

Thursday Morning Bible Study:

Exodus: God Forms His Holy Nation

4. The Travelling Mount Sinai Experience (Exodus 23:20–31:18)

Right at the end of the instructions / statutes that the LORD gave to Moses for His royal priesthood and holy nation (20:22–23:19) the LORD gave promise to the people about the coming days of their travels to Canaan (23:20-33) that includes strong exhortation alongside the promise.

The promise is that “an angel” will travel with them, to guard them and to bring them to the promised and prepared place. It seems to me that this “angel” (or “messenger”) is in fact Moses himself. That seems to be borne out in 23:21 “Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him...for My Name is in him.” If they do this, then the LORD will be an enemy to all those who oppose them, an adversary to those who seek to make things adverse for Israel. As they go through the wilderness to Canaan, Moses is given to them with the promise attached of the LORD’s keeping of them through him, and with it is the exhortation that the people must “keep themselves” (the literal translation of “pay careful attention” in v.21) to him. Likewise, the terror that God will send before his people into the promised land (23:27) is probably Joshua the leader. The blessedness of the gift of the land is directly linked to the exhortation to not enter into covenant with the inhabitants, which would involve entanglement with their worship and sin against the LORD as they serve these other gods.

The responsiveness (or not) of God’s people to His saving acts determines how those acts work towards them – either as salvation or judgment. To resist the angel and to reject his words is to reject the acts of God. It is foolish to presume that the grace of God operates on us *ex opere operato* (simply by force of their own action, regardless of our relation to that grace.) “Of course God forgives; that’s his job!” (attributed to Voltaire.) In Jeremiah 7:8-10, we see Israel has fallen dreadfully into thinking that because they have the temple they are safe in their gross idolatry, injustice and immorality. Such a god is not the living God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but the projection of our own desire for unaccountability. In Jesus we see that the Father is too gracious be sub-gracious like that! Grace is deeply connected to accountability before Him.

In chapter 24 this relationship of promise and law by the LORD and faith and obedient response by the people is formalised in the covenant ceremony. Whilst the people had given their responsive consent to the covenant (19:8), now that is enacted. This 24th chapter is not about the *establishment* of a relationship between Israel and the LORD. It is all about their being *commissioned* to be a holy nation, a royal priesthood (19:4-6). The relationship existed from the first promises to Abraham, and Israel are the graced inheritors of those promises. These promises had been worked out in the great events of the Exodus — the LORD had shown Himself to be their Saviour. But now at Sinai, the Law has been given to them for their life as the LORD’s redeemed nation among the nations, as God’s special people with a ministry to the rest of the nations of the earth, which also belong to the LORD. What it means for them to be this ‘*am segullah*, this “treasured possession” had been spelled out in the words given to Moses on the mountain (20:22–3:33) which in turn spell out the words given to the whole people when the LORD spoke to them as they gathered at the foot of the mountain (20:1-21.)

So it is not their obedience (or desiring of obedience at least) that creates or seals the covenant. That obedience (or desiring of obedience) was the outflow of the redeeming will of God that established the covenant. The covenant sealing ritual that follows shows where the creation and sealing of the covenant arises – in the gift of God Himself. Having written all the words of the LORD in a book, Moses then rises early the next morning to build an altar (symbolic of God) and 12 pillars (symbolic of the people of God.) Young men are commissioned to offer burnt offerings (symbolic of complete dedication) and peace offerings (symbolic of full communion) to the LORD.

The blood from the offerings is collected in basins and half of it Moses throws against the altar. God is dedicating Himself to His people and offering full communion to them. For the LORD this is going to be worked out in faithfulness and mercy (even in severity in judgment) when His people prove to be unfaithful to Him.

Then Moses reads the Book of the Covenant (all the words and rules) to the people and they pledge formally in these words, “All the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” (This is a repetition of words they said back in 19:8 when the first step towards the giving of the law for their ministry as a holy nation, a royal priesthood had been made.) Then Moses took the remaining blood and threw it over the people – as a sign of their pledge to complete dedication and full communion with God. For the people of God this can only be known in unimpeded obedience. (There is no point speaking of dedication to God if there is no intention to obey His words.)

Then, as the LORD had commanded, Moses takes Aaron and his two eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, with 70 of the elders of Israel up on to the mountain. This has been previewed in vv. 1-2 of the chapter, and now in v. 9 it is taken up again. Together these verses enclose the covenant making with the people — and that leads us to see this event of the leaders going up to the mountain is actually all about the people: these leaders are really representing the people as they go up to worship the LORD on the mountain. The whole of the covenant making that has just taken place has its culmination in the joyful feast in the presence of God.

There they “saw the God of Israel” — but it is, as it were, through a glass, a clear, sapphire pavement. They are near but not near. They “worship from afar” but they are granted this time in the presence of God. Only Moses (and his assistant Joshua) can ascend further up onto the mountain of God, and only Moses can enter the fiery cloud of the presence of the LORD. The people have come out to meet God at the foot of the mountain; Aaron, his sons and the elders can only come so far; Moses can enter the cloud. Each is given communion with God – but something still stands between the people of God and full communion with Him, with nothing between.

