

Moses and the Glory of God

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. We're going to begin this evening with a revealing statistic. It came out this week, maybe many of you saw it, the census results in Scotland from 2022. But I guess the big news that was featured is the fact that now 51%, so the majority of people in Scotland now identify themselves as nuns, people with no religion. And Scotland is actually secularizing, becoming non-religious faster than the rest of the UK. For example, Wales and England are down at 37% said they had no religion. So the majority of people around us, therefore, are people who most likely don't believe in God, who, because of that, don't believe life has ultimate purpose, and therefore are seeking to set their own path through life.

Now, when we come to the Bible, and when we consider what we believe, we recognize that what everybody needs is to know their Creator, to know who God is, and to know how to approach this God, so that we might enter into life with Him. But for the vast majority of people in Scotland, there's either no knowledge of who this God is, or perhaps, and maybe we've had experience of this, and people have a caricature of God that they then reject. Perhaps, you know, a God who is holy in that sense of just a figure of fear, a judge. People don't want that. Or maybe the God who is altogether love, who just accepts everyone regardless and doesn't care about obedience, if he likewise is a God easy to dismiss. And when people do that, of course, they're rejecting a false God. And our great needs, and our great calling, as we were reminded this morning, is to help people to discover and to delight in the God who is. And Exodus 19, I think, can help us with that. Because we are joining here the end of a journey. The people of Israel have now reached the goal of their three-month or so journey, where all the way along they've been asking questions.

Asking questions of Moses, asking questions of God. What are we doing here? Why are we on this journey? If you've ever been on that kind of journey, are we nearly there yet? In a sense, that sums up Israel's experience. But now they reach the goal, and now all of a sudden, they understand, here's the purpose. As they arrive at Mount Sinai, to meet with the one true and living God, and for God to meet with them. To be with them. To be faithful to his covenant promise to his people.

So as we come to this meeting of the people at Mount Sinai, this is a high point, literally a high point, in their national story. And it is a national story, because in the past, all those covenant promises that we've heard stated and restated were made to a family, the family of Abraham. But now this is a nation bound together by God, bound together to God. And so all of a sudden, they're discovering their goal.

To meet with God and to worship. And of course, in any journey, goal and purpose matters. We don't want to wander aimlessly. We all set a direction, set a course.

[3 : 5 2] Think about the wisdom literature. Not just in the Bible, but generally, wisdom literature will often speak of life as a path, life as a journey, which also implies purpose and destination. It's crucial for us as people to know where we're going, where we're heading. And Exodus 19, then, becomes an invitation to see the goal that not just Israel were made for, but that we're all made for.

That we're made to know and enjoy life with God. To hear his word, to enjoy fellowship with him, to receive and to experience his love. But of course, we need to know who God really is.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, he does something really helpful in book one of that work.

He discusses generally the universal law of human nature. And he makes the point that all of us as people, we know there is an ought to in the universe. There are things that we ought to do, things we ought not to do. He says every argument implies that. There is a standard that is agreed upon, and arguments happen when that agreement is broken. And taking that further, we understand that there is an absolute standard that exists. When we compare, for example, one morality against another morality, we're always recognizing that there is an ultimate standard that we can compare against. And C.S. Lewis does a really useful job in that book of moving from that to recognizing that there must therefore be a divine mind behind that sense of that universal moral law.

And so, we're also left with that uneasy feeling, all of us, in our conscience that we have at different times and in different ways broken the law of God, and that before true goodness, as we consider and confront true goodness, we have reason to be uneasy. And that matters because one of the jobs that we have as the church is to remind people of the reality of that moral law, and to remind people of the real power behind that law, because it's only as we recognize true goodness and holiness that we recognize how far short we fall that people are ever going to be ready to receive Christianity as good news. And the good news that we find here in Exodus 19 is good news about the nature of God, that God is awesome in his holiness. We see that here at the mountain. But we also recognize that he is a God of amazing grace, and he's a God who comes to be with his people, and that's the goal of his saving work. So, we need to think about these things together. So, let's begin with God and amazing grace, especially in verses 3 to 8. Now, just to make the observation in verses 1 and 2, Moses, our author, highlights the fact that they've now arrived at Mount Sinai. It becomes a section marker within the book, because the people are about to spend around a year camped around Mount Sinai. But here they are, as they've just arrived, they're preparing to hear God's law and to enter into covenant. And then Moses, in verse 3, goes up to meet with God. And the first time he goes up, God gives him, commissions him to speak to the people.

[7 : 41] What's his message? Well, it's a wonderful message that speaks to us of God's grace. Verse 4. God says to Moses, tell the people what I, the Lord, have already done. You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to my cell.

