

THE TERRIFYING SIDE OF GOD

Exodus 19:1–20:20

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As we look at this Scripture we're attempting to look at how God is speaking to us. I think in this particular passage of Scripture there are at least five ways God is speaking to us.

I. In the first two verses he is speaking to us about a time and a place to listen.

Thus it is that after Israel has been brought safely through the sea and has been tested already five times in the wilderness it is now three months after its Exodus, arriving at the wilderness of Sinai in an actual kind of amphitheater where a large gathering such as Israel could meet. In that place at Sinai Israel will remain encamped for nearly a year. In fact if we find a comparison between Exodus 19:1 and Numbers 10:11; all of the Scripture between 19:1 and Numbers 10:11 comes at a time when Israel is encamped at Sinai. It is a period of ten days short of twelve months. God has acted in Israel's history. That has been the theme of the first 18 chapters of the Book of Exodus.

Now that He has acted, we also find Him as one who speaks. Israel has not done very well simply living on the experience of the Passover and the Exodus. They have already failed God several times in their wilderness. They need more than an experience that has intersected their life at a particular moment in time. If they are to prove faithful to God, they need the continuing teaching and the word of God to fortify the experience with God which they have had. We may be sure in our own lives whenever we have found that God has acted, when He has saved us or when He has done some significant deed for us, He will seek to follow it up with teaching, that our experience with Him might not simply rest upon that thing which He has done for us, but that our experience be faithfully formed by the word which He speaks. It is God's intention to

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take Egypt out of Israel even as He had once taken Israel out of Egypt. The difficulty with Israel at Sinai is that there is still an awful lot of Egypt there.

So it is when we are brought to Christ in conversion. We are saved and God has taken us out of the world. But there is yet a process which we undergo where He takes the world out of us. So it may be said that conversion rightly follows salvation. It seems there's a difference in terminology. We speak of being "saved" and we speak of being "converted." We may refer both of those terms to the same moment in time when we come to Christ. But "conversion" is somehow even beyond salvation in impact, for Israel is "saved" from its oppression in Egypt, but its mind has not yet been changed in a lot of things, which is the essence of "conversion"—to go a new direction. So God is seeking to reform the whole way of life of the Children of Israel as they are here at Sinai. Even as when we come to Jesus Christ He immediately seeks to reform our values, our thoughts, our morals, our attitudes, the way we handle adversity and trial. All of these things He seeks to change in us to truly bring us as a new creation unto Himself.

Sinai, therefore, for the Children of Israel in its nearly twelve-months encampment there, will prove to be a hinge moment in its history. It is a moment after which they will decide to walk with God or they will decide to part company with Him. It is indeed one of the tragedies of the Old Testament, that in the greatest period of time, which is the height of revelation in the Old Testament, that period of time is also marked by a depth of disobedience that perhaps likewise is unparalleled in the Old Testament. A tragedy of Sinai is that Israel will leave Sinai with much the same nature as they had when they entered it. They had entered it a people not really responding well to trial and to adversity, not really understanding or willing to understand the nature of the God who had called them. They will leave Sinai and immediately hasten into the most failure which that generation would experience.

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How possible it is time after time to come into the place where God is speaking to us, only to leave the same persons we were when we entered. It is possible, for example, to go to church for many week or many years or all of your life and not to be vitally changed by that experience of God speaking to us. What a tragedy it would be if after listening to God we leave with the same disposition, the same nature, the same attitudes which we had when we entered His presence. Sinai, therefore, as a lesson to us may be a negative lesson, but a lesson nevertheless that God can speak with the greatest of holiness, yet unless we receive His word to our heart we leave unaffected and unchanged.

There is a time and place to listen to God. Indeed Israel, after its redemption, goes into the wilderness that it might listen. How striking it is when we look at the New Testament to find that when Paul the apostle is converted he goes into the desert, perhaps the same area of Sinai, and for some three years spends time listening to God. He emerges with a full word of God in his heart and life.

