

Holy Nation, Holy God

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 19:1-25

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Transcendence and Immanence

Is God transcendent or immanent? Phil Ryken says that throughout history, there have been some periods in the church when we emphasize God's transcendence. And other times that we emphasize his immanence.

To transcend means to go beyond. God's transcendence has to do with his distance from us. He's holy and glorious. He's beyond us. And he is separate from us. We're the creature; he's the creator. If we see God as transcendent, how do we approach God? With awe and even fear, right?

To be immanent means to "remain in." So, God's immanence is his nearness to us. It has to do with the way he relates to us in a personal, intimate way. It has to do with grace. And if we see God as immanent, it gives us confidence to approach him.¹

The truth is God is *both* transcendent and immanent. He's over all things. He transcends all. *And yet*, he descends to us as well. He comes near! And there's no contradiction in any of this. The problem is we tend to emphasize one aspect over the other. What do you think we emphasize in our age? And what do we emphasize in this church? What about you personally?

I think we tend to focus on the immanent. We lean into the reality that God is love. We're comforted that he calls us friends. We emphasize grace growing deep and going wide. And we're right to do so.

But we're not right if we miss the fact that God is also holy. He's a consuming fire, a holy righteous judge who will one day call the whole world to account. And God is in charge! He determines who's saved and how they're saved. And he will only be worshiped on his terms and conditions. If we don't lean into *both* of these truths equally, we have a wrong view of God.

Our passage this morning focuses on both God's immanence and his transcendence, but really drives home the transcendent part.

The God Who Sanctifies

Someone has said that Exodus can be divided into three parts. In the first part, we see the God who saves Israel from Egypt. In the second part, the God who sanctifies a people for himself. And in the third part, the God who settles among his people in the tabernacle.

Last week, Dominick concluded the first part of Exodus so well! Our text this morning begins the second part. God's people finally come to the mountain to worship God as he promised Moses in chapter 3. And at the mountain he speaks to them and establishes a covenant with them. In this covenant he calls them to be a holy people, set apart, or sanctified for him. And the call for God's

¹ Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, Preaching the Word

people to be holy is grounded in God's holiness. As Leviticus says, "Be holy, for I am holy." This is the truth that we're going to learn this morning.

Exodus 19:1-25²

¹On 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. ²They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³while 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: ⁴You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now 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; ⁶and 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."

⁷So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸All 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. ⁹And 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."

When Moses told the words of the people to the LORD, ¹⁰the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments ¹¹and 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. ¹²And 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. ¹³No 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." ¹⁴So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. ¹⁵And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman."

¹⁶On 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. ¹⁷Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸Now 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. ¹⁹And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. ²⁰The 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.

²¹And 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. ²²Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them." ²³And 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.'" ²⁴And 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." ²⁵So Moses went down to the people and told them.

This is the Word of the Lord.

In this chapter, we see Moses ascend and descend from the mountain three times. His first trek up and down the mountain he calls Israel to be holy. The next two trips teach us two ways that God is holy.

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®] unless otherwise noted.

BE HOLY (1-8A)

Let's begin with the first trip and the call to be holy.

After Israel gets to the mountain, Moses goes up on the mountain. And God gives his words to speak to his people. God's word is the way that he sanctifies his people. This first speech lays out in the most basic form the covenant. What we often refer to as the old covenant or the Mosaic covenant. But even though it is the old covenant, I think you'll see that it's highly relevant for us today. It's at the heart of what God's people are called to do. It gives us our purpose.

The covenant comes in three parts. It teaches us three things about our call to be holy. The second part stands at the center of the covenant. So, I'll cover it last.³

The Reason: God's Grace

The first part of the covenant describes what God did in the past to save Israel. Look at verse 4: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." The Bible never starts with rules. It always starts with grace. It never starts with what we're called to do. It always starts with what God's done. We have to get this order right! The reason God calls us to be holy is because of his grace. Before Israel is ever called to be holy, they're reminded that God saved them, and he saved them by grace.

The Purpose: God's Glory

Not only did God act in the past. If his people would keep his covenant, God promised to do something in the future. Look at verses 5-6: "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." This is Israel's mission statement. God saved them and is sanctifying them for a purpose. The purpose of their holiness is for the sake of God's glory.

Israel is God's treasured possession. He set them apart from all the other nations in the world. But he did this for a reason. He set them apart *from* the nations so they could ultimately become a blessing *to* the nations.

