

Exodus Chapter 19

Verses 1-25: The rest of Exodus, plus Leviticus and the first 10 chapters of Numbers, contain what is commonly referred to as the Mosaic Law. This chapter, in addition to (chapter 20), follows the pattern of ancient suzerainty treaties, thus suggesting that Yahweh is King and Israel is His kingdom. His subject people are to render complete submission, allegiance, and obedience to Him. A typical treaty contained a preamble (verse 3), historical prologue (with emphasis on the benevolence of the "great King," verse 4), specific obligations of the vassals, witnesses to the treaty, and a list of the consequences of keeping or breaking the treaty (i.e., blessings and curses). The pattern follows closely that of the Hittites, who were destroyed around 1200 B.C., thus demonstrating the antiquity of the law and the fact that it is a complete unit not to be dissected. It may also explain the nature of the two tablets (Exodus 31:18). One would be a copy for the "great King" and the other for the vassal, Israel.

Verses 1-14: God fulfilled His promise to bring the people to Mount "Sinai" to worship Him (3:12). As was ancient wedding custom, Israel was to purify themselves for three days prior to the Lord's visitation. Preparing their bodies, minds and hearts for their covenantal marriage to the Lord. To ready oneself to meet with the Lord involves a person's undivided attention.

From 19:1-40:38: This section outlines Israel's activities during their approximately 11 month stay at Sinai (compare 19:1 with Numbers 10:11).

Exodus 19:1 "In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they [into] the wilderness of Sinai."

"Sinai" is the name of the desert peninsula joining Egypt to Canaan (Israel). It is a rugged wilderness to this day. Mount Sinai (also called Horeb), is near the southern tip of the peninsula and is generally identified as Jebel Musa, the location of Saint Catherine's Monastery, which was built in the sixth century A.D. The peninsula itself served as a trading and mining center from the Old kingdom Period (2700-2200 B.C.) onward.

Archaeological investigation has been limited by the rugged terrain and the political instability of the area. The most interesting finds come from Serabit El-Khadem, which revealed copper and turquoise mining, and produced the famous Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions, which provide the earliest evidence of a Semitic alphabetic script. These finds clearly prove the existence of writing during this period of time. This discovery is significant because of the claim by Graf and Wellhausen in the nineteenth century that there was no writing in the much later period of Moses (1500 B.C.).

Exodus 19:2 "For they were departed from Rephidim, and were come [to] the desert of Sinai, and had pitched in the wilderness; and there Israel camped before the mount."

The desert has its provinces, or divisions, distinguished by a variety of names; and the "desert of Sinai" is that wild and desolate region which occupies the very center of the peninsula, comprising the lofty range to which the mount of God belongs. It is a wilderness of shaggy rocks containing crystals and red granite, and of valleys for the most part bare of lush green vegetation.

"And there Israel camped before the mount": Sinai so called from Seneh, or acacia bush. It is now called Jebel Musa. Their way into the interior of the gigantic cluster was by Wadi Feiran, which would lead the bulk of the hosts with their flocks and herds into the high valleys of Jebel Musa, with their abundant springs, especially into the great thoroughfare of the desert. The longest, widest, and most continuous of all the valleys, the Wadi-es-Sheikh, while many would be scattered among the adjacent valleys. So that thus secluded from the world in a wild and sublime amphitheater of rocks, they "camped before the mount."

We are being reminded that it had been a very short time (three months), since God delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt, and brought them to the mount of God. Everything that had happened to them happened for the purpose of teaching them the ways of God. We Christians, (spiritual Israel), can take a lesson from this as well. Things that we call "troubles" to us; are also happening to teach us the ways of God. God allows problems to come to make us strong and to make us realize that He is the source of our strength. God purposely brought them to this mountain to receive from Him the law.

Verses 3-8: The Israelites discerned the familiar pattern, in shortened form, of a suzerainty (superior-subordinate relationship), treaty in God's words: a preamble (verse 3), a historical prologue (verse 4), certain stipulations (verse 5a), and blessings (verses 5b – 6a). The acceptance in solemn assembly would normally be recorded in the final treaty document. Here it follows upon presentation of the treaty to them (verses 7-8; see note on 24:7).

Exodus 19:3 "And Moses went up unto God, and the LORD called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel;"

"Out of the mountain": The sign which the Lord had given particularity to Moses when he was still in Midian (3:12). That God had indeed sent him, was now fulfilled; he was with the people before the mountain of God.