II. There is secondly in this text for us a reason for being, Exodus 19:3–7.

In this reason for being God indicates to Israel in verses 3–4, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” We only find out what our reason for being is if we look at what God has already done for us. We cannot find our purposes apart from God. That is in essence what Moses is communicating to Israel. Now that God has done something for you, you can really find out why you exist. Why you live. What God has done is described for Israel. It is said of God that He bore Israel on eagles’ wings. Previously in Exodus we see God saying that He led Israel out with an outstretched arm. That is a symbol of power. But the phrase “on eagles wings” is a symbol of tenderness. It is as the great eagle in teaching the young eagles to

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fly lets them go into the air at a high altitude and swoops under them to pick them up that they might be sustained until they have thoroughly learned to fly. God had brought Israel out on eagles' wings not by loading them in 747s. But it's a poetic phrase symbolizing how tenderly God leads His people. Indeed, Israel in the wilderness was like a young eaglet that had a terribly tough time of flying, continually crashing to the ground in regard to its faith. God comes along and scoops them up and bears them forth on eagles' wings.

How good it is to realize that the God of Israel is our God as well, who scoops us up on His wings when we have fallen and tenderly leads us forth that He might accomplish in us all of His purposes.

The purposes which God has for Israel are three. They are God's purposes for us if we look at 1 Peter 2:9. Peter, the New Testament apostle, adopts wholesale the purposes for believers which are here stated for Israel.

A. The first purpose is that Israel might be God's own possession. The second purpose is that it might be a kingdom of priests. And the third purpose is that it might be a holy nation. So we also are also called to be God's possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. What does it mean to be God's own possession? I think to be God's own possession on the negative side involves the following: It means that you are not a casual purchase. When God sought to bring you to Himself, it was not some spur-of-the-moment feeling toward you. Indeed, the New Testament speaks of the fact that God's love for you is so deep that the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, was slain to save you. Therefore, when you become God's own possession, it is as a result of God's intensive concern for you.

To be God's own possession also means that you are not a cheap purchase. God did not find you at a nickel and dime store. God thinks very much of you; no matter how much you may think of

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yourself, God puts a price tag on you that is very high. Thus the New Testament is able to declare to us “You are not your own. You are bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The price with which we are bought with is the blood of Christ. The great value which God attaches to your life is seen in the offering of His only Son, Jesus Christ, for you.

In being God’s possession you are not bought on an installment plan. God, when He wanted you, had enough to get you in Christ. If you have truly become Christ’s, then you don’t simply have one foot into the kingdom or a hand and a foot into the kingdom. Either all of you is in the kingdom or none of you is in the kingdom. You are not “working out your salvation” in the sense of earning it. For God in Christ Jesus has already earned it for you. And the only “installment” has been completely paid. You are totally His. Israel was not half out of Egypt. It was not partially out of Egypt. It was totally out of Egypt and in so being it could be rightly described as God’s possession.

But on a positive side we may say this: Whatever is God’s possession, God is going to seek to make improvements on, since He owns it. Don’t be surprised when you become God’s possession that the Spirit of God is going to start rearranging you to fit God’s tastes. There may be some pictures hanging on the wall of your mind that God does not like there and He wants to substitute some beautiful paintings there. There may be some dark closets which you have painted all black, and the Lord says, “Let’s get some light in this place.” There may be attitudes, there may be relationships, there may be things inside of you that God, now that you are His, is seeking to improve.

Indeed, as the people of God are at Sinai, Israel is finding that God through the Law is seeking to bring improvements upon what He owns. Yield to the improvements that God wants to make in your life—they are for the betterment of your house.

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B. Not only is Israel, in terms of its purpose, and we, in terms of our purpose, to be God's own possession, but likewise we find a second purpose in the fact that we are a kingdom of priests. This is God's number one occupational goal for all of His people. "Priests" not in the sense of someone who simply wears a clerical garb with a turned-around collar, but a priest in the sense that all of us stand as mediators between God and our fellow man that we both show God to others and in turn bring others to God. God's purpose in calling Israel was not simply to create a little island of religious piety in the midst of the ancient world. His purpose was really to make the whole of Israel a means of mediation between the nations of the world and God. So that in Israel's experience the nations of the world might come and see and recognize and own God as the Lord. It is the goal of God for us that all of us conceive of our occupational goal as priests. What are you? I know that many occupations are represented within our congregation. I hardly dare list less I leave some out. But before the occupation, which you are in the worldly sense, God puts an occupation upon your life already when you are His. That is simply this—you are a priest. It is God's intention in calling us to make us the means by which His life and His love is shown to others. In turn in prayer we represent others before the Lord.

C. Thirdly, the purpose for Israel and the purpose for us was to be a holy nation. The term "holy" is enough perhaps to scare us. I would simply define "holy" as "healthy". It is descriptive of persons who've got it all together. God needs people in the world who have it together, who know what life is really like, and who can live it to the hilt in the freedom of God's way. Thus the Lord, in describing Israel as a holy nation, intends to make them models to the world. So it is that God designs this in our lives—to make us models of the Christian life and doctrine that others may see in us something of God. Great and high callings are for us.

