

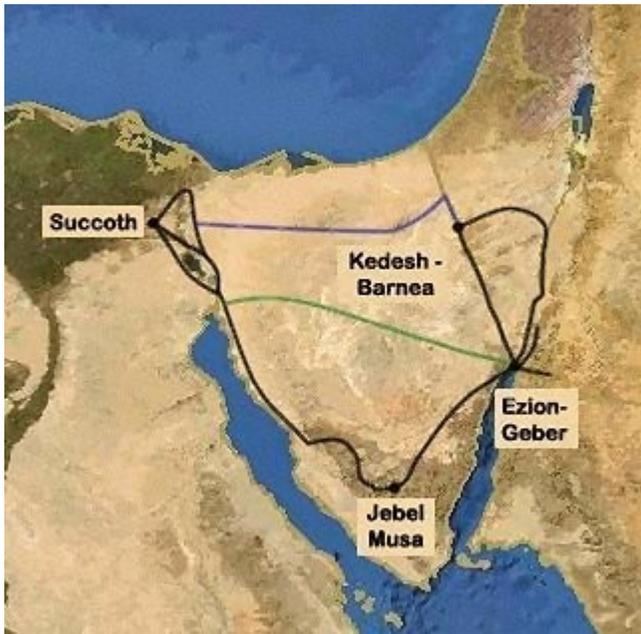
Mt. Sinai: Preparation & Consecration

Exodus 19:1-25

Israel is at a critical junction as a nation. What has happened in her deliverance out of Egypt and is about to take place during this time at Mount Sinai defines her as God's people.

Exodus 19:1-3a

Where is this place to which Israel has arrived? Look at the map you have printed in the program this morning.



The traditional route from Egypt to Mount Sinai is to the southern end of the Sinai Peninsula. The problem is that no one knows for sure where Sinai was. Nor, for that matter, the location of places mentioned in the Biblical record. If you look at a Bible atlas, or perhaps you have a map in the back of your Bible, the places all have question marks.

While not discounting traditional views, there are other suggestions in more recent times. I personally would lean towards the view that the Israelites moved across the Sinai desert on a more northerly route to a mountain near the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba. There are a couple of major reasons for this.

Moses spent forty years living among the Midianites, one of the desert tribes. This was where he was living and earning his livelihood as a shepherd when God spoke to him and called him to return to Egypt. The place of the Midianites was in this region, primarily to the east of the Gulf of Aqaba.

When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, he said to him:

I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain. – *Exodus 3:12*

Another main reason why I don't think the location of God's mountain is at the southern tip of Sinai is because of this statement in Deuteronomy, chapter one:

It is eleven days' journey from Horeb (that is, Sinai) by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea. – *Deuteronomy 1:2*

The amount of time needed to journey from the southern tip of the Sinai to Kadesh-barnea, the place from where the spies would search out the land, doesn't seem to fit within that timeframe. The whole nation, with men, women, children, herds and flocks, would have to travel at a pace that would seem impossible to maintain. The 160-mile trip would likely have taken from 16-26 days based upon typical speed of herds and flocks.

Until we find further archeological evidence, we have to be willing to live with some uncertainty as to many locations in the Old Testament. That doesn't mean the Biblical record is wrong or inaccurate; we just don't have enough information at the present time. In any case, the people finally arrive at the destination to which they were headed.

After the people camp near the mountain, Moses goes up to meet God. The text seems to indicate that Moses makes three separate trips up the mountain. The important thing is that Moses isn't just there to hear God; he is to take God's words down to Israel. In this way he is serving as the mediator between God and the people – a role we have already seen him playing and one he continues to play until his death.

I. God's Messages to the People

A. Remember Who God Is – Exodus 19:3-4

God's deliverance of Israel out of Egypt is such a defining event for Israel. God was showing his great power for his glory on behalf of his chosen people.

This is the redemptive story of Israel. Philip Graham Ryken, writing about verse four, says:

This summary of salvation mentions three separate stages in Israel's pilgrimage: a bringing out, a lifting up, and a drawing close.

God brought them out of bondage in Egypt; he lifted them up as an eagle bears up her young; and he drew them close to him. This is the purpose for which he has brought them to his holy mountain. Moses writes about this later in his final address to the people before his death as the people are poised to enter into the Promised Land:

But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions. – *Deuteronomy 32:9-11*

Remember, Israel, who your God is: "I am your deliverer, your Savior." Then God lays out the expectations he has for his people – **Verse 5a**.

What is this covenant? It harkens back to the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants. God is going to codify the terms of the covenant in what is to follow.

Keeping the covenant, however, is not the basis of Israel's salvation. Obedience was to be the by-product of the covenant. This is what God expects from the people whom he had redeemed out of Egypt.

B. Remember Who You Are – Exodus 19:5b-6

1) A treasured possession. The Hebrew word here indicates royal property. We see the same word used later in Israel's history in relation to the building of the Temple. Listen to I Chronicles 29 where David is speaking to the people:

I have provided for the house of my God, so far as I was able, the gold for the things of gold, the silver for the things of silver, and the bronze for the things of bronze, the iron for the things of iron, and wood for the things of wood, besides great quantities of onyx and stones for setting, antimony, colored stones, all sorts of precious stones and marble. Moreover, in addition to all that I have provided for the holy house, I have a *treasure* (here

is our same word) of my own gold and silver, and because of my devotion to the house of my God I give it to the house of my God.

