in force only as long as the Israelites were *νήπιοι*, i.e., minor children, immature and irresponsible (Ga 4:1-11, 21-31). This special body of regulations was given to no other people, but only to the physical descendants of Abraham who had been spiritually abused in Egypt, whom the LORD through Moses had led out of Egypt, and whom he during their desert wandering wanted to lead back to the faith of Abraham. The fact that subsequent generations of Jews placed themselves under this law was entirely their own fault—and their undoing.

Moses gave the Israelites at Sinai these regulations orally and in written form (beginning at Exodus 21 and continuing through Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). In contrast to these regulations, what was the purpose of the moral law (the Ten Commandments), given to all nations and people? When the LORD gave Israel the moral law, he presented it so clearly and persuasively as the one great and important law that after hearing it the people immediately recognized it as such. On the mountain God had revealed the law under the visible signs of cloud and fire. Under the most fearsome signs and wonders God's own mouth had proclaimed the message of his law in the ears of the people. In the presence of witnesses he had given Moses two stone tablets which he himself had made and on which his own hand had written the Commandments. He established this as a permanent law, giving it a place of prominence ahead of the other regulations. Why? For what purpose?

The law of God is the rule, the standard according to which, and the yardstick by which every human being will be measured and judged on the last day. In accordance with this law of God everyone will receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2 Cor 5:10). This is the reason why God has written this message, the great message of his law, on the heart and conscience of every human being, so that he is without excuse (Ro 2:6-16).

Only the law can work on a person's conscience and arouse a fear of God. This is not what the Scriptures commonly call "the fear of God," which is a fruit of the gospel. The fear of God which the law produces is a trembling in the presence of divine majesty, trembling with solemn awe before the God who punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him, but who shows love to thousands who love him and keep his commandments (cf. Luther's explanation of the Conclusion to the Commandments). This fear of a jealous God and LORD must enter the heart not only of the impenitent and unconverted. (The penitent criminal said to his unconverted partner: "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence?"). Fear of a holy and jealous God must be present in every Christian. David confessed: "My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your laws" (Ps 119:120). The "decrees" of Moses (Ex 21:1) did not in and of themselves arouse this fear of God; they were only temporary outward regulations. That is why these decrees are again and again punctuated with the sharpest commands of the moral law forbidding the worship of idols. Exodus 20:23 emphasizes that especially, as do the closing verses of that chapter, which call for building an altar without steps, so as to foster a modest and chaste worship. They also warn against building an altar with dressed stones, since the use of a chisel would defile the altar. These closing prohibitions lead over (in chapter 21) to regulations relating to the details of Israel's desert wandering, details which fill the pages of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

Moses' decrees, the regulations governing everyday life among the people of Israel, can be classified, although not rigidly. They take for granted that the individual Israelite knew God's moral law and that he feared God (if only weakly). God's intent in giving these regulations to his people was so that their entire national life would be consecrated to him. Moses began with regulations governing life in the family and in the home, followed by a warning against idolatry. Beginning at Exodus 22:18-20 he addressed the administration of justice (the **אֱלֹהִים** of 22:28 are to be understood as "authorities") and demanded equal justice for all—for both the powerful and the powerless. Regulations governing the chief festivals followed, as do further warnings against idolatry.

Moses then ascended the mountain to the LORD in the cloud to receive instructions for celebrating the covenant's ratification (the book of the covenant, the covenant blood, and the covenant meal, Exodus 24). Moses remained on the mountain with God for forty days and nights. God commanded his people to bring a voluntary offering, and then gave Moses detailed instructions for building the tabernacle, God's temporary earthly dwelling place. These details fill chapters 25-31, which conclude with instructions for dedicating the tabernacle.

The narrative of the giving of the law is interrupted by the account of the people's idolatry involving the golden calf. God himself brought this to Moses' attention: "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it. I have seen these people, and they are a stiffnecked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

The incident involving the golden calf was Israel's first gross breach of the covenant. If only it had been their only one, or their final one! In response to Moses' heartfelt plea God postponed the carrying out of his threat, but added: "When the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin." God also warned the idolatrous Israelites: "If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you" (Ex 33:5).

