

# Exodus|Liberation and the Mission of God

## God Unapproachable

Exodus 19

11.8.15

*In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. <sup>2</sup> When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain. <sup>3</sup> Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: <sup>4</sup> 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. <sup>5</sup> 'Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; <sup>6</sup> and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel." <sup>7</sup> So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him. <sup>8</sup> All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD. <sup>9</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD.*

<sup>10</sup> *The LORD also said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; <sup>11</sup> and let them 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. <sup>12</sup> "You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. <sup>13</sup> 'No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." <sup>14</sup> So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments.*

<sup>15</sup> *He said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman." <sup>16</sup> So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup> And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. <sup>19</sup> When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down, warn the people, so that they do not break through to the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. <sup>22</sup> "Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, or else the LORD will break out against them." <sup>23</sup> Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, 'Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.'" <sup>24</sup> Then the LORD said to him, "Go down and come up again, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, or He will break forth upon them." <sup>25</sup> So Moses went down to the people and told them.*

We've been looking at Exodus on Sunday mornings. This year we're in the second half of the book. The actual Exodus has happened. God rescued a baby marked for death...and that rescued child, Moses, was adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh...and raised in the palace with all the learning of that day...until God stirred the young man, Moses, to rediscover his identity. He saw the enslavement of his people and he lashed out against an Egyptian guard and killed him...and Moses went on the run.

And there in the Arabian desert...he married and settled down until, at a Mountain called Horeb or Sinai, Moses met God in the BUSH that was on fire but somehow not burning/not consumed.

Now he's the rescuer of the people...the plagues and the Red Sea crossing have taken place. Last week, we saw the nation bitter against God but blaming Moses...until God arranges to be judged and to be condemned in Moses' place...and out of that judgment, water and life comes out of the Rock.

Today, Israel prepares to meet this God, the God of their fathers who has rescued them. It happens at Mt. Horeb or Sinai (full-circle to where Moses first met God). Israel will remain here for a whole YEAR and 59 chapters of Scripture will describe their stay. God brought them OUT to worship Him – THIS is the meaning of freedom – to meet their Maker and Redeemer.

What's the feeling at Mt. Sinai? Well...it's tense. It's unpleasant in the extreme...if last week the Israelites dealt with the emotion of anger (annoyance, frustration, bitterness) THIS WEEK it's the dark emotion of FEAR! And somehow IN this fearful scene there's a key to what it means to live with God in the present world.

Let's look at: 1) The Deafening Signs of Death 2) The Delicate Signs of Life 3) The Deafeningly Delicate Way That Emerges ONLY in This Tension.

Probably, Moses has some recognition of where he is. The place is highly significant – over and over again it's simply called "THE mountain" and finally, Mt. Sinai.

Moses is being established VERY clearly as mediator between God and the people. This arrangement of coming to God through a third-party is going to be central to the whole Bible and it's really emphasized strongly IN THIS PASSAGE. (v.9 - "Also believe in Moses forever.")

He goes up and comes down THREE times. He first brings a message of their required obedience and at once the people respond... rashly?...I don't know! It's NOT like they can negotiate but they sort of blurt out (as they do in other places as well) "All that the LORD has spoken WE WILL DO!" and Moses, the mediator, brings that response to God on the mountain.

And THEN...God instructs them to prepare for the meeting. Somehow, they are to be consecrated, to wash, and to wait for the LORD to come down on the third day. And ...after they had seen the plagues and the Pillar of Cloud ...and the Red Sea open before them and God...as it were...judged on the Rock... I wonder what they were expecting when Moses said, "Get ready! God is going to come down"?

I think they were probably nervous...they had seen these displays of God's presence (Plagues, Pillar) but THIS was going to be somehow more direct and something new. And just in case they were in any way cavalier or casual or cool about what was about to happen, God tells Moses to WARN them!

They are to set boundaries...to keep their distance... to stay OFF the mountain...on pain of death. Don't even touch someone who has touched the mountain. And then all these very loud indicators that "THIS is serious!": "Beware...prepare...do NOT go up...borders...death...thick cloud...thunder/lightening ... the camp trembled... and a VERY LOUD TRUMPET (first mention of a trumpet in the whole Bible – I THINK!)... and smoke of a furnace...trumpet getting louder and LOUDER...God answering with thunder...don't gaze (21) i.e. no curiosity seekers...and PERISH...set bounds ...lest God BURST OUT..."

Those are all words signifying things we don't like. Many, many indicators of things we avoid and that frighten us... signs of danger and death. And that's the dominant theme of the chapter. The two most obvious unavoidable, earsplitting features are: #1 "THE mountain" (at least 13 times!) AND #2 all these symbols of dread... YOU CAN'T MISS IT.

And Moses himself is torn...He's given what seems to him an impossible task. He is to prepare and to consecrate the people to meet YHWH on the third day...when the ram's horn blows (13), "they shall come up to the mountain"...BUT HOW?...v.23 "The people can NOT come up to Mount Sinai for YOU warned us saying, 'Set bounds about the mountain...'"

It's an irreconcilable dilemma – "don't come up til you're ready...on the third day come up..."

"but we're not ready..." We are to approach the God who is...unapproachable.

And then...the sub-dominant themes of the chapter ... not the deafening thunder and trumpet that you just can't miss but things subtle and even delicate that might only be noticed on a second or third sweep: for instance, the way God makes His first approach to Moses. "Say this to the house of Jacob and tell the sons 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 then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'"

God is reminding them of His unilateral commitment to them. God came to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob before they'd done anything good or worthy. HE made a promise to rescue them and HE KEPT HIS OATH even though they'd done nothing to deserve it.