"House of Jacob ... children of Israel": In employing this dual designation for the nation, the Lord reminded them of their humble beginnings as descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, who had been with them in Egypt. And of their status now as a nation (children = people).

Exodus 19:4 "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and [how] I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself."

"Bare you on eagles' wings": With a most appropriate metaphor, God described the Exodus and the journey to Sinai. Eagles were known to have carried their young out of the nest on their wings and taught them to fly, catching them when necessary on their outspread wings. Moses, in his final song, employed this metaphor of God's care for Israel and especially noted that there was only one Lord who did this (Deut. 32:11-12).

Moses realized all along, that this mount was the mount of God. Moses started up the mount to meet with God, but before he got there, God called out to him and told him what to say to this group of people he was leading. I believe God called them the "house of Jacob" showing their covenant with God through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He spoke of them as the "children of Israel" showing that they had grown into a mighty nation. God reminded them that it was by His power they were brought out of Egypt. He said that He had protected His, all along. God told them that He had led them to this very mountain where He dwells.

Verses 5-8: "Mosaic Covenant": The dispensation of Law meant government by the Mosaic covenant. This covenant was given to Israel in order to reveal sin and death. The Law reflected the holiness of a personal God, instructed the people in Gods' discipline, reminded them through its priests and sacrifices of God's salvation, and acted as a pedagogue to lead them to Christ. The Law contained three elements:

- (1) Commandments revealing the righteousness of God;
- (2) Judgments expressing social requirements; and
- (3) Ordinances directing the religious life of Israel.

No one was ever saved by keeping the Law. It was simply God's moral guideline for Israel. This dispensation ended with vicarious judgment at the Cross, as Christ died for the sins of all men (Jer. 31:31).

Three titles for Israel, "A peculiar treasure," "a kingdom of priests", and "a holy nation", were given by the Lord to the nation, contingent upon their being an obedient and covenant-keeping nation. These titles summarized the divine blessings which such a nation would experience. Belonging especially to the Lord, representing Him in the earth and being set apart unto Him for His purposes.

These expanded ethnically and morally what it meant to have brought them to Himself. "For all the earth is mine", in the midst of the titles, laid stress upon the uniqueness and sovereignty of the Lord and had to be understood as dismissing all other claims by so-called other gods of the nations. It was more than the power of one god over another in Israel's situation. It was the choice and power of the only Lord! (See 1 Pet. 2:9), where Peter uses these terms in the sense of God's spiritual kingdom of the redeemed.

Exodus 19:5 "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth [is] mine:"

The phrase "peculiar treasure" actually means "personal property." Israel was God's personal possession (Psalm 135:4), since He had redeemed her from bondage, not because of her goodness, but solely because He loved her and was faithful to the promises given to the patriarchs. Those who fear the Lord become His "peculiar treasures" whom He will never forget, even in that time of great judgment (Mal. 3:16-18). Notice;

Titus 2:13-14: “Jesus Christ who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.”

Although “all the earth is mine,” and everything in it was created by God and belongs to Him (Gen. 14:19, 22; Psalm 24:1-2), Israel is His special treasure.

Because “all the earth” is the Lord’s, He can do with it as He pleases (Psalm 24:1), and in His “covenant” with Moses and Abraham, He designated a “special people for Himself and a land for His people (Gen. 15:12-21).

This covenant that God was trying to make with these people was a conditional covenant. It depended entirely upon them obeying His voice and keeping commandment with Him. And then and only then would the blessings be theirs. God had chosen them to be His alone. He would not share them with false gods. Everything and everyone belong to Him, but He has given man a free will to follow Him or not. He desired to bless them above all people, but they had to do their share as well. Covenants have two sides. Both parties have to agree to keep the agreement.

Exodus 19:6 "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These [are] the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel."

As “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (see 1 Pet. 2:5, 9). God planned to bless all the families on the earth through Israel (Gen. 12:2-3; John 4:22; Rom. 9:4-5).

This message that God had given Moses, was to be told to them in total. God wished to bless them and have them for a special people set aside for Him, but they had to live holy lives. He wanted to make them all priests to fellowship with Him. Jesus is the High priest. They could reign with Him as His subordinates. Their part was to stay holy.

Exodus 19:7 "And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the LORD commanded him."

He not only explained to them what God had given him in charge, but put it to their choice, whether they would accept these promises upon these terms or not. His laying it to their faces speaks his laying it to their consciences. And they answered together: All that the Lord hath spoken we will do. Thus, accepting the Lord to be to them a God, and giving up their selves to be to him a people.

