

Mediator

Exodus 19-20

After a wonderful Easter celebration we come back to the book of Exodus to an extremely important section of the Bible – the formation of God’s covenant with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. This is a HUGE part of redemptive history because it’s through this covenant that God provided a way for sinful humans to draw near to him in the centuries leading up to Christ. People had rejected and forgotten God and now he was revealing himself through the people of Israel and providing a way for mankind to know and worship him again.

But even more importantly, God was also using this covenant to prepare people for the ultimate work of redemption, which took place through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. So as you look at all the different aspects of God’s covenant with Israel you can see that they point to Christ – they are shadows of what he would accomplish for us. So for 1500 years this covenant was in place until Christ came and fulfilled it in every way and ushered in a new and better covenant.

Now, because God established this covenant with the people of Israel, it was also vitally important in their history as well. It was through this covenant that God established them as his people and showed them how their relationship with him was going to work. How could a sinful nation of former slaves be adopted by a holy God and actually be able to relate to and worship him? This covenant spells that out. It formed the basis of God’s dealings with Israel throughout Old Testament history. Most of what happens in the Old Testament goes back to this covenant and Israel’s cycles of obedience and disobedience to it and the consequences that happened. So if you’re going to understand the Old Testament, you have to understand this covenant. It’s a big deal.

I’m going to cover this part of Exodus in two sermons. The chapters we cover today are mostly about the preparations for entering the covenant. And in a couple weeks we’ll focus more on the terms and confirmation of the covenant. So as we look at the preparations of the covenant today, one of the things we are going to see is the importance of the role of the mediator in the covenant. Moses was God’s chosen mediator and as we see his role, it will make us all the more thankful for Jesus and what he accomplished as our Mediator in his life, death, and resurrection.

A good way to appreciate Christ more fully is to try to understand what it would be like to encounter God in all his glory without him. What would that be like? The Bible is clear that there is a day coming where we will all stand before God in his glory and what we experience on that day will be drastically different depending on our relationship to Christ. Will we stand with Christ, or will we stand without him and face God alone? This passage will show us why we so desperately need Jesus as our Mediator.

There are a few places in Scripture where you see what happens when humans encounter the raw glory and majesty of God and Exodus 19 is one of them. This is an awesome chapter if God gives us eyes to see it. It gives us a glimpse of the raw glory and majesty of God when he actually pierces into and descends upon his creation. It's at a level similar to a staggering natural disaster times 10. Maybe if you combine a class 5 tornado, a severe of thunderstorm, an earthquake, and a raging forest fire you start to get an idea.

God brought the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and through the wilderness to his holy mountain – the mountain of God – Mount Sinai. They are encamped in the valley below the mountain anticipating an encounter with God. What would it be like? This was an enormous occasion and no one really knew what to expect.

Read Exodus 19:1-6.

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ² They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³ 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: ⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ 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; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

This was a preliminary encounter between Moses and God in which Yahweh gave wonderful covenant promises to the people – amazing love and protection and blessing and honor. He bore them on eagles' wings – that's an amazing picture of

God's love and protection. The Expositor's Bible Commentary says, "As the young eagles were carried on the adult wings and brought out of the nests and taught to fly, so Yahweh had lovingly carried and safely delivered Israel." And now, if they listened to him and obeyed him and kept his covenant with them, they would be his treasured possession – valuable and distinct from all other nations. A kingdom of priests, blessing all nations with God's grace, and a holy nation, set apart for his purpose and plans. Theirs would be a position of blessing and honor. Moses was to tell this to the people and in the next verses we see how they responded.

Read Exodus 19:7-9a.

So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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."

So the people agreed. They entered in and committed themselves to this covenant with God. And now Yahweh was going to meet with them on this momentous occasion. What would it be like? Rainbows and unicorns? Angels with trumpets? Jubilant fanfare and celebration? Well the first way God described it was as a "thick cloud." And then he told Moses that the people would have to prepare for his coming.

Read Exodus 19:9b-15.

When Moses told the words of the people to the Lord, ¹⁰ the Lord said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments ¹¹ and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³ No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." ¹⁴ So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. ¹⁵ And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman."

You can feel the tone changing. Blessings and promises turned to warnings and cautions. In order to prepare to encounter the glory of Yahweh, they had to wash their clothes and abstain from sexual relations for two days. Barriers were set to keep the people away from the mountain, and warnings given to not touch. If anyone did, they should be stoned or shot with an arrow. They could not live.

When you prepare for a momentous occasion, you do it carefully. I remember getting ready for my wedding. I got shaved and all cleaned up and tried to look as good as I could. I put on my tux along with all of my groomsmen. I was filled with nervous excitement. Of all the important things that day, the thing that was the biggest deal to me was seeing Amy for the first time – encountering my bride to be as she walked down the aisle. It was an awesome moment that I prepared for. And I'm glad I didn't have to worry about getting shot or stoned!

As the people of Israel got ready to encounter the glory of Yahweh, they prepared for something that seemed to be dangerous. And on the third day, Yahweh descended...

Read Exodus 19:16-20.

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. ¹⁹ And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. ²⁰ The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

Thunder and lightning, a raging inferno, a tornado and an earthquake – the entire mountain was engulfed. Try to imagine. If you've lived through a natural disaster it might help – this was all of them, all at the same time. It was an awesome and terrifying experience – not a demonstration of anger and judgment, but the raw glory and majesty of Yahweh. It was so powerful it was terrifying – even from a distance. The people were so overwhelmed they thought they were going to die.

