

Exodus 19 - The Presence of Yahweh

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever." When Moses told the words of the people to the Lord, the Lord said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and 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 you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman." On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. 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. And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest

they break through to the Lord to look and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them.” And Moses said to the Lord, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, ‘Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.’ ” And the Lord said to him, “Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them.” So Moses went down to the people and told them.

Exordium

Throughout the pages of Scripture, coming into the Lord’s presence is overwhelming, intense, and usually a terrifying experience. We will see this as we peer into this passage this morning.

The people will finally make it to Mount Sinai in our passage this morning. Yahweh has kept the promise He made to Moses in Exodus 3:12 that the people would serve or worship Him on this mountain. He has redeemed, delivered, and rescued them. The time has come for a covenant to be made between Yahweh and the people of Israel. He is their King, and they are His people.

Over the next 11 months and 20 days, the people of Israel will stay at Mount Sinai. This time is covered from Exodus 19 to Numbers 10:10. A total of 59 chapters of Scripture. The people will learn how to live in God’s presence and how God will dwell with them. Two foundational questions are answered in these 59 chapters: 1) How can a holy God dwell with an unholy people, and 2) How can an unholy people be in the presence of a holy God? God’s holiness is not something to take lightly, which is made clear in this passage. The mighty, forceful, powerful, glorious, and majestic presence of God descends upon Mount Sinai, and it is a spectacle to behold.

As we travel through these verses, we will see parallels between Yahweh, Moses, and the people of Israel, as well as between the Father, the Son, and us, His covenant children. This chapter has much to teach us about Christ as our Mediator, the holiness of God, and how we are to approach Him in worship. God dictates how we worship Him, and we must, through Christ, who is our prophet,

priest, and king, worship Him well.

My thesis for these verses is that entering the Lord's presence is terrifying, but for those in Christ, it inspires joyful worship.

Exodus 19:1-15 - Preparing to Meet Yahweh

It has been approximately 2 months since the people of Israel were freed from Egypt. We are given a summary that they were at Rephidim and are now encamped at the mountain of God. Moses is communicating with Yahweh, and he gets specific instructions on what will occur next. Moses, continually functioning as a prophet, will bring God's words back to the people.

As we come to Exodus 19:4-6, we will find that these verses are vibrant. They're so rich in revealing the nature of God and the nature of His people. Listen to Exodus 19:4 again, "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."

We notice that the call Yahweh gives is for the people to remember what they experienced in the Exodus. There is an experiential reality to us being redeemed, delivered, and saved. Are we not moved when we reflect on the grace of Christ? Don't tears sometimes fill our eyes as we meditate on the truth that Christ delivered us from the bondage of sin? Don't we become excited when we think that one day we will be with Christ forever because He saved us from eternal damnation? True salvation is more than a pursuit of intellectual truth. Redemption is much more than mere emotionalism that holds no water. We also must recognize that the experiential nature of salvation is rooted, not in us, but in Christ. Scripture testifies to this reality in Colossians 1:13-14:

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Shouldn't these verses cause our affections to be moved? Incredibly, God transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son. Just as Israel looked back to the Exodus event, so we look back to the work of Christ, enjoying the great gift of salvation.

If we go back to the text in Exodus 19:4, we see that God is the active agent in Israel's deliverance. "See what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings." Yahweh is clear, "I am the initiator of your salvation. You did not gain your freedom because you sought it. I, and I alone, am the divine orchestrator behind Egypt's defeat." Yahweh, in His grace, loved, freed, redeemed, rescued, and purchased these people. God authored their freedom. He brought them out on eagles' wings, revealing a safe and swift exit from Egypt.

When we think of our salvation, do we believe that we had any part in pursuing God? Scripture makes it very clear that no one pursues God on their own. Romans 3:9-12:

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

Who does Paul say seeks God? No one. Not a single person seeks God. This means that, like the people of Israel, God sought us out first. He pursued us. He redeemed us. He delivered us. We, by grace through faith, were saved. This is extremely important. We were unable to seek God in our sinful state. The Holy Spirit had to cause our hearts to become flesh before we could receive the Gospel by faith. God pursued us and initiated the work of salvation in our hearts. As 1 John 4:10 says:

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Our entire relationship with God is based upon the simple premise that He sought us out first. He safely and swiftly transferred us from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of His glorious Son. He did all the work. Furthermore, the plan of salvation was decreed in eternity past. The incarnation of the Son, His suffering, death, burial, and resurrection were always the plan. Christ on the cross was not "Plan B." God is the great initiator of the plan of salvation, and the initiator of our own salvation.

