

# AM Exodus 19:1-9 & Matthew 28:16-20 The Great Commission

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[ 0 : 00 ] Exodus chapter 19 and we're going to read from verses 1 to 9. That's on page 72 of the Pew Bible. Exodus chapter 19 at verse 1.

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came to 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.

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 all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

[ 1 : 23 ] These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him.

All the people answered together and said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do. And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.

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.

Amen. We'll turn again to God's word after we've sung again. Let's sing another psalm. One more time from God's word before we consider it together.

Let's look at Matthew's gospel. Matthew, the last chapter. Chapter 28 of Matthew's gospel.

[ 2 : 23 ] And just that last part from verse 16. Commonly known as the Great Commission.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him.

But some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

May God bless to us these readings we've taken from his holy word. Now before we turn to consider what these words mean for us, let's join together.

[ 3 : 36 ] Now just to say as I begin that one main difficulty we have, I think we often have in the western world especially, to understand the Bible, is that we often fail to see connections that are there quite obviously to the Middle Eastern mind.

And we don't make allowance for the fact that God's word in its origin was spoken into a different culture. And it was an ancient culture at that.

So in terms of distance, culture and time also, we're at a disadvantage humanly speaking. The original hearers would have made links that we cannot without some kind of special unpacking of the context.

For example, one small example would be that to understand what Jesus was doing when he washed his disciples' feet after the Last Supper, we need to know not just about the action itself, but we need also to know about the kind of person who would normally perform this act.

That is to say that the lowest ranking servant of a household would have been the one to whom that particular duty would fall. And so that gives Jesus' act of washing his disciples' feet a very clear message of self-humbling.

[ 4 : 59 ] That no, and what he's saying there is that no act of loving service towards God or God's people is to be considered too low for us.

So that's just an example of how reading into the culture helps us to understand the big message. When we come to Matthew 28, we find Jesus, after his resurrection, meeting with his disciples on a mountain in Galilee.

We're not told which mountain it was. There's been much speculation over this. But, however, there he gives them instructions for their mission. And sometimes we call these instructions that we read this morning, the Great Commission.

What is often failed to be recognized is that these instructions are given by Jesus in a form which is not easily recognized by modern Western eyes.

But once we recognize and realize this formula that he uses, the Great Commission takes on an importance beyond the appearance of mere words.

[ 6 : 09 ] Jesus' words here are in the form of a covenant. And this is, it ties in with what he said at the Last Supper, that he was making a new covenant with his people in his blood.

No longer the blood of animals. This was going to be something which was established in the light of the cross and the blood he would shed there.

So, this new covenant he was bringing to being was to replace the old covenant. A covenant being a solemn agreement.

Which he, Jesus, as the second person of the Trinity, had made with Moses and Israel at Mount Sinai. So, we don't often think, do we, about Jesus being on Mount Sinai.

But he was there. He is the word of God. He is the communication between God and man. So, as the eternal logos, as he's called, the word. He was there on Mount Sinai as the second person of the Trinity speaking to Moses, as we read.

[ 7 : 17 ] Now, that was the time when the old covenant was brought into being. With one particular people called Israel. Covenants were common in the ancient Near East and often made by an emperor or an overlord, you might call him, to regulate his relationship with a people he had conquered.

Such a covenant, for example, was made by Nebuchadnezzar when he conquered Judah. You read about that in 2 Kings.

King Jehoiakim was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and then to make Jehoiakim into what was called a vassal king. A king who was to serve the greater king, the emperor.

A covenant was made to show the terms of their treaty. So, when such covenants were made, what would happen is that an emperor would call the people to a place of his appointing.

And then he would declare to them the terms of his covenant. For example, in the case of Nebuchadnezzar, he might have said something like this to Jehoiakim.

[ 8 : 28 ] He'd give information about himself and what he'd done for them. I'm Nebuchadnezzar, lord of all the earth, who has power over your lives. They would also then say what he required of them.

I require you to give me so many taxes, so many soldiers conscripted into my army, so many crops a year from your fields. He would spell out the benefits of serving him.