In Jesus Christ we have the mediator of a new and better covenant. He stands on both sides of the covenant – as the Son of God dedicating Himself to His people and offering full communion to them in faithfulness and mercy, and as the Son of Man, dedicating himself the God in complete dedication and full communion in unimpeded obedience. His shed blood binds the people of God and God the Father in an indissoluble bond and establishes the people of God as the royal priesthood, the holy nation, the people belonging to God, that we may declare the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. He is the one in who both God and humanity at table are sat down. We have been given confidence to go into the holy places by the blood of Jesus, and we can draw near with complete assurance of faith, having been cleansed even in our hearts from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:19ff.) There is nothing that could disqualify us from

fellowship with God because Jesus Christ has acted as our great high priest. And it is this that stirs and empowers us, in him, to live lives dedicated and obedient to the Father.

As it is, the word that the LORD gives to Moses on the mountain at this time (chh. 25--31) is all about how He will provide for the prolonging of the Sinai experience in the life of God's people. In the instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle and all its furnishings the LORD is actually providing for a "travelling Mount Sinai" to be present in the midst of the people as they travel to the land of promise. Just as the people could not go onto the mountain, and Aaron and his sons and the elders could only go so far (even Joshua who helped Moses further up had to stop at a certain point), and Moses alone could meet with the LORD at the top of the mountain, so the tabernacle had courts for the people, for the priests and for the high priest. That last place, corresponding with Moses at the top of the mount, "The Most Holy Place" was to be the housing for the ark of the covenant and its mercy seat. The LORD says that it is there, "I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give in commandment for the the people of Israel (25:22)." Outside the Most Holy Place was the Holy Place into which the priests could come for their specific ministrations – corresponding to the place on the mountain to which Aaron and his sons (with the elders) could come. And then around the tent as a whole was a courtyard surrounded by walls, but not enclosed above, to which the people of God could bring their sacrifices in offering to the LORD, at the bronze altar.

The furnishings and materials used all pointed to degrees of holiness. In the Most Holy Place and the Holy Place all the furniture was made of pure gold. None of these furnishings was to be directly held by human hands. The screen that separated the two sections was to be decorated with angels; the screen that separated the Holy Place from the courtyard was not to be so decorated. The coverings that went over the Most Holy Place were to be placed in order, working outwards, of blue, purple and red, and finally to be covered with tanned skins ram skins and then goatskins on top. The clasps that held the curtains of the screens were to be made of gold (not *pure* gold), as they stood on the junction of areas of transition from one degree of holiness to another. The frames for the curtains were to be made of silver. The walls of the courtyard were to be placed on frames set on feet made of bronze, and the walls were to be made of undyed linen, held together by silver hooks. The utensils of the bronze altar, and the large washing basin were to be made of bronze. The only coloured part for the courtyard was the gate of the court which had a screen made of blue, purple and scarlet yarns.

Now these instructions were given so that the extraordinary events that Israel had experienced at Mt Sinai would become part of their daily life as the people of God. Meeting God, hearing His law, and being set apart by Him in this way to be a treasured possession, a holy nation, and royal priesthood, was not to be a once off event that Israel could look back to. No – to fulfill this commission Israel would need to continue to be the people who met God and to whom the LORD their God came in grace and mercy. *Israel was to be the people among whom the LORD dwelt.* And the Tabernacle was God's gift for this ongoing encounter by Israel of the LORD's coming to them. It must have been awesome and joyful, demanding and life-giving to have that presence with them.

It is not that the Tabernacle engages God, but rather that God promises to make Himself available to His people in blessing through the Tabernacle worship. And so, despite Israel's persistent unfaithfulness, the LORD continues faithful – in judgment and blessing – to His purpose for His people. This unfaithfulness can be seen throughout the desert wanderings, and into the Promised Land. The Tabernacle “settles down” and becomes the Temple when the people settle in the land, but then the Temple also does not engage God. Israel remains unfaithful, and the LORD remains faithful. When Israel turns from the LORD in idolatrous rebellion, the LORD can – and does – depart from the Temple (the prophecy of Ezekiel), but goes with His people into exile.

Jesus comes, the eternal Word of God who has taken on human flesh bones as His dwelling place, and tabernacles among us. Again there is rebellion against the LORD, the worst of all, and the killing of the Son of God follows. But this is turned by the Lord into the very event that will actually prepare a place for the people of God in the Father's house. The death of Jesus prepares that place by preparing the people, taking from us our sin and standing us in the holiness and blamelessness of the Father. And then the Holy Spirit is poured out upon us, the Spirit of hope who writes into our hearts a longing for the great day that is coming, the day when the dwelling place of God is with man, the day of the revelation of Jesus Christ, when all sin, evil and death is destroyed forever and only righteousness dwells in all the creation. That is the day in which we will see God. Jesus will have given us complete freedom to enter into the abode of God! And that's where I'd rather be!!