

Meeting God At The Mountain

Exodus 19:1-25

Series: Book of Exodus [#13]

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Introduction

A news headline a few days ago read: *Two-for-one wedding, baptism special*. If you just glance at the headline you may be a bit confused. If you go on, the article begins by telling us that the Church of England is offering couples a two-for-one service—marriage for them and baptisms for their children. Even with this added information you may be still be a bit confused. There's more. Forty-four percent of children in Britain are born to unmarried women, and the church states it's research found that one in five couples seeking a church wedding already had children. So, it is *adapting to the times*.¹ Whatever you think about that, my point this morning is simply that a casual reading of things can sometimes leave us confused.

Exodus 19 can be like that. Unless we have a good perspective of how this chapter fits into the flow of the book, we might scratch our heads and wonder what is going on, and not understand its significance. Exodus 19 begins the record of Israel *Meeting God At The Mountain*. That much is fairly clear. But, again, the rest may not be so clear. So let's begin by...

Getting Our Bearings.

We can start by taking an overview look at the events. Last week in chapter 18 we saw Israel camped in the wilderness or plain by Mt. Sinai. The opening of chapter 19 dates this for us, three months after they left Egypt. In verse 3 Moses makes the first of a number of trips up the mountain to meet with God. There God layed out the terms of His covenant with Israel. Moses returned down to the camp and told the elders, who then conveyed it to all the people. The response was unanimous. Verse 8, "All the people answered together and said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do!'" Moses returned to the mountain and reported this to God. God told Moses that in three days He was going to come in a thick cloud and speak to Moses in a way the people could hear, so that they would believe he is God's chosen leader. Moses went back down and reported this to the people.

Then, at verse 10, God tells Moses (either on his next hike up the mountain or in the previous one) that he is to consecrate the people. They had to be personally, spiritually prepared for this meeting. God set out the conditions of being personally prepared and not going up the mountain, which Moses relayed to the people when he returned.

When the third day came, the shock and awe display of God's presence began with clouds, fire, smoke, lightning, thunder and violent shaking. Then there was a frightening loud blast and, finally, God spoke. *It was terrifying!* In the midst of this Moses made his way up the mountain and back to again receive and repeat God's warnings. And then once again he went up to God and came back with more instructions.

It is after these things that chapter 20 opens with God speaking, starting with the ten commandments. This was a most dramatic, terrifying and confusing day.

A very reasonable question is “What’s going on here?” To begin answering this question, let’s look at God’s premise for what He is doing. There are two things that form the basis for what God is doing here. The first is His sovereignty. God is the one and only God who is supreme above all of His creation. He has no equals. So, as Psalm 115 tells us, “He does whatever He pleases” (verse 3). Thankfully, God is always true to His perfect, holy, loving and righteous character.

Note some evidences of His sovereignty in this chapter.

- In verse 3 He called Moses to meet with Him, and told him “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel.” There was no discussion. He was to deliver a message that God gave with no input from Moses or anyone else.
- Then at verse 9 God announces to Moses that He is going to appear in three days. Again, Moses, did not have any input into this or the preparations the people had to make.
- This pattern continues when, in verse 20, God came down to Mt. Sinai, called Moses up to meet with Him and gave Him more instructions.

When you try to picture what is going on in this scene of God initiating the covenant with Israel, frame it as flowing from and demonstrating His sovereignty.

The second basis of what God is doing here has to do with Israel. He reassures them. He is telling them they can trust Him to lead them and fulfill His covenant because of what He already had done. He is asking them to trust Him, but not to take a blind leap of faith.

Look at verse 4, where He tells them “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians.” Just a few months earlier they had witnessed the devastating plagues that brought the Pharaoh and his people to their knees, that proved the Pharaoh was not a god and that all the gods of Egypt had no power or even life. To top it off, when Pharaoh’s elite troops chased after Israel in the path God made through the Red Sea, God drowned them all. God had displayed His sovereign, awesome power over the most powerful nation of that time.

Then God tells them to remember what He has done for them. Still in verse 4, “how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” Later, in Deuteronomy 32, Moses sang,

“For the LORD’S portion is His people; Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of a wilderness; He encircled him, He cared for him, He guarded him as the pupil of His eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that hovers over its young, He spread His wings and caught them, He carried them on His pinions” (9-11).

What a beautiful, powerful and yet tender image! With its powerful wings the parent eagle not only hovers over its young, but helps them, lifts them up as they learn to fly. God says, “Remember what I have already done in caring for you, mighty, miraculous things!”

Then, to understand what is going on here, we move to God’s promises. Let’s pick it up at verse 5,

“Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own 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.” (5-6)

First, God promises they will be His “own possession.” This term refers something that belongs exclusively to a person, often a valued possession or treasure. It frequently was used to refer to possessions of royalty. God is saying, “Although all the earth is Mine, I have chosen *you* to be My treasure.” Their relationship with God was special and unique.

