

Text: Exod. 19:9-25

Title: "Living under the holiness of God's covenant"

Time: 2/28/21 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: The elevation of Mount Sinai is about 7500 feet above sea level. It is well over twice as tall as Mount Monadnock, which stands at 3200 feet. *Yankee Magazine* once claimed that Mount Monadnock is the most-climbed mountain in the world. I have been on top of Monadnock twice, and it was really the descent the second time that convinced me that there may not ever be a third time for me on top of Mount Monadnock.

Whereas Monadnock is famous as the most-climbed mountain in the world, Sinai is famous as the one mountain only two men were allowed to climb, Aaron and Moses (v. 24). The impossibility of climbing Mount Sinai has nothing to do with the physical condition of the people of Israel, but rather everything to do with their spiritual condition, and with the nature of their God who met them there.

Last week we noted that with chapter 19 we begin to understand what the life of the redeemed is like in God's work of redemption. Verse 4 tells us how they got to God. It was all the work of their Redeemer. Nothing that comes after verse 4 helps them get to God. They were delivered once for all through God's power to crush the bondage of Egypt through the blood of the Passover Lamb. He delivers His people miraculously, instantaneously, and irreversibly, bearing them out of slavery on eagle's wings (v. 4).

With chapter 19 we begin understanding some of the changes that come to the life of the redeemed by seeing that it is first a covenantal life, and we said last week that this

covenant, like others of our legally binding promises, involves an element of love and an element of holiness.

Last week we saw God's love in His covenant with His people. He not only initiates the covenant and explains the covenant, but also He is prepared to account for His people's inability to keep the covenant. Because of His love, they shall be kings and priests in the world. That victory takes us back to the blood of the Lamb that cleanses from sin's disobedience and unbelief. What wondrous love is this!

This morning we will be looking at the rest of chapter 19 beginning in verse 9, where we find that life in covenant with the God of the Bible is a legally binding relationship with One who is inexpressibly holy. The holiness of the God of this covenant is displayed before His people in the unscalable height and unsafe storm of Mount Sinai.

We will notice three simple things from the passage: (1) the people had to climb to get to the foot of Sinai; (2) the Lord had to descend to get to the peak of Sinai; and (3) the people needed Moses and Aaron to go up and down Sinai for them.

I. The people had to climb to get to the foot of Sinai (vv. 10-17).

Illustration: Our federal government has erected a fence in Washington, D. C. around the capital building. The fence is 7-feet tall and is topped with razor wire. National Guardsmen and police patrol the fenced-in area carrying rifles. The United States capital police website warns would-be visitors that due to ongoing concerns about the pandemic, the capital building remains closed to the public. None of those measure, of course, are designed to keep potential visitors

safe. They are designed to keep federal officials and employees safe.

Application: The Lord delimits Israel's ability to approach Mount Sinai in a similar way (v. 12). What is different in this case, however, is that the Lord is putting down these parameters for the protection of the people He governs, not for His own protection.

The Lord gives the people three days in which to sanctify themselves (v. 10). *Sanctify* is the verb form of the noun *holiness* in the original language. It means *to make something holy*. So these instructions were to bring a certain kind of holiness to the people that would prepare them to climb to the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses told them to do three things.

(1) They were to launder their clothes (v. 10), so holiness has something to do with clean garments. Throughout the Scripture, salvation is often described as clean clothes. Isa. 61:10, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels."

(2) They were to wait for the ram's horn before touching the mountain (vv. 11-13), so holiness has something to do with listening for the ram's horn. In our passage the sounding of the trumpet of God is illustrative of what a command of the voice of God sounds like (v. 19). Throughout the Scripture, salvation is often described as the command of God. 2 Cor. 4:6, "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

(3) And they were to refrain from the sexual companionship of marriage (vv. 14-15), and so holiness has something to do with separation from human reproduction. We will find this feature in God's law, even when it comes to the marriage bed, that there is something unclean about human reproduction. Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." Holiness is salvation from our sinful conception in our mother's womb and our sinful birth. This is the Bible doctrine of original sin.

And so, what all this teaches Israel is not only that holiness is a normative perfection in the nature of God, but also that unholiness is the sad state in which they find themselves. They are sinners by birth, by nature, and by choice. And so are we.

All our righteousness is like wearing filthy rags, so we need washed garments spiritually (Isa. 64:6, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away"). And all our understandings are void of spiritual truth, so we need the command of God's voice (1 Cor. 2:14, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned").

And that is Israel's problem at the Mount of God. That is why they have to go through all this trouble simply to climb to the foot of Mount Sinai. Rom. 3:23, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Israel is about 7500 feet short of the glory of God.