So, he reminds them of his rescue, of his protection, of his caring for them, of his carrying them to himself, that powerful eagle image. He's saying to them, remember that, as God, I have graciously acted in your favor, in judging Egypt, in saving you from slavery. And it's so important to recognize where this falls. The law comes in chapter 20, but before law, there is grace. It is a people who are saved by grace, who are given the law as their means for how to live in covenant with God.

And we discover that the people are brought here to Mount Sinai because of God's grace, because of his faithfulness, because of his covenant promise. God told Moses that as early as chapter 2, in verse 24. We're told God heard their groaning when they're slaves, and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. In chapter 6, in verses 6 and 7, we hear something similar. Moses is commissioned there to say to the Israelites, I am the Lord. I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves, and I will redeem you, and I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.

So there's wonderful grace in what God has already done. And then verse 5, they're told, here is what the Lord requires. Now, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant. So they're told to obey and to keep the covenant. So remember, this is a people who are saved by grace. So this call to obedience is not a call to obedience in order to earn God's favor. It's a call to obey in order to enjoy the benefits of life as God's people. They're commanded to keep the Ten Commandments as a response of faith. They're called to the obedience of faith. Now, we notice in verse 8, their very enthusiastic response, that people all responded together, we will do everything the Lord has said.

Now, history will make clear that they don't do that. They didn't know their own hearts. Perhaps they didn't understand just how much they would need God's grace. They will certainly need the sacrifices for forgiveness that God provided. For us too, it's important to understand that we need grace in order to obey. That our willpower by itself won't cut it. We need our hearts to be transformed by grace. We need our obedience to be fueled by God's gracious provision of His Spirit.

[11 : 07] But then look next at what the Lord promises within the covenant. So He's spoken about His grace in saving them. He's called them to obedience. But that's an obedience that will be fueled by grace.

But then look at His wonderful promises here in verse 6. If you've been here for the last few weeks, you'll know how much grumbling, how much testing of God has been going on. But here is amazing grace, even to a grumbling, complaining, testing people.

If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you'll be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you'll be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Three things there. There's a special love implied here. The language of a treasured possession. So God uses that imagery that He is a king. And as the king, the whole earth is His. But He has a particular treasure that He keeps close to Himself of particular value. His most prized possession, God says, is His church. He's His people. So there's a special love in this covenant that God establishes with His people. There's also a special access. When God calls them a kingdom of priests, it's a reminder of the freedom of access that the people have to the Lord their God.

They're not on the outside looking in. They're not living by themselves and God is far from them. Rather, God is coming to live literally in the midst of the camp. So they can really know and enjoy their God and King. It's one of the great privileges of the people of God. So they have a special love and a special access and they also have a special calling. A calling to be a holy nation. To be a people who are set apart to belong to God, to be set apart by God's loving choice of them, set apart to enjoy life with Him, set apart to make Him known in the world, in part drawing the nations towards God as they live these set apart lives. In the way Israel lived and cared for one another and practiced justice and in the way that they worshipped, they were to point people to the truth of their God. And it's the same for the church today. As we were reminded this morning, our life, our witness, our character, our worship is to be a pointer to the reality of Jesus.

[14 : 04] So this is wonderful news, isn't it, for Israel on their long and winding and often confusing journey. They're God's treasured possession. A kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

So then perhaps it's no wonder that Peter, as he writes to encourage and to comfort and to call a church in the first century to persevere as they begin to face opposition, as they live as exiles on the margins of society, he applies the same language to them. Says what's true of Israel is true for the church in the first century, and it's true for the church in the 21st century also.

It's a remarkable call of grace. Many of you perhaps will know that it was the General Assembly this year. There's always a Lord High Commissioner. This year it was a royal visit. Edward and Sophie were in town. They were down at Holyrood House, and so some of us saw royalty. Some people that we know shook hands with royalty, even shared some canopies with royalty. But nobody was invited to live in their palace. Nobody was invited to join their family. Partial but not complete. That's what the true king does for us as he calls us to himself. He invites us all the way in by his grace. And our need as his people is to know the God of amazing grace, and to be amazed by that grace every day.

As Martin Luther said, to beat the gospel into our head and into our heart, so it transforms how we think and how we live. To remember that we too, just like Israel, are redeemed by God's love. That we too have been carried on eagle's wings out of a deeper slavery. The slavery of sin leading to death.

And by Jesus' work on the cross, God has brought us to himself. And he treasures us. Jesus, the Son of God, the Son of God came into this world, and he truly did obey God's law. He truly did keep the law of God. He did the will of the Father always, dying in love for those who don't, for those who can, for those who won't. And when our faith is in the Lord Jesus, we have this wonderful, new relationship with God, where we are truly precious to him. In fact, Jesus loves his bride so much that he has tied his joy to the church being with him. So that Jesus' joy won't be truly complete until his return, and he takes all his people to be with him forever. That's how precious the church is to Jesus. The church is precious to God our Father. He holds us in his hands, and he will never let us go. We're invited into personal relationship with the God who made us. Jesus shocked the people of his day when he said, when you pray, pray Father, our Father in heaven. There's a unique intimacy with God that we have through Jesus. And remember, Jesus said, I don't call you servants, I call you friends. And we get to participate in the mission of Jesus as we too are called to live those holy lives to bear witness to the good news. So we discover a God of amazing grace. We also discover, or secondly, a God of awesome holiness. And that's in verse 10 towards the end of the chapter.