Moses did just as God had commanded him. He gave the whole message of God, without alteration to the people.

Exodus 19:8 "And all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the LORD."

“And all the people answered together”: Presented with the details of God’s bilateral, conditional covenant (note the “if you will obey ... ye shall be” in verse 5). The people, briefed by their

elders, responded with positive enthusiasm. The Lord's response to them does not take it as a rash promise by the people (Deut. 5:27-29).

It seems that the elders of the people received this message from God through Moses. These elders, carried this message to the people; and the people unanimously agreed. They had not been given the details, but they knew from experience the power of God. Their reply was "We will do the will of God". The chain was reversed here and Moses took their reply back to God.

Exodus 19:9 "And the LORD said unto Moses, Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and believe thee for ever. And Moses told the words of the people unto the LORD."

"Believe thee for ever": The Lord designed the upcoming encounter with Him so as to forestall any later accusation that Moses had himself compiled the law and had not met with the Lord on the mountain. It would also lead to great deference being accorded Moses by the people.

Before now God had not appeared and spoken to the people. Probably this thick cloud that God would speak to the people from was the same cloud that led them in their travels. This cloud being thick would keep the presence of God (Light), from burning up these sinners. The Light of God cannot be looked upon by sinful man. This voice of God coming from this thick cloud would be heard by all the people and would leave no doubt in any of their minds that God Himself was leading this large group. It also, would assure them that the messages Moses was giving them, were really from God. They would be more receptive to Moses, knowing it was actually God speaking through Moses.

Exodus 19:10 "And the LORD said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes,"

"Sanctify them": How serious this step was for the nation was emphasized for them by two days of special preparation. The inward preparation for meeting with God was mirrored in the outward actions of maintaining bodily cleanliness.

Exodus 19:11 "And be ready against the third day: for the third day the LORD will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai."

There is no special "significance" in this mention of "the third day." The important point is that the purification was to continue through two entire days, one day not being sufficient. This taught the lesson that man's defilement is, in the sight of God, very great.

The Lord will come down in the sight of all the people (see the comment on Exodus 19:9).

Moses had gone back to tell God that the people were in agreement. Now God told Moses to go and prepare for His descent to the people. To be truly sanctified is to be washed in the blood of the Lamb and made pure by Him. Sanctification really takes place inside a person's heart, but since these people were not children of grace, this type of sanctification (made right with God) was not possible.

The next best thing was to cleanse them completely on the outside. This washing was symbolic of the washing away of sin. The "third day" just shows the holiness and also shows the reverence we are to have for God. This "coming down" just meant that He would come near enough, that they could hear His voice. He would be covered in a very thick cloud so as not to blind them with His presence of Light and to protect them from sudden death from His presence. The whole mountain (Sinai), would be a very holy place with the presence of God.

Exodus 19:12 "And thou shalt set bounds unto the people round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, [that ye] go [not] up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death:"

The proper approach to a holy God could not have been better stressed than by imposing a death penalty upon those who violated the arbitrary boundaries which God had set around the mountain.

We will learn in a future lesson, that where the presence of God is, everything must be pure. We will find that in the tabernacle in the wilderness, in the holy of holies, not anything less than 24 karat gold (pure gold), was used. Everything in there had to be 24 karat gold or 24 karat gold overlaid. Anything in the presence of God had to be pure. Not only could they not touch Him, but they could not be in close proximity of Him. God is pure and holy. He cannot be around sin at all. Nothing impure can touch God. These people had not been purified by the shed blood of the Lamb (Jesus Christ).

Exodus 19:13 "There shall not a hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether [it be] beast or man, it shall not live: when the trumpet soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount."

Even animals could not encroach upon this sacred area (Heb. 12:20).

We see here, an extreme holiness that God's presence had brought to this mountain. Moses was to build a barricade to keep the people from getting too close to the mountain while God's presence was on it. If someone strayed over too close to the mountain, the people were to stone the person to death or shoot and kill him with arrows. Even the ones carrying out the punishment could not cross the barricade or they too, would be killed. The trumpet sounding long was a signal for them to come in hearing distance, but not to cross the barricade.

Exodus 19:14 "And Moses went down from the mount unto the people, and sanctified the people; and they washed their clothes."

The same day that he went up which was the fourth day of the month.

"And sanctified the people": Instructed them and ordered them what they should do for their sanctification, in order to their hearing the law from the mouth of the Lord.

