

Life With God: Meeting God

Exodus 19:16-25

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 19. As we prepare to look at our text, the first thing that I want to remind you of is where we are. We are before the mountain of God. We're in the wilderness of Sinai and we are about to see God's covenant established and confirmed with His people. You cannot understand Exodus 20 rightly without understanding what God teaches in Exodus 19, because Exodus 19 provides the context and it provides the background to the commands that are made in Exodus 20 and indeed all the way to Exodus 24. If you do not understand the various themes stressed in Exodus 19, you will misunderstand the role of the law in the Christian life. You'll misunderstand the role of the law in salvation if you do not understand the backdrop of Exodus 19. That's the first thing that I want to say.

And following close on its heels, I want to remind you that as we looked at Exodus 19:1-6, we stressed that God's grace is the background for His giving of the law. The Lord Himself emphasizes again to Israel His redeeming work for Israel, before He gives them the law from His own lips in Exodus chapter 20. He does this in Exodus 19:1-6, especially in verses 4, 5 and 6 where He emphasizes that He has brought His children, He has brought his people out of Egypt on eagles' wings. They have contributed nothing to it. He did not say, "If you obey the commandment I'll bring you out of Egypt. If you live up to the standards of My covenant then I'll redeem you from the bondage of Egypt." He says, "Look I've already done it, I've already redeemed you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Indeed I have borne you here on eagles' wings. If it had been up to you, you would have turned back at the Red Sea. If it had been up to you, you would have turned back at Marrah. If it had been up to you, you never would have gotten here to Mount Sinai, but I did it Myself and you contributed nothing to it. Now, therefore here is My word, My command for you."

So the grace of God in redemption gives us the background and the framework whereby we can understand the use the use and the function of His law. His law is not the way in which His people are saved. His law is not a means which He gives to them whereby they may save themselves. It is the expression for how a people, conformed and transformed into the image of God by His grace, ought to

live in gratitude for His redemption. So, understanding Exodus 19 helps to understand Exodus chapter 20. This law is not given in the context of a tyrant-vassal relationship. It is given in the context of a redemptive relationship in which God is willing to share great and undeserved blessings with His people. His commands, themselves, are not merely the commands of a petty tyrant designed to increase His own coffers, His own status to do Him good at the expense of His people, but in fact, His commands simultaneously bring Him glory and do His people good. So, Exodus 19 gives us a backdrop whereby we can understand and also importantly not misunderstand the meaning of Exodus chapter 20.

Exodus chapter 19 also makes it clear that what is about to happen at Sinai is a covenant. We are about to witness a covenant-making ceremony. We've seen that before in the Old Testament. We've seen it in Genesis chapter 15 and chapter 17, but here for the first time God will enter into an explicit, open covenant relationship with an entire nation. He will ratify His promises to them in a covenant. There is no parallel for this in any world religion. There is no parallel for this in any near-Eastern religion. There is only one God in all of the world who has ever covenanted with His people, it is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of Hosts, the God of Israel. So this is a wonderful backdrop to the ten commands. This realization that we are about to engage in and see a covenant making ceremony.

Finally, notice in verses 14 and 15 of Exodus chapter 19 there is a stress on the people preparing themselves for this covenant making ceremony. They are to consecrate themselves to the Lord and prepare to come before Him. It is a serious thing to meet with God. So Moses gives the command for them to consecrate themselves in preparation for meeting with God and when we get to Exodus chapter 19, verses 16 to the end, finally the encounter with God comes. Remember friends, we have said it over and over, that the theme of the book of Exodus is that the people of God are saved to worship. Now we are coming to the culmination of that theme which we saw from the very beginning of this book. The children of Israel are brought out of Egypt in order that they might worship God. Here in Exodus 19, beginning in verse 16, they begin a meeting before God that was going to last for eleven months. Let's hear God's word.