How far short are you in the presence of your holy God this morning? The gospel good news always begins with the bad news first. The bad news is that God is holy, you and I

are sinful, and the justice of that equation means that you and I rightly deserve our holy God's condemnation in hell forever. We need to get to the top of the mountain, but we have trouble even climbing to the foot. That is where the Lord finds us when He comes to meet us in our lives. He finds us in our sinful unholiness. And so Israel had to climb just to get to the foot of Sinai.

II. The Lord had to descend to get to the peak of Sinai (vv. 18-20a).

Illustration: One of the most iconic American movies ever made is the 1939 production of *The Wizard of Oz*. The movie was based on the first of a children's series of novels written by an American author named L. Frank Baum. I first saw the film as a child, and I can remember the disappointment I felt when Dorothy finally makes it to the castle of the wizard, sees the fire and the smoke of his image billowing forth impressively, and then discovers that it was all a cruel charade when the curtain gets drawn back and the true wizard is found to be a helpless old man who could never get her back to Kansas as she had hoped.

Since the production of that film, *pulling back the curtain* has become a meaningful metaphor in our language. Innocent though the film is on the surface, it turns out that when you pull the curtain back on the children's book's author, you find a racist member of the Theosophical Society of that time who wrote articles advocating the complete extermination of the Indians as an inferior people.

Application: The God of heaven is the opposite of the wizard of Oz. When sinful man pulls the curtain back on the Lord, he sees what our passage describes – lightnings, thunderings, dark clouds, earthquakes, and smoke and fire like a furnace. It is as though the Lord's holy presence has elec-

trified the mountain in such a way that if a sinner were to bump into it, he would be destroyed immediately. This is no charade. This is who lies behind the curtain, a curtain that is pulled back for Israel's eyes in a way it has not been done for our eyes.

But we too must know, as the writer of Hebrews warns, that even today we must worship the Lord with an understanding of His holiness: "See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we, receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:25-29). The fire of Sinai is a NT truth.

If the God you have come to worship this morning looks to you like the old helpless wizard behind the curtain, you do not know the true God of this holy covenant. We must see Him as He has revealed Himself to be. He is holy; He is a consuming fire; He must be worshipped acceptably with reverence and godly fear. He had to descend to get to the peak of Sinai. Do not worship some other god this morning.

III. The people needed Moses and Aaron to go up and down Sinai for them (vv. 9, 20b-25).

Application: Because the best Israel could do was climb to the foot of the mountain, and because the Lord had to de-

scend to get to the peak of the mountain, the Lord provides a mediator so that He and the people can enter into covenant together.

The Lord's demonstration of the holiness of this covenant has the purpose ultimately that sinners might believe eternally in Moses (v. 9). God wants sinful Israel to believe in Moses forever. To believe in someone, you have to be alive; and to believe in someone forever, you have to be alive forever. The Lord wants Israel to possess eternal life.

To believe in Moses forever required faith in the promise of Moses in Deut. 18:15-19, which is the Lord's ultimate solution to the holiness problem of His covenant (v. 16). Here again we must see the truth from the Book of Hebrews that Jesus Christ is our better Moses and our better Aaron. He is the Apostle and High Priest of our salvation (Heb. 3:1).

When Peter preached the gospel in Acts 3 (vv. 22-26) and when Stephen gave his defense before the Jewish Sanhedrin that murdered him in Acts 7 (vv. 37, 52-53), they referred to this Deuteronomy passage, explaining that Jesus Christ is its promise's fulfillment. The Father Himself, on the Mount of Transfiguration, where Jesus appeared with Moses and Elijah, points to Jesus as the fulfillment of Moses's promise - "This is My Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Hear ye Him" (Matt. 17:5).

And Jesus explains to stubborn, unbelieving Israel, who claimed still to be believing in Moses while rejecting Jesus: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. . . . Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me; for he wrote of

me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" (John 5:37, 45-47).

Conclusion: The life of the redeemed is the life of a beloved people in covenant with the holy God of the Bible, the only God who is, who was, or who is to come. It is a life made possible because there is a Mediator like Moses and Aaron, only far better. Our covenantal relationship with the true God is made possible by Jesus Christ. New life begins here.

Moses ascended to descend again. Jesus descended to ascend again (Eph. 4:8-10). To believe in Moses forever is to have eternal life in the Mediator who Moses said would descend from heaven, die for the sins of men, and rise again and ascend back to heaven. It is His death that ratified the covenant, washes us from our sins, clothes us in His righteous obedience, and presents us faultless in the holy presence of Almighty God. Dear Sinner, is Jesus the Mediator who has brought you to God? Or will you remain one who refuses to believe Moses forever? The choice is yours.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*