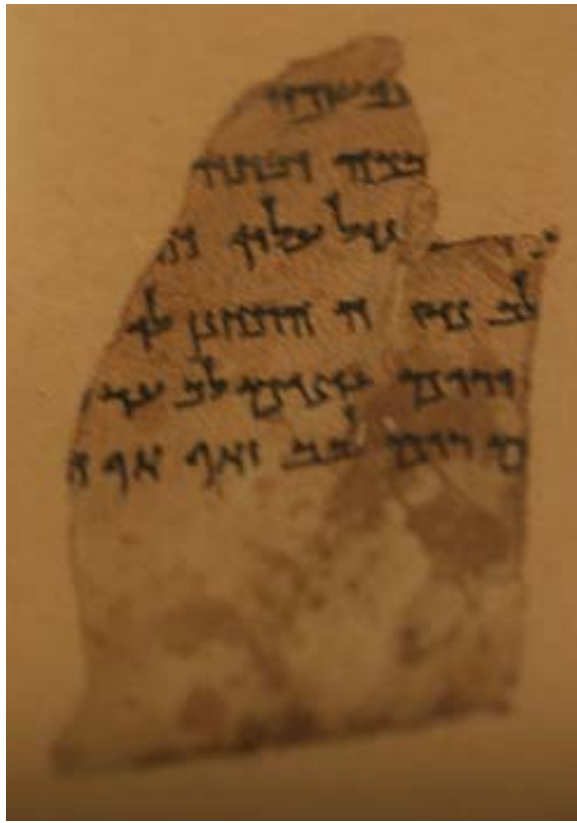


The Covenant Pulpit



EXODUS

Possessing the Promises

“LOVE LETTERS IN STONE”
EXODUS 19&20

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Police found her naked body next to a telephone that was dangling by its cord. Before she died she had frantically tried to make one last phone call.

Folks in her home town always said that the Mortenson girl would end up dead before her time. They also knew that she wasn't really a *Mortenson* girl. Her mother Gladys had conned Martin Mortenson into marrying her to hide an unwed pregnancy. The Mortenson girl never did find out who her real dad was. When she was a baby her mother walked out on Martin, leaving her daughter to grow up without a father's love.

She was only six years-old when Gladys was carted off to an Insane Asylum. The Mortenson girl spent the next 10 years being shuffled through foster homes. In one she was sexually abused by a foster father. In another she was raped by an older boy. In a third she was molested by a man who rented a room. Afterwards he said, "Here, honey, take this nickel and don't tell anyone what I did to you." When she told her foster mother, the woman screamed, "What did you do to lead him on? You had better not tell anyone! He pays his rent on time and we can't afford to lose his money." She later complained, "I found out at an early age that I was only worth a nickel."

Even after she grew up to be a Hollywood goddess, she saw herself as little more than a sex object. She once said, "A sex symbol becomes a thing, and I hate being a thing." She never felt loved, especially by men. She told a reporter, "All I want is to be loved for myself." Yet Norma Jeane Mortenson was always reinventing herself. As a child she adopted her mother's maiden name and became Norma Jeane Baker. She turned into Norma Jeane Dougherty when she got married at age sixteen. Later she wed America's baseball star and became Norma Jeane DiMaggio. After she married a world-renowned playwright, they drank a toast to Norma Jeane Miller.

When she was a 21 year-old model, a Hollywood publicist gave Norma Jeane her most famous name, Marilyn Monroe. He promised to turn her into the hottest sex symbol in movie history. In more than 30 films she parlayed her "ditzzy sexy blond" persona into mega stardom. But she felt used and dirty, like a molested little girl. She cynically said, "In Hollywood a girl's virtue is worth less than her hairdo." Another time she quipped, "They pay you a thousand dollars for a kiss and fifty cents for your soul."

She plowed through three failed marriages, numerous unhappy romances, and secret affairs with the President of the United States and the Attorney General. She sadly confessed to a friend, "I'm just a small girl in a big world trying desperately to find someone to love." Toward the end of her life, a disillusioned Norma Jeane said, "A wise girl kisses but doesn't love, listens but doesn't believe, and leaves before she is left." Though she was idolized by millions, she confided to another actress, "It's all make believe, isn't it?"