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III. We've looked so far at a time and a place to listen and reasons for being. The third thing we see in this text of Scripture today is a meeting with God, Exodus 19:7–25.

These verses describe the preparation for the encounter with God at Sinai when He speaks in chapter 20. The encounter begins with Moses coming down to the people and setting before them the words which the Lord has already spoken to Him. Verse 8 says “All the people answered together and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken that will we do.’” Great affirmation. They're willing to say at this point, “No matter what God says at this point, I'll do it. Lay it on me!” And God lays it on them. And when He is through they are ready to say in 20:19, “Let not God speak to us lest we die.” “All that God says we will do. I'm confident enough of my faith that whatever you tell me I'll go through it.”—Then God speaks and we say, “Oh, God! Don't speak anymore lest I die!”

How easy it is to make the kinds of confident affirmations which Israel makes before we really know what is involved. “Anything You say I'll say. Anywhere You tell me to go, I'll go. Any trial You call me to go through, I'll go through.” Then the word comes. Then the experience meets us and the testing comes and we say, “Oh Lord! Don't speak any more.” It is not wrong to make the confident affirmation. The problem is not making the affirmation all along the way. Israel's problem was not that it shouldn't have made the affirmation to begin with. God was very pleased with that. The problem came in that Israel needed to continue to renew that and remind themselves of that affirmation as they walked with God.

There is after the confident affirmation of the people God's instructions in verses 9–15 on the people's consecration. They had a three-day period of affirmation before God came down on Sinai. There was to be the washing of clothes, boundaries were to be set so that neither man nor beast came and touched the mountain. And there was to be an abstinence from sexual

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relationships. The threefold act of consecration: The washing represented that God wanted His people to be clean. The boundaries represented the fact that God wanted His people to be secure; if they transgressed the boundaries they would not be secure. The abstinence from sexual relationships indicated that God wanted His people to have a heightened awareness physically and psychologically and spiritually of His presence. So God comes down and prior to His coming down the people are made to know the difference between an ordinary day and a special time of meeting with the Lord.

There then is the coming down of the Lord which is described in verses 16–25. Lightning! A thick cloud covers the mountain. A loud trumpet blast begins. At that point all the people begin to tremble. God Himself comes down in fire, with smoke emerging from the mountain as a symbol of His presence. Then the earth itself begins to quake. All the while the sound of the trumpet is getting louder and louder. It's not one short toot, it's a continuous blast and God's presence is marked by a visual and auditory sense that He is there. Perhaps we might say that this is the height of God's revelation to His people.

In light of that revelation we might have one of two reactions. We may tremble or we may be grateful. We may be grateful that when God comes down, His presence is so real that it can both be seen and felt. How striking it is that this same characteristic of trembling or gratefulness is present when persons meet the risen Christ. It is at the empty sepulcher when the angel descends and rolls away the stone that those who are guarding the place tremble with fear. But when Mary and the disciples and the others realize it is the Lord, they are overcome with joy and gratitude that He is risen.

So the presence of God can incite in us either trembling or gratitude when His manifest power is disclosed. There will indeed come a day when as Paul says we will all appear before the

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judgment seat of Christ. We will all see the certain quality of awesomeness to the character of God. In fact, the Book of Revelation, in describing the quality of God and what is going on around His throne, speaks of that throne as being surrounded with thunders and lightnings and flashes. Also with the sound of trumpet. So that awesome occasion of meeting God also will be ours. We're not simply reading about something which has once occurred, and we'll never have a chance to experience. Meeting God in His awesome nature is one experience which in Christ causes us to respond in gratitude to the Lord.

God places restrictions upon Israel when He comes down. In fact, it's so significant that God does describe His coming as "coming down." Israel couldn't go up to Him. God must come down to us. That's the heart of the New Testament message as well. God, in Jesus Christ, comes down to us. Israel has the experience here of having restrictions placed upon it, that it not come near the mount. We do know, by the way, that no other nation in the Old Testament came as close to God as Israel. But as close as it came, we may come closer. For the rabbis who comment on this passage, their words are filled with eloquence, as this covenant which is given at Sinai is regarded as an eternal covenant, a covenant which will never be greater. A manifestation of God which will never be more splendid. If ever God had manifested Himself, that complete manifestation is at Sinai. But yet the people are standing way off from the presence of God. The superiority of the new covenant which Christ makes, prophesied by Jeremiah, "I will write my word within your heart," the superiority of that covenant is no more seen than in the instance where John in the Upper Room, where Christ is going to commemorate the sealing of the new covenant with His blood, where John leans upon Jesus' breast and is embraced. At Sinai one can only come far away from God. There were boundaries established. But in Christ Jesus we may come way beyond the boundaries, to lean on God Himself.