For example, my rule is so wise, you need me to be ruled properly. I will protect you from your enemies. And there would also be punishments which would be imposed in the case of rebellion or disobedience.

With this in mind, whenever we look at the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy in particular, you find that the Lord uses this kind of formula in his dealings with Israel.

This is what you might call God accommodating himself to a culture of the time. And so, what we said about Nebuchadnezzar, we could say about the Lord regarding Exodus 20.

[ 9 : 37 ] Information about himself and what he'd done for them. I am the Lord, I'm Yahweh, your God, who has brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, out of the house of slavery.

So that's something about what he'd done for them. What he required of them. You will have no other gods before me. You will not make any graven images, even those which would represent

me.

Don't worship them. And so on. The Ten Commandments are within the context and framework of that covenant idea. There would be the benefits of serving him, protection and provision.

He says in Deuteronomy, I carried you on eagle's wings. I brought you to myself. I will be your God. You will be my people. You will be my treasured possession if you obey me.

All of this is in the context of a great overlord dealing with his people. Not like slaves, but as honored servants of the greatest king of all.

[10:40] And these words were spoken to Israel by God the Son when they were at Mount Sinai. Now in Matthew 28, he again speaks to his people. Now not the twelve tribes, but the, I was going to say the twelve apostles.

Only eleven of them were there at the time. But notionally there were twelve apostles who were representing a new Israel. And Jesus draws on the language of covenant as he does so.

What was a mountain of fear? If we'd read the list, maybe we should have read the rest of that chapter. Read it this afternoon and see how in Exodus 19, the people are quaking with fear when God descends on Mount Sinai.

That was a mountain of fear for Moses and Israel. Meeting with a holy God as an unholy people. Now that had become a mountain of joy.

Because the holy God has now become reconciled to his people. Signified by the tearing of that curtain of the temple the day Jesus died. The barriers have been removed.

[11:47] The people may come to God without fear. Except a holy fear. The fear which does not wish to offend the one we love the most.

That's why the disciples could stand before Jesus without fear on that mountain in Galilee. So what do we see as the major points of this great commission of Jesus given in covenantal form?

See, first of all, covenant authority declared. As we heard, when these great overlords made or renewed a covenant, they always appointed a place of significance which would reinforce the lordship and character before the people.

That's why Jesus chose Galilee and this mountain in Galilee as the place of his establishing of his new covenant. So we're not told, as I say, which mountain this was.

But one tradition is it was Mount Tabor. Which is traditionally the mount of the transfiguration. Where the identity and character of the Lord Jesus as the eternal son of God were revealed in power.

[12:52] Could have been there. It's not so much important where it was as to what happened there. The Lord Jesus revealed the full extent now of his authority.

Total. All authority in heaven and upon earth has been given to me. This is the same God who in glorious majesty had descended in smoke and flame on Sinai.

And now he is standing, not with trumpet blasts and thunder and lightning happening as it suits as at Sinai. He stands there.

He is as the good shepherd. The loving saviour. He is still the overlord. But he is a loving lord who has given his life for his sheep. And he's now about to send out his under shepherds in search of the rest of the sheep.

As he told them, he says, other sheep I have which are not from this fold. Them also I must bring from outside of Israel. So the question at this point would be how do you see Jesus?

[13:56] Various representations throughout history have shown Jesus as a weak, bearded, long-haired hippie. Or somebody who is soft and wimpish.

It's no wonder in the light of those stereotypes that so many modern Scottish males have tended to avoid Christian faith as something that is effeminate and weak.

If Jesus were seen as he really is, the all-powerful lord of all creation, then perhaps he would be taken much more seriously. For a little while he disguised his true identity and lived as a human for the suffering of death, for our sins.

In what Martin Luther called the incognito of the cross. But now he's been crowned with glory and honour. As we read in Philippians 2. God the Father has now highly exalted him and publicly accorded to him the name which is above every name.

Which name is that? Yahweh. The Lord has revealed, the Father has revealed the Son as Yahweh, the eternal God. Given his throne back to share the glory he enjoyed with the Father from before ever the earth was.

[ 15 : 13 ] But in addition to that, there's a man in the glory. There's a man on the throne of heaven today. The God-man Christ Jesus. Who says all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.