"And they washed their clothes; as the Lord had directed Moses to enjoin them, and as he had commanded them (see Exodus 19:10).

Moses came down and prepared the people. They washed themselves and their clothes.

Exodus 19:15 "And he said unto the people, Be ready against the third day: come not at [your] wives."

“Come not at your wives”: This was so they would be ceremonially clean (see Lev. 15:16-18).

We see here, a cleansing of the people and a total separation from things of the world. They were to even abstain from sex for three days. This outward cleansing was symbolic of the cleansing that should go on inside of a believer. These three days, symbolized a time of acceptance of serious prayers we make to God. Fasting and prayer include total abstinence from sex relations, and all worldly things and a cleansing of the body by doing without food for three days and nights. This is a time acceptable unto God.

Exodus 19:16 "And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that [was] in the camp trembled."

“Thunders and lightnings”: The dramatic visual presentation of God’s presence on the mountain, accompanied by thick cloud and trumpet blast, more than impressed the onlookers with God’s majesty and power, they trembled, but so did Moses (Heb. 12:21). The unusual was happening, not the usual phenomena from volcanic activity, as some writers have proposed.

God deals with people many times, with thundering and lightning. Many times, the voice of God was heard as thundering. We can look at this scene now. The people were ready. They had washed their clothes and bodies and abstained from worldliness, and they were at least cleaned up on the outside. Moses had warned them not to get too near the mountain and now, this voice as of a loud trumpet sounded. God was covered with a thick cloud to conceal His bright Light. This trumpet voice had called them to attention and frightened them so badly that they trembled.

Exodus 19:17 "And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount."

An open space must have intervened between the camp and the “bounds.” Into this Moses led the representatives of the people, so bringing them as near to God as was permitted.

"To meet with God": Who came forth in such an awful and solemn manner, as their King and lawgiver, to deliver a body of laws to them, to be the rule of their future conduct.

"And they stood at the nether part of the mount": At the bottom of it, where bounds were set, and a fence made, that they should proceed no further, and yet near enough to hear what God said to Moses and to them.

Exodus 19:18 "And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly."

This appearance of the Lord was marked by extraordinary phenomena as He “descended” on Sinai “in fire”.

This had to be an awesome sight. It appeared that the whole mount was on fire. The presence of God many times, is seen as a fire or smoke. "For our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:29). Many times, earthquakes were God dealing with mankind. All of this happened so there would be no doubt that the voice that came from this mount, was the voice of God.

Exodus 19:19 "And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice."

That He physically spoke to Moses (“the voice”), in the peoples hearing was important so that they would “believe [Moses] forever” (19:9).

Trumpets are sometimes associated with great pronouncements of God. The volume and intensity of this “trumpet” blast were unprecedented.

When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound in the sky to redeem us from the earth, it is the voice of the Lord as well. I believe this was similar here. The voice and the trumpet got a little confusing. Probably they are the same. Perhaps the voice of God is as a trumpet. Then God spoke in words understandable in answer to Moses. "By a voice" just means the words were understandable to all the people.

Exodus 19:20 "And the LORD came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the LORD called Moses [up] to the top of the mount; and Moses went up."

In the above visible tokens of his presence and power; otherwise he is the incomprehensible Jehovah, that immense and omnipotent Being, who fills heaven and earth, and cannot be contained and circumscribed in either.

"On the top of the mount": Where the fire he descended in rested, and where the smoke and thick cloud were, as a token of his presence.

"And the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount; who either was at the bottom of it with the people, or in a higher ascent of it between God and them.

"And Moses went up": To the top of it, where the Lord was, as he ordered him.

Moses was sanctified, and had been ever since God spoke to him in the burning bush. Moses could be in God's presence, but not look upon the face of God. This would not be the first or the last time that Moses would be much closer to God than the people. God had set Moses aside for this very purpose.

Exodus 19:21 "And the LORD said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish."

To be in the presence of a holy God required boundaries. It was God's mercy that had Moses "charge the people" so they would not die.

We can see that the barricade Moses put up was for the protection of the people. God feared the awesomeness might cause them to try to break through, so that they might see God, and if they did, they would die. In (Numbers 4:20), God forbids the looking on holy things. This should show us how reverent we should be in the presence of God.

Exodus 19:22 "And let the priests also, which come near to the LORD, sanctify themselves, lest the LORD break forth upon them."

