

Mississippi, Moses, a Mountain, and a Mediator
Exodus 19:7–25
August 16, 2026

I've said more than once that when we finished Hebrews a few years back, I *immediately* wanted to preach it again. On good counsel, I did *not* do that. Instead, we went through 1 Peter, Galatians and a number of Psalms. Nonetheless, *half*-jokingly, I've also repeatedly said that going through Exodus would also be how I'd smuggle Hebrews back into the pulpit. Because the book of Hebrews is something of a commentary on the Pentateuch, helping us rightly read a book like Exodus.

As I *hope* you recall, much of Hebrews is about access, about the degree to which we might draw near to God, and *why* we're able to. Which is an important concept for us to consider, both a few years back *and* today. Because we are a people, and we're surrounded by people, who often *assume* access—to places, to others, and even to God Himself.

Recently, while in Starkville, Mississippi, I was reminded of *limited* access, and—as well—access *granted*. As many of you know, we were there for a wedding. It was the first time I'd ever been to Starkville. But it *wasn't* the first time I'd thought of Mississippi State baseball. Some of my absolute favorite players from the 90s played there. And I've *long* wanted to visit their famous Dudy Noble Stadium.

Thankfully, Julie happened to pick a hotel that was a little less than a mile from it. So quasi-early Saturday morning, I snuck in a morning jog over toward campus. During that run, I saw almost *no* one. School wasn't in session. It was Saturday morning.

But eventually, I saw a beautiful baseball stadium, and in front of it two statues of guys I'd watched growing up. But of course, that entry was about as close as I could get. Large, barred barriers blocked entry into the stadium itself. At one point, I moved as close as I could and peered through the prison cell-esque bars to see what I could see. It was, "that far, and no farther."

Soon it was time to start jogging back. But *right* as I'm about to leave, a man walked up with his son. We struck up a conversation. I tell him I've never been to Starkville, that I love baseball, and that I've always wanted to see this ballpark. I guess I wanted to explain why I was just standing outside of it by myself early on a Saturday morning.

And though he *just* met me, didn't even know my name yet, he immediately responded, "Listen, it's my son's birthday. And in five minutes he's getting a private tour. Join us." I pushed back a little, saying "I don't want to impose. Also, I have a wedding in a bit." He pushed back *harder*, asked what time the wedding was, and then concluded, "You've got time."

Long story *sort*—of short, five minutes later I was standing on the field, a few minutes later sitting in the dugout, and then shortly thereafter walking around in the team locker room. It turns out that the *one* person I ran into that morning was a guy named Jeff. He is the director of development for Mississippi State. Furthermore, his aunt—currently a VP for the Dodgers—was the architect that designed that stadium.

Access was limited. And *then*, access granted.

Now, again, Hebrews is about the *latter*. It's about having access. But that truth *only* makes sense—and its absolute glory understood—in light of Exodus 19 and Mount Sinai, which is mostly about *not* having it. Yet, note first:

1. At this mountain, Moses draws near (vv. 7-8)

Last week we talked a *lot* about the covenant God made with His people here at Sinai. In something of a preamble, He reminded them of what *He'd* done for their good, what He'd done to the Egyptians, and how He'd brought them to Himself. But *after* that covenant prologue, He'd

commanded them to *keep* that covenant. That is, *if* they were to continue to benefit from His delivering mercy, and if His blessing was to remain upon them, there were certain things they must do. God told Moses to deliver *that* message to the Hebrews.

Keep in mind that He'd given Moses those words in a certain place. As you recall, the Hebrews were camping **in front of the mountain** (19:2). And yet verse 3 reads: **Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain.** The Israelites settled around the *base* of Sinai. Moses stood *on* it. He'd drawn near.