At age 36, her life was spiraling out of control. On her last night alive, she called actor Peter Lawford. She talked incessantly about how unloved she felt. She sobbed, "As a woman, I am a failure. Men expect so much of me, but I'm never able to live up to their expectations." Finally Lawford said, "Marilyn, I have enough troubles of my own," and abruptly hung up on her. Popping lethal barbiturates as she frantically dialed her phone, trying to find someone who would listen. When police discovered her lifeless body the next morning, her phone was dangling by her bed.

Claire Boothe Luce, the former editor of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* magazines, wrote about Norma Jeane's suicide. She asked, "What really killed this love goddess who never found love?" Luce believed that the answer was in that dangling telephone: "Marilyn Monroe died because she never got through to someone who would love her." She concluded, "Millions of people are dying because they can't get through to someone who loves them."

In Elton John's megahit, *Candle in the Wind*, memorializing Norma Jeane, there is this line: "Loneliness was tough, the toughest role you ever played." Loneliness is the toughest role that any of us will ever play. An *MTV* poll discovered that 45% of 15-24 year-olds feels lonely "most of the time." In his book *Fatherless America*, David Blankenhorn writes that 40 percent of American children go to bed without a father in the home. A 2008 George Barna poll found that two-thirds of Evangelicals feel lonely even while at church. Claire Boothe Luce was right when she wrote that millions of people are dying because they can't get through to someone who loves them.

Marilyn Monroe's dangling phone is so tragic. If only she had called God. He knows all the lonely people in the world. Do you know how much he loves you? Come to Mt. Sinai and see for yourself. 3400 years ago God came down and etched a love letter in stone. In this love letter from our heavenly Father, we are told how to love God and one another. But, even as Moses was getting that love letter, the people below were already groveling before a golden calf. God cries from the mountaintop, "I desperately love you, and want you to love me and your neighbors the same way." The people scream back, "We want to love ourselves and the gods of our own making!"

3400 years later we still don't know how to love God or others. That's why we destroy the Norma Jeanes of the world. Like Peter Lawford, we hang up on those desperate for our love. Along with Norma Jeane, we are poisoning ourselves even as we frantically look for love in all the wrong places. No one will ever make it to the Promised Land alone. We desperately need God and one another. That's why the 10th principle of Exodus is so critical:

**The Law commands, but gives neither feet nor hands;
The Gospel calls us to fly and gives us wings.**

When Moses saw the people worshipping the golden calf, he angrily threw the tablets to the ground, breaking them to smithereens. Those broken tables were a picture of God's broken heart. As you look at those shattered pieces, think about all the hearts shattered because people refuse to love the way the Ten Commandments tell us to love. God's law is good, but we are bad. The Law can tell us how to love, but can't give us the power to do it. So the love letter becomes an unbearable burden—as hard, cold, and heavy as those stone tablets Moses lugged down the mountainside. That's why we need the gospel of grace. John Bunyan, the writer of *Pilgrim's Progress*, wrote a verse to teach this truth to children:

Run, John run, the Law commands.
But gives neither feet nor hands.
Better news the gospel brings.
It bids me fly and gives me wings.

For the sake of all the lonely, broken people like Norma Jeane let's see if we can find the wings to soar on the winds of grace. Here are five truths:

1. When we can't climb God's mountain of holiness, he climbs our mountain of sin.

In the 19th chapter of Exodus the Israelites are now encamped at Mt. Sinai. Soon Moses will climb to the summit to meet his LORD face-to-face. God says to them in Exodus 19:4&5, "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself...you will be my treasured possessions..." These are the words of a passionate lover. But Mt. Sinai is one scary place. In verse 12 Moses is told to put a fence around the mountain. Any person or animal that touches the mountain will die. When God visits, it is no trifling matter. We read in verse 16, "Everyone in the camp trembled." We glibly say that we want the presence of God to fall on us. But look at verses 18&19: "Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpets grew louder and louder." A New Testament writer says in Hebrews 12:21, "The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.'"

What message is God giving his people (both then and now) at Mt. Sinai? The key is a little phrase tucked away in Exodus 19:23: "...the people cannot come up..." Earlier Moses tells the people to clean themselves thoroughly, but they *can't* get themselves clean enough to stand in the presence of his glory. He tells them to abstain from sex, but they *can't* get themselves holy enough. Any one who even touches the mountain must die. Ponder this

fact: if we cannot even touch that which God has touched without profaning it, how can we even presume to touch God himself? No wonder Hebrews 10:31 says, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

King David asks two questions in Psalm 24:3: "Who may ascend to the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?" His answer in Psalm 24:4 is devastating: "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol, or swear by what is false." No one can ascend to the hill of the LORD! There's not a one of us who can say that our hands are clean enough, our hearts pure enough, or our conduct righteous enough to come up into his presence. If you touch this consuming fire of a God, you will be instantly incinerated by his glory. This God is no Huggy Bear. Moses knows that if he survives this God who hides his glory in the thick thunder clouds at the summit, it will be by grace alone.

