

Life With God: Preparation for a Divine Encounter

Exodus 19:7-15

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 19. We are before the mountain of God in the wilderness of Sinai and the Lord has already spoken words to Moses. Words which He intended for the people. Words of grace and responsibility. What we are witnessing, when we are looking at Exodus 19, is a covenant making ceremony. It is the ritual in connection with the establishment or confirmation of a covenant between God and His people.

It is vital to understand Exodus 19 so that you don't misunderstand Exodus 20. You can even say more than that. It's vital to understand Exodus 19 less you misunderstand the whole purpose of Exodus 20 through 24. Exodus 20 gives us the summarization of God's law, especially in the Ten Commandments. Exodus 21 through 24 gives the elaboration on that law, especially with regard to neighbor love. It is possible to go to those commandments and think, "Ah ha, this is how God is telling you how you can be saved. This is how God is telling you how you can be found exceptional in His sight. This is how God is telling you to be able to be declared righteous and accepted by Him and justified." But if you don't understand Exodus 19 you'll never think that about Exodus 20.

So, as we begin a series in which we are going to work through the Ten Commandments it is vital for us to understand the grace foundations of God's law in order that we might appreciate the correct role, the appropriate role, of God's law in the Christian life. I'm not primarily interested in doing a historical study of what this may have meant for Israel, as interesting and appropriate as that might be in some settings. I'm primarily interested how this word, this great passage, comes to bear on us as believers, as new covenant believers, in this day and age.

Now, that having been said, I'd like to say two more words of introduction. One, about what we have already looked at in Exodus 19 verses 1 through 6 and then one about something that we are going to look at. First, I want to make this comment. In Exodus 19, look especially at verses 3 and 4 then allow your eyes to fall on verses 5 and 6. Moses is given words from God, which contain both grace and promises, and calls to obedience and responsibility. So, in the words

that Moses has already been given to speak to the people, we see words of grace and words of responsibility, words of promise and words about obedience. In other words, in this relationship, which is being established between God and Israel, we see that God's grace is the foundation of that relationship, but that that relationship itself will have as a part of it our response of obedience. Obedience is not the way we get the grace of the relationship, but it is the expression that we have gotten the grace of the relationship. So understanding that grace and obedience are not competitors in the relationship that one has with God is vitally important. Obedience is not the way we get His grace, but it is the expression that we have received His grace and here, isn't it interesting, that in this word, this declaration that God makes to the children of Israel here in Exodus 19:3 through 6 that both His grace and our responsibility are emphasized. We might expect both of those elements to be present in any healthy relationship between God's people and God. That's one thing that I want you to be mindful of.

The second thing that I want you to be mindful of is the language of verses 5 and 6 and what they don't mean. The language there is "if" and "then" language. There are a variety of reasons why God chooses to use that kind of language with Moses. It's clear that if/then doesn't mean, if you're obedient, then I'll redeem you out of Egypt because they are already out of Egypt. So that can't be what if/then means. If you'll obey my commands, then I'll redeem you out of Egypt. They are already out of Egypt, but why is Moses using this kind of language? If you keep my word, then you will be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a peculiar, a chosen, a special and elect people to me.

Why the if/then language? Why the language of conditionality? There are a lot of legitimate answers to that. One is, of course, as will be stressed throughout the first five books of the Bible; blessing always comes in the way of obedience. What does sin promise you? Sin says disobey and you'll get what you want, and God says to you, obey and you'll find blessing. But if you disobey, not only will the laws of diminishing returns impact what you get, but you'll also find out that what you wanted really wasn't what you needed. So, the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, the instruction of God there in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy will emphasize over and over that if you want to live the life of blessing, then live in the way of God's commands. That is one reason we see this if/then language, but that can't be the whole answer. What's another reason?