"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. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 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. When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. And 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. Then the Lord spoke to Moses, "Go down, warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to gaze, and many of

them perish. And 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 Thou didst warn us, saying, 'Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.'" 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, lest He break forth upon them." So Moses went down to the people and told them."

In this great passage, God speaks to us of many things, but I want to focus on three of them. He speaks to us here of His awesomeness. In verses 16 through 19, you get this incredible description of this cosmic pyrotechnic display that God is putting on at Sinai, and the purpose of that display is to stress the awesomeness of the presence of God. In verses 20 through 25, looked at from one angle, you see God once again putting His stamp of approval on Moses as the leader of His people and as the mediator of God and His people of Israel. God emphasizing to the people the authority that Moses bears so that they might follow Him. From another angle, verses 20 through 25 emphasize for us the impossibility of having fellowship from God apart from a mediator. I want to consider those three things with you today.

I. In a day of general irreverence toward God, we ought to fear Him.

First look at verses 16 through 19. Here we see God's awesomeness revealed in this tremendous display at Sinai. And this is something that we need to recapture as a church. We live in a day and age of general irreverence in the church for God. Let's leave the pagans alone for a few minutes and let's pick on the church. The problem of irreverence in our day and time is primarily a problem in the church. The church is casual about God. The church is often irreverent in the way she approaches God and in the way she carries out His commission, and one of the things that this passage makes crystal clear is that this is not a God you want to be irreverent with. This is a God who is to be feared. That is, One who is to be held in awe and reverence and respect and before whom we ought to humble ourselves and be grateful for His grace and mercy to us.

We're greeted in verses 16 through 19 with a scene that very much looks like a combination of the eruption of a volcano and a colossal thunderstorm on the plains. Now we know something about thunderstorms here in Jackson. We have some doozies. I remember when I first moved to Jackson and kept seeing people with weather radios and I said to myself, "Why do we have weather radios?" After tornado season and thunderstorm season, I didn't ask that question again. We have as many tornados in Mississippi as they do in Kansas, but you've never been in a thunderstorm unless you have been in a thunderstorm on the plains. There is no place to go, it's absolutely un-harnessed. Here we are seeing the combination of what looks like a volcanic eruption and a mighty thunderstorm at the same time.

Let me stop and say, don't try to find some naturalistic explanation for what's going on here. Doesn't it drive you crazy when commentators do that? That's not Moses' point. Moses is not asking you to go back and come up with a national weather service meteorological explanation of what happened here. The point is that God is directly revealing Himself. He's manifesting Himself to His people. His power is being revealed in these natural phenomena over which He is sovereign and in control. It is an illustrious manifestation of God's power and presence that we are seeing here and look at the elements of it.

Look at verses 16 through 18. Thunder and lightning. Peals of thunder and lightning explode in the sky above the mountain. You know that in the Old Testament, and even in the New, that God manifested His presence to His people with a display of thunder and lightning. Here it is at the mountain. Verse 16 again. Thick clouds descend upon the top of Mt. Sinai. This is the cloud of glory. This is God's manifestation, this is the Shekinah glory, the glory cloud of God. It signifies His presence. The Hebrews knew that God was not locally confined to Mt. Sinai. They knew that He was not just the God of the clouds as if He were in the clouds. He was the God over the clouds. When God manifested Himself in the storm, in the fire, in the cloud, Hebrews knew He was not some sort of pantheistic deity who is sort of the god of trees, the god of the water, the god of the fish, the god of the sun. He's the God over all those things. All these naturalistic phenomena are designed to emphasize His sovereignty.

We're told in verse 16, and also at the end of the verse, and also at the beginning of verse 19, thirdly that there is a loud trumpet. This is the ram's horn, the shofar, that was used to announce the arrival of the King. It grows and louder. You might translate that it comes more frequently and frequently. Either way, the idea is that the King is drawing near. This is like a mighty royal procession, regally making its way through the skies of the desert to descend upon Mt. Sinai. This is the Lord drawing near to His people. His people would have understood the significance of that horn sounding.