– *I Chronicles 29:2-3*

Israel was God's treasured possession. She was special, but not because there was something intrinsically good or worthy about her that drew God's attention and favor. Moses reminds the people of that in Deuteronomy 7:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. – *Deuteronomy 7:6-8*

2) A kingdom of priests – Two aspects we should consider here. First, the nation of Israel as a whole was called to worship God, to see their lives as a sacrifice to God. Later, God will set aside an entire tribe of Israel – some of whom would specially serve him as priests. But there is a calling to the entire nation to be worshippers of God, to be a kingdom of priests.

The second aspect is in regard to other nations. God's plan for Israel involved his plan for the whole world. God had told Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. It would be through this nation that the Redeemer would eventually come.

3) A holy nation – Israel was to be “set apart,” different from all other nations because of God's choosing of them for his own glory. They were called out from among all the nations of the earth for God's divine purposes. As such, they were to see themselves as and act differently than others.

Application: God deals likewise with us. He reminds us who he is: he is our redeemer, our Savior. We are to remember that it is God who saves us. Paul writes those well known words to the Ephesians:

For by grace (God's unmerited favor) you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. – *Ephesians 2:8-9*

Having been saved, we are called to obey his voice. Just as in Israel's case, obedience is not the means of salvation, but the consequence of salvation. We don't obey to be saved; we obey because we are saved. Jesus put it this way to his disciples: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

We are to remember who God is; we are also to remember who we are.

- We are a treasured possession. In his prayer for the Ephesian believers, he prayed that they would know “what are the riches of his (that is, God's) glorious inheritance in the saints.” In other words, in some way, God is rich because you, as his child, are his.

Writing to Titus, Paul describes our salvation and says Jesus “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14).

- We are a kingdom of priests. This is clearly a New Testament perspective of all believers. The Apostle Peter describes this identity of those who have been redeemed by God:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. – *I Peter 2:4-5*

Every believer is a priest, worshiping and serving the living God our Savior.

- As believers, we are also a holy nation. Peter continues later in that same chapter:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. – *I Peter 2:9*

Israel, chosen and redeemed by God: a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. You and I as those who have been chosen and redeemed by God: a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. What a calling we have!

From God's words to the people, we move on to see God's warnings to the people.

II. God's Warnings to the People – Exodus 19:7-25

Three times God warns Israel about how they were to approach him. He is teaching them something of his character. This God is absolutely holy; he is above and beyond his creation. We call this God's transcendence. Paul describes this in his letter to Timothy. Speaking of God, he writes:

...he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. – *I Timothy 6:15-16*

This God who is transcendent above all other things, is at the same time a God who stoops to be known by those to whom he chooses to reveal himself. We call this God's immanence. The prophet Jeremiah records these words of God to his people:

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD.... – *Jeremiah 29:13-14*

We see in Exodus 19 that at the same time God is revealing himself to Israel, he is concealing himself from Israel. The prophet Isaiah says: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, our Savior" (Isaiah 45:15).

This is just how God operates. It is a reflection of who he is. This is the basis of the commandments he will lay out for his people – **Exodus 20:1-6**.

This God who dwells in unapproachable light, yet approaches his people that they might know him. God want us to know him as this transcendent God.

Most Christians today, though, tend to see God more as a "friend," kind of a "cosmic buddy." There is an inordinate stress upon the personal-ness of God. God is certainly personal. But is it possible that the pendulum has swung too far to that side?

We present a "user-friendly" God to people without the balance of his majesty and holiness. Modern Christians, certainly we evangelicals, have become overly casual in our approach to God and his presence, even when we come to worship. Perhaps God is not pleased with such a non-chalant attitude. Annie Dillard, in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, expresses her concern that we have forgotten to be mindful of the danger there is in coming into God's presence. She writes:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.

Now here is an important difference between Israel's situation and ours. Israel was to fear God. Not just in a reverential awe and respect, which is required of us as well, but a genuine fear. God's revelation of himself to Israel produced trembling before the Almighty.

There's a story of an incident at a military base on Okinawa. At the end of their July 4th celebration, there was to be a spectacular fireworks display. Apparently, as the time approached 3 tipsy airmen headed for the commanding officer. One of the men ambled up to the general and, without even a salute, cheerfully swatted his arm.

"Say," he asked the general, "What time do the fireworks start?"

The general eyed him coolly for a moment then replied, "Any minute, son. Any minute."

But things are vastly different for believers living in the day of New Testament grace. Turn in your Bible to the New Testament book of Hebrews, chapter 12.

Hebrews 12:18-24

Balance: We don't "fear" God as the Israelites were to fear God. But because of who he is, it does require of us a deep sense of reverence and respect. Peter Enns writes:

The Christian life is not one lived in fear. Nevertheless, I see another extreme, both in others around me and in myself as well. This is the "God is your pal" approach to the Christian life: confidence without reverence.

He continues later with this conclusion:

Exodus 19 is a clear reminder that the God we meet with regularly, by virtue of the intercessory work of the risen Christ and into whose presence we have confidence to come, is the Creator of everything. He is fearful, threatening, unsettling, all-powerful, all-knowing. He is, to use the well-known expression of the beaver in C.S. Lewis' classic children's book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, not safe but good. He is both someone to be feared and the one who has traversed the universe to meet us where we are, in the form of a human being, born of a woman, who bore our sin in his own body and who loves us dearly. It is perhaps, in the end, a paradox well worth maintaining: We fear him because he is good; we see his goodness because we fear him.