

Meeting God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 January 2008

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] If you would like to follow along, you can take your Bible out and turn to Exodus 19 on page 64. Exodus 19. We come back to Exodus with a bang today.

Exodus 19 is one of the most momentous and menacing chapters in all the Bible. I don't think there's anything quite like it. And if you just look at the first two verses, you can see that God has finished rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt.

But he doesn't bring them to the land flowing with milk and honey. He brings them to this mountain, Mount Sinai, and he brings them to himself, to the place where it all began, where he appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

And he keeps them there. He keeps them there for an entire year. And if you're tracking with us, from Exodus 19 all the way to the end of the book, they're still at Sinai, all the way through the next book, Leviticus, they're at Sinai, until half the way through the book of Numbers, they move on.

And the reason is, God wants to teach his people one very important thing, that he wants to come and dwell with them. And so next week, from chapter 20 to 24, he will give his people the law.

[1 : 2 9] From chapter 25 to the end of Exodus, he says, I want you to build a little tent for me to live in. We call it the tabernacle. We'll look at both of those. And then in the book of Leviticus, which I'm sure you're all salivating for, which we're not going to do, he gives them a way in which he, the holy God, may live with them.

And the reason chapter 19 is such a shattering chapter is that for the first time in scriptures, God comes to meet with his people en masse. So you see down there in verse 4, he says, I brought you to myself.

Look down at verse 9, look, I'm coming to you in a thick cloud. And verse 17, then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God.

Now that sounds like a happy Sunday activity, doesn't it? I mean, if you were to go home today and someone would ask you, how was church? And you were to say, we met God, that would be a pleasant thing to say, don't you think?

Yeah. Yes. The problem is, you see, Exodus 19 shows us that that is unspeakably dangerous and unspeakably devastating.

[2 : 4 5] In fact, Moses continually warns the people in the words of God, don't even touch the edge of the mountain. If you do, you will be put to death.

And I think most of us in our sophistication recoil from this kind of thing. We say, come on, can't we get past a God of fear? God just could not or should not be like this.

I mean, we need a religion built on love and kindness, not on fear and terror. And as we look at this this morning, we need to see that the living God is not like us.

His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. He is completely untameable. And to domesticate God, to try and make him fit our view of things, what we have to do is we have to take the axe and we have to chop off both sides, both extremes in our view of God.

We have to do away with God's burning, strange and alien grace. And we have to do away with God's holiness.

[3 : 59] You can't have one without the other. And when you chop those things off, you end up with this mushy middle, a kind of pale reflection of ourselves. And it's an idol and it's not going to do anything for us.

It's this two-sidedness of God which is at the heart of the chapter. Very interesting. You know, the people of God are saved.

They're redeemed. They're rescued. What's the first thing God wants us to know after he saved us and rescued us? It's this two-sidedness of his personality. He wants us to feel both his glorious grace and his burning purity.

In fact, the whole chapter is arranged in such a way that we are to feel both of them. There are three scenes. Actually, three times Moses goes up the mountain.

He's over 80. God keeps saying, come up. And the last time he gets to the top and God says, go back down. We'll come to that. So, the first scene is all about his grace.

[5 : 01] The last scene is all about his holiness. And in between, the middle scene, God prepares his people to meet him and that's the point. So, let's look at these three little trips up the mountain by Moses.

The first is in verses 3 to 8. And as Deb read it this morning, actually, Deb, as you read the first reading, I was very tempted to preach on the genealogy in Luke.

That is a very important section because it shows that people have stories, which is why so much of the Old Testament is in narrative, you see.

Where were we? Oh, yes. The first time up. These words, they're some of the most precious words in all the Bible. You see in verse 3, Moses, he recognises the mountain.

This is where God met him. He races up the mountain and God speaks to him. And he explains what he's done and why he's done it. You see verse 4? You've seen what I did to the Egyptians.

[6 : 04] How I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant. There's a five alarm bell word there.