God made that promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. God said, "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Israel was special and unique among the nations. That's true. But they had a purpose that was bigger than themselves. They were called to bless the nations.

And how would they do that? Well for one, they would mediate God's presence to the nations. That's what God means when he says, "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests." What does a priest do? He mediates between God and man. So Israel was to point the nations to God, not to keep God all to themselves.

³ Following Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage*, The Bible Speaks Today

And how would they mediate God's presence to the nations? By being holy. They were to be a *holy* nation among the nations. As Israel lived holy lives they would show something of the holy God to the nations. To be a display of God's glory! God made himself known to Israel. Their job was now to make God known to the nations.

This call to be holy is not just for Israel. It's also for us in the church today. 1 Peter 1:16 says, "You shall be holy, for I am holy..." And what's the reason for our holiness? It's grounded in the grace of the gospel. Peter says, "knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ" (vv. 18-19).

In 1 Peter 2:9, Peter says "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession." And what's the purpose of all this? It's so we would glorify God. "That you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

The Means: God's Word

But how do we glorify God among the nations? Or in other words what does it mean to be holy? That's the central question at this point. And it brings me to the central part of the covenant.

Look at verse 5: God calls them to "obey my voice and keep my covenant." How do we live holy lives? We live holy lives by living according to God's Word.

Holiness comes from obeying God's voice. Or keeping his Word. The way we reflect God to the nations is by living our lives according to his Word.

So what's the application for our lives? If we want to live lives in response to God's grace. If we want to live for God's glory. It's not enough to simply *hear* God's Word. We have to *do* God's Word. Why is that? Because there's an inextricable link between God and his Word. When we obey God's Word, we obey God. When we disobey God's Word, we disobey God. Do you understand the deep connection? How we respond to God's Word *is* how we respond to God. And that's why when we obey God's Word, we reflect something of who God is! Does that make sense?

Moses went down to the people and told them about this covenant. And what did the people say? Look at verse 8: "All the people answered together and said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do.'" They agreed to live in response to God's grace, for God's glory, according to God's word.

But at this stage in the game, they didn't quite realize God's holy word was connected to a very holy God. They knew God through the exodus. But they didn't quite understand God in his fullness. They didn't fully know who they were dealing with. They didn't understand the immanent God was also the transcendent God. They didn't quite realize how high the stakes were in this covenant.

FOR GOD IS HOLY (8B-25)

And so in the next two scenes God showed them that their call to be holy was grounded in his holiness. We're called to be holy, because God is holy.

In these two scenes we're going to learn two truths about God's transcendence and holiness.

He descends, but is separate.

The first thing we learn about God is he descends to us, but is separate from us (8b-15). This section starts out with God telling Moses he's going to *come down* on Mt. Sinai (vv. 9, 15). Moses will *go up* the mountain. And the people will *come to* the mountain. Just close enough so that they can hear God speak his word to Moses so they'll believe Moses' words are God's words. But even though God descends to his people, he is separate from them.

This is drawn out in a number of ways. For one, he comes in a cloud (v. 9). And while the cloud represents God's presence among his people, it also represents his separateness from them.

His separateness is also seen in the commands he gives to the people.⁴ There's a command for them to consecrate themselves (v. 10). And a command to consecrate the mountain (vv. 12-13). Once all of this consecration happens, the trumpet will sound and the people can come up to the foot of the mountain.

One of the ways they consecrate themselves is by washing their garments. Now this may seem a little strange, but it's really a basic idea. Certain clothes fit certain occasions. You don't work on your car in a suit. And you don't go to the courthouse to appear before a judge in sweatpants. Or at least you shouldn't. In fact, if you did, that would reveal something about your attitude. In the same way, you don't approach a holy God in grimy clothes. You need to put on clean clothes.

This points to a spiritual reality. People stained by sin can't approach a holy God. If they do, they'll be killed. This comes out in the consecration of the mountain.

The mountain was consecrated by setting limits around it (v. 12). This was God's way to protect his people from imminent death. This was God's grace. Moses and Aaron could go on the mountain to receive God's word. But the people needed to keep a distance. We see this same principle later in the tabernacle. The priests could go into the holy of holies, but the people had to stay in the outer court.⁵

There's a point in all of this. The only way to approach a holy God is his way! And the holy God requires his people to be holy if they're going to approach him. They have to consecrate themselves. The word consecrate is the same root word for holiness.