In verse 18, if you look at the beginning of that verse, smoke and fire are mentioned as one of the manifestations. The smoke is ascending like a furnace, we are told. You have this picture of this gigantic fireplace, belching smoke into the air, thousands of feet above Mt. Sinai. I wonder what Steven Spielberg could do with that scene?

It's an incredible scene, but do you remember the last time that God manifested Himself to His people like this in the books of Moses? It was in Genesis 19, at Sodom and Gomorrah, the last time He manifested Himself in the form of the fire and in the form of the smoke and in the form of the furnace. Genesis 19:28 was the last time when God had revealed Himself with this kind of phenomena, and it was a sign of judgment. Now think of it here. Here is God preparing to enter into covenant with His people, and He comes not only with a sign of power and a sign

of presence, but with a sign of judgment.

In verse 18 we are told that the mountain itself quaked like a volcanic eruption, an earthquake. The natural order is quailing under the weight of the presence of the Almighty. The Almighty has made this mountain to be the tabernacle of His presence, the holy of holies, and the physical structure of the mountain quails under His presence. No wonder we're told that the response of God's people in this scene is to tremble. Wouldn't you have trembled, had you been there? And the purpose of this display, my friends, is to declare the presence of the Lord. To prepare the way for the sermon that God is going to deliver with His own lips, to provide the context for this covenant making ceremony which is going to come in Exodus 20 to 24, and to remind the people what's involved in meeting with God.

Do you realize, friends, that never before and never after did God manifest Himself to the gathered assembly of His people with such a spectacular display as this. Do you realize that never before had there been a manifestation on this order to God's people? Do you realize that never in the ministry of Joshua, never in the ministry of the Judges, never in the times of the kings and the prophets, never in Isaiah's time or Ezekiel's time or Jeremiah's time, or in Malachi's time, or in Paul's time, or Peter's time, or John's time, or James' time, or in Jesus' time, did God ever manifest Himself like He manifested Himself here? There has never been a physical display in the history of God's redemption like this one. There never will be until the Lord Jesus comes again in power and in glory. I want you to understand that God is putting the exclamation point on this because the sermon that He is about to preach, beginning in Exodus chapter 20, is something that He wants to get through to us.

Matthew Henry says, " never was there such a sermon preached before or since as this which was preached here to the church in the wilderness. God Himself was the preacher. His pulpit, or rather His throne was Mt. Sinai." Matthew Henry is exactly right, although I would remind you that there is a reason why Matthew records for you the fact that Jesus delivers His great sermon in Matthew chapter 5, 6, and 7 from the mountain side. You understand the nature of Jesus' claim by that proximity, by that locality. It is certainly true that God Himself is going to be the preacher, and the events in Exodus 19 are to prepare us for the significance for what's going to happen in Exodus 20. It's as if God is saying, 'what is about to happen is very important. I don't want you to miss this,' so we get this incredible sermon introduction like unto no sermon introduction you have ever heard.

Within all that is there not a lesson that our God is a consuming fire, that He is almighty, that He is King, that He is judge, that we ought to fear Him? God is teaching us that He is an awesome God and therefore drawing near to Him is an awesome thing. One great prophet of our age, John Piper, the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, has I think put his finger on one great problem in the church today, and that is, 'that man the creature is big in the church and God the Creator is small.' What we think is important in the

church, what we want done in the church is important, not what God thinks, not what God wants, not what God says. We come to the church saying, 'how will our needs be met?' We come to the church saying, 'how will these services be fulfilled, and if you don't do them the way I want, I'll pack my bags and go somewhere else.' Man, the creature is big, and God the Creator is small and it is as if God is saying, 'I want to make sure that the Israelite never, ever, ever make that mistake.'

It is a perennially important issue for the church today to realize that God is big. Not just because He appears to be big, or wants to make Himself to appear to be big as if He's the wizard of Oz saying, "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain." He is big. That's why He ought to be big in the church. He is big. Have we acknowledged that in the way that we live? Our God is awesome and in a day of general irreverence towards Him. We ought to fear Him. That's the first thing we learn from this great passage.