You shall be my own possession among all peoples for all the earth is mine. And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Speak these words to the people.

See what God is saying? He's saying, you know what I had in mind in rescuing you? Every moment of the time I had my covenant with Abraham in mind.

You remember back in chapter 2, God said, it's because I remember my promises to Abraham, I'm going to rescue you and deliver you. God had not forgotten that he said to old man Abraham, I'm going to make you a mighty nation.

I'm going to take you into a land and through you, I am going to bring blessing to all the people of the earth. That's why God says, I've rescued you from Egypt.

[7 : 02] Now, we'll go on next week in chapter 20 and God will fill out what it means for his people to be part of the covenant and to keep his law.

But it's very important before we get there to see the order and the sequence of things. Before God asks his people to do anything, he saves them. Before we lift a finger to obey his voice, God rescues us.

Here in chapter 19, God's people are rescued and redeemed and now they must keep the covenant. He says, you saw what I did to the Egyptians.

You witnessed the plagues. I'm like a mother eagle. He said, I swooped down and I picked you up under my wings and I carried you and I've flown you to this mountain.

You didn't do it. You didn't fight the Egyptian army. You didn't split the sea. You didn't bring the plague of locusts. And the reason I've done this is I've brought you to myself because that's what covenant is all about.

[8 : 05] We are going to bind ourselves to one another and at the heart of that binding, I will be your God and you will be my people. I delight in you. Your happiness is my happiness.

That's what this is all about. And he says, do you know what it's going to mean when you obey my covenant? He says, you will be my treasured possession. I've said this before here.

In the ancient Near East, the king owned all the property in the land. But the king also had a private treasure room. And in the private treasure room, there was one little box in which was his segula, his precious, most precious possession.

And that is what God thinks of us. And that is what God says here. You will be my treasure and my joy. My private possession.

He says, you're going to be a kingdom of priests. All of you are going to be, you're going to be different. You're going to live separately and differently from the world to serve the world. You'll have royal prerogatives.

[9 : 08] Prerogatives. And there's one word that's going to describe you. You're going to be a holy nation. Holy and different among the peoples. I listen to a lot of sermons.

It's part of my job, actually. It's a nice part of my job. Except when I have to critique them. I'll tell you about that another time. When preachers speak about obedience, they tend to call on two different kinds of motivation.

Either they use duty. They say God has commanded it. Look, it's here in the word. You must obey. Or they use gratitude. Think of all the wonderful things God has done for you.

You must obey. But that's not the motivation that God uses here. The reason his people are to be holy and different, the reason they are to obey his voice, is for the sake of other people.

You shall be my own possession among the peoples. And then he says, this is not just a loose throwaway line. All the world is mine. He's deliberately referring back to the covenant with Abraham and his purpose to bless all the families of the earth through his people.

[10 : 26] So here is the thing. Our obedience is not primarily for our own benefit. It's not even for God's own benefit. It's not so that we'll be spiritually happy and prosperous.

It's so that the blessing we have received might pass on to those who watch us. And they do. It's so that they might come to know the living God and become part of his treasure as well.

And you know these words? They're picked up by the apostle Peter in his first letter. And he says to Christians, you're a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God's special possessions, so that you might advertise God to the world.

So, a holy nation. That's the first trip up the mountain. But Israel really has no clue what holiness is all about. And so we come to the second trip in verses 9 to 15.

And at the heart of the second trip up the mountain, God calls his people to three days of preparation for him to come down on the mountain.

[11 : 30] Just look down at verse 10. Go to the people and consecrate them. That's the word make holy from the same root. Consecrate them today and tomorrow and let them wash their garments, clean clothes.

And be ready for the third day. On the third day, the Lord will come down on the mountain in the sight of all the people, set bounds, saying, take heed, you don't go up or even touch it, you'll die.

Verse 15, be ready by the third day, don't even go near a woman. Now, I don't know about you, but on first sight, I think these instructions are a little unusual.