AND He has a future for them! They will, as they trust Him and obey His voice and remember His oath to them...they will carry out a mission to the world. THEY will be a MEDIATOR to the nations. They will be the priestly people who have been given the promise and given the knowledge of God...and THEY will stand in the gap and, priest-like, they will love the world along with God and represent God to the world...a kingdom of priests. Their calling will have international ramifications because in the original promise God had said, "IN YOU will all the nations be blessed!"

So before calling them to measure up and before they HAVE measured up, God unapproachable approaches them with GRACE... not "measure up and THEN I'll rescue and us YOU" ...but "I have favored you BEFORE you measure up and obedience will follow."

A second delicate sign of life is the repetition of the third-day. Warren Gage looked at the so-called "great commission" in Luke's Gospel where Jesus Christ said; "all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled...Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day..." (Luke 24:44-46)

But where IS IT WRITTEN in the Hebrew Bible (the Law of Moses, Prophets and Psalms) that the Messiah would suffer and rise on the third day?

And Dr. Gage has helped the church by showing some 40 passages in the Hebrew Bible that USE this imagery...death... being interrupted on the Third Day...This is one of those passages. In the face of all these symbols of dread – smoke and fire and thunder and loud LOUD trumpet and warnings of death...God is saying that ON THE THIRD DAY...He will communicate His power and presence on the Third Day through a Mediator.

This is one of some 40 passages preparing the world for the great communication of God's power in raising Jesus Christ from the dead on the Third Day. It's just one more example of an oft-repeated pattern – God's descent and power revealed on the Third Day...seen finally in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Later, the Apostles will see Mt. Sinai as the great symbol of human inadequacy and moral failure. Paul would say "Sinai is like Hagar – when Abraham took God's promise of an heir (Isaac) and Abraham tried to fulfill that promise by his own effort... Sinai and all the law of Moses, when we try to do it ourselves, when we USE it to measure up...it becomes slavery and death.

Paul saw that the Jerusalem of his day...that decadent form of Judaism that was built on human effort rather than God's grace was also a form of Sinai...a form of religious slavery built on human effort...it was death...Paul had known it firsthand!

And the writer to the Hebrew Christians uses this same scene to say, "Because Someone has come and fulfilled the Law of Sinai...a mediator, even better than Moses who is qualified to approach God Unapproachable THEREFORE we come to a better mountain than Sinai. Listen to this long passage and listen good because it changes the fear we experience at Sinai and turns it into freedom and peace and worship: (Listen to Hebrews ch. 12)

*For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.*

This terrifying scene of the God who cannot be approached with a merely human righteousness finds its destination and its fulfillment in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. He has hushed the Law's loud thunder and He has quenched Mt. Sinai's flame.

Now, HOW shall we then live? Are we to fear God? Are we free NOT to fear because God is no longer this way...no longer holy? Has Jesus Christ somehow changed God or changed us...how does this work?

Well, we do see, in this scene and at Sinai, a picture of the holiness of God...and that has not changed. The commands of God have not become the suggestions of God. We ARE called to obey and we ARE called to "put to death" our sin as it says in Romans 8.13 and other places...We ARE called to a mission under the command of this Holy God.

Believers in Jesus Christ ARE called, by the Apostles, the New Israel and the kingdom of priests – we are ALL mediators to the nations in some sense. Listen to 1 Peter ch. 2, *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2.9-12)*

Paul said to the Corinthians, “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Corinthians 7.1)

But how...? Is the pursuit of OUR mission...after the real Third Day...i.e. on THIS side of the Cross and Resurrection...IS our fear of the Lord, IS our freedom, IS our approach different than theirs? Well, yeah! WE are the New Israel and have these promises and we are called to pursue a lifestyle that sets us apart from our culture as different...as...and I know this seems impossible...but as “holy” (see all the intros to the NT Letters, “saints”). “Pursuing holiness in the fear of the LORD...” BUT as Paul will say, “Putting to death the deeds of the body BY THE SPIRIT...” i.e. NOT like Abraham with Hagar, by our own ingenuity/effort. That’s death; that’s Sinai!

The key for US is to see the Unapproachable God on the mountain...has indeed been satisfied by a Perfect Life – the life of Jesus Christ, lived for ME. He has come, from the Mountain into our hearts to lead us. There IS a holy kind of beauty and wonder and awe and fear in this...We’re called to represent Him to the world. It’s our mission. Those who fear the Lord (Ps 33.18) are those who trust in His lovingkindness, His “hesed”, His Gospel! We are being freed not FROM obeying...but being freed TO obey...as sons.

Our mission and holiness are pursued in this ongoing exercise of humility and confidence, repentance and faith. Somehow free (as the people of the New Exodus!) and yet bound willingly to a Master who is our perfect Father...a Mediator who is our perfect Brother... He is working His life into us...a life, an obedience, a holiness that simply can’t come by mere human effort but is the fruit of grace, organic and refreshing to a world that needs to be refreshed.

It’s a holiness that we could see on Sinai...but can only be enjoyed and shared (with sinners like WE are!) in the shadow of that other mountain...Mount Zion... Mount Calvary.

It’s a paradox...deafeningly delicate...hard to describe because we so easily fall off one side or the other rather than living in the beautiful and painful tension...of grace leading to the Newness of Life.