At this point a new note of severity enters God's treatment of his people. Up to this point he had dwelt in the midst of his people; his earthly dwelling place was right in the camp of Israel, where he associated with them in pure grace. Now God informed Israel that he would no longer live among them. Instead, he had Moses pitch a new tent, the "tent of meeting," outside the camp, some distance away. Here God would meet with his faithful leader as with a trusted friend. It was to this "tent of meeting" that an individual Israelite seeking God's guidance would have to go. The people soon noticed that the bright cloud symbolizing God's gracious presence was outside of their camp, hovering over the tent Moses had pitched.

Despairing of his own wisdom and ability, Moses again pleaded fervently with God for himself and for the people. In his zeal he got carried away and asked to see the LORD in his full glory—a petition which God rejected. God did, however, renew the covenant which the people had broken. He instructed Moses to chisel out two new stone tablets, carry them up the mountain, and meet God in the cloud. The LORD inscribed the tablets with the same words that had been on the first tablets, which Moses had broken. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and reaffirmed his covenant with the people of Israel (Ex 34). The sermon which the LORD preached on this occasion was heartfelt and utterly magnificent. God indicated the new manner in which he would treat this stiffnecked people—in boundless grace, but also in relentless severity toward stubborn transgressors. Moses continued to communicate with the LORD in the cloud. Whenever he returned to the people to share the new revelation he had just received, his face would glow with a radiance that blinded all who saw him.

The next four chapters of Exodus resume the detailed narrative of how the tabernacle was constructed and equipped. Chapter 39 describes the priestly garments; chapter 40 records how the tabernacle was dedicated to the LORD and occupied by him.

With the exception of several historical narratives, Leviticus, the third book of Moses, is purely ceremonial law: infinitely detailed prescriptions for Israel's worship. Leviticus 26:46 states explicitly: "These are the decrees, the laws and the regulations that the LORD established on Mount Sinai between himself and the Israelites through Moses." Leviticus 27 is an addendum to the book, treating the matter of special vows and the tithe. It closes with the words: "These are the commands the LORD gave Moses on Mount Sinai for the Israelites."

## II. Renewal of the Covenant

As Exodus 32 comes to a close, it brings us to a critical juncture in the history of the Sinaitic covenant. At that moment God's entire plan—to make the children of Israel his children by rescuing them from Egypt and leading them to Canaan—was on the verge of being wrecked. All that salvaged it was the fact that God chose, on a number of occasions and always at just the right time, to intervene with new revelations of his might and his mercy.

From the moment it had been announced, God's revelation at Sinai had the character of law. That same character is observable also in the signs and wonders which had preceded the giving of this covenant, as well as in those that followed it. Their purpose was to proclaim to Abraham's descendants that the LORD (Jehovah) is the true God and the only all-powerful God of heaven and earth. The awesome holiness of this covenant revelation was impressed upon the eyes and ears of the Israelites particularly by the fact that God announced the heart of this revelation—the ten commandments—publicly and with his own voice (cf. Ex 20:18). Every act of disobedience, therefore, carried with it the threat of severe punishment, even death. In addition to the ten commandments (דְּבָרִים), the covenant included thousands of individual regulations (מִשְׁפָּטִים), which Moses, in the LORD'S name, transmitted to the people in writing, so they could put their obedience into practice in every area of their moral and worship life.

Through the Sinaitic covenant, therefore, the Israelites were surrounded by the law, no matter which way they turned. They could not lift a finger without having to fear the anger and the punishment of their powerful God. The real reason for the stern law-character of the Sinaitic covenant was the persistent stubbornness of Abraham's descendants. For 400 years they had taken part in pagan idolatry and had clung to its shameful abominations. Moses had often experienced this en route to Sinai. And even at Sinai Israel heard the LORD'S rebuke: "You are a stiffnecked people—whom I am going to have to destroy suddenly." And it was not long before the majority of the people gave him occasion and reason to do precisely that.

It was during Moses' first six-week stay on Mt. Sinai, while he was busily writing down the sacred regulations in the presence of the LORD, that he heard the LORD announce: "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt." God shared with Moses the details of the people's apostasy in worshipping the golden calf and then added: "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against

them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." With a masterful intercession Moses, the thoroughly terrified but faithful leader, persuaded God to postpone, at least temporarily, the carrying out of his threat. "Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened." Now Moses went down the mountain to the people, carrying the two covenant tablets written by the hand of God. When he discovered the people still involved in their idolatrous frenzy, and when he learned that Aaron had led them into this sin, he was furious (Ex 33:20). He agreed with the LORD'S judgment that Israel had broken the covenant. And as the people's divinely ordained leader, he felt obligated with his own hand to carry out the LORD'S judgment on their apostasy, in order once again to effect a reconciliation between God and a covenant-breaking people (33:30).