Next God promises that they will be a kingdom of priests to Him. They would have the privilege of worship and service. They would have the privilege of representing Him to the rest of the world.

And God also promised that they could be a holy nation. This was a promise of privilege to have the character of God built within them. God repeatedly called Israel to true faith and holiness saying “Be holy, for I am holy” (e.g., Leviticus 11:44). What a stark contrast that would be to the rest of the world in their day ... and to ours!

Finally, to understand what is going on here we need to look at God’s conditions. Go back to the beginning of verse 5, “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant ...” The covenant God was inaugurating with Israel was serious—it was, after all, an agreement with God. God will always keep His part, there is no question about that. Israel was another matter. We have already seen their lack of faith and obedience, their grumbling and complaining. We also know that is only a taste of what would come. We know too they were people like us, and so we can understand but not excuse their failure to keep the covenant.

God said their behavior would have consequences— blessings for keeping the covenant and judgment for not keeping it. God’s conditions in basic terms were to obey what He told them and keep all the covenant. Keeping the covenant did not save them. They, like Abraham from whom they all came, would be saved only by faith in God as He revealed Himself. Keeping the covenant from a heart of faith and love for God would keep them close to God and His blessings would flow.

This dramatic scene of Israel meeting God at the mountain is the beginning of God setting out His covenant with Israel and the people entering into it. God, who is sovereign, set out the terms. God has stated the blessings He will give as they keep the covenant. God set out the conditions in broad strokes here. Much more follows, beginning in chapter 20.

This is not just history. There are truths about God and ourselves here. So we need to turn our attention to ...

Gleaning Truth For Ourselves.

There are a fair number of truths here, but let's concentrate on four. First, God chooses, God saves by His sovereign grace. There are two truths which work together in a way we cannot fully understand. Only God can. One is God's sovereign choice of each one who becomes and is one of His. The second is that God offers His saving grace to all who will receive it, by choosing to accept it. The two go together. Today we are looking at just the first, God's sovereign choice by His grace.

We see that clearly with Israel. When we turn ahead to Deuteronomy chapter 7, we read Moses words to Israel,

“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” (6-8)

Again, a bit later in chapter 10, he told them

“Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day.” (14-15)

The people of Israel did not and could not do anything to earn God's choosing them as His people, nor to earn forgiveness of sins and life with Him. God chose them by His sovereign grace.

This is a universal truth—it is true for all people in all places at all times. Paul underscored the reality that we can't save ourselves by what we do as he wrote in Romans 3:20, “by the works of the Law no flesh [person] will be justified in [God's] sight...” And again, in Galatians 2:16, “a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.”

But that is what all man-made religions try—they try to reach up to their god or gods to appease, convince, to make themselves acceptable. Some people try to do that with the one true God, the God of the Bible. All those efforts are worthless. We would be without any hope except for the more than wonderful reality that God reached down in His sovereign grace to provide salvation in Jesus, to save us, regardless of who we are or are not, of how deserving we might or might not be, or of what we have or have not done.

In John 15 Jesus said “You did not choose Me but I chose you” (15). And again, “I chose you out of the world” (19). Yes, God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4). Praise God that He chooses, that He saves by His sovereign grace! Gone is the endless and empty trying and trying. Gone is the uncertainty and questioning! Yes, Praise God that He chooses, that He saves by His sovereign grace!

A second important truth for us from this chapter is that God is faithful to His promises. We noted this truth in our first week in Exodus, God always keeps His word (1:1-22). A few weeks ago we examined the evidence and reality that God is forever faithful (15:22–17:16). All along the way we have seen, and we will see God being faithful to His promises.

In chapter 3, when God called Moses at Mt. Sinai, He told him,

“Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.” (12)

Chapter 19 and the following chapters are the fulfillment of that promise. And we know all of this goes back much farther. When God called Abraham, generations before these events, He promised him,

“And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3).

So some time after these events Moses reminded the people,

“the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them” (Deuteronomy 4:31).

When we move into the New Testament, Paul sets out the principle that God’s faithfulness to His promises is tied to His character. 2 Timothy 2:13, “If we are faithless He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” And so we can have confidence from day to day, even when we don’t see the evidence of God’s faithfulness. The writer of Hebrews encourages us, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (10:23).

We can have confidence for the future, and for what will happen when Jesus returns or we finish our course on earth. As Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica,

“may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Whatever you are facing, whatever else may be doubtful or even clearly unreliable, always remember, God is faithful to His promises to you.