I'm going to give my people three days to get ready to meet me. I'll come down on the mountain and meet them. So you're meant to devote all your time to preparing for God to meet, for God to meet with you.

That means even the best gifts of God, sexual expression, we're not to do that. And on the day he comes down, you're supposed to wear your Sunday best. My mother and I, in my early years, had an ongoing argument about whether you should wear decent clothes to church.

[12 : 38] She doesn't have a leg to stand on, except for this verse. I think the key, though, to understanding this is this.

Sin has not yet been dealt with. Yes, God has rescued his people from slavery, but the redemption that God is bringing is something far deeper and far more permanent than just taking them out of Egypt and putting them in Palestine and giving them happy farming for the rest of their life.

The true freedom that God is going to bring is a freedom from guilt and sin, but in Exodus 19, that sin has not been dealt with yet. God has not given the sacrificial system to cover their sin, to atone for their sin.

Israel cannot yet stand in the presence of God, and so God creates a way for them to make themselves holy so that they might be able to bear to hear his voice and experience his glory.

There's nothing about clean clothes that make you holy. It's just like, you remember when God appeared in the burning bush, he said to Moses, take off your sandals. There's nothing about taking off your sandals that makes you intrinsically holy.

[13 : 53] It's just a gracious act of God to enable his people to come close to him. Because God wants all his people to come to the place where we see that holiness is a life and death issue.

It's like the Garden of Eden. Only this time it's not the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which will cause us to die. This time it's the mountain itself, because it's the mountain on which God is going to come down.

And because their sin is not dealt with, if they even so much as touch the edge of the mountain, they will die. But even this, even these warnings and this call from God, are mercies and kindnesses.

He places the mountain between himself and his people to protect his people from the results of their own sin. And he keeps sending Moses down with his word as an intermediary, explaining what's going on, revealing what's going to happen.

And so we come to the third trip up the mountain. Verses 16 to 25. I don't think there's any way of getting around the fact that this is a terrifying section.

[15 : 15] The morning of the third day arrives, and people wake up, and if you look down through the verses, you can see there's thunders, and lightning, and flashing, and sound from the top of the mountain, and a thick cloud of darkness descends on the mountain.

And there is a united trumpet blast, which rattles the ribcages of everybody in the camp. I think the trumpets probably mean there are angels close by. And in verse 17, Moses brings the people out to the bottom of the mountain so that they might meet God.

And the Lord descends in fire, and in the smoke and the flames, we read in the text that the mountain itself shakes. And God gathers the people and brings them to the mountain, and as they get closer to the mountain, closer and closer, the trumpets get louder and louder, and the smoke gets darker, and as the mountain quakes, the Israelites quake.

And when the trumpets reach almost a deafening pitch, in verse 21, the Lord calls Moses up a third time up the mountain for one reason, and one reason alone, it's to repeat the fact that they can't come up the mountain.

And Moses says, you already said that, God. And God says it again. Don't come up the mountain. Don't let them even touch the mountain. It's a holy thing. Now there's a little postscript in chapter 20, if you just cast your eyes over to page 65, which helps us understand what's going on here.

[16 : 50] Verse 18. This is on the same day. When all the people perceived the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled.

And they stood far off, and they said to Moses, you speak to us, and we will hear you, but let not God speak to us, lest we die. And Moses said to the people, do not fear, for God has come to prove you that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin.

Just think about this for a moment. This is the same God who walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day in the Garden of Eden. God has not changed.

What has changed is that outside the garden, our lives and our world is marked by sin. It is because of sin that as the creator approaches his creation, lightning, thunder, and terror breaks forward.

It's what we were warned of. You remember at the Garden of Eden, the end of Genesis 3, God puts an angel at the exit with a flaming sword saying, you cannot force your way back into God's presence.

[18 : 12] What we need is a complete transformation. We need to be made holy again. We need someone to eradicate the problem of sin in our lives. And despite their attempts to make themselves holy, Israel, they cannot come close to preparing themselves for God's presence.