[18:23] I imagine most of us and most people that the last point is one that we like and we feel comfortable with. We love to hear about grace. We love to be reminded that God is love. And perhaps we'd like to stop there. And because the next reality about the God who is, becomes much more unsettling. We certainly recognize that it becomes really unsettling for Israel at Mount Sinai as they are confronted with the holiness of God. I don't know if anybody's been watching or has watched the documentary series, This is Wrexham, which is following the football team, Wrexham FC, and their Hollywood owners. Well, there's a really fascinating scene where the owners have applied for government money to redo their stadium. And as part of their appeal, it turns out that the king and the queen, Charles and Camilla, are going to come and visit. And what's really fascinating is that these two Hollywood stars take multiple etiquette lessons. I thought it was really striking. Even Hollywood knows meeting and approaching a king. It really matters how you do it, that you do it right.

For your information, if you ever have to shake hands with a king, it's two pumps and release. That's the one thing I picked up. If it matters how we approach the king of the UK, how much more?

The king of the UK, how much more? The king of the UK, how much more? The king of the UK, how much more? And so Exodus 19 reminds us in lots of different ways, God is holy. Be careful. Don't presume upon him that God is truly awesome. We see it first in the preparation that the people are to make.

So if you go with me to verse 10, the Lord said to Moses, go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Make them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day. So they must wash to be ready. And of course, washing in the Bible is connected with the idea of purity. That becomes a symbol of the need that the people have to be pure, to have a pure heart before God.

The God who says, be holy because I am holy. We see it in a different way in verse 15. He said to the people, prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations. So there's a washing now, there's an abstaining. What's the symbol here? It's a symbol that God calls them in this moment to have hearts totally devoted to him, ready to hear and respond to his word and give their first love to the God who saved them. We also see the limiting that there is. Verse 12 and 13, put limits for the people around the mountain. Be careful you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it.

[21 : 29] Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death, whether that's a person or an animal. It reminds us perhaps of what happened in Exodus 3. Moses at the burning bush as he encounters God and he's told, take your sandals off because the place where you're standing is holy ground. Where God is becomes holy. Mount Sinai is marked as holy because God will be there. But again, remarkably, there's still the invitation to come. Verse 13, only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they approach the mountain. So they don't get to decide when and how. They get to respond to the king's invitation.

The king's summons by grace and the people are to come. That limiting, of course, was restated. As Moses goes up to meet God, the Lord said to him, go down and warn the people not to force their way through. There was that fear that some people might presume, that some might approach with idle curiosity. We want to see God's glory. There was that worry that people might approach on the basis of their own personal righteousness. And people need to understand our God is a consuming fire.

And so the preparation speaks to the holiness, the otherness of God. And we see it next as God comes down in the presence of God as it's revealed here. So in verse 20, we're told the Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai, which isn't itself amazing. The creator of all draws near to speak to Moses, to be with his people.

Here are the signs of his coming. Verse 16, on the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning with a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast. The trumpet announces the king of the universe has come to be among his people. And the whole creation reacted. There's thunder and lightning in verse 18. You get that sense that Mount Sinai has almost become a volcano covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire. There's in the earthquake as the whole mountain trembles violently. The Lord is present. We've already seen through Exodus the symbols of the cloud and the fire representing God's presence. And the fire representing God's presence and presence with power.

And interestingly, in the way that it's described here in verse 18, it says, Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire. And you get the sense that the cloud, the smoke is serving to shroud, to veil the blazing glory and holiness of God so that the people might be safe, that they might be shielded. You know, like those warnings you get around solar eclipse times. You cannot look directly at the sun. We cannot look directly at the blazing glory of God. And so he shields something of his glory with the smoke.

[24 : 55] So the holiness of God is on clear display, but we might be asking, do we really need the holiness idea? Wouldn't it just be better to focus on God's love? Especially as we think that, you know, in our city, it's not even anywhere close to 51%, probably 90 plus percent of people are not in church, don't know anything about God. Wouldn't this attract less people if we talk about holiness? Wouldn't it attract more people? We just talk about love? Back to C.S. Lewis, you know, the moral law and the power behind the law, Romans 1. Paul will say, actually, the truth is everybody has that consciousness that there is a God. We like to suppress it, perhaps, but everybody knows. And that being the case that there is a God, and he does judge, actually becomes really important what you and I need. What, 51% who say they don't have any religion, the whole of Scotland needs, is the truth. That there is God who did make everything, and he is truly holy. He is perfect. He has no law. He is separate from all that is evil. He is true good. He is the one who determines what is right and what is wrong. He is the one who determines what is true and what is false. And to break his good law is to face the danger of judgment.

