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# 1

## Stopping at Sinai

*The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb.  
Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant,  
but with us, who are all of us here alive today.*

*Deuteronomy 5:2-3 NRSV*

In the beginning . . . there were stories. Quite literally, the first book of the Bible is filled with great stories! The plot moves quickly, the characters are compelling, and the storytelling is skillful. A person who appreciates a good story will find the Book of Genesis easy and enjoyable reading. There are love stories and sibling rivalries. We see complicated marriages, broken relationships, and lovely reunions. We read of kings and battles, blessings and threats, revenge and forgiveness. The story that begins with Creation weaves through the fall and the flood, through covenants, providence, grace, and salvation. The divine hand is prominent and evident at some times, while working marvelously behind-the-scenes at others.

By the time the curtain closes on Genesis, the plot of the story has moved us down to Egypt. And when the curtain opens on Exodus, the story picks up and fast-forwards through four centuries very rapidly. The large, extended family of Jacob moves to Egypt as VIP guests, but after a generation, their circumstances change completely when they are involuntarily transformed from guests to slaves. They live through four hundred years of slavery there before the time of their deliverance comes.

The pace of the storytelling slows in Exodus to tell about that deliverance, and it is a truly compelling story. We follow the recurring confrontations between Moses and Egypt's Pharaoh—a relationship so tantalizing that it has inspired a good deal of creative speculation in film treatments of this biblical event. We watch the series of plagues, as God gradually wears down the nation that enslaves God's people. And then we read the account of the climactic night, when the Hebrews eat a symbolic and hurried meal just prior to being set free from their bondage.

Next thing we know, the scene has moved to the shore of the Red Sea, where God prevails in one final battle with the fatally stubborn Pharaoh. Then the Lord leads the people into the wilderness, providing food, water, and guidance each step of the way. And, finally, halfway through the Book of Exodus, the people and the readers arrive at their first real destination. The ultimate destination for the Hebrew slaves, of course, is the Promised Land. That's what God has in store for them at the end of this journey. But it is not a direct flight. They have a layover. There is a planned, deliberate stop at Mount Sinai between Egypt and Canaan.

We read of the people's arrival at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. We read of their departure from Mount Sinai in Numbers 10. For those keeping score, there are fifty-seven chapters between that arrival and that departure. You see, then, how dramatically the material changes. As does the pace of the narrative—some would even say that it stops

altogether. After so many chapters of stories, during which we were moving through time and space, we now find ourselves immersed in many chapters of Law, parked in one spot for what feels like a very long time.

## An Earnest Habit

I grew up with my father's Bible reading example before my eyes. He didn't verbally insist that I follow his example; he didn't need to. His influence was so strong, and my admiration for him was so great, that I naturally observed everything he did.

I had observed two prominent elements of my dad's Bible reading. First, he read every day. This was not a thing he did when he felt like it or when he had the time to get around to it. It was a priority. It was first thing every morning. And, second, he read from cover to cover. I had heard the story of how, when he was still just a boy, the importance of reading the whole Bible was impressed on him by a traveling evangelist. And so, in response to that encouragement and challenge, he read through the Bible from start to finish that year, and he had done it countless times since.

With those two elements of his example prominently before my young, admiring eyes, I resolved to do the same. I decided that I would read through the Bible from start to finish, and I would read every day. And so I began, earnestly, with Genesis 1, and I read every day for many days. But then, after a certain number of days, I broke my pattern. I had gotten into Leviticus, and I found that the reading was difficult for me. Frankly, I didn't feel much interest in picking it back up the next day, and so I didn't. In fact, I let quite a few days pass, and then, when I started again, I literally started again. This was admittedly compulsive, but at least it was earnest. Because I had failed to keep the daily pattern, I made myself go all the way back to the beginning and start over with Genesis 1. And so, with new

resolve, I began my daily reading pattern again, planning to read the entire Bible, from beginning to end.