When John the Apostle in the book of Revelation is looking into these great mysteries that are revealed to him by Christ.

He says in chapter 4 of Revelation, he says, I looked and behold there was a throne and there was a lamb in the very midst of the throne. That's where Jesus is.

The lamb in the midst of the throne. This lamb who is also a lion. And so the question, that's the main challenge for us is, have we recognized Jesus for who he truly is?

The Lord of all. Have we submitted our lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ? If not, why not? To him alone belongs all our worship.

[ 16 : 16 ] He does not rule with tyranny and selfish ambition like so many of this world's potentates do. He rules through love for the protection and interests of his subjects.

He rules as the head of God's family, as we were reading earlier, providing for all our needs and protecting us with his presence. He loves us with an everlasting love.

So covenant authority was declared there. Secondly, covenant obedience was required. It was always part of God's plan that Jesus' disciples would continue on the earth the work that he had begun.

As he prayed in John 17, he says, Father, as you sent me into the world, so now I am also sending them into the world. He began by calling a few disciples, trained them for a few years.

And for 40 days after his resurrection, he taught them different aspects about the kingdom of God and how it could be extended. And the instructions he gave there have come to us.

[ 17 : 23 ] They've been passed on to us. As the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians, he says, That which was given to me I have delivered unto you. This is how scripture and the requirements, the commandments, the New Testament commandments of scripture are given.

Being passed down from the apostles to the churches that they founded and then to the churches that they planted and so on. The same requirement coming to us that came to them.

So what is the instruction? There seems to be a list of commands in Matthew 18, 28 rather, at verse 18. But really there is only one.

There's only one command. Make disciples. Make disciples. What's a disciple? Another way to think of disciple is a learner. An apprentice.

Because all our lives we'll be disciples of Jesus. We'll never be masters. We'll always be learning more and more about Jesus. As these disciples, learners, apprentices of the Christian way.

[ 18 : 30 ] So that's the command. Make disciples. It's a command to bring all the nations of the world under the authority of Jesus Christ. The Bible doesn't use the word Christian.

Well, it does twice, actually. But when it does, it makes it clear that Christian was the name that was given to the Christians by those who were not Christians. And then it was finally accepted.

Just for the removal of confusion. Yes, okay, we're Christians. We'll accept that name if you want us to style us that way. But first of all, they were called believers or followers of the way.

Referring to Jesus as the way to God. So, make disciples. How? How were they to do that? First of all, by going. Secondly, by baptizing.

Thirdly, by teaching. So, by going. By going where? By going to all the nations. And this is the common theme in our Psalms for today. These four Psalms have this unifying theme that the gospel which was restricted to Israel and enjoyed only by Israel for so many thousands of years is now going out to the ends of the earth.

[ 19 : 48 ] And this is the astounding statement that Jesus makes to these men. God's grace up to then had been focused only on the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And those who like Ruth the Moabitess or Rahab the harlot would come into the community of Israel. It was always in Israel though that God dealt for matters of salvation.

Even Jesus said to the woman of Samaria, salvation is from the Jews. And he was right. It was God had coursed it that way up to that point. But now Jesus is saying go out from Jerusalem to Judea, other parts of it, then to Samaria, then to the utmost parts of the earth.

Because Gentiles were reckoned to be unclean in God's sight. They had no accurate knowledge of God. It would be hard taking the gospel to Gentiles.

It sounds actually a bit like the mentality I used to hear from some people. That it was easier to reach out to people who already had a church background. Since it was assumed that they would be brought into the church more easily.

[ 20 : 55 ] There's only a half truth there however. People who have a church background have knowledge in their brain which is about the gospel. It's not illuminated knowledge yet.

Like before I became a Christian in Dumfries through the witness and testimony of this church. For 18 years I'd come to know lots and lots of things through a Sunday school about Jesus.

But the lights were off. That knowledge meant nothing. But when God does decide to regenerate and awaken a heart. Yes, when the lights go on you say, oh now I know who David was.

I understand who Moses is. Yes, all the information comes to life. So there is that. But yet, don't forget this. That it was actually the church of the day that crucified Jesus.

