

Mount Sinai at last!! Let's plunge right in. Verses 1-2, "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."

Last week when Moses met with his father in law, Jethro, the people had already arrived in the area of Sinai. But here at the beginning of chapter 19, we find the writer emphasizing their arrival at Mount Sinai as if to say, "We are finally here!" He tells us the specific day, "on the third new moon after they left the land of Egypt," then underlines it by saying "on that day," then focuses our attention back to their destination with, "**There** Israel encamped before the mountain." I like to use highlighters, don't you. Here we have an example of ancient highlighting meant to grab the reader's attention. The writer is almost shouting...We've Arrived!! For we are now at the hinge of Exodus, where God himself defines the central theme. Just as he intended all along. You may remember that theme from the Introduction at the beginning of our study, "The grace of God and the law of God."

Yet Canaan, the promised land, is as far away as ever. God says,, 'Trust us. We're taking you to a land flowing with milk and honey.' So the people trusted (well sometimes anyway). From Egypt he leads them south to a mountainous wilderness. After three months of walking they're still no closer to Canaan than they were in Egypt. Of course we know they grumbled. Like the Israelites, we too say, 'I'm giving you my life Lord, trusting you with everything.' Then as so often happens when you trust him completely things go downhill. After a couple of years, you too may look back and say, 'What happened...God seems to be taking me in the opposite direction from where he said he would.' And yes, you may grumble too. I know I have. For his children, the way to the resurrection is through the cross. The way to the promised land is through the desert.

Did Moses remember what the LORD said back in Exodus 3:12, "This will be a sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." Did the memory reassure Moses? Did Moses take comfort in the fact that Mount Sinai was God's intended destination all along? Yes, it was intended. For the Lord God does not do accidents!

Verse 2 tells us that while the people were setting up the camp, Moses leaves the unpacking to others. He wastes no time. Moses hurries up the mountain to meet with the LORD. Imagine that enormous crowd of people spreading out in family tribes, children racing among the animals, making discoveries. Men and women hard at work, setting up the encampment. This was not haphazard. By now the people were well practiced but this time was special. Moses was on his way to meet with their God. From Chapter 19 on to the end of the book of Exodus, almost a year, Israel will camp at the foot of Mount Sinai though the people do not know it yet.

Before we move forward into verses 3-6, I want to draw your attention to four primary words repeated often in this passage. Repetition is another method writers of scripture use to highlight the most important features of the story. First, **God**, who is referred to most often by his personal name in the Hebrew Bible. It is written in all caps LORD, translated as Yahweh meaning, I Am. His name refers to the LORD's eternal, unchanging nature and constant presence. **Moses** is mentioned almost as often; as he is summoned by Yahweh to serve as a mediator between God and the people. The **Mountain** itself, **Sinai**, will act as God's temple or dwelling place for this period. And finally **Israel**, the people Yahweh chose for Himself. All the action swirls around these four elements as Moses ascends and descends the mountain three times in this chapter and four more times during the remainder of the Exodus story. The LORD of love carefully beckons his people closer. Beckoning and Terrifying. Loving and Holy.

Here are verses 3-6, “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 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.”

Alec Moyter and Tim Keller point out the order of God’s transforming work in humans found in verses 3-6: first grace, second obedience while living out God’s gifts. Both men stress the extreme importance of their order for understanding the entire Bible. In these verses, God himself describes this order of grace. God works in this way throughout scripture. Nothing must be allowed to upset this order of God’s work in our lives.

Let’s take a look. The sequence begins with God’s saving acts of grace as he chooses Israel, fulfills his covenant promise, saves them from slavery, and defeats the Egyptians. In their misery, Israel calls on Yahweh. But when he answers they are fickle; enthusiastic one minute and grumbling the next. Salvation is by the LORD’s grace, pure and simple. And why would he do such a thing? To affirm his covenant with Abraham which he entered into out of Love. His desire for mankind has never changed. From page one of the Bible, he has always wanted to be with his people. As he says to Moses in verse 4, “I bore you on eagles wings and brought you to myself.” First comes Grace.