And people need to know that because only then does God's grace sound like good news. It sounds like the cure to the horrible illness of sin that we all wrestle with. It's only then that the Christian message of repentance and forgiveness makes sense.

So we've seen a God of amazing grace and a God of awesome holiness. One last thing to recognize, and it's God and the Emmanuel principle. The Emmanuel principle, God with us. So, so far we've been following Israel's journey, and now they've reached their goal to meet with God. What is God like?

He is both awesome and holiness and amazing in His grace and His love. He is the one who has called them. He has rescued them. He's carried them to Himself. And they must be careful how they approach.

They must be careful to approach in the right way. And we might wonder, how do these two realities go together? They seem so opposed. It may be why Christians and why churches across history have tended to skew in favor of either God as love or God as holy, perhaps liberal and conservative. How can we keep those realities together in our own faith and as we look to communicate who God is? Because we must, because that's who He is. Turn with me to verse 9. Verse 9, we have this. The Lord said to Moses, I'm going to come to you in a dense cloud so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you. So, three things to notice there. First, the Lord comes. So, this is the Emmanuel principle. This is the heart of the covenant. Central to the covenant promise, the fact that God would be with His people, that we are saved for relationship with our God. So, the Lord comes. The second thing we see is that the

[28 : 33] Lord speaks. And that reminds us, as God's people, we need His Word of truth and life. That Israel will discover how they are to live in line with God's character and will. How are they to be the redeemed people of God? They need God's Word? And the Lord provides the mediator. Perhaps the most striking thing here, and maybe you noticed it, the people hear me speaking with you, Moses, and will always put their trust in you. Not they'll put their trust in me as their God, but they'll put their trust in you, Moses, as the mediator, as my chosen representative. That's a reminder that they need Moses, the man on the mountain who meets with God on their behalf. As we close, let's recognize that hundreds of years later, we discover how these words, these words of promise, are ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Jesus. Jesus, who before His birth was announced as the one who would be

Emmanuel, God with His people. Jesus, who is both the Lord God, the Father speaks from heaven, this is my Son, the one who receives worship while on earth, but He's also the perfect mediator. Fully God and fully man, becomes the perfect middleman, the perfect representative for us.

Jesus is God's Word, to us God's Word, who became flesh. He is God's ultimate revelation, that to hear and to receive the good news that's all about Jesus is to gain entry to eternal life with God.

During Jesus' life on earth, on another mountain, and Moses was there too, Jesus was transfigured so that His appearance shone with the glory of God. So Jesus is up on a mountain and He is shining with the glory of God.

And then what happens? A cloud comes, covers the mountain, and the Father speaks, this is my Son. I love Him. Listen to Him. And so we meet in Jesus, one who reveals God, one who speaks as God, one who is the way home to God. And to read the Gospels is to discover Jesus, the one who lived a life of beautiful holiness, to discover the one who always obeyed, who never sinned, who is full of goodness and truth, marked by compassion and mercy, so that even as people betrayed Him, even as He was led to His death, He never sought revenge, He never acted sinfully in anger.

[31 : 51] And while on earth, He extended beautiful grace to sinners, so that moral and social outcasts flocked to Him. Foreigners and rebels were drawn by Him because of His great grace.

And His cross, the climax of His mission, shows us how holiness and grace go together.

Because there, as Jesus dies in the place of sinners, holy justice is satisfied. Jesus is loaded up with sin, facing the penalty that sin deserves.

On Mount Calvary, our great Savior is put today. And at the same time, amazing grace is displayed. The Father giving the Son as an act of love that we don't deserve.

The Son coming to serve us, to save us as our substitute. One who's ready to be cast out and to face death, so we can be drawn in and truly live with God, knowing God with us.

[33 : 01] So that He, Jesus, is our holy and gracious God. And He is how we can approach God. So that we can approach God, as the author of Hebrews says, not trembling with fear, but with bold confidence.

We come boldly to the throne of grace. God's people have no fear of being consumed because of our great mediator, Jesus, our man on the mountain, the God-man.

And so our great need, our national need, is that Jesus would come to us. That we would hear His gospel word of salvation.

That we would trust in Him. So that we too would reach the goal of our journey. That we would know our God. That we would meet with our God.

That we would enjoy Him. That we would worship Him. Let's pray. Lord, our God, we thank you for revealing in your words the kind of God that you are.

[34 : 14] That you don't leave us in the dark. You don't leave us to guess and speculate. Lord, we thank you that you are both awesome in your holiness and amazing in your grace. And we thank you that Jesus has come to be with us to demonstrate that so clearly to us.