Moses first of all shattered the two tablets of the law, in testimony that the solemn contract God had concluded with the people had been broken and was no longer in effect. He then burned the golden image, showing the Israelites that the object of their devotion was really a nonentity, unable even to defend itself. He ground it to powder and threw it into a stream which flowed down the mountain. By so doing he not only defiled the people's water supply, but ridiculed them by forcing them to drink their stupidity. He criticized Aaron sharply for the part he had played in that idolatrous worship, and saw to it that 3000 of the ringleaders were publicly put to death.

Was God now reconciled to apostate Israel by the punitive zeal of his servant? Even Moses knew the answer was No. He therefore promised the people: "I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin" (32:30). He begged God for reconciliation—but the people were unsure how the LORD would react to his plea. With a powerful prayer, full of deep emotion, Moses stormed the throne of grace. He confessed the people's great sin and pleaded: "Please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."

This was clearly a sinful request. There is only one way guilty earth-creatures can be truly reconciled to God, and that was achieved by One greater than Moses (Jn 19:30; Ps 49:8f; Mic 6:6f; Jn 4:10; 2 Cor 5:18f). This is the chief teaching of the Old and New Testaments. By contrast, Moses offered his measly soul to the LORD as reconciliation for an apostate people! "If not," he added, "then blot me out of the book you have written." The book of life inscribed by God himself in eternity, before time began, contained and still contains Moses' name, and yours, and mine. Either that book is absolutely unchangeable, or else God can never be trusted in anything he says. Does not Moses' prayer accuse God of possibly being unstable and fickle? And had Moses actually given any thought to what it means to be rejected by God eternally? God's threat to reject the descendants of the patriarchs had so confused Moses that his prayer was pure foolishness.

God angrily rejected Moses' appeal. "Whoever has sinned against me [i.e., ultimately rejects my grace] I will blot out of my book. You, the leader of my people, have made a mistake—though with all good intentions. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. When the time comes for me to punish, however, I will punish them for their sin." Verse 35 refers to the punishment Moses had already carried out; it was apparently added not by the person who transmitted this account orally but by the author who wrote this book. The remark about Aaron tends to diminish the guilt of the people.

From Exodus 33:1 on everything prepares for God's renewal of his covenant with his apostate people, the account of which is recorded for us in chapter 34.

Exodus 33 opens with God's command to Moses to resume the march to the promised land. God promised to send an angel to drive out the pagan tribes still occupying the land of promise (v 2). Verse 3, however, brings the startling announcement: "But I will not go with you because you are a stiffnecked people and I might destroy you on the way."

Between verses 3 and 5 the remark is inserted that the people "began to mourn." They were frightened and began to take off their ornaments, "badges" identifying them with the covenant. God had demanded that ("Take off your ornaments, and I will decide what to do with you"). During the journey from Mt. Horeb, therefore, no one wore the identifying badge. The people, conscious of their guilt, moved about restlessly in the camp from which God had removed his presence. They knew that they now stood outside God's covenant but

did not know what to do about it. They also knew that, unlike them, their leader had not been rejected by God. What would Moses now do?

The answer is given in 33:7. Moses took a tent and pitched it outside the camp. (Luther's translation here is in error. It could mislead the reader into thinking that the tent Moses set up was the tabernacle, which God had designated as אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד i.e., the tent of meeting, the place where God would meet with his people. That tabernacle had, however, not yet been built. As a matter of fact, because of Israel's apostasy, construction had not even started.) The tent referred to here must have been one that Moses built on his own initiative. He recalled how God had ordered the building of a tabernacle, and the tent he now pitched outside the camp could serve a similar function. Since the LORD had withdrawn his presence from Israel's camp, a person needing divine advice could not meet God in the camp, but had to go to the tent of Moses some distance removed from the camp.

At first the people were curious how the LORD would deal with Moses. From their tents they would watch him leave the camp, go to his new tent, and return. What they were most interested in was to see whether the LORD would come to that tent while Moses was in it. And he did. The pillar of cloud would come down from the heavens and stand at the entrance. "Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to his tent" (v 10). With their actions they hoped to demonstrate to the LORD that they still respected him and were indeed worthy of his continued guidance. That rekindled their hope that one day they would reach the land where milk and honey flowed.

