

Promise for Obedience

Exodus 23:20–25; 2 Peter 1:1–8

Where are we? We have preached 25 messages on the book of Exodus—specifically, that part called the “Book of the Covenant,”¹ a little book-within-a-book spanning essentially from the end of Exodus 20 to the end of 23. This was the very first part of the Bible ever written down, and the very first part of Holy Scripture read aloud in the hearing of the covenant people—a practice that continues in faithful churches to the present day. When God’s voice had thundered over Sinai with the Ten Commandments, the people were terrified. They told Moses, “You go speak with God and tell us what he says.” They felt threatened at the prospect of standing in the presence of God without a mediator—as should we all! At the final day, those who appear before God apart from the only mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be cast into hellfire.

God by his providence used his people’s fear to give us the beginning of the written Scriptures—a hugely important gift. As we have studied this text we have seen examples of all three categories of law: moral, ceremonial and judicial—that is, instructions for right living, for worship and for civil judges. We’ve seen that though the ceremonial aspects of these laws have been abrogated—done away with by the finished work of Christ—there are moral aspects that “forever bind all.”² For instance, though the church is no longer required to keep the Feast of Firstfruits—in fact, cannot, as there is no longer a levitical priest, physical temple or animal sacrifices—the principle of being thankful and offering to God the firstfruits of our increase continues to the present day. God wants us to have thankful hearts. He wants us to present our bodies a living sacrifice. And he wants us to depend on him—the God of heaven—to supply all our needs, both physical and spiritual, both in this life and in the life to come. These moral aspects of God’s law remain binding, and the believer joyfully obeys them.

Today, we have largely finished the legal part of the Book of the Covenant. Having given a summary of the kinds of obedience that he requires, God now gives a marvelous, lavish promise: if the people will obey, God’s angel or messenger will go before them and personally lead them into the Promised Land. The Israelites may not have realized the importance of this promise, but we, separated by time and space from the original setting, can appreciate it. And the exciting thing, as we shall see, is that this promise was not temporary and time-bound; it is for us today. The Angel who led his covenant people into the land of Canaan is the same one who leads his covenant people today, and will lead us infallibly to heaven.

¹ Ex. 24:7

² WCE 19.5, https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_19

Are you ready? Does this whet your appetite? Pay close attention as we draw some principles out of the text before us. Let's figure out the identity of this angel. Who is he? I have three points: (1) He demands our exclusive loyalty and obedience. (2) He possesses the authority of God himself. And (3) he will defeat all his and our enemies. First,

1. He demands our exclusive loyalty and obedience.

God says, "Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Beware of Him and obey His voice." Notice: the speaker here is God; he speaks of another, whom he calls "an Angel"—here, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity—who demands our exclusive loyalty and obedience. The word "angel" (מַלְאָךְ) occurs 213 times and means *messenger*. It can refer to a *human sent with a message*, such as when Jacob, returning from Padan Aram after having been away for twenty years, sent *messengers* to his twin brother Esau. It can refer to messengers of God, such as the two angels sent to Lot, in Sodom, to warn him, "Escape for thy life," for it was God's intent to destroy Sodom with fire and brimstone. It can refer to the heavenly beings who worship continuously in the presence of God in heaven: "Praise ye him, all his *angels*: praise ye him, all his hosts" (Ps. 148:2). In our present text God says (as in the KJV), "Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared." He refers to the covenant people collectively with the singular "thee," indicating familiarity and kinship and distinction from the world: "Behold, I send an Angel before *thee*, to keep *thee*." In ancient times a husband would say to his wife, "I love thee" (singular), referring to her alone. He would not have said, "I love you" (plural), referring to a lot of people! This is the sense in which the LORD Jehovah says, "I send an Angel before *thee*," indicating his tender love for his covenant people. As he says in Jeremiah, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee" (Jer. 31:3). God has tender love for his people, and wants to protect them from danger "in this vale of tears" that is, the world in which we sojourn.³ If you, by faith, are a part of his people, you can be assured that he has that tender love for you. He has your best interest at heart.

Referring to this angel God says, "Beware of Him and obey His voice." Though the definite article is not used, context tells us that this is no ordinary angel. The NKJV rightly capitalizes the word, indicating his power and authority. "Beware of Him" can be expressed "Be on your guard before him" (NAS) or "Pay careful attention to him" (ESV). This angel, though unseen, justly demands the people's exclusive loyalty and obedience. As they journey toward the Holy Land their continual responsibility is to obey this unseen being, God's messenger.

³ Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 9 (<https://all-of-grace.org/resources/heidelberg-catechism>)

The language that is used rightly expresses the loyalty and obedience we owe to God himself. The whole church recognizes that the God of heaven is, in the words of the Belgic Confession, “one God, who is one single essence, in whom there are three persons . . . namely, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁴ This God—the God of heaven, the one only living and true God—demands our exclusive loyalty and obedience. He created man, and put him in the perfect environment of the Garden of Eden. He revealed himself to him, and had fellowship with him. He gave him a single command: “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” The first man disobeyed and brought death and condemnation upon the whole human race. We—all of us—are born sinners. In David’s words, “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5). We need to be converted—born again by the Holy Spirit, brought to faith, brought from the darkness of sin to the light of the Gospel, to Christ, the Light of the world. We need to see that there is absolutely no hope for us apart from Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the only Mediator between God and man. We need to confess him before men and be received into his church, the covenant people. As we journey through life to the Promised Land—heaven itself—we need the Savior’s presence with us to guide us and sustain us, to empower us to obey him, to take his cross upon us and learn of him, to learn what is so eloquently expressed by John in his first epistle: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” Fellowship with Christ is *life*; apart from Christ is only death and condemnation. Jesus invites us, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.”⁵ In union with Christ and in obedience to him we find true, spiritual rest. He, through his Spirit, enables us to walk by faith and keep his commandments.

God held forth before Israel a marvelous promise: “Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.” God would bring his people through the arid wilderness into the safety of the land flowing with milk and honey. But the promise remains: God brings his believing people through the danger of this present world to the glory of heaven, our eternal inheritance. As we walk this pilgrim journey we must keep our eyes on Christ and follow him, the author and finisher of our faith. We must serve him, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death our sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life. Such is the life of obedience, which is the fruit of a true and living faith. To obey Christ is to obey the Father. We are to obey Christ, whatever he says to do. God doesn’t say: “Obey him most of the time, as it pleases you.” He

⁴ <https://threeforms.org/the-belgic-confession/> article 8

⁵ Matt. 11:29

says simply, “Obey His voice.” If you are a follower of Jesus Christ you can’t pick and choose which parts of his teaching you agree with and which parts you disagree with. He is the LORD, and his word is law. He is to be obeyed—even the hard parts. The Christian is to live a life of obedience.

Second, notice that this Angel

2. possesses the authority of God himself.

“Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him.” Here is language that is too exalted to apply to any mere man. The Jewish rabbis concluded that the LORD spoke of Joshua, but here is an angel who demands absolute obedience, who has power to pardon sin, of whom it is specifically said, “My name is in Him.” Such language is too exalted to be applied to Joshua. The name of God—Yahweh—is said to be “in” this angel who would accompany God’s people through their wilderness wanderings. In John 14:11 Jesus said, “Believe me that I am *in* the Father, and the Father *in* me.” Only the Lord Jesus could have said that. Here is a mystery: the Son is in the Father, and the Father in the Son.

“My *name* is in Him.” Here is God’s personal name—Yahweh, that holy name that is not to be taken in vain. The teaching of Scripture is that Jesus is Yahweh, the LORD. “This is his name whereby he shall be called, [literally] YAHWEH OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jer. 23:6). This is the Lord Jesus who “is made unto us wisdom, and *righteousness*, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). No one can be perfectly holy and right with God without the righteousness of Christ. This is the Jesus who perfectly kept God’s holy law on behalf of unworthy sinners, whose righteousness is credited to all who put their trust in him, as did Abraham, who “believed in the LORD, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness.” If you are trusting in the Christ of Scripture for salvation, then you can be assured that your sins are laid on Christ, and his perfect righteousness is credited to you. When God looks at you, he sees the perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ—absolute perfection, qualifying you to enter heaven. How can this be? This is the glory of the gospel.

Jesus Christ is no mere man. He is the eternal Son of God, who for our sakes became man, so that he could go to the cross and die for sinners. The Angel who would accompany the people of God on their journey to the Promised Land is the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. God sent no lesser person. Does this seem too good to be true? The apostle Paul confirms it when he writes in 1 Corinthians 10:1ff., “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. *For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.*” This is a remarkable statement. It is

undeniable. The New Testament confirms that the *Lord Jesus Christ* accompanied the children of Israel on their journey to the Promised Land.