II. Moses is your mediator and he's a walking/talking Bible, obey him.

The second thing is this. Look at verses 20 through 25. I want to look at these verses from two perspectives. These verses put God's imprimatur on Moses' authority. You remember the children of Israel hadn't been much on following Moses from time to time. From the time that He announced Himself to them way back in Exodus to very recently, in fact within weeks of this event, the children of God had been fairly resistive in following Moses, but Moses was God's hand picked man. Moses was the mediator between God and His people and between His people and God, and his position was vital. God wanted him to be honored.

Look at verses 20 through 25 and see how God does that. Actually, let me ask you to sneak back and take a peak at verse 17 to begin with. Notice, it's Moses who leads the people out, verse 17, then skip down to verse 19, it's Moses who speaks to God and God answers him. They are in the middle of this tremendous display at Sinai and suddenly Moses speaks to God and God answers him. Boy, that gives you some clout. Then you go on down and you look at verse 20 and it's Moses who's called by the Lord to come up the mountain, even though no one else can. Aaron goes along because he is the mouthpiece of Moses, but it's Moses who is called up the mountain. It's the Lord speaking to Moses, and giving Moses instructions to deliver, and in verses 23 and 24, Moses and the Lord engage in a conversation. In verse 25, Moses delivers God's message to the people. This would have been incredibly impressive in the eyes of the people. The people are trembling because of this display of the presence of the Lord and Moses is just going and coming. He's heading up that mountain, he comes back down the mountain, he head up the mountain, he comes back the mountain. They are told, 'set foot on the mountain, you die.' Moses goes up, Moses comes down, Moses goes up, Moses talked with God, God talked with Moses, he comes back down. This is an imprimatur on the authority that God has given to Moses.

It's as if God is saying, 'Moses is your mediator. He is a walking, talking, living, breathing, Bible, listen to him. Because when he speaks, I speak. Don't try and discount his authority without thinking he's going to discount My authority.' My friends, that was needed because the people had been rebelling against Moses.

You know, Derek has been preaching through Joshua with us, and one of the passages in Joshua 1:17 always strikes me as a bit humorous. It's not meant to be humorous, but it always strikes me a bit humorous when a group of Israelites say to Joshua in Joshua 1:17, "Joshua, just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we're going to obey you." I always thought that if I were Joshua, I'd say, "can I have another clause added onto that? Can I get my lawyer to come in here and just work out something where you would say you'd do a little bit better than you did for Moses?" The children of Israel didn't have a very good track record with Moses, but God is giving them every reason to listen to him here. He's the one man who can come and go and not be killed. He's the mediator. You need him, you need to listen to him.

Of course, in the original context what they needed to learn was to listen to the authority of Moses, but doesn't this say something to us about the authority of God's revelation? Moses was just a vehicle of revelation. His words, they were God's words. Yet, there are people today who want to make a division between God and His word. And they want to say, "I follow God, but I don't follow His word." God is saying, "no my word from Moses or from Elishah, or from Isaiah, or from Jesus, or from Paul, or from Peter, or from John is just as is I had spoken it to you with my own lips," if I can speak that way about the one true God. So God is teaching us here the authority of Moses, and the authority of revelation, the important of us listening to that , not picking and choosing. Well I want to listen to this Moses. said, but not that.

III. It is impossible to enter into covenant with God without a mediator.

From another perspective, verses 20 through 25 teach us a third truth, especially verses 21 and 22. Just zero in on verses 21 and 22 for just a minute. Here, in the midst of making preparations for this covenant ceremony we learn that it is impossible to enter into covenant with God without a mediator. I want to say this reverently, my friends, but do these instructions that God gives to Moses, "Moses, tell the people not to break through and come to the mountains," do those instructions strike you as a little strange? My friends, God here announces the most unnecessary set of instructions ever given to the history of mankind.