So it's only a half truth to say it may be easier to go to people who already have a knowledge. It could be difficult. Without the illuminating power of the Spirit of God.

[ 21 : 58 ] So, in my experience it's often the other way around. Sometimes the hardest people to reach with the good news of Christ can be unregenerate people with a church background. Who for one reason or another have put off and put off and put off surrendering their life to Christ.

And every time they put it off there's this like another element of hardness becomes, comes into them. And unless, unless God himself softens such hearts they will become hard as adamant.

So, whereas I remember going to the door of one man in Nairn when I was up there. And this man had no church background whatsoever.

And I said to him, would you like to come to our church? And he said, okay. Just like that. Okay. I was getting all ready to explain lots and lots of things about the church and about the gospel.

He just said, okay. Okay. So, when God does open a heart and prepare a heart to say, okay. Then it can often be the other way around.

[ 23 : 02 ] Remember this. That at the end of the day this is God's work we're doing. He is the one who is opening hearts like that of Lydia. Or sending earthquakes to waken up the Philippian jailer.

It's his work. So, how far should we go? Well, Jesus our Lord says, well to all the nations. And although I don't believe that every Christian is meant to become an overseas missionary.

There's no doubt that many are called to be, to serve overseas. Especially to unreached peoples. That's the real priority, I think, in our day and generation. Just like Scotland, there are many other nations which have heard the gospel.

And which have turned away. What about those nations which haven't yet had the opportunity? I think they should go to the very top of the list. Scotland should still figure there.

But I think we have had a fair innings, as they say, in cricket over the last several hundreds of years. And if the Lord were to turn away from Scotland, yeah, that would make it harder for the churches to maintain a witness in such a hard generation.

[ 24 : 10 ] But that's what Jesus did. That would be sharing the experience of Jesus. Testifying to people who might ultimately crucify you. That's why he said, take up your cross and follow me if you want to be my disciple.

So, the important thing is to be open and listening to what God is saying to you. I mean, there may be some people here. I mean, I pretty much can say I'm not probably going abroad now.

I've had my time of things. But younger people, as you grow up and hear about countries that don't know Jesus yet, where the gospel hasn't reached yet, you might be inspired.

But like William Carey, the missionary who went to India, you might be inspired to go and take the good news and work there among them, get to know them, share the gospel, so they too can come to know Jesus.

So, going to all the nations is a really important thing. By baptizing them, Jesus is referring here to the application of water in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

[ 25 : 16 ] Which could be, by various means, we know Christians throughout the world, some do it by pouring the water, some do it by sprinkling, some do it by immersion. The major point that Jesus is making in our passage is that those who would be his disciples must first be identified as belonging to him.

That's the significance of baptism. Identification with Jesus Christ. At the time these words were spoken, for a Jew to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ was an invitation to be persecuted in the way Jesus was persecuted.

Even the Pharisees have said, if anybody said that Jesus could be the Messiah, or sent by God, that person was to be put out of the synagogue and hounded. It really cost something to be a Christian in those days.

Roman soldiers who identified with Jesus could expect to be executed for not worshipping Caesar as a god. And even today it can be very dangerous for someone from a Muslim background to convert to Christ.

In every case, baptism is the definitive moment. The kind of, we might say, the crossing of the Rubicon that Julius Caesar did, and there was no turning back. This is the Rubicon moment for somebody from an antagonistic culture, when after they've crossed that point, there's no turning back.

[ 26 : 42 ] I've been involved in discipling young men from Tunisia and Iran, who became Christians in the last few years.

And my friend from Tunisia, who was baptized as a believer in Edinburgh two years ago, he can't go back. If he goes back to his country in Tunisia, he'll be killed.

And so he's staying here in the UK. He's very sorry. He can sometimes speak with his mum on the phone. His sister's a bit more sympathetic.

But his brothers are dead against him. And they would kill him if he went back. There's another brother from Iran who's Kurdish. And he had to leave because he actually saw the...

First of all, he left Iran because he saw that Islam was false. And he began to tell others that Islam was false. Ironically, he didn't yet know Jesus. But he was on the road searching for the truth.