Well, another reason we see is that "if you keep these commands then I will bless you" is to emphasize the role of God's command. What will be the great distinctive of God's dealings with His people in the days of Moses? The giving of the law. That's the great emphasis. The revelation of God's law at Sinai. We've already said last week, for eleven months these people will be parked in front of Sinai receiving the law of God, dwelling on it, meditating on it. They will see the very tablets of stone first written by God's hand then rewritten by Moses handed out and discussed and the elaboration on those commandments given through

the mouth of Moses. The great emphasis of the era of God's dealing with His people in the time of Moses is the written, verbal revelation of His command. It doesn't mean that He has never had commands before. It doesn't even mean that His people didn't have an inkling of what His commands were before this. But it means that His commands as the very hallmark of a life of trust are emphasized in this great passage. So the if/then language of verses 5 and 6 reflects that without in anyway suggesting that salvation was by works. For if you understand the covenant of Exodus 19 and read Exodus 20 in it's light, you will never buy into the idea that the religion of Moses was a religion of salvation by works. No, it was salvation by grace, though the law was emphasized consistently because the great distinctive of this era of God's dealings was His verbal, written revelation of the law, but we'll get to that later.

Let's hear God's word here in Exodus 19, beginning in 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. And all the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD. And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I shall come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear what I speak with you, and may also believe in your forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD. 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 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. No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live. When the ram's horn 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."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired and inerrant word. May He as His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord, bless us as we consider Your word, that we might trust and obey in Jesus name. Amen.

This passage breaks into three parts fairly easily. If you look at verses 7 through 9, you will see somewhat of a description of this covenant ritual that is being made between God and His people with Moses as the mediator. First reporting God's words to the people, then the peoples' words to God. Then in verses 10 through 13, you find this instruction of God to the people about how they are to

prepare themselves to meet with Him. They are to consecrate themselves and even that message, that instruction for consecration has three parts in it. Then, finally, in verses 14 and 15 you see Moses carry out those instructions for sanctification. I want to concentrate on the first two sections of this passage, and I want you to see two or three great truths even from these sections. In verses 7 through 9, I want you to see that covenant of grace must be embraced. In verses 10 through 13, I want you to see that it's serious business having a relationship with God. Then again in verses 10 and 13, though this is often reiterated in verses 14 and 15, I want you to see one reason that we, as new covenant believers, have it better because we have a better mediator than the children of Israel did at Sinai. Those three things I'd like you to consider with me for a few moments.

I. God's covenant must be embraced by faith.

First let's look at verses 7 through 9. In that section, we are seeing the covenant confirmed between God and His people through Moses the mediator. There are some strange things here. It's not strange for us to hear God tell Moses to go tell the people His words. To this point God has not spoken directly to His people. In Exodus chapter 20, God is going to speak directly to the people and something very interesting is going to happen, but I'm not going to tell you yet. We'll get there eventually. Something very interesting is going to happen when God speaks directly. Nothing is strange about God saying, "Moses, go tell the people what I said." You know what is interesting? Look at the end of verses 8 and 9. We're told there that Moses goes back up the mountain and tells God what the people said to His promises, what the people said to His offer of this covenant of grace. Now, if you're like me you are scratching your head and you're saying, "Why is Moses going back up the mountain to tell God, who knows everything, what the people said?" Not because God needs a human to tell Him what the people said. What we are seeing enacted is covenant ritual where the representative of one party goes to the other party and says, "Here are the conditions of the covenant, here are the promises of the covenant, here are the stipulations of the covenant." And then a representative of the other party comes back to the one who has offered the covenant and says, "Well they agreed to those conditions. They agree with those requirements." But interestingly Moses is the one mediator for both parties appointed by God.

Notice in verse 8 that the people respond to God's gracious offer of this covenant by saying, "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do." If you're like me you're also thinking, "Wait a minute, you haven't heard Exodus 20 yet." It would be easy to criticize the children of Israel for being a bit too hasty to say that they were going to be able to do all this. I understand the legitimacy of this, but the thing I want to emphasize is this, the children of Israel had to embrace this covenant. This was God's purpose, for them to embrace willingly His covenant. God offers His covenant, He makes promises, He offers blessings, but that covenant must be

embraced. The children of Israel had to embrace this covenant by faith. They had to acknowledge God's lordship, and they had to trust in His blessing, the promises that He had made to them in this covenant. So, when the children of Israel say, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do," among other things, they are confirming that they corporately embrace the blessing and the promises and the favors of this covenant that God has offered to them. They trust in Him, they acknowledge Him to be who He says He is, and they acknowledge Him to be their God. They are embracing the covenant.