Here is a reference to the miracle of the water coming out of the rock. Calvin explains: “by the word *rock* is meant the stream of water, which never ceased to accompany the people. For Paul extols the grace of God, on this account, that he commanded the water that was drawn out from the rock to flow forth wherever the people journeyed, as if the rock itself had followed them.”⁶ As the Israelites traveled through the Sinai desert, they drank of the spiritual Rock that followed them, the Lord Jesus Christ, who told the woman at the well, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you *living water*. . . . whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:10, 13). Christ is the only one who can give living water! If your soul thirsts for God, that thirst can be quenched only in Christ.

The Israelites of the Old Testament drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was *Christ*. This teaches that there is *one* people of God, saved by Jesus Christ. There are not two peoples of God—an earthly people, the Jews, and a heavenly people, the church. There is *one* people of God, one church, one way of salvation, one way to heaven.

Thirdly, observe that

3. He will defeat all his and our enemies.

Speaking of the angel who would go with his people the LORD promises, “But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off.” Notice the words, “I will cut them off.” By faith, God’s people would go into the land promised to Abraham, and though the nations of Canaan would fight against them, God himself would cut them off, and Israel would dwell safely in the Land.

Please note that Scripture teaches that this divine promise was indeed *fulfilled*. Joshua 21:43ff. says, “So the LORD gave to Israel *all* the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it. The LORD gave them rest all around, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. *Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.*” It is a misreading of Scripture to think that God’s land promises to the Jews await some

⁶ Calvin, commentary on 1 Cor. 10:4 (Logos Bible Software)

future fulfillment. God not only promised blessings for obedience but also curses for disobedience, including the following (Deut. 28:43–48):

“The alien who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower. He shall lend to you, but you shall not lend to him; he shall be the head, and you shall be the tail. Moreover *all these curses shall come upon you and pursue and overtake you, until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God*, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you. And they shall be upon you for a sign and a wonder, and on your descendants forever. Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of everything, therefore you shall serve your enemies, whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in need of everything; and He will put a yoke of iron on your neck *until He has destroyed you.*”

Israel would learn this bitter lesson as it went into captivity in Babylon. At the time of Christ the land of Israel was under the subjugation to the Romans, and forty years after our Lord’s death the city of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. God never promised that he would bless Israel while they rejected Christ. The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day cried out, “Let him be crucified! His blood be on us and on our children.” But while the majority of Jews rejected Christ, a remnant believed, among whom was the apostle Paul—a bitter enemy to the church, brought to faith in Jesus Christ by God’s sovereign Holy Spirit.

The Jews who marched into the Promised Land had to deal with the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites and all the rest. So likewise we, twenty-first century Christians, battle the enemies of the faith, the enemies of biblical morality.

Indeed, the world is not a friend of grace, as we learned once again this past week with the brutal murder of Charlie Kirk, an outspoken Christian, as he spoke at an outdoor event at a college in Utah. His murder shocked the nation, drawing grateful praise from supporters and vile hate from those on the left that hated his biblical worldview. Charlie Kirk stood for biblical morality, biblical marriage and the gospel of Christ. These are things the man that murdered him hated. Utah’s governor reported that there were messages on his gun casings, including, “Hey fascist! Catch!” indicating that he intended to shoot to kill. I did not agree with all of Kirk’s political positions, but my heart is grieved that an outspoken Christian was cruelly murdered.

Yes, Christ has enemies, but as the Shorter Catechism, summarizing the teaching of Scripture, puts it, “How doth Christ execute the office of a king? Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering *all his and our enemies*” (SC 26).

Yes, in the present day Christ restrains and conquers “all his and our enemies.” Psalm 2:7–9 says, “I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou

art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."

Christ says to his people: "*I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee*" (Heb. 13:5). Because of this, the Christian can say with the hymnwriter, "Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side; bear patiently the cross of grief or pain; leave to your God to order and provide; in every change he faithful will remain. Be still my soul: your best, your heavenly Friend *through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*"⁷ Amen!

⁷ <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/be-still-my-soul/> accessed 9-13-25