Imagine if someone were to ask you your favorite movie or book. Then they ask, "Could you summarize that movie for me in a sentence or two?" You'd give them a vast, general overview of the movie. That is what Exodus 19:5-6 is regarding the Law. Indeed, it does not cover all the details of the covenant at Sinai, but it does provide a snapshot overview and serves as an introduction to the Law. The preamble to the Sinai Covenant is the Lord putting forth the terms, "If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

Moses went down the mountain and gathered the elders together. He told them what Yahweh said. Most likely, the elders spoke these words to the people under their care. What was their answer? "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." The people give verbal consent to the covenant. As we already discussed, God initiated the covenant with these people. They did not dream this up on their own. They have committed to obeying God's voice and keeping His covenant. For those of us who know the Old Testament, we know that the people did a really, really bad job of keeping God's voice and obeying His covenant. God disciplines them over and over again. Israel is sent into exile, and then Judah is sent into exile. I think we can relate to them more than we'd like to admit. How often do we fail to keep the commands that the Lord has given us? How often do we fail in loving one another? How often do we fail to have our relationships shaped by the grace of God instead of selfish interests? Like them, our failings are constantly before us.

Yet, look at what God promises to His people. These people will be 1) His treasured possession among the nations, 2) A kingdom of priests, and 3) a holy nation. These people, a fledgling nation that has been oppressed for a long time, are now told by the God of the universe, "You are my people." Could you imagine? "The very God that just defeated the most powerful nation has said that we are His." The mercy, love, and grace of God did not stop after they were freed. He continues to pour love upon them, despite their wandering hearts.

Yahweh says, "You will be my treasured possession," or "prized people." Even though the Lord is the Creator over the entire earth, including every people

group, these people are His treasure. They will also be a “kingdom of priests to Him.” He will be their King, and as priests, they will show the world how He has caused them to be transformed by imitating Him. Finally, they are to be “a holy nation.” They are entirely set apart and different than the world that surrounds them.

Isn't it interesting that Peter quotes this same passage when describing the New Testament Church in 1 Peter 2:9:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession

This is who we are in Christ, brothers and sisters. We are a chosen race out of the nations. We are a royal priesthood, and every Christian is responsible to serve in the Kingdom of God. We are a holy nation entirely set apart for God and His purposes. Finally, we are His treasured people. We are His prized possession. These truths are for us today. How often do we have a lopsided view of who we are before God? Yes, we are sinners. We have indwelling sin that needs to be mortified. No doubt. Yet, we are also His prized possession. God's eye is upon us. He knows what we need when we need it. He looks upon us with favor through Christ. The Church is the Lord's holy nation. Let us be ever thankful that He has made us a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a treasured people for His possession.

The Lord promises that His presence will descend upon Mount Sinai. There will be a thick cloud, and the people will hear God when He speaks to Moses, and they may believe in Moses forever. As Moses is their prophet and mediator here, so Christ is the greater prophet and mediator for His people. Hebrews 1 makes it clear that God has spoken finally and fully through the Son, and we believe in Him forever.

The preparation for the meeting is simple: The people are called to consecrate themselves for two days, wash their garments, and refrain from sexual relations for three days. These instructions are given so that the people might be pure, ritually and ceremonially clean. Furthermore, no one or no thing shall touch the mountain when the Lord descends to meet with Moses. If they do, they shall die.

There are two realities in these verses that we need to see. First, the consecration addresses their purity in the eyes of God. No one who is unrighteous and unholy can come before the righteous and holy God. He demands holiness. He demands righteousness. So, the question is, how can we, an unholy and unrighteous people, come into the presence of our glorious God? The answer is Christ Jesus. To go before God and worship Him, we need the righteousness of Christ applied to us. Otherwise, we have no hope. Our hope in being declared innocent and able to worship in the Lord's presence is in Christ alone.

The second truth is that the people *prepared* to meet God. They did not come unprepared. How often do you spend preparing yourself for worship on Sunday mornings? Do we take time on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday preparing to meet with the living God? Do we meditate on the areas of our hearts that need refining before we enter into the presence of God? Do we contemplate and meditate on the truth that God, the Creator of the universe, is meeting with us right now?

There are multiple ways we prepare ourselves for the gathering. First, read and write the passage of Scripture that will be preached on numerous times during the week. Let the Word get into your mind and heart. Second, read the lyrics to the Sunday service that are in the digital bulletin that you receive every week in the newsletter. Third, purchase the Trinity Hymnal or the Trinity Psalter, and read and sing the hymns during the week. I often open these during the week and read them, allowing the hymns to encourage my soul. Fourth, pray for me as I prepare (I desperately need your prayers), and pray for your brothers and sisters as they prepare. Meeting with the living God is an incredible privilege we have every Sunday. Let us not take it for granted. Let us prepare ourselves individually as we, the church, prepare to meet corporately with the triune God.

Exodus 19:16-25 - The Meeting with Yahweh

The Lord now descends upon Mount Sinai, and it is a sight to behold. A thick cloud covers the mountain, and there is a deafening trumpet blast, and all the people tremble. This trembling indicates an intense emotional reaction to what is

happening. The people are fearful. This is a normal reaction when one comes into the presence of the all-powerful, all-glorious, and majestic God of the universe. In Joshua 5:14, Joshua falls to his face when coming into contact with the commander of the Lord's army, who is Christ preincarnate. In Ezekiel 1, Ezekiel falls on his face after seeing the glory of Yahweh. In the book of Revelation, John comes face-to-face with the ascended and glorified Jesus. What is his response? He falls at Jesus' feet as though he were dead. When people come into the presence of the Holy God, their response is to fall in humble submission and fear, and worship the Lord. The people of God have a reverent fear of the one who sustains the universe.