Truth number three: God commands and blesses faithful obedience. The first two truths are broadly recognized and embraced in the North American church today. These last two are broadly recognized, but not broadly embraced. We can look at large surveys and studies or individual lives and find a disconnect here for large numbers of believers. “Yes, God wants me to be faithful, and I want His blessings, *but ... but ... but ...*”

God said to Israel, “*If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be ...*” (5). As we already noted, the issue here was not their salvation, but receiving and enjoying God’s conditional blessings. When God said there were to be “consecrated” (10) and “ready” (6) for His coming to them on the mountain, He expected them to do exactly that.

The same truth applies to us. In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul reminds us that we are God’s servants, His stewards and that it is required that stewards be found trustworthy—that they be faithful to God’s directions. If I want God’s blessings I need to be faithful. One chapter before that, Paul tells us that our work for God will be tested for quality. Only the work which passes the test will remain, and all that remains will be rewarded. This refers to Christ’s evaluation of our work when we appear before His judgment seat in heaven (2 Corinthians 5:10) and so, that judgment and those rewards will have everlasting implications. It is not, Paul makes clear, about our salvation. He wrote, “If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15).

God commands and blesses faithful obedience. Whatever we think, however we may try to excuse or downplay the importance of our obedience, this truth applies to each and every believer in each and every circumstance. Let me share a current example of how God blesses the faithfulness of His people. For years the Cleardale Gospel Chapel met in a school. It is one of the Evangelical Free churches in our Parkland District. They decided that the time had come for them to have their own building. They had a plan for a very simple but functional building and to do most of the work themselves. They decided to begin when they had raised \$80,000 and proceed as they had funds.

Even though the economy had worsened by the time they had reached the \$80,000 goal, they honored their earlier pledge and started. At a few points they came close to halting construction, but then more funds would come in. Early this year our district men’s retreat took an offering for their project of just over \$6,000. A number of district churches also sent sizeable contributions. The Canadian Pacific District made the church a short term loan.

They kept trusting that God would provide as they were financially responsible, faithful and kept working hard on the project. They thought they might move in with just bare concrete floors, but funds came in to finish all the floors. When they went to buy just enough chairs for the present group, a donation was made to get enough chairs to fill the meeting area and for tables and chairs for the fellowship area as well. God kept blessing,

providing as they kept being faithful in handling the finances and work.

During the last service in the school, the pianist said she was excited to get into their new building but would miss having a nice piano. That Tuesday she received a call asking her to be at the church on Thursday morning. After she waited there for a while, a truck pulled up. The driver told her he had three grand pianos on the truck and had been instructed to have her choose the one she wanted for the church. You see, a man from the community, not a part of their church, had been in that last service in the school, and he made this donation.

There are many more threads to this story. It is a clear example that when God commands us to be faithful as good stewards, in His own way unique to each individual and church, He blesses our faithfulness. I think far too often in the current day we short circuit the opportunities of receiving God blessings by marching ahead, trying to figure out, trying accomplish things on our own.

The fourth truth for us, and the second which is broadly recognized but not so broadly embraced, is that God who draws us close must be respected and revered. God called Israel to meet with Him at Mt. Sinai. He was coming down to them in a very dramatic way, and yet He said, verse 12,

“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 [the *all clear*], they shall come up to the mountain.” (12-13)

This warning is repeated again inverse 21 and once more in verses 23-24. God is coming to them, drawing them close to Himself, and yet there is this distance that must be kept under penalty of death. God’s point is that while He draws us close, He must be respected and revered. He is eternal, creator, holy God.

In Deuteronomy 4 Moses told the people in verse 23,

“watch yourselves, that you do not forget the covenant of the LORD your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image in the form of anything against which the LORD your God has commanded you.” *Why be very careful?* The next verse, “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (24).

We see both God’s transcendence, that is His being separate from and above us, and His immanence, His being with us, in Isaiah 57:15,

“For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’”

Today many people tend to focus on Immanuel, God with us, without an adequate understanding of God's transcendence and our need to respect and revere Him. We rejoice in the writer of Hebrews telling us

“Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” (10:19-22)

But we may pass over his statement two chapters later that we are to “offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe” (12:28). God is, Paul tells us,

“the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see.” (1 Timothy 6:15b-16a)

God who draws us close must be respected and revered, never treated casually, never treated as our heavenly *big buddy*, never treated as a geni who gives us whatever we want.

Conclusion.

Meeting God At The Mountain. This meeting was special and foundational. God directed Israel to remain in that place for almost a year. They were taught about the covenant and God's law and built and worshiped in the tabernacle before God led them north toward the Promised Land (cf. Numbers 10:11).

As you think about them 3,500 years ago and yourself today in the next moments, talk with God about how you are responding to these four truths:

- God chooses, God saves by His sovereign grace.
- God is faithful to His promises.
- God commands and blesses faithful obedience.
- God, who draws us close, must be respected and revered.

¹*Church: Two-for-one wedding, baptism special.* MSNBC, July 23, 2009. © 2009 The Associated Press. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32102596/ns/world_news-world_faith/> © 2009 MSNBC.com

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