In this narrative, Moses will end up ascending Sinai seven times and, of course, going back down seven times.¹ Our text *today* details what Moses does after he descends the first time, after hearing from the Lord the details of the covenant. Verse 7: **So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him.**

Later in Deuteronomy, the *same* language will be used when life and death, blessing and cursing, are “set before” the Israelites.² But here, after the terms of God's covenant have been “set before” the Israelites, terms they were to accept, verse 8 gives us their response: **All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!”**

As we asked last week, “Will they?” Hebrews has a good bit to say about that. Nonetheless, they *said* they would, in a significantly unified embrace of God's covenant.³ Verse 8 goes on: **And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD.**

Of course, that describes *another* ascent up the mountain for Moses. With that in mind, it's worth asking, “Did God *need* Moses to climb Sinai and deliver the message to Him? Was Yahweh unaware of their answer?” Of course not. He knew their answer *before* He asked the question. But Moses would keep ascending and descending—five more times in fact—in order to communicate vital truths. And not just in his speaking. The formality of the “up and down” kept the Hebrews reminded that they were *not* merely dealing with their elders, nor with just Moses, but with the one true God.⁴ And He cannot be approached by just anyone, nor on just anyone's terms.

Yet Moses drew near. However . . .

2. At this mountain, the Hebrews *cannot* draw near (vv. 9-15)

As the people's mediator, Moses would speak the word of God to them. However, for that word to be effective, the Hebrews must believe—in some sense—that he heard it from God. That's *some* of what happens in verse 9: **The LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever.”** In a way they would *never* forget, that will happen in the moments ahead.

But *after* Moses tells Yahweh that the people agreed to do all He demands, the Lord gives yet *another* command in verse 10: **The LORD also said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; and let them be ready for the third day.”** Just as a reminder, to “consecrate” something is to set it apart as holy.⁵ The Hebrews had been commanded to do a similar thing with their firstborn back in Exodus 12. Part of the purpose *then* was to help them to remember the Passover, but *also* it taught them something about who God is.⁶

¹ Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 186.

² Jeffery Leonard, *The Preacher's Hebrew Companion to Exodus 15:22–40:38*, 119.

³ Leonard, 119.

⁴ Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 424.

⁵ Stuart, 425.

⁶ That is, *everything* belonged to Him (Ex. 13:2).

There's a good bit of similarity here. God was teaching them something about Himself. But this time they weren't to *merely* consecrate the firstborn; they were to set apart *everyone*. It doesn't take a ton of imagination to conclude that the practicality of this consecration would be no small undertaking. In terms of numbers, Exodus 12 says that there were 600,000 men in this traveling band, *not* including women and children. So, *before* the third day, over a million garments would have to be washed—out in a *desert*.

This was no small task. Because what's ahead was *not* to come about on their terms. In fact, the consecration over the next couple days would reinforce—over and over, garment after garment—the seriousness of what was *about* to happen. Which is detailed at the end of verse 10: **The LORD also said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; and let them be ready for the third day, for on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.”**

And if the seriousness of what's about to happen *still* didn't land, God continues speaking to Moses in verse 12: **You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, “Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death.”** This is partly why *last* week I emphasized that the Hebrews were in *front* of the mountain, not *on* it. The mountain was inaccessible to them. The Lord says, “This far, but no farther.”

Of course that's not the *last* time He'll say that. But nor is it the *first*. Nor is it the first time He's said it on *this* very mountain. In Exodus 3:5, from a bush ablaze but not consumed, He'd told Moses: **Do not come near here.** Why bring that up? Because what Moses would *eventually* need to teach God's people, in our text today, Moses first learned from God Himself—in the *same* place.⁷

And that lesson is this: a holy God is far from safe for an unholy people. That's a lesson not limited to Exodus 3, nor 19. In the years ahead, Nadab and Abihu would too learn it in the book of Leviticus. The Day of Atonement would reinforce the principle. Years later, the Psalmist would sing this pertinent question: **who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?** (Ps. 24:3). And the answer is not, “anyone.”

Because God is holy, so holy that it can be said to include all of his moral perfections.⁸ Therefore, His holiness is *not* something we consider casually, nor approach frivolously. Furthermore, the holiness of God is *not* a passive attribute. It's an active force.⁹ We might even say, as the Scriptures unfold this reality, it—He—consumes.

And because a holy God is not safe for a sinful people, it's actually in mercy that God limited access, back in Exodus 3, and here. Should they have touched the mountain, they would've been destroyed. Verse 13 doubles down on the consequences: **No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.** They were to wait for the third day. And there was a particular *way* they were to wait.