Sadly, I believe we have lost this concept in our worship in American Christianity. We have lost sight of the fact that when we come together as a church to worship the Lord, we are entering into the holy and awesome presence of the Almighty Lord. This is why the Puritans would call their church buildings "meeting houses." They were clear with their language; this is the location where we, as the bride of Christ, meet our Holy God corporately.

We've lost sight that our corporate times of worship are with the Holy God of the universe. How many people do we know who come on Sunday mornings or evenings with the goal of self-worship? They desire to feel better about themselves, or they wish to have their ears tickled by the service and sermon. Or dare we look inward at ourselves? How many times have we come into this sanctuary, treating the meeting with God as if we are going to Walmart or Lowe's? This is why we are called to prepare our hearts days in advance before coming to worship the Lord each Sunday. We are not the objects or subjects of worship. Only the Lord is the subject and object of worship each Sunday.

A few years ago, I heard a pastor tell his congregation that Sunday morning worship was like entering a locker room at halftime, where you receive the play from the playbook to live that week. I was stunned. He had made a parallel between the gathering of the saints in the presence of God to a locker room, and he, indirectly, referred to the Bible as a "playbook." I think somewhere along the line, we've grown far too casual in our approach to worshiping the Lord. Instead of realizing that we come into the sanctuary to glorify God through Christ Jesus

by the power of the Spirit, we can treat it like a fast-food restaurant. “This is BK, and I want it my way.” There is a powerful lesson to be learned in Exodus 19:6, when God meets with His people, it is not a casual experience. He dwells with us in holiness and power.

In Exodus 19:17, Moses brings the people out of their camp to the foot of the mountain. You can sense the tension in the text. A people who are terrified in their camp are now brought to the mountain where the Lord dwells. As they approached, their eyes would have seen the smoke and the fire descending from heaven. Furthermore, Mount Sinai itself is trembling. This is an incredible scene as the holiness and righteousness of Yahweh are on display—notice who brings them to Yahweh’s presence: Moses. They do not approach God in any way they think, want, or feel. Moses, as their mediator, is the one who brings them to their God.

Don’t we also need a mediator to approach the Lord? As Moses brings the people of Israel to Yahweh at Mount Sinai, Christ Jesus, as the true and better Mediator, brings all His people to God. Jesus is clear that He is the only way to the Father. John 14:6:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

The claim of Christ is exclusive: “There are no other ways to God except if one comes through Me.” Had it not been for Christ saving us, we would have no access to the Father. This means that there are dozens of thousands of people in Rockingham County who are unable to come to the Father. How many of our unsaved family members, friends, and neighbors believe that being a good person is good enough to gain favor with God? In these moments, we must have the courage to lovingly tell them that the only way in which God’s love applies to them is if they are in Christ, the true Mediator. They, like us, need Christ Jesus to bring them to Mount Zion into the very presence of God the Father. Christ brings us to the throne of grace and mercy.

As we return to the text, we see the tremendous power of God’s holiness and presence in Exodus 19:19-20. The trumpet grows louder and louder, Moses speaks, and God answers him in thunder. Wow, the power of God’s very voice.

As Psalm 29:3-9 states:

The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

The presence of God has come to Mount Sinai, and His voice thunders for all to hear. Yahweh calls Moses, and Moses ascends to the top of the mountain where he will meet with God. Moses will be the conduit between Yahweh and His people.

As Moses is meeting with Yahweh, Yahweh gives instructions for Moses to go back down the mountain to restate the seriousness of touching the mountain. If anyone comes through to look on the Lord, they will perish. The command is serious because Yahweh's holiness is not to be taken lightly. Also, the priests, those who are ordained to service, will be commanded to consecrate themselves. Moses' response is, "The people will not break through because they've already been told not to, and there is a barrier around the mountain." We do not know why the people are to be given this command again. It seems likely because they would forget, or intentionally transgress the previous command, after all they've been a disobedient people thus far. However, Yahweh reinforces the command and tells Moses to get Aaron. Aaron will join Moses at the top of the mountain. Moses goes down Mount Sinai and relays all these instructions to the people.

Closing

Do we take seriously that we have no standing before a holy God except by the blood of Jesus Christ? Also, do we realize that it brings Jesus joy to usher us into the Father's presence? As Hebrews 2:11 states,

For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is

not ashamed to call them brothers

Jesus is not ashamed to call you His brothers and sisters in the Father's presence. I can think of thousands of reasons why Jesus would be ashamed to call me His brother. I know my heart. I know my actions. I know my sinful thoughts. Yet, because Jesus saved me, I can worship the Lord in His presence, just as we have this morning.

As Hebrews 10:31 says,

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

However, we come joyfully to worship God in Christ Jesus. As we sing our closing hymn, let us do so with the understanding that we are in the presence of the Almighty God. Thanks be to Christ that we are in Him and that He joyfully and lovingly brings us to the Father.