After some days, however, the same thing happened again. I got into the material about the Tabernacle and the sacrifices, and I simply lost interest and stopped. And after some more time passed, I once again renewed my resolve to read the Bible through, and once again I went back to Genesis 1 to start over. I don't know how many different times this pattern repeated itself. And I don't recommend such compulsiveness. But I share that story from my adolescence to let you know that it was not exactly love at first sight when I met the Old Testament Law.

In the end, I came away from that period of my relationship with the Bible very familiar with Genesis and Exodus. And I am also very familiar with the struggles so many Christians have with the Old Testament Law. When the reading reaches Mount Sinai, that is where so many of us stop.

## Previous Appointment

We noted above that the children of Israel did not catch a direct flight from Egypt to the Promised Land. They had a scheduled stop along the way. It was a deliberate appointment to meet with God at a very specific place.

The meeting was booked long before the slaves had been freed. Indeed, back at the burning bush, when God was first enlisting Moses for the task at hand, this appointment was built into Israel's calendar. The Lord promised Moses, saying, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain" (Exodus 3:12 NASB).

An important grammatical detail is lost in the English translation. Unlike Hebrew, contemporary English does not naturally distinguish

between the plural and the singular second person pronouns. Both come out as *you*. The old King James English, however, offered more precision, with its use of *thee* and *thou* as singular pronouns and *ye* as plural. So the scheduled appointment reads this way: “When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain” (Exodus 3:12 KJV).

God is saying, “I will be with you, Moses. I have sent you, Moses. And I will give you, Moses, a sign. You, Moses, will bring the people out of Egypt. And then you, *the whole group*, shall worship me here on this mountain.”

It’s a beautiful image of coming full circle. At this moment, Moses is alone on the mountain with God, and he is receiving a seemingly impossible assignment. The children of Israel, meanwhile, are miles away, languishing in the tight grip of Pharaoh. But the Lord promised that, in the foreseeable future, Moses would be back at that mountain with God, but that next time he would not be at all alone. Instead, he will have with him that whole nation of slaves, and they will worship their Deliverer together at the very place of God’s call. Beautiful!

Mount Sinai is not their final home, you see, but it is a destination. It is an essential, scheduled stop along the way. And that is where they receive God’s Law.

## Life with God 101

When my wife, Karen, was pregnant with our first child, we kept close at hand the book *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. We referenced it often as it walked us through what was new and unfamiliar territory to us. And, likewise, once our daughter was born, we turned to other books and resources to help guide us in our new life as parents.

The children of Israel were entering into a new life. For generations they had been slaves; now they were free. They had been living

in one land, but soon they would be living in another. They had lived their lives thus far as the property of others, but soon they would have houses and land of their own. They had been governed by whips and chains, but now they would be governed by God and God's Laws.

This was going to be a new life, indeed, and they would need a reference, a resource, to guide them in that new life. God's Law would be that resource. God's Law would guide them.

This was to be more than just a new life circumstantially, however. It was also a new life relationally. In a sense, all of their relationships became new once they were free people. And, most significantly, they were entering into a new relationship with God. Specifically, they were entering into a covenant relationship with God.

*Covenant* is one of the central, recurring themes of Scripture. In the time of Noah, God established a covenant with humankind and all of creation (Genesis 9:8-17). Later, the Lord initiated a covenant with Abram (Genesis 15:17-21). Israel remembered God making a covenant with David (Psalm 89:3-4). The prophet Jeremiah anticipated the day when God would establish a new covenant with people (Jeremiah 31:31-34). At the Last Supper, Jesus identified the cup as the blood of a new covenant (Matthew 26:27-28). And the apostles celebrated and taught about that new covenant that is available through Christ (for example, 2 Corinthians 3:5-6; Galatians 4:24; Hebrews 7:22).

*Covenant* was not an exclusively religious or spiritual term. Human beings established covenants with one another as well (for example, 1 Samuel 18:3). But it was understood to be a most solemn alliance, a binding agreement, a pledge. And the beauty of this recurring theme in Scripture is that God is the one who initiates covenants again and again with human beings. That is to say, the Lord makes solemn alliances, enters into binding agreements with people.