How are we made holy? How do sinful people approach a separate God? We're not given the answers here, but we see certain principles at work that get developed later. For one, we know Moses serves as a mediator. They can't come near to God or hear from God without a mediator. And they have to be made clean to approach God.

Many commentators think that Moses likely offered a sacrifice here.⁶ They think that's implied in verse 14, where Moses consecrated the people. We don't know for sure, but we know that's how it worked in the tabernacle. Priests couldn't enter God's presence without the blood of a sacrifice. And we can't enter God's presence without the blood of Christ.

We are sinners in the sight of a separate God. But through the blood of Christ we can have confidence to enter the holy places (Heb. 10:19). He's our great high priest (Heb. 10:21). Our

⁴ Ryken

⁵ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, The NIV Application Commentary

⁶ Ryken

mediator who stands between the holy God and sinful people. And in Christ, we have put on the robe of his righteousness. Our filthy rags have been made white as snow (cf. Rev. 7:9-14).

This is the grace of the gospel. But it only makes sense if we rightly understand the holiness of God. He is separate from us. And the only way we can come near to him is through his Son's mediation and sacrifice.

He descends, but it's not safe.

Let's look now at the second aspect of God's holiness in Exodus 19. He descends to us, but is not safe.

Most of you are familiar with the line from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* where Mr. Beaver tells Susan that "Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion." Susan thought he was a man. And so she asks Mr. Beaver the question, "Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." To which Mr. Beaver responds, "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Now I know this illustration is overused. But while it's overused, I'm afraid it's not overly understood. We love God's goodness and rightly so. And because he's good, we assume he's also safe. But God is not safe. If we don't approach him in his way, he is quite dangerous.

This comes out in a number of ways in verses 16-25. When the people are consecrated and at the mountain, we read in verse 16, "On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet so that all the people in the camp trembled."

This imagery of lightning and thunder is picked up in the New Testament in books like Revelation to refer to the awful judgment of God (Rev. 8:5; 11:19). The people trembled for good reason. Later in verse 18, we're told the mountain itself trembled. The immanent God is good, but he's not safe.

God promised he would descend and he did. And he promised he would speak. But when he spoke, verse 19 says, "And God answered Moses in thunder." God's very voice was like thunder. I'm sure it was terrifying!

In verse 20 God came down on Mount Sinai. And at this point we expect the narrative to come to a close. But it doesn't. In verses 21-25 God reiterates the warnings he spoke earlier in the passage. He warns the people that if they break through the barricades around the mountain that he himself will break out against them. This warning is sounded twice, in verses 21-22 and in verse 24. It's a surprise that reveals an emphasis in the passage. God is not safe.

Hebrews 12 tells us that our God is a consuming fire, a burning holy flame (vv. 18, 29). If we don't approach God in God's way, we will surely die. He is separate from us and he's not safe.

And in an effort to emphasize God's immanence, we must not forget this truth. He's also transcendent. But we do well to also emphasize God's immanence. God has come near to us in the person of Christ, so that we can come near to God.

A Better Word

In fact, the way to approach God has changed radically in the new covenant. This is drawn out in Hebrews 12:18-29.

The author of Hebrews tells us that we do not approach God as the Israelites did at Mt. Sinai. “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 beg that no further message be spoken to them” (vv. 18-19).

Instead, we’re told, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (vv. 22-24).

Through Christ’s blood, we can now draw near to God without fear of death. This is a better word. This is the good news of the gospel.

So what should we do with this word? The author of Hebrews tells us that even though the way to God is greater now than it was in Exodus 19, that so is the warning to us.

In Hebrews 12:25-26, the author warns us that if Israel didn’t escape the judgment on the mountain, how do we think we’ll escape God’s judgment on the last day, when Christ comes to judge the earth. When Christ not only shakes the earth, but the heavens.

Friends, we have a God who has come near to us. He’s made a way for us to know God and worship God through Christ.

But if you do not know Christ, if you have not placed your trust in him and in his sacrifice for your sin, you have much to fear. So I invite you to trust in him today. Acknowledge that he is holy and you are sinful. Admit that you deserve his holy, righteous judgment. And then turn to Jesus for forgiveness. Receive the kingdom that cannot be shaken.

And if you do know Christ then the author of Hebrews tells you how to respond today too: “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, for our God is a consuming fire.”