And after that merciful warning, the Lord continues to give instruction at the end of verse 13: **When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.** Again, not *on* it, but *to* it. They are allowed to come *closer*, likely so that they might better hear and experience what's about to happen. But they can't come *too* close.

Moses however, having drawn near, heard these instructions from the Lord. And then he descends yet again to do what He's been told to do. Verse 14: **So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments. He said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.”**

⁷ Stuart, 114.

⁸ Timothy George, *A Theology for the Church*, 223.

⁹ Motyer, 39.

Again, they were waiting for the third day. And there was a particular way they were to wait. The instruction about the opposite sex was intended to impose a certain discipline upon them. The consecration required the people to keep the holiness of God at the forefront of their minds. And, further, the command “do not touch” would reinforce their unworthiness before this holy God.¹⁰ That’s *how* they waited.

But before we consider what happens on the third day, we might consider again Exodus 3. It’s the same mountain, a mountain on which the fire of God’s presence dwells. And I’m guessing you remember the question Moses had about that bush ablaze. Exodus 3:3 reads, and Moses wonders, **why the bush is not burned up**.

It’s a good question, but maybe it’s also intended to lead us to other questions. That is, not only, “Why isn’t the bush consumed?” but “Why isn’t Moses?” Maybe today we’d ask, “Why aren’t we?”

And if those questions seem impertinent, or make little to no sense to you, then *maybe* your conception of God, His character, and His presence need to be informed by what happens when He descends at Sinai in Exodus 19.

At this mountain, the Hebrews *cannot* draw near. Yet . . .

3. At this mountain, God draws near (vv. 16-25)

Verse 16: **So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.**

Exodus 19 is a theophany, which is a big word for an appearance of the Lord Himself in the Scriptures. Some have said that *this* passage is the most vividly described theophany in all of Scripture.¹¹ The language is intended to underscore the intensity of the phenomena, a storm of cloud, lightning, and thunder.¹² And we know that this scene overwhelms because of how verse 16 ends: **all the people who were in the camp trembled**. Keep in mind that His drawing near is *not* out of nowhere, nor unexpected. In fact, they’ve prepared for three days. And yet they’re *still* fearful.

Also, bear in mind that this appearance, and their view of His glory, is actually shrouded. That’s the reason for the thick cloud.¹³ He’s manifested Himself to a certain degree, but He’s *not* done so fully.¹⁴ Which is *not* to say His glory was *ever* diminished, but that He accommodated Himself—clouded Himself—so that He might be among the Hebrews without also spelling their destruction.¹⁵

Nonetheless, though His glory is somewhat shrouded, they remain terrified. And yet, Moses brings them even *closer*. Verse 17: **And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.** Before this, they were camping in *front* of the mountain. Now they are at the *foot* of it, as close as they could get without touching it.

They’re *already* terrified. Then, verse 18: **Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently.**¹⁶

¹⁰ Motyer, 195.

¹¹ At least in prose. See Leonard, 139.

¹² Leonard, 124.

¹³ Back in verse 9 the Lord said He would *come* in a thick cloud. In verse 16 that’s what has happened.

¹⁴ Stuart, 426.

¹⁵ Motyer, 198.

¹⁶ Throughout the Old Testament, God’s presence is frequently represented by fire and cloud. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 382.

The Lord descends. And the smoke from His fire ascends. By the way, this is not contained to some small patch of Sinai. It says **Mount Sinai was all in smoke**. That phrase could be translated, literally: “As for Mount Sinai, smoke, all of it.”¹⁷ Smoke surrounds the mountain, proceeding from a fire into the clouds like a furnace. And the Hebrews, who were terrified in *front* of Sinai moments ago, are now at its foot. Also: Sinai shakes. This is what happens when God descends.