Now think with me here. It would not have entered into my mind to go on to Mt. Sinai. Volcano, fire, smoke, earthquake, shaking, cloud , death. It's not in my mind. I'm not going anywhere near that thing. In fact, you'd have to hold on to me to keep me from going back to the camp. Yet God says, "make sure and go down and tell the people not to come to this mountain." You don't have to tell me that.

Lord, I'm not coming there. Why is God giving this instruction? Well, we answered that in part last time when we said that when God inhabited, as it were, with His presence, Mt. Sinai became the tabernacle, the holy of holies, into which only the mediator could enter.

Ah, but secondly, you see, there is the point; only the mediator could enter. Notice what happens here, the people are told, 'don't touch the mountain.' The priests are told, look at verse 22, the priests are told, 'don't touch the mountain.' Now, look, I know for you Bible scholars, you know that the priests hadn't been appointed yet and you're wondering, what priests? Here is my answer, "I don't know." Maybe these are the elders who would have had priestly functions in Israel at this time. Maybe these are heads of families who would have had priestly functions at the time of the patriarchs. I don't know though. Here's the point: "Not even people consecrated to serve Me are to touch this mountain, only you Moses." Why?

Because God wants to drive home this point, the only way to come into My presence without judgment is by a mediator. A mediator, not appointed by you, but appointed by Me. This unnecessary set of instructions are the most necessary set of instructions ever given because we always come up with ways to introduce ourselves into the presence of God on our own terms rather than trusting in His mediator, and God is saying, 'if you do that, I will fry you.' Can I say it that way? 'If you do that, I will fry you.' What does He say, 'I will break out against you. I'll break out against the priests, I'll break out against the people, I will break out against you.' Because it is natural for man to dictate his own way to God. It's kind of like, 'God I'll get around Y and I'll do it on my own terms.' God says, 'no one comes on his own terms with Me. You only come in relationship to My appointed mediator.'

Still today, there are people who say, I can find my way into God's presence and blessings apart from Jesus. I'll be good. I'll keep the ten commandments, I'll keep the golden rule, I'll give lots of money, I'll come to church, I'll do it my own way and He'll accept me. They are saying, 'Lord on my own terms I can come in Your presence and not be judged and God is saying in Exodus 19: 16 through 25, 'come that way and I will break out against you.'

Now, on the other hand the liberals are saying, "I don't even have to worry about that. God's not like that. He's nice. He likes everybody. Anybody can come into His presence anytime they want to, no qualifications. He's nice." God is saying, "I'm the almighty God of thunder, and cloud and fire, and no one comes into My presence apart from the mediator that I have appointed." It is absolutely impossible to draw near to God or enter into covenant with Him without judgment apart from His mediator.

You know, there are a lot of people who will say, "That's Old Testament religion," and "That's not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" Let me give you a

quote from Jesus, "No one comes to the Father but by Me." That's Jesus' religion, my friends. "No one comes to the Heavenly Father by by Me." The reason we come safely is because He has born the judgment that we deserve in order that we might be brought right into the presence of our almighty, all powerful, and righteous, and just and loving and gracious and compassionate heavenly Father. The very first lesson of the fear of God is to acknowledge that we can't know Him and we can't fellowship Him apart from His mediator.

Having learned that lesson, the grand comfort of the fear of God is that once we fear Him, there is absolutely nothing else left to fear. If you have stood before the anger of this display at Sinai and you have been ushered in behind the veil through Jesus the mediator, what else exactly is there out there left to be afraid of? If that consuming fire has now been reconciled to you through Jesus Christ, who or what, could possible cause you to tremble? That's the word that Moses has for you, and that's the word that Jesus has for you today. It's your business to cling to Him by faith. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we acknowledge You to be the one true God, almighty and power, deserving of reverence and awe and respect. Grant by Your Holy Spirit that we might so fear You, that we would trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation as He is offered in the gospel and walk with You in delight because of Him both now and forever more. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

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