And Grace finds a way to do what the Law can't accomplish. When we couldn't ascend the holy hill to God, he came down to us. When we couldn't take on his glory, God took on our flesh. When the unclean couldn't touch his holiness, the holy one touched our uncleanness. Thank God for another mountain—a jagged pile of rock outside the city limits of Jerusalem. It is fitting that it should look like a skull, for it is a place of death. Appropriately, this rock formation sits in a garbage dump. There the refuse of humanity are brought to be crucified at this place called Mt. Calvary. Though we were not able to climb Mt. Sinai bearing his glory, he was willing to climb Mt. Calvary bearing our sin. If we touched Mt. Sinai, our sin would profane his holiness—and we would die. When he touched Mt. Calvary, his holiness sanctified our sin—and he died.

It was the great exchange: he bore our sin so that we could be clothed in his righteousness; he endured the wrath of God so that we could enjoy the grace of God; he died so that we might live; he descended into hell so that we might ascend into heaven.

At Mt. Sinai, God commanded us to love, but he didn't give us the arms or legs to ascend to his glory. At Mt. Calvary he showed us how to love, and paid the penalty for our refusal to love. But if we are ever going to be able to love God and our neighbors the way he loved us on Mt. Calvary, we must look to a third mountain. It's on the edge of the Valley of Armeggedon in Israel. The locals call it Mt. Tabor. The 17th chapter of Matthew tells us that, a few weeks before his crucifixion, Jesus took some of his disciples up on that mountain. For a dazzling moment, he was transfigured in all his glory, giving a sneak preview of what he would be when he later ascended back to heaven. Those disciples saw something of the great glory of God that was on Mt. Sinai 1400 years earlier. And standing there on Mount Tabor with Jesus was Moses in all his resurrected glory. It is when we stand with Jesus,

filled with his resurrected presence and power that we will be transformed into his glory. Only the gospel calls us to fly and gives us wings. Have you trusted in his finished work on Mt. Calvary? Have you asked him to fill you with his presence and power so that you can ascend to the holy hill of God?

2. Before we can love him, God has already loved us.

In Exodus 20 Moses is about to receive the Commandments telling God's people how to love their Father in heaven and their neighbors on earth. But first he says in Exodus 20:2, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Before he tells them to love him, he reminds them that he has *already* loved them. He never says, "I'll love you *if* you first love me or only *after* you love me," or "I'll love you to the *extent* that you love me." He loved them when they were still in love with the gods of Egypt. He remembered them when they had forgotten him. He felt their pain when they complained that he didn't care. He set them free even as they criticized him for the way he did it. His love is unconditional,

When I read Exodus 20:2, I remember the night the Death Angel passed over Egypt. God was punishing the Egyptians for their disobedience. St. Paul writes in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death." The Israelites hadn't been much more obedient, but they obeyed the one command of God that mattered when they killed their lambs and smeared the blood on the doorposts of their houses. By putting them-selves under the blood of the lamb, they were saved that night. It is no accident that the firstborn sons of Egypt were killed. God is reminding us that the lambs were a picture of his Only Begotten Son. When you hear the weeping in Egypt you hear the weeping of a loveless and lost world. You also hear the weeping of your Father in heaven, the day the Only Begotten Son of God (his little lamb) suffered and died on Mt. Calvary so that his blood could wash away the sins of sons and daughters of this world

When God begins by declaring his love, before he asks for our love, he is saying that his grace takes precedence over his law. Mt. Calvary towers over Mt. Sinai. How will we ever manage to love God and our neighbors? 1 John 4:19 gives the secret: "We love him, because he first loved us." Either we will focus on what we have to do, or on what he has already done. Either we will beat ourselves up because we haven't done enough, or we will rest in the fact that he has done enough. We will love him and others out of gratitude, not a sense of obligation. Grace will give us the wings to soar.