This is no small matter. An omnipotent, eternal, sovereign God is under no obligation to make alliances with finite and fallen human

creatures. It is sufficient for Almighty God to give commands— one-way instructions. But a covenant suggests a two-way relationship; indeed, it implies a partnership. A commandment is really only binding on the one being commanded. A covenant, on the other hand, has the quality of being mutually binding. And God deigns to initiate such covenants.

So it was there, at Sinai, that the people of Israel entered into a covenant relationship with God. There they received from God the Law, and the centerpiece of that Law—what we know as the Ten Commandments—was carved on two tablets like a contract printed in duplicate. And the copies of that contract were kept in a box, which was known as the ark of the covenant or the covenant box. In short, the Law represented the terms of the covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel.

The Law, then, was Israel's guide and reference book for their new life, their new future, and their new relationship with God. Call it *What to Expect When You Belong to a Holy God*. Meanwhile, inasmuch as you and I are welcomed into a relationship with that same God, and inasmuch as we, too, are given a new life and new future by God, we will find beauty, wisdom, meaning, and guidance in the same reference that the Lord gave to Israel back at Sinai.

## The Necessary Stop

A generation of moviegoers will remember the 1984 cult favorite, *The Karate Kid*. A teenager named Daniel is tutored in karate by the elderly Mr. Miyagi. The problem is that it doesn't feel at all to Daniel like karate is what he is learning. Instead, so far as he can tell, he is just being required to do chores—mindlessly repetitive chores—like painting a fence and waxing a car. At a critical moment in the training process, however, the method suddenly becomes clear. Mr. Miyagi was training Daniel's hands and arms to do their parts of the action.



Waxing a car is not self-defense. Painting a fence is not winning a match. But the wise instructor knew that those chores were necessary steps toward the ultimate goal. The chores were means to an end. Practicing actions that were not inherently karate proved to be training for karate.

Long before *The Karate Kid* hit the theaters, the Lord God had already employed such training for his people. “The Law has become our tutor,” Paul wrote to the Galatians, “to lead us to Christ” (Galatians 3:24). Did the people of Moses’ day recognize Christ in the holy days, in the priesthood, or in the Tabernacle? No more than Daniel recognized karate in car waxing, I suspect. But the Law was part of the process.

Both Paul and the writer of Hebrews use the image of a shadow. “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves” (Hebrews 10:1 NIV). “These are a shadow of the things that were to come, the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Colossians 2:17 NIV). So it is that we refer to foreshadowings of Christ that are contained in the Old Testament, and especially in the Law.

Likewise, the elements of the Old Testament Law point to some greater reality beyond themselves. They are like the old connect-the-dot puzzles we had as children. Before the lines were drawn, the picture was unrecognizable. Once the connections were made, however, then it all became clear. So it is that, in Christ, the dots are connected, the picture is colored in, and we recognize that it was all a portrait of the Son of God. Similarly, the dots of the Old Testament Law all come together to form the same picture.

Luke tells us a story that helps to illustrate the point. On Easter Sunday afternoon, two of Jesus’ disciples were traveling to the town of Emmaus. While on the road, Jesus met up with them and conversed with them along the way. As they talked, it became clear that the men were bewildered by the events of recent days. And so, “beginning

with Moses and with all the prophets, [Jesus] explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27).

The use of Moses’ name here is a reference to the Old Testament Law. And so we discover, along with that first generation of disciples, that the things that had happened to Jesus were not random, accidental, or surprising. Rather, all of it was anticipated and even foreshadowed. What Jesus did was the fulfillment of promise and prophecy. He was the reality hinted at by the shadows seen in the Law of Moses.

In this way, then, we see just how necessary a stop Sinai was along the way for Christians. It was not just part of the physical itinerary between Egypt and the Promised Land; it was a part of a theological journey too. It was necessary, not only for that immediate generation of Hebrews (completing their journey) but also for the larger population of God’s people across the millennia. The Law is a place we go through on our way to Christ. Indeed, the Law helps us to get to him.