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IV. Exodus 20:1–17 describes to us a communication from God at Sinai.

Some summary things about the giving of the Law, the Ten Commandments:

God who does something *for* us desires to do something *in* us. The first 18 chapters of Exodus tell what God has done for the Children of Israel. But now in the remaining chapters of Exodus we see what God is attempting to do in the Children of Israel. Freedom is never simply a deliverance from something. It is a freedom which comes within. The question might well be raised, “Are these commandments, which we find here in Exodus 20, for today?” Indeed we see the relevance of the commandments if we state them in their reverse form. What if the commandments were totally reversed and read something like this? Worship any and every God you want. All gods are manmade. There is nothing sacred, even God’s name. Give God none of your time. It is not necessary to honor your parents. It is ok to murder. It is ok to commit adultery. It is ok to lie. It is ok to attempt to get your neighbor’s house, his wife, his employee, or his property or anything else that is his. Stating these in reverse shows how fundamental these commandments are to the ordering of society.

What purposes do the commandments serve in regard to both Israel and in regard to us as believers? One thing is they reveal the holiness of God. That is to say, as we look at these commandments we get an understanding of the moral disposition of God. The Scriptures continually teach us that not only is God great but He is also good. Not only is God powerful but He is also holy. He has a sense of what is right and wrong. He is not a despot. He is not a person who has all power like a Hitler and then chooses to do with that power whatever He will. He operates in holiness. Therefore the Law shows us something of the character of God.

But the Law is certainly given for our benefit as well. That’s a second purpose for the Law. It was given for the benefit of Israel and it is given for our benefit. The Law is divided into two

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parts. The first four commandments describe relationships with God. The last six describe our relationships with others. It's instructive to know that relationship with God comes first. God's way of looking at human life is that if a relationship with Him is right first that is the foundation on which we build right relationships with others. History is replete with examples of nations who have forgotten that divine order. We believe these commands that the state or government is subject to a higher power. The last six commandments cannot really come true unless the first four are in focus. When a tyrant or a dictator comes along and forgets or chooses not to remember "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me," then that tyrant becomes a "god," answerable to no higher law, and tyranny breaks out upon the people. These commandments, therefore, are a protection for Israel, that its leaders might never forget that they are subject to a God who has judgment over them even as they have judgment over the people. They are to remind us, as well, that good life cannot be built unless we build it in God.

The second part of the commandments also speak to us of the preservation of things which are crucial for us. The commandment in regard to honoring our parents speaks to us of the preservation of the home. The commandment regarding murder speaks of God's way of preserving life. The commandment against adultery is God's way of preserving marriages. The commandment against stealing, God's way of allowing us to preserve our property. The commandment against lying, God's way of preserving our reputation and our honor. And the commandment against coveting is God's way of preserving our contentedness.

These are purposes for the Law. But a third purpose we find in the New Testament of the Law is that it is given to reveal sin. Of course, the Law was never given that we might be saved. The Law has no power to save. It simply has the power to provide a foundational moral code to live by. It has the power also to reveal what is wrong. In this sense the Law may be likened unto a

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mirror and a lamp. The mirror reveals to me what I am. I don't like it, but it does it. Also you can walk into a dark room and you can't see at all in the darkness. But turn on the light and what is in the room is revealed. The Law reveals what is in the rooms of our lives. For the Law turns on the light and causes us to look deeply and seriously at ourselves. The Law, like the mirror, does not create the evil. The Law, like the light, does not create the evil. The evil already exists. Nor does the Law have power to remove the evil, just as the mirror or the light do not have power to remove the evil. The purpose of the Law is simply to ask us one simple question, "Are you what you ought to be?" Inevitably, when we look at the Law and look honestly at ourselves we have to say, "No, I am not." Therefore the Law, Paul says, is a schoolmaster to Christ. That is, it gets us ready for Christ to come into our life and rearrange those things in our lives which the Law could never do.