3. Love's definition is etched in the goodness of God's law.

Love is not *Hallmark Card* feeling. It has substance and definition. We don't have to grope around in the dark trying to figure out how to love. In

the first four commandments of Exodus 20: 3-11 we are told how to love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. The order of the commandments is critical. We will never love our neighbors until we love ourselves, and we will never love ourselves until we are in a passionate relationship with the God who loves us. So God begins by focusing on the way we are to love him. Verse three says, **“You shall have no other gods before me.”** God is to take first place in our life. Nothing else is to come between us and him. Remember, that’s how he loves you. Nothing—not even your sin or his cross—stood between him and his love for you. Verse four says, **“You shall not make for yourself an idol.”** Love means that you accept the one you love, just as that person. You don’t try to recreate that person over again into the image of what you want them to be to make yourself happier. In the same way, you accept and worship God for exactly who he is. Remember, God loves you just the way you are. He *is* remaking you, but is to be like the person you were intended to be in Eden. Verse seven says, **“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.”** If you love someone, you will treat that person with a sense of awe and reverence. You won’t drag the name of that person through the mud. You won’t play games with that person’s dignity or worth. God never speaks of you except with the most exalted of terms like, “saint...beloved...chosen...called...elected...predestined...beloved sons and daughters...” Verse eight says, **“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.”** If you love someone, you will want to spend quality time with that person. You can hardly wait to be alone with that person. You will put that one first in your priorities. Is there any more precious gift to give anyone than your time? Remember, he is there all the time waiting for you. He delights in spending time with you. Do you delight in time alone with him?

The next six commandments tell you how to love your neighbor as yourself. The fifth commandment in verse 12 with the first neighbors you ever had: **“Honor your mother and father.”** Our world is falling apart because parents and children do not love and honor each other. People who haven’t learned honor in their families of origin will struggle all the days of their lives. Imagine the difference, if only Norma Jeane Mortenson had started out life in a loving family where everyone was honored. Verse 13 says, **“You shall not murder.”** Verse 14 says, **“You shall not commit adultery.”** Verse 15 says, **“You shall not steal.”** Verse 16 says, **“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”** Verse 17 says **“You shall not covet...”** anything that belongs to your neighbor. Can you imagine the paradise this would be, if only we loved one another like this?

When Moses brought these commandments down from Sinai, it changed the history of the world. The best that we are in Western Civilization is because of these laws on how we should love. And yet, the worst thing happen because fallen people cannot follow keep these laws of love.

4. If you ever grasp the Law of Love it will break your heart.

When Moses told the people about the Laws, they were not happy. In verse 19, they cried out to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." Almost everyone sees these Ten Commandments as fearful and burdensome. Moses tries to calm their fears in verse 20, "Do not be afraid, God has come to test you, so the fear of the Lord will be with you to keep you from sinning." Moses gives no comfort with those words. If I had been there at Mt. Sinai, I would have responded, "God has come to test me? Is that supposed to make me feel better?" I know that God doesn't grade on the curve. He expects nothing less than perfection—a score of a hundred alone gives me a passing grade." Moses says, "...the fear of the Lord will keep you from sinning." Again, I'm going to respond, "Fear has kept me from sinning." Fear and guilt are poor motives for doing what's right. Moses no sooner goes back up the mountain to talk to God, than the people begin to build a golden calf. In one fell swoop they basically break all ten of the commandments. When you realize the requirements involved in loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and then loving your neighbors as yourself, you are doomed from the beginning. This is a severe love test will never be passed by mere mortals.

5. Those loved in brokenness are transformed by grace.

In verse 23, God again reminds Moses, "Do not make any gods to be alongside of me." Within days they will erect the golden calf. But thank God for verse 24, "Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings..." This mound of earth is a picture of that mound of rock outside Jerusalem. Their burnt offerings are a picture of the lamb who will be crucified on it as the ultimate offering to God for our sins." Every one of us has denied God and destroyed our neighbors in the pursuit of our idols. The purpose of the Law of Love is to show us that we can't love in our own strength. The Law is good, but we aren't. The Law brings us to the end of ourselves, and drives us to Jesus. Jesus says in Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit (the bankrupt, the broken-hearted) for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." When we are broken by the Law and stand guilty and shattered before golden calves, that have given us nothing in return for our idolatry, there is another altar over there: a mound of earth on which our Savior hangs crucified. He cries out, "Though you haven't loved me, I have always loved you." If wish that Norma Jean had known this when she was desperately trying to call someone that night. But you know. Will you call him to come and love you so that you might love again?