[ 27 : 48 ] He came to Scotland and he heard the gospel. Through Harpin Memorial Church in Glasgow. And he was converted. His search had come to an end. So there are people like that who...

For whom it's a real issue, real question to be baptized. Because that is that moment beyond which there's no turning back. In our own country and culture, it has because of the way that many churches view the unity of the covenant, like the free church, then children are often baptized as families.

Their parents present them as such. But yet even with infant baptism, the element of faith and commitment on the part of the parents must not be overlooked or minimized in any way, as it sometimes has.

As Principal William Cunningham of the Free Church College said in the 19th century, no one should bring their child for baptism who does not themselves possess the faith and commitment which would be required if they were being baptized for themselves as a believer.

So that's quite a challenge for parents who wish to present their children for baptism. Do I actually follow Christ?

[ 29 : 05 ] Am I committed to Jesus myself? Why should I be bringing this child up in my family if I'm not prepared to show them the way of Christ, first of all, by my own faith and commitment?

So we know that through many churches in the UK, because of traditionalism, what was later known as christening became more or less a rite of passage.

But thankfully there are churches which, according to the principle of unity of the covenant, are making it clear that this is no mere rite of passage.

So then, whether you were baptized on your own profession, which has become increasingly common in the case of people who have no church background, or whether you were presented for baptism by believing parents, the point is that baptism makes a strong statement that as your covenant overlord, Christ has a claim on your life.

In identifying with Jesus through baptism, you are saying, I was bought with a price. I belong not to myself, but to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[ 30 : 17 ] Identifying with Christ. So by baptism, by baptizing, thirdly, by teaching the things that Jesus commanded. And what were those? Are those things only to be found in red letters, in a red letter Bible?

No. He's referring to the things he had commanded his apostles. In Acts chapter 1 verse 2, we read that Jesus was taken up to heaven after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

And those commands come to us through the Gospels and the letters of the New Testament. So when we read in Acts 2.42 that the new believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching,

that refers to the teaching which Jesus himself had passed on to them.

So, just to recap then, we've considered the covenant authority which Jesus declared for the new covenant. We've considered the covenant obedience which he required in that new covenant. But thirdly, the covenant blessing was assured. Jesus knew that these commands he had given in the Greek commission were not for the faint-hearted. Those apostles and every believer who followed their example would face great difficulties and trials, as we've said.

[ 31 : 33 ] John Fox, the martyrologist who lived, I think, in the 17th century, records that almost every one of the 12 apostles met with a martyr's death in various parts of the world as they sought to fulfill the Great Commission.

So, in conclusion then, what was it that impelled them and others to go to the nations in obedience to Christ's command? What was it? And what should it also be that should impel us?

It was this. He said, I am with you always to the very end of the age. It was the assurance of his presence. They were assured that Jesus knew his people could not fulfill his commands if he himself were not with them.

So, a few days after he spoke these words, after he ascended, he sent his Holy Spirit to make his presence real again in their hearts to dwell with them and give them the strength to go on and to go out in his name to the ends of the earth.

So, they were assured of the covenant Lord's presence. They knew that the covenant Lord was sovereign over all. Every place they went to, they can say, this place belongs to Jesus Christ.

[ 32 : 54 ] For he has all authority over heaven and all of earth and over every soul in this place to declaring his authority to those whom they preached the gospel. And thirdly, they knew that they were identifying with their covenant Lord.

He had suffered as he testified to the truth and so were we. even as we speak, there are many laws now being made in the UK which stem from ideologies which are diametrically opposed to God's Holy Word and to our understanding of humanity as God created us.

And as the church stands for the truth in those areas as well as in other areas too, we can expect that we may have to suffer as we stand for the truth of God in this day and ungodly generation.

But with Christ in our hearts, in our churches, as we seek to submit to his rule as our covenant over Lord, we will be empowered by the strength that he alone provides.

It was that that made Paul the Apostle declare in Philippians. He says, yes, I can do this because I can do everything, all these things, through him who is strengthening me.

[ 34 : 14 ] So may we, like them, do so to the praise of his glory. Amen. Let's pray.