"The LORD would speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (33:11). We take from this that the LORD's earlier displeasure with Moses had given way to warm friendliness. We will need to recognize this if we are to appreciate how gently the LORD treated Moses as he now disputed with God. God wanted to restore to the dejected leader of his people a spirit of joy and of willingness to carry out his difficult task with patience and determination. The reference to Joshua may have served to discourage individual Israelites from burdening their troubled leader with their own problems while he was alone in the tent.

And now to the confrontation between Moses and God (vv 12ff). "Moses said to the LORD, 'You have been telling me, "Lead these people," but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, "I know you by name and you have found favor with me." If you are pleased with me, teach your ways.'" Moses was not asking for information about the route Israel was to follow to reach the promised land; he later recruited his brother-in-law Hobab for that purpose (Nu 10:31). Moses did, however, want to comprehend the LORD'S spiritual ways, the divine plan which was hidden from Moses but which he would be expected to carry out when, in days ahead, the people would experience spiritual difficulty. Moses was painfully aware that in this respect he had in the past made serious mistakes, mistakes he hoped in the future to avoid. And he added the thought: "Remember that this nation is your people" ("God, your heart's affection and your honor are at stake here").

To this the LORD replied: "My Presence will go with you and I will give you rest." With these words God answered Moses' complaint (v 12, as well as vv 2, 3, and 5). God's answer takes us back to Exodus 3:2 and 23:20-23. God referred to "the angel of the LORD'S Presence," the one of whom he had said: "My name is in him"—in other words, the incarnate Son of God, known throughout the Scripture as "the LORD." When God referred to "his Presence," we recognize that as a synonym of "my Angel," the Angel of the LORD.

Moses had still more to say (v 15): "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." Grammatically, the words can be construed as an independent condition; the syntax would allow that. But the clear sense of the passage is that Moses was voicing glad agreement with what God had just said (v 14). God's rich promise was the answer to an urgent need Moses keenly felt. "How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all other nations on the face of the earth?"

To this the LORD answered: "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I have graciously accepted you as a child and as a very special friend."

Was Moses now satisfied with God's answer? No! After all of God's great promises and his gracious proclamation—with which Moses was in agreement—he called out, cried out: "Now show me your glory!" What Moses was asking God for is not simply the logical consequence of the friendliness God had just displayed in his dealings with him, but stands in unexpected contrast to that. Gently but firmly God rejected Moses' request as foolish. Moses' previous experiences on Mt. Sinai should have taught him that no sinner can see God's glory without being destroyed by it. Perhaps Moses drew the wrong conclusion from the fact that in the tent outside the camp God had spoken to him face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Perhaps that is why Moses now hoped to be able to see God in his full glory without being destroyed by the sight. But he was wrong. Paul makes that clear in 1 Timothy 6:16. Until Judgment Day dawns, the fact will remain: "No one has ever seen God" (Jn 1:18 and 1 Jn 4:12).

And yet we Christians know from experience how it could happen that Moses pleaded to see God. At some time in our lives we may have suffered under some special cross—from some illness or misfortune, from physical or spiritual or professional problems beyond our capability. Since we had learned to pray, we prayed—often, and continually—and our prayers were answered. Conversely, there were times when God seemed not to hear us. Then again—to our great joy—he answered our prayers, as he did for Moses (Ex 33:12-17). At a time like that we can begin to feel that we are about to crush Satan completely. And then a new and difficult element is added to our load of suffering. We pray fervently: "You are my God; you must hear me, as you have promised"—but our special prayer goes unanswered. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 12:8,9 that he had an experience like this. Three times he sent special prayers to God, and three times his prayers were declined with the explanation: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

It was just such a situation that led Moses to plead: "Show me your glory!" "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (v 20). In the verses that follow the Lord helped Moses' to understand that there is only one way we can recognize God—and that is by studying him after he has acted (see Mk 8:12 and Jn 4:48)

We now come to God's renewal of his covenant with Israel, Exodus 34. The real introduction to this, however, is found in Exodus 33:19. The distinctive characteristic of this covenant is God's kindness, the absolute faithfulness of his grace and his fatherly administration of his grace. In Exodus 33:19 we read: "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you." This was God's answer to Moses' request, an answer which, however, promised the exact opposite of what Moses had begged to see. God answered, in effect: "I will let you see my glory, but not the glory which would destroy you. I will let you experience all of my goodness, for I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence," namely, that "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." In the message of the name of the LORD, i.e., in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have the secret of how to approach the otherwise unapproachable God. People who ask, "*Cur alii prae aliis?*" are only repeating Moses' mistake—wanting to see God's glory with human eyes and to grasp it with human understanding. But it is in Jesus Christ that God has revealed to us his election of grace. That is how St. Paul understood it (Ro 9:10f; Eph 1:4ff; 2 Tm 1:9-11).