## The Road of Discipleship

Sinai continues to be a necessary stop for us today. Let us not think that the usefulness of the Law was exhausted in Moses’ generation. Even the fulfillment of the Law in Jesus is not a reason to pack it up and put it away on a shelf. Rather, the Law continues to be an essential part of the journey for those who follow Jesus.

Interestingly, Jesus himself elevates the importance of commandments for his followers. Too often, Christians have used Christ as a sort of hall pass to get them out of the Law. But that is a misunderstanding of his teaching and his role.

Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus minced no words about the continuing importance of God’s Law: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth

pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19).

Jesus also impressed upon his disciples the relational dynamic of commandments and obedience. We gather from his critique of the Pharisees that they were often guilty of a sort of heartless and mindless legalism. And their example is not meant to be our model. “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20 NIV). In contrast to the Pharisees’ faulty example, however, we are taught that obeying the Lord’s commands is meant to be a matter of love (John 14:15).

And, finally, we discover that obeying the Lord’s commands is essential to discipleship. Jesus’ final recorded instruction to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew is known as The Great Commission. He said to them, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20 NIV).

The recipe for discipleship, you see, is baptism and teaching. Baptism is the entry point. The teaching is what equips and guides us for daily living as disciples. And the content of that teaching is to obey the Lord’s commands.

We said that Mount Sinai was an essential, scheduled stop along the way for the Hebrew slaves. That mountain serves as a metaphor for the Law that was given there. And the Law, too, is an essential, scheduled stop along the way for the people of God today. It is not our final home, but it is a necessary part of the journey—the journey to Christ and the journey of following him.

For many modern Christians, Old Testament law is set aside as tedious, troubling, or expired, showing the wrath of an unloving God. The psalmist, however, tells us otherwise—thanking God for it, calling it perfect, and claiming that it revives the soul. Where, then, is the disconnect? In *The Gospel According to Leviticus*, Rev. David Kalas uses his thoughtful style to weave through the Old Testament, assuring the modern-day Christian that not only is there plenty of love in the law, but also relevant lessons that could only have come from the same loving God we've known all along. A six-session Leader Guide is also available for facilitating a small-group study of *The Gospel According to Leviticus*.

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David Kalas comes to the laws of the Old Testament with fresh eyes, an emancipated imagination, and verve about the ordinary stuff of human experience. The outcome of his study is a new appreciation for God's laws and the way in which its teaching can shape an alternative existence for an alternative community. —**Walter Brueggemann**, Professor of Old Testament Emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary

How many well-meaning resolutions to read through the Bible cover to cover have dead-ended in Leviticus? Perhaps it's time to take another look. In David Kalas' wonderful, engaging style, he intersperses stories with deep insight and uncovers gentle love letters from God throughout this perhaps most neglected book of the Bible.

—**Jessica LaGrone**, Dean of Chapel at Asbury Theological Seminary

Okay, let's be honest. The Book of Leviticus scares the daylights out of most of us. David Kalas helps us as he navigates the tension between mystery and certainty with a robust and thoughtful pilgrimage through this much-maligned book.

—**Jorge Acevedo**, Lead Pastor at Grace Church, a multi-site United Methodist congregation in southern Florida

As Christians, we often choose to ignore the rules of the Old Testament for the loving relationship with God through Jesus Christ provided in the New Testament. David Kalas offers us a provocative bridge that moves us from "either/or" to "both/and" thinking, allowing us to see God's mercy, grace, and love in Old Testament rules as well as New Testament relationship.

—**Hee-Soo Jung**, Bishop, Wisconsin Episcopal Area of The United Methodist Church

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**Abingdon Press**<sup>™</sup>  
[www.abingdonpress.com](http://www.abingdonpress.com)

RELIGION / Biblical Studies / Old Testament US \$16.99

ISBN-13: 978-1-5018-7940-1



Cover design: Marcia Myatt