Are you what you ought to be? That is what the Law is asking. There is only one person in all of human history that could look at the question which the Law asks and answer it in the affirmative. That person is Jesus. When the Law asks Him, "Are you all that you ought to be? Have you kept the commandments?" Only Jesus is able to say without equivocation and without hesitancy, "Yes, I am what I ought to be. I have kept the Law."

Following the giving of the Law at Sinai there is a response to God. Exodus 20:18–20 is fascinating because it shows to us that when the people understand God's requirements their concern immediately is to appoint Moses as their intermediary or as their mediator. "They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die'" (NIV). Then Moses began speaking to the people. Already in Exodus God had appointed Moses to be His mediator with the people. But now for the first time the people themselves realize when they first see the manifest holiness of God, that they themselves

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need a go-between. They need a mediator. And they appoint Moses to be their mediator. Moses therefore serves as an example for us of what Christ Himself will do. Christ is a better mediator of a better covenant.

At Sinai the only way I could have gotten up to the mountain to meet with God is if I had been Moses. Or if I had some way of getting inside Moses. So that being inside Moses I could have gone up the mount.

In the New Testament, the only person who has direct access into the presence of God is Jesus Christ our Lord. The only way we could have direct access to God is through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. It struck me as I was looking at this theme this week that that phrase is consistently used in the New Testament that we are “in Christ Jesus.” I am alive to God in Christ, according to Romans 6:11. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). We are baptized into Christ’s death. That is baptism is a physical way of expressing your spiritual reality, that we are placed into Christ. Therefore if I’m going to translate Sinai into New Testament terms I see Jesus walking up the mountain to meet with God. Am I left behind at the boundaries? Am I left behind to tremble in fear? No. Some way, in a way I cannot fully analogize or understand, God has provided a way whereby I can get right inside of Christ Jesus, and inside of Christ Jesus, there is protection and security so that I might go into the very presence of God himself. In Christ Jesus. And in Christ Jesus there is safety. Wherever He goes I can go. Wherever I go He can go. I am in Him and He is in me. Where does Christ want to go? “I go to the Father” (John 20:17). Therefore where can I go? I can go straight to the Father. Where do I want to go? As the Holy Spirit purifies me, I want to go to the people that God wants me to go to, to the things which God wants me to do. Is Christ there with me? Yes, He is.

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When this Old Testament covenant therefore is laid against what we have in the New Testament we see a tremendous comparison. The Old Testament recognizes the covenant made at Sinai is inadequate. Jeremiah 31:31–34 says the day will come when God will make a new covenant when it will not be written on tablets of stone but it will be written in our hearts and God will then be our God and we will be His people. It is this covenant which Christ is concerned about when He meets in the upper room with His disciples and says “This is My blood of the new covenant.” It is this covenant, which is sealed at Calvary, written in Christ’s blood, not simply engraved in tables of stone, but written with the blood of Christ. A covenant that God has made with us that He would be our God and we through Christ would be His people. Therefore when the writer of Hebrews comes to this great theme of contrasting Sinai with the covenant we have in Christ, He says this in Hebrews 12:18–29: “You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’ But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ The

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words ‘once more’ indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, create things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (NIV).

What is this word saying to us? It is saying that we, as believers, must not think of ourselves as coming to a Sinai which is filled with awesomeness and dread. Rather, we have come to a festal gathering, to angels, to the company of just men made perfect, to God, to Jesus Christ. Having, therefore, that confidence that we may come, let us not be like Israel, who with a lesser manifestation walk away and disobey. Rather, having received the greater, let us walk away to do the will of the Lord and to keep all that He has for us.

As we come to communion we come to one who we can be so close to in Christ that we can stand clearly in His presence unafraid, unashamed, realizing that He has brought us to Himself and we are His people

Closing Prayer

Our response, like the Children of Israel to You after You have spoken to us, is to realize that we also need a mediator, someone who will represent us to You, our Father. Someone who will represent You to us. You have chosen Your Son to be the mediator of the new covenant. We thank You that through Him now as we celebrate these elements of the covenant that we have access to You. We stand in Your presence ready to listen, ready to fulfill our reasons for being. Ready to hear. Ready to be filled with Your spirit so that Your way and Your life might indeed be written within us. So Lord, as we gather now to take the bread and cup as signs of the new covenant, we do so with gratitude and with awe, that You love us so much that You through this

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act of giving on Calvary have made us Your own possession. We are not our own, we have been bought with Your blood. Through Jesus our Lord. Amen.