No one can dictate to God the terms in which they come to him. And think about this. These are God's precious ones. These are the ones that he's rescued from Egypt.

These are the ones who he's just described as my precious possession who he's going to come and dwell with. His chosen treasure. But they are not holy.

Their sin is not yet dealt with. I think that when we look at the top of the mountain and we see the fire and the thunder, what we are doing is we are looking at God through the eyes of sin.

It's sin. It's sin which takes the beauty and the splendour of God and transforms it into something dreadful and threatening. It's sin in us that separates us from God and which brings death.

[19 : 27] It's sin in us that radically changes our relation with God. For those of you who are in Bible studies on Exodus, it's very interesting. This is the third time God has made his appearance to Moses.

The first time it was light, burning bush. The second time it was light and dark and the pillar of cloud and fire. And now it is just darkness. God does not appear.

He is appearing in a way that he's never done before. He didn't appear this way to Abraham. But now that God is rescued from slavery, the Lord wants them to see their own darkness, that there's no one like him and that their true slavery was not in Egypt but to their own sinfulness and to their own unholiness.

And that's part of the tragedy of sin. It makes us blind to our sin and it makes us love unholiness. That's why one of the infallible marks that you belong to the true and living God is a growing hatred of sin.

One of the marks of spiritual maturity is that you look at sin and you see it in your own life with increasing sadness and increasing seriousness. If you do not think sin is a big deal or if you think that holiness of life is not a life and death issue, the Bible says you cannot know Jesus Christ or the gospel.

[20 : 52] And if you are a Christian and you're happy with sin, the Bible says you are sliding and you are in great danger. It is this reality of sin that God determines to overcome even if it costs him his life.

This is the reason for the covenant. Rescuing the people out of Egypt, that's easy. Getting them into the promised land, that's a snap. But transforming his people, healing the rupture, is far more difficult and it will require a mediator far greater and far more wonderful than Moses.

We need a new mediator. We need a mediator who's going to bring a new covenant. We need a perfect mediator who won't just bring us to this fiery mountain, Mount Sinai. We need a mediator who's going to bring us right to the heavenly Jerusalem where we might be able to stand in front of the living God, the judge of all the earth, without any accusation, with confidence and boldness of access.

I'm speaking, of course, of Jesus Christ. As we finish, let's turn in our Bibles to Hebrews chapter 12. I want you to see this passage, please. It's right near the back, Hebrews 12, page 211.

verses 18 to 24.

[22 : 25] This is an extended meditation on that day at Sinai, looking now through the lens of Jesus. For you, speaking to believers, Christian believers, for you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness and gloom and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further be messages be spoken to them.

They could not endure the order that was given if even a beast touches the mountain it shall be stoned. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I tremble with fear, but you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly, the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all.

This is who we've come to. And to the spirits of just men and women made perfect. And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.

I think if Exodus 19 does anything for us this morning, it ought to give us something of a tiny glimpse of the power of what Jesus has done for us.

Because Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant who has dealt with our sin. And it was on the cross that Jesus bore at close range the consuming fire of God's wrath for us.

[24 : 04] And it's only in Jesus Christ, you see, that we can hold together both the burning grace of God and the burning holiness of God. In his death and resurrection, he holds these two things together.

Apart from him, you can't hold them together. The lovely thing for us is that we live this side of Jesus. The mountain said, stay away or you'll die.

And the cross of Jesus Christ says, come in, draw close. So verse 28, therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken.

Let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire. Yes, he is. This is the God with whom we have to do.

And every single one of us must pass through the consuming fire. We either do it on our own with our sin intact or we do it in Jesus Christ and through his cross.

[25 : 11] It's God who made the provision in Jesus Christ. And if we come to him and if we pass through the cross, we are able to stand and look at his face and see in his face all the beauty and glory and splendor that we so deeply desire.

and we see that the throne of judgment is actually the throne of grace. So brothers and sisters, let us today draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we might receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need which means now.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.