So easy for me to flip the order. Just below the level of my conscious mind is a automatic reptilian human impulse, “if I obey, God will accept me.” Have you ever heard this little voice inside? It’s one we understand instinctively, the marketplace, “if I obey, God will give me what I want.” This obedience is conditional. Obedience is the cash I place on the counter to get what I want. And suppose I don’t get it? I feel cheated. This is not God’s way. It’s my way. It’s the way other religions work. All other religions say if you do this and this you will find God. Christianity says God comes down to us in Jesus. God descends. “I brought you on eagles wings to myself.” That’s grace. Grace first. ‘I’ve saved you, now obey me and enjoy the blessings of being my child.’

Grace first. Second obedience to the law. Motyer explains, “It was not that they were ordered to obey so that they might enter the covenant, but that already being within the covenant, they were called to obey so that they might enjoy the benefits and privileges of God’s people.” I found this an astonishing statement. Covenant people do not even **earn** God’s gifts by their acts of obedience. The gifts are already theirs. God’s call is to live in the way of grace. God didn’t give Israel the law, expect them to follow it, and then save them. He saves them from Egypt first by sheer grace and then says, ‘I gave you my love. I bore you on eagles wings. I saved you by grace. Knowing that; now come close, obey me, be my treasure, delight in me, walk with me. Live in me and live out all the glorious gifts I have for you. Become my priests and spread the truth of Yahweh to the world. Become a holy nation.’ Every gift flows naturally out of loving God back. His gifts are possessions that a loving Father joyfully gives to his children. I am his treasure and God is most glorified when he is mine. Following God’s law is living into the way of grace.

*If it all flows naturally what makes obedience so difficult?* You and I have read further into the OT. Story after story of chosen, messy, self driven people with very few bright spots. We’ve experienced enough of our own failures to obey the Lord’s voice, his word. Obedience is more than difficult. It is contrary to the human heart. Besides in verse 5 Yahweh says, “**IF you will obey and keep.**” He must have understood the challenge. Replacing Self in the human heart is a delicate and messy surgery, far more difficult than a heart transplant. It requires God on

the throne of my heart, loving God more than myself. And Sinai is not the end of the story. God came to make a way for us in Jesus.

Tim Keller points out that “The story of Exodus is the largest and most visual aid ever planned to teach the gospel.” First, the people are saved out of slavery by the awesome power of Yahweh, by the blood of the lamb. The same is true of me. Are we not the most fortunate of people because we have Jesus, the cross, the resurrection, the Word, and the Spirit. Israel was accepted by the blood of the lamb. I’m accepted by the blood of Jesus and all that he did. That’s grace. What motivates me to obey? The Spirit and Word form me and as the cycle continues, the deeper and deeper God’s earth shattering grace transforms, the more I fall in love with him. And when you fall in love with Jesus you want to please him. Find it thrilling to delight him. Find his word captivating. And grace flows throughout that process. As Keller says, “Obey to know him, love and serve and display him.” This is our walk in the way of grace. For most of us, this is a long journey through a wilderness.

In Exodus we see God’s pattern of work with his people throughout the Bible. Moyter points out that the unfolding of our faith in the Lord is always this way. First God’s grace, then our response of obedience to his Word and the formative work of the Spirit.

And the promised land? Well, that’s another book, Joshua or Revelation and we need to return to Moses.

So Moses heads down the mountain, eager to relay the message from Yahweh God. All the leaders gather to hear Moses. They carefully pass the word of the LORD throughout the tribes. Words that remind them of what they had experienced; what they had seen with their own eyes. The power of God’s rescue in Egypt, a dry path bordered by towering walls of the Red Sea on either side. Manna, water, and quail in the wilderness. The cloud of Yahweh to follow by day and fire by night. Moses spoke God’s words, his covenant promises. Then comes Yahweh’s call for a response from the people. “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.” Without hesitation thousands upon thousands of voices shouted, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.”