That is not something that has passed away in the days of the old covenant. Today, in order to have a vital saving relationship with God you still have to embrace the covenant. You know, there are all sorts of people who you're friends with, who believe that God exists. They may believe that He is a God of love and of mercy and of compassion. They may even believe some of the things that the Bible says about Him, but they have never embraced Him. There are a lot of ministers who say that the gospel is to go out and tell people that they are already saved, that they are already in a grace relationship with God. Notice here that Moses is emphasizing in this very passage that even when God is offering grace, it must be embraced. The way the children of Israel do that is, fundamentally, by faith. They acknowledge God to be the Lord and they trust in His promise. The obedience flows from that, but fundamentally they embrace Him as Lord and they trust in His promise. The covenant must be embraced.

I want to pause right now and say, it's a wonderful thing to come to the Lord's house and hear about God, Lord's day after Lord's day after Lord's Day. It would be a terrible thing to do that and never to have embraced the promises that are set forth by Him and about Him in His word and in the preaching. If you want to know God savingly and eternally, you must embrace His promises by faith. It's not enough to know about them, it's not enough to know about Him, but you must embrace the promises of Him as your Lord. Trust in Him.

Of course, for those of us who live in this age, which is the end of the ages, the time after the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, that means trusting in Jesus Christ alone for salvation as He is offered in the gospel. God's grace as offered demands a human response. That human response is an embrace of the promises and that happens by faith. If you want to know Him and enjoy Him forever, you must embrace Him, you must trust Him. That truth is as true now as it was in Exodus 19. That's the first thing I want you to see. God's grace covenant has to be embraced and it has to be embraced by faith.

II. Communing with God is serious business

Second thing is this. Look at verses 10 through 13. Here God says, now I am going to come and meet you Moses and not just you, I've been meeting with you, but I'm going to meet My people. I'm coming for a visit. I'm moving into your

neighborhood and in preparation for My coming, the people need to consecrate themselves. In verses 10 through 13, He tells us at least three ways, and we could probably count four, but at least three ways that the people of Israel are to consecrate themselves. To consecrate means to be set apart to the Lord especially for Him and for His service and God specifies three ways at least in which they are to consecrate themselves. Look at verses 10 through 13.

First, in verse 10, end of the verse, they are to wash their garments. Second, they are to be ready for the third day. Thirdly, bounds are to be set around, not the people, but around the mountain. What's going on there? They are to wash their garments. What do you think the symbolism is? It's not just that they need to be clean and tidy, you know, like your mother scrubbed you up real good before Aunt Zelda came to visit. There is something of greater significance here. God is holy, the people are not. God is clean, they are not. They need to be clean before the Lord in order to come into His presence, and the washing of the garments reminds us of that truth. That is a truth that Moses is going to elaborate ad infinitum in the next three books of the Old Testament. To dwell in the presence of the Lord, you must be clean, you must be holy, so the garments must be washed. It's a physical reminder of a spiritual truth. Clean up.

Secondly, be ready. There is a three-day wait involved. God says, I'm coming, but I'm not coming for another three days. Now that enables them to have time for preparation, but it also gives them time for reflection about what it is to have the Lord come visit you. I would warrant that there was some nervousness amongst Israel in those days waiting for the Lord to come meet them. Among other things, it required them to be focused upon the Lord. You notice in verse 15 that Moses says that during that time there are to be no conjugal relations? Why? Because conjugal relations are sinful? No, because their focus is to be holy upon the Lord. Marital relations are wonderful and beautiful and godly, but the children of Israel are to be wholly focused on the Lord for three days.