The message of the name of Christ is the glory of God's covenant renewal with the apostate descendants of Abraham. Incidentally, we learn here what "proclaiming" is. The Hebrew has קָרָא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה. Translated literally, that expression, especially from the time of Abraham onward, invariably refers to "calling out." Merely reciting historical data about Christ, restating specific details of the gospel, is not proclaiming Christ, even though occasionally this may bear some fruit. The only preaching our Lord has instituted is believing and energetic confession to all the world: "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!" (1 Kgs 18; Mt 10:32; Lk 12:8).

### **Exodus 34: The renewal of the covenant**

Verses 1-4: "The LORD said to Moses: 'Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets. Be ready in the morning, and then come up to me in your accustomed place (*in jene Felsenkammer*) near the top of the mountain. And make sure no other living creature



is nearby...." So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and early in the morning climbed Mt. Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, with the two stone tablets in his hands. The LORD himself inscribed the ten "words" (דְּבָרִים) on the tablets.

It was not the Lord's intention that this new covenant would be exclusively a gospel-based covenant, without any statement of the requirements of his law. The time for that had not yet come and would not come until Christ appeared on earth. The covenant God renewed with his Israelite people was indeed a covenant full of promise, but it remained an Old Testament covenant. It was also a covenant with the spiritually deformed descendants of Abraham who did not understand anything about sin, and who needed first to be helped to grow toward Old Testament maturity (Ga 4).

For purposes of comparison: the first Sinaitic covenant carried so strong a note of law that it could produce no good fruit. "Law brings wrath" (Ro 4:15). When God renewed his covenant with Israel, the new one did not carry as prominent a note of law as the first one from Sinai. The demonstration and the proclamation of God's kindness and mercy were a much more prominent element than formerly. The Lord wanted, and Moses was instructed—if we may borrow New Testament terminology—to deal with the people more evangelically.

This principle applies also to us of the New Testament when we observe so little fruit of our labor. This principle can also be misused, if we preach only gospel and virtually forget about the law. Luther was willing to grant to that pastor or teacher the title "doctor of the Holy Scriptures" who was able in practice to apply law and gospel properly. But more about that another time, God willing. For now let it simply be emphasized that law and gospel must both be preached in the church, but must be properly distinguished. Let us now look at God's marvelous preaching of grace (Ex 34:5ff). The details of God's grace are stated more abundantly and more explicitly than anywhere else in Scripture (with the exception of Moses' restatement in Numbers 14:18). .

"The LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with (Moses) and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, `The LORD!—the LORD is a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.' "

It is only with fear and trembling that one approaches the task of putting into words the fiery flood of the LORD'S love and of his zeal to punish which smolders unseen underneath the ashes. With Moses one can only bow before the LORD in deepest humility, and worship him (v 8). In addition, emotions in the heart of God are described here which cannot be logically defined and delimited, but which one can only attempt more or less to feel. Furthermore, we are dealing here with the emotions which the infinite God has in Christ. Our hearts can be only faint shadows of the divine heart.

The writer will attempt to give several Hebrew expressions their literal equivalents. Verse 6 is an exclamation. The first "LORD" (יהוה) is followed by a Masoretic punctuation mark (*Paseq*) which looks like our exclamation point and serves much the same purpose. The second "LORD" begins a sentence without a verb and requires the insertion of "is" in order to make a simple declarative sentence. The most profound concept of God's grace, which Luther in verses 6-7 and later on translated with *Gnade*, "grace," or with *gewisse Gnade*, "sure mercy" (Is 55:3), is actually "the ardor of love," "the fervor of love," as well as the compassion that burns in the heart of a mother for her neglected infant (Is 49:15). That emotion is designated in verses 6-7 by the Hebrew term חֶסֶד. In John 3:16 the Savior who suffered death for us summarizes this love—merciful and fervent—in the adverb *so*: "God so loved the world...." Luther's translation of the participle נֹצֵר with a verb in the second person ("...you who maintain love to thousands..."), can probably be accounted for by his intimate personal relationship to the God of love and grace.

Now only one task remains for us. That is to put God's new revelation of his grace into practice as we apply law and gospel in the local congregation.