**They had no idea what it would mean to obey his voice.** This is before the Ten Commandments. What would it mean for them to keep his covenant? How would his call impact their lives day after day? Yet their response is so beautiful. They had seen. They had experienced his active khesed love for them personally. They didn’t count the cost. They were of one mind. I only wish I was standing there shouting with them in that wonderful moment of unity and faith. “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.”

**We can only obey because God has spoken and revealed his word.** Moyter notes, “Lordship has no specific meaning without revelation, as we see in the Acts account where Paul asks, ‘Lord, what do You want me to do?’ And receives the reply, ‘You will be told what you must do’ (Acts 9:6). Moses was therefore an essential figure. He stood between the people and the LORD to hear the word(s) the Lord spoke and then communicate that to the people. The life of obedience arises out of the word of God. In our case, this is the Bible. Holiness is obedience to revealed truth.”

Can you imagine how Moses felt? This must have seemed a decisive turning point. For the second time he quickly walked back up the mountain with the people’s jubilant response.

Verses 9-13, “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.” Moses told the words of the people to the LORD and God gave lengthy instructions how to prepare Israel. Yahweh was coming in three days! Imagine the thoughts that nearly overwhelmed Moses as he hurried down the mountain once again. Moses could barely breathe. He was grateful for the advice of Jethro. The elders had already proven their worth. They would be essential to carrying out Yahweh’s instructions in time. Everyone must purify body, heart, and mind. Clean clothes would symbolize this. Refraining from sexual intercourse extended their preparation to holiness of the heart and emotions. The Lord wished to have his people’s hearts focused on himself alone.

There was so much to do; priests, shepherds and guards to instruct, water to find, adults, children and clothing to wash. The people would have to wait patiently, accept their unworthiness to approach God. This would show holiness of mind. The LORD was clear. “Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.” All this must be communicated throughout the camp with intensity of purpose.

Moses knew the committed forgiving love of Yahweh but the LORD was not tame, not safe. His holiness could be fatal for sinful humans. Something tragic could happen. Thousands of people made the situation unpredictable. Moses sighed. So much was at stake. And all must be ready in two days time, for on the third day a trumpet blast would sound to call the people close to Mt. Sinai. Yahweh himself would descend in the sight of all the people.. The thought thrilled and frightened Moses.

The third day arrived and Moses was apprehensive but prepared. The elders, priests and people had worked diligently to do exactly what the LORD required. Everything seemed ready. Verses 16-20, “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.”

The trumpet blast alone was enough to terrify. It grew louder and louder without pause, without a breath. The mountain reeled and rocked, stones fell, thick smoke rose wrapping Sinai in darkness pierced by lightning as the mountain responded to the presence of the LORD of hosts. Booms of thunder joined the rising trumpet blast. The thunderous voice of Yahweh called Moses, who obediently trudged to the top of the mountain for the third time.

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.” Surprised that further safeguards were needed, Moses reminded the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, ‘Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.’” The people could lose focus, to stare in curiosity but not awe and wonder. They might forget their status. So easy for humans to do. The people needed further warning. Their holiness is not God’s holiness. But this needs God’s eye to see.

**The heart of the matter is that we are dealing with a holy God.** Not even the best intentioned, most sincere efforts at self sanctification make us fit for his presence. In our final

two verses the LORD sends Moses back down the mountain to set stricter limits, protecting the people and unconsecrated priests from their curiosity and a sense of privilege.

“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.”

Finally the dramatic stage is set. The people and priests are at a secure distance. Yahweh is satisfied. The Israelites are protected. Moses and Aaron are in place on the mountain. The obedience of Moses beautiful to behold. The time has come for the LORD to speak to his people and reveal his law.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word, for the treasures about you and your steadfast pursuit of mankind that we find in its pages. Thank you for saving us in Christ by grace and for transforming us by the power of your Spirit and your word. Go with us now as we join our groups and talk about you. Open our hearts to the Exodus story. Show us how our lives follow the same patterns of your grace and our obedience out of love for you, Father. May our discussions bring you honor and glory. In the name of Jesus our Savior. Amen