From the midst of all that power, Yahweh called Moses to go up, and he did.

Read Exodus 19:21-25.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look and many of them perish." ²² Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them." ²³ And Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.'" ²⁴ And the Lord said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them." ²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and told them.

"Don't touch. Don't go near." That was the clear message. Yahweh was protecting them. From what? From his glory. Direct contact with his glory would kill them. It says Yahweh would break out against them. That's what happened to a man named Uzzah many years later when he touched the ark of the covenant. It says in 2 Samuel 6:6-8: *"And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. ⁷ And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. ⁸ And David was angry because the Lord had broken out against Uzzah."* A confusing account until you start to understand the danger of the glory of God to humans corrupted with sin.

If someone came in here walking down the center aisle holding a long metal pole and at the end of that pole was a hook holding a cauldron filled with red-hot liquid lava, what would you do? You'd get out of the way. You'd feel the intense heat come into the room and you'd get out of the way. What would you do if they tripped? You'd scramble as fast as you could to get out of the way. Lava is intensely dangerous – it destroys human flesh if it comes into contact with it. And so does the unhindered glory of God. Uzzah didn't believe that. He treated the ark as important, but not holy, and there's a big difference. Holiness is deadly to man with sin, and Yahweh broke out against him.

Yahweh didn't want that to happen at Mt. Sinai, so he warned Moses to not let the people go near him. Only the priests could if they were consecrated to God. They had to be purified. The raw glory of God would destroy them because of their sin.

While Moses was still with the people, God spoke from the mountain. This was the first time he spoke to the community of Israel as a whole and the only place I could find where he did so, because we'll see after it happened that the people couldn't handle it. It was just too much. The rest of the commandments were given through Moses. These were the first commands that were part of the covenant and it appears that Yahweh was giving them to lay the foundation and give a preview of the moral code of the entire covenant and community. The first four have to do with how God's people are to relate to him and the last six with how they relate to each other.

As important as they are, I'm going to just read them today and not preach through them, but I do believe they are worthy of our deep consideration. They reveal God's person and character and the kind of people he wants and is conforming us to be. I did do a sermon series on them in the summer of 2019, and you can hear those messages through our website, but I found out they're not easy to find or get to. So if you want to listen to them, let me know.

Read Exodus 20:1-17.

And God spoke all these words, saying, ² "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³ "You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹² “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

¹³ “You shall not murder.

¹⁴ “You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ “You shall not steal.

¹⁶ “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷ “You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

After hearing these commands from Yahweh’s thundering voice on the mountain, here’s how the people responded...

Read Exodus 20:18-21.

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off ¹⁹ and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” ²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.” ²¹ The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

The people couldn’t handle the intensity of everything that was happening. Encountering the glory of Yahweh was a terrifying experience – even from a distance. It was way more than they could handle. They were amazed they didn’t die, and it was clear that if they would have approached the mountain they would have. The manifest glory of Yahweh would have destroyed them, so they stood far off and pleaded with Moses. And notice what they asked for – they recognized that what they needed in order to survive and enter into that covenant with Yahweh was a go between – a mediator between God and man. And for them it was Moses. Moses had been set apart by God to draw near to him and live. It’s not that he wasn’t a sinner – he was chosen by God for that priestly function.

That’s where I want to stop today. In two weeks we’ll come back to this and see that Moses goes back up to the mountain and God begins to lay out the commands and terms of the covenant.

The God on that mountain is the same God we worship today. He hasn't changed. The magnitude and intensity of his glory is no different. He is a consuming fire. And one day we will stand before him. What will that be like?

It totally depends on your relationship with Jesus – God's appointed Mediator. If you stand before God without him, it will be a terrifying experience. If it's just you and your sin before God, you will be utterly ruined and face everlasting judgment. That's what hell is. God doesn't want that to happen – he doesn't want that any should perish.

Therefore he has provided a Mediator. He has provided salvation and that salvation is in his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a perfect life of sinlessness, representing us before God. He then died on our behalf to pay the penalty for our sins so that in him we can be totally forgiven. And then he rose again to new life and ascended into heaven where he intercedes for us – he is our intercessor before the Father – our Mediator. Through faith in him, we are united with him forever – his perfect righteousness becomes ours. His payment for sin is added to our account. And his new life is poured into us. We become one with him so that we can actually share in his glory and not be consumed by it. It will be far different for those who are in Christ.

The author of Hebrews wanted his readers to understand that so that they would persevere in the faith and not turn away from Jesus. "How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" he wrote. He also wrote about how different it will be for those who are in Christ when we encounter the living God.

Here's what he writes in Hebrews 12:18-29:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them.²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned."²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

If Christ is not your Mediator and you are not trusting in him, it should fill you with the dreadful expectation of judgment. Nothing will protect you from the glory and wrath of God. But if Christ is your Mediator – if you are one with him through faith – you can feel joyful expectation of heaven. On the day when you stand before God you will begin to experience unending wonder and joy. And because of that, we ought to marvel in Christ and what he’s done for us. Our hearts should overflow with worship for what he has spared us from and accomplished for us. We should also have a renewed zeal to pray for unbelievers and do what Christ has called us to do and tell them of his salvation.

We are going to enter into a time of worship and in it I want us to let our hearts and our praises overflow with thankfulness to Christ – our Savior and Mediator.