Finally, bounds are set around the mountain. Why again? The mountain, you remember, my friends, is going to become a tabernacle. There was no hand built tabernacle at this time. The mountain of Sinai is going to become the tabernacle. God is going to indwell it. Under the laws of the tabernacle, who could enter into the holy of holies? Only the priest, only the mediator appointed by God, and him only once a year. Otherwise you go in and you die. The same thing for Sinai. What's the point? God is holy, we are not. It's an awesome thing to commune with the living God. Over and over and these laws of consecration are being emphasized. It's a serious thing, it's serious business to commune with God.

I want to put to you, my friends, that that is a very important lesson for the Christian Church. We live in a day and age where professing Christians deal flippantly with God. We're casual about our relationship with God. I hesitated whether I should even share the illustration, but I remember it so vividly, I've never been able to wholly get it out of my mind. I remember going to a Greek

drive in to have cheeseburgers with a dear friend in college who was preparing for the ministry. He is a minister in another denomination now. I remember sitting down over those jumbo cheeseburger plates and saying to him, "David why don't you pray for us." And here went the prayer, "Yo God, slap some blessing on these cheeseburgers." You see why I hesitated to share it. I've never heard anything more baldy flippant in relationship with God, thank heavens. But frankly, that type of casual attitude towards God pervades the church today. God is reminding us here in Exodus 19 verses 10 through 13 that communing with God is serious business and it's no less serious in the glorious days of the new covenant in which we dwell than it was in Sinai.

III. The great difference between Sinai and Zion is the Mediator.

Now let me prove that to you. Turn in your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 12 verses 18 and following. By the way, this is going to get us to our third point. The first thing I want to emphasize is this, you must trust. You must trust, you must by faith embrace God's covenant grace. Secondly communing with God is serious business. God is sovereign, He's almighty, He's not to be monkeyed with. Thirdly, the way, the difference, the great difference between Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion is not that God was awesome then and He's not awesome now. Not that the scene is fearful then and it's not fearful now. The great difference between Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion is the mediator. Look at what the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 12:18, "For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire and to darkness and gloom and world wind and to the blast of a trumpet and to the sound of words that sound with such that those who heard begged that no further word to be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command if even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned." So terrible is the sight that Moses said, I am full of fear and trembling. "You have come to Mt. Zion in to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first born who are enrolled in Heaven, unto the judge and to God, the judge of all and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect."

Stop there for a second. You see, the scene is no less awesome. It's not that at Mt. Zion there is less to be in awe of. What happens in the Bible when angels come to visit people? One angel appears and suddenly there is abject fear and the angel always has to say, "Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you." Here, you're told you are going to be in the midst of myriads of angels. It's going to be an awesome sight. What's the difference? Not because God is less awesome, not because it's a less awesome thing to enter into the presence of God and Mt. Zion. What's the difference? Verse 24, "and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood which speaks better than the blood of Abraham." See there is the difference. The difference between Sinai and Zion is that now you have been, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, united to the Mediator. The mediator is no longer a man of great admiration and loyalty and godliness

who is still yet a sinner. The Mediator is the God-man Jesus Christ, perfect in holiness, power, love, and purity. You are united to Him and where as, in the old covenant, only the mediator went alone to the tabernacle or to the mountain and the people watched and waited, in the new covenant because we're united to the Mediator, we go within veil with Him. The veil is awesome, Mt. Zion is awesome, the myriads of angels are awesome. God the judge is awesome, but we go boldly because we are united to the Mediator.

Have you trusted in the mediator, who can take you into the presence of God and you will not be consumed? That's what Moses is reminding you to do as we read this Old Testament passage with New Covenant eyes. He's reminding you that it's serious business to commune with the living God and He can't be taken flippantly and you've got to embrace His covenant.

How do you embrace it? You embrace it by trusting the mediator, Jesus. When you do, you find that the blessings of the covenant grace are so much yours that you can enter into the presence of the living God and see Him face to face and fear not being consumed. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, teach us to trust and obey from grace. In Jesus name. Amen.

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