And yet, as we go on in Exodus, *this* is the God who will dwell with His people. If you’re wondering “how,” that’s a great question. It will be a lot of “this far, and no farther.” With priests, tabernacles, sacrifices, and meticulous instruction, the Hebrews will learn what it means to be blessed with the presence of God, and yet still breathe. Alec Motyer describes the big-picture of what’s to unfold in this way: “Exodus cannot be described simply as the book of the holiness of the Lord, nor simply as the book of the presence of the Lord, but as the book of the holy God present in all his holiness at the heart of his people’s life . . . who makes provision whereby they, in all their unworthiness, may live safely with him.”¹⁸ How can a holy God dwell in the midst of an unholy people? That’s a question Exodus seeks to answer.

But we’re not there yet. At this scene one might think it *couldn’t* get more intense. But it soon does. With fire and smoke *above*, and seismic tremors *below*, verse 19 goes on: **When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder**. The language indicates that God and Moses *kept* speaking to one another, over and over again.¹⁹ It wasn’t over quickly. In fact, the New Testament tells us that *this* sound was such that those who heard it begged that it would cease (Heb. 12:19). What they *see* overwhelms. So does what they *hear*.

Again, if we’re picturing the scene, be reminded that throughout this narrative there’s movement. The Hebrews had been called from in *front* of the mountain to its *foot*. Now, in verse 20, Moses is called by God to move from *on* the mountain to its peak. Verse 20: **The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up**. As Moses ascends to the summit, the scene escalates—again. And we might say the danger does as well. So, at the peak, the LORD warns Moses again. Verse 21: **Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Go down, warn the people, so that they do not break through to the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish.”**

That verse *seems* to warn those whose consecration might make them presume.²⁰ Verse 22 does something similar: **Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, or else the LORD will break out against them**. The washed clothes wouldn’t save. Nor would any sort of spiritual standing within the community.

Then, verses 23–25 restate the entirety of the matter. First, Moses tells the Lord he’s heard Him: **Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.’”** Moses seems to grasp the seriousness. But that doesn’t mean the LORD won’t say it one more time, almost in summary fashion. Verse 24: **Then the LORD said to him, “Go down and come up again, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, or He will break forth upon them.”**

If there’s something *added* in this final reiteration, it is the *active* role of Yahweh toward those who approach wrongly. Earlier in the chapter, to touch the mountain would lead to stoning by

¹⁷ Stuart, 430.

¹⁸ Motyer, 10.

¹⁹ Alexander, 383; Leonard, 130.

²⁰ Motyer, 199.

another in the community. But here, to break through and approach God would mean that He Himself would break forth upon them.

God drawing near doesn't make access *less* serious.

Conclusion

Everything in this scene points us to something vital about who God is. And if we consider it in reverse, we'd say that Sinai shows us the holiness of God, teaching us that humanity *cannot* approach or draw near however we'd like. That's *some* of what Sinai pictures for us.

But we also see that because they did *not* have access, someone must mediate for them. In this passage, in the up and down Sinai, Moses repeatedly pictures that reality. Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Not them.

And not *us*. The mountain shows us the need for a mediator. Moses gives us a shadow of Him.

And we say he's a shadow, because though Moses mediated for the Hebrews, though God invited him to draw near, he did so *only* as a man.²¹ However, that's on purpose. Because as a shadow, he points. As does this entire scene. It all points to when God would once again draw near. Again, He descends in glory, again, as holy. But *this* time He would be clothed in flesh, dwelling among us—God *and* man—so that *He* might mediate for us, the man Christ Jesus (John 1:14; 1 Tim. 2:5).

And because He mediates for us, Hebrews tells us that we **have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned." And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I am full of fear and trembling."** That's *not* the mountain we've come to.

Because the true and better Mediator does *more* than go where we cannot. When He ascends the hill of the Lord, He *brings* His sons and daughters with Him. Which is why the book of Hebrews can say we haven't come to Sinai, but instead **have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant** (Heb. 12:18–24).

At Sinai, the Hebrews cannot draw near. They *must* not.

But the book *of* Hebrews tells us of another mountain.

So that, instead of "this far, no farther," instead of bars and barriers, we've been given access by Another. And because of Him, we now hear, "Let us draw near" (Heb. 10:19-25).

²¹ That's right at the center of old covenant realities—human mediators, prophets speaking on behalf of God to humanity and priests representing humanity to God.