Either the firstborn, as the Jews generally interpret it, so Jarchi and Aben Ezra. Who were sanctified to the Lord, and in whose stead afterwards the Levites were taken. Or the sons of Aaron, who should be, and were potentially, though not actually priests, as Ben Gersom expresses it, from an ancient book of theirs called Mechilta.

Or rather some principal persons, as heads of families and the like, who, before the priesthood was settled in the family of Aaron, officiated as priests, and drew nigh to God, and offered up sacrifices for themselves and others. And were distinguished from others by this character, and therefore do not intend princes, as some interpret the word. For the description of them will not agree to them, but plainly points to a sort of men, to whom it was peculiar to perform that office. These Moses is bid to charge that they:

"Sanctify themselves": In the same manner as the people in general were before ordered, and keep themselves within the same bounds. Not daring to transgress them, because they were persons that used to draw nigh to God in the performance of religious actions.

"Lest the Lord break forth upon them": And smite them, that they die, in like manner as he made a breach on Uzzah afterwards for touching the ark of the Lord (2 Sam. 6:6).

God was saying by this, the priests had to clean themselves up also. They were not exempt from cleansing, just because they were priests. The same rules were for them that were for the people. We will see in a later lesson, that the priests who went into the holy place, who had not cleansed themselves from sin were killed. God's ministers are not exempt from His laws and covenants. The ministers more than the people, should live holy lives. To whom much is revealed much is required.

Exodus 19:23 "And Moses said unto the LORD, The people cannot come up to mount Sinai: for thou chargedst us, saying, Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it."

No sooner had Moses proceeded a little up the mount, than he was suddenly ordered to return, in order to keep the people from breaking through to gaze. A course adopted to heighten the impressive solemnity of the scene. The strict injunctions renewed to all, whatever their condition, at a time and in circumstances when the whole multitude of Israel were standing at the base of the mount; was calculated in the highest degree to solemnize and awe every heart.

Moses reminded God of the barricade put up to protect the mount from the people.

Exodus 19:24 "And the LORD said unto him, Away, get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou, and Aaron with thee: but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the LORD, lest he break forth upon them."

“The priests”: With the law still to be given, no priesthood had been established in Israel. These priests must have been the firstborn in each family who served as family priests because they had been dedicated to the Lord (13:2; 24:5). Their place would be taken over later by the Levites (Num. 3:45).

Exodus 19:25 "So Moses went down unto the people, and spake unto them."

As the Lord had commanded him.

"And spake unto them": Charging them to keep their distance, and not presume to pass the line he had drawn, or the fence or barrier he had made.

We see here, a little scolding from God to Moses. When God tells us to do something, our answer should be "Yes Sir", not an explanation why it isn't necessary to do it. Moses immediately did as God told him. Moses was to warn even the priests not to come near the mount. Only Moses and Aaron (chosen men of God, sanctified by God for this work), could come on the mount.

Exodus Chapter 19 Questions

1. How many months had the Israelites been gone from Egypt, when they came to the wilderness of Sinai?
2. What was Mount Sinai called?
3. Why had all these things happened to the children of Israel?
4. Things we, Christians, call troubles, are sometimes what?
5. What was God's purpose in bringing the Israelites to the mount of God?
6. Moses went up unto _____.
7. What house was Moses to speak to?
8. God said He bare them up how?
9. Why does the author believe God called them the house of Jacob, here?

10. If they did what 2 things, God would make them His peculiar treasure to Him?
11. What type of covenant was God making with them?
12. What did God want them to be like to Him?
13. Who did Moses give God's message to?
14. How did the people answer?
15. How was God going to appear to the people?
16. What was the purpose of this?
17. What was Moses to do to the people, to get them ready to meet God?
18. How long did it take?
19. What was the washing symbolic of?
20. What was Moses to do, to keep them away from God?
21. What would happen to anyone who touched the mountain?
22. Why was stoning, or shooting with an arrow, to be the way of death?
23. What was the signal for them to gather near the mountain?
24. What, besides washing, did God tell them not to do to prepare to meet God?
25. How is fasting and prayer today similar?
26. What occurred on the mountain that told them God was there?
27. When this happened, what did the people do?
28. Why was the mountain as if it were on fire?
29. What was the smoke likened to?
30. Who went up and talked with God?
31. Why did God tell Moses to tell the people to stay back from the mountain?
32. Were the 70 priests allowed on the mountain?
33. What did Moses say that angered God?
34. Who was the only one allowed to go with Moses on the mount?