

Sermon 93, Going Up the Mountain, Exodus 24:1-2, 9-18

Proposition: God revealed His glory to Israel, to the elders, and to Moses through cloud, fire, and above all, through His Word describing His Tabernacle.

- I. The Invitation, vv. 1-2
 - A. Three Levels of Access
 - 1. People at Base of the Mountain = Courtyard
 - 2. Elders on Sides of the Mountain = Holy Place
 - 3. Mediator on Top of the Mountain = Most Holy Place
 - B. Being in God's Presence Demands Worship, v. 1c
- II. The Ascent, vv. 9-15
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 - A. The Fire: Israel Beholds Their God
 - B. The Cloud: Moses Encounters the Mystery of the Divine Being
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 - D. The Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant: Moses Encounters the Mystery of the Divine Presence

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we looked last time at the covenant ratification ceremony and also spoke about the ascent up the mountain that followed. As you'll recall, we saw that God established a bond in blood with Israel. That covenant was defined in Genesis 17 as "I will be your God, and you will be my people." Though God doesn't use that specific phrase in Exodus 24, something very like it is found in Exodus 19 when God says "You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." That "to me" means "You will be mine." Well, Israel is in covenant with God now. We're going to look at some of the same territory we covered last week, but speak more about the end of the chapter (which we didn't cover) and notice the three different levels of access to God that the chapter clearly mentions. Above all, we will be looking at this chapter in light of its climactic statement that the glory of Yahweh was on Mt. Sinai like a consuming fire, and the chapter's role as an introduction to the sprawling revelation of the tabernacle that comes next. God revealed His glory to Israel, to the elders, and to Moses through cloud, fire, and above all, through His Word describing His Tabernacle.

I. The Invitation, vv. 1-2

As we saw last week, the chapter opens — or better, the Book of the Covenant closes — with God’s speech to Moses inviting him to come back up the mountain with 73 others.

A. Three Levels of Access

However, the way that the invitation is worded highlights three different holiness statuses.

1. People at Base of the Mountain = Courtyard = Common

God specifically mentions that the people are not allowed to come up with Moses — in fact, they are not allowed to leave the bottom of the hill. As we saw in ch. 19, Moses had already had them build a fence at the base of the mountain. On one side of the fence was the “common” zone, the place where they could go. On the other was the “holy” zone, the place where any ordinary Israelite, or even animal, would be killed. This area corresponds to the courtyard area of the tabernacle whose plan God is about to reveal to Moses. In terms of holy and common, clean and unclean, we would call this common. It is not positively unholy. It is neutral. And it is all the farther toward God’s presence that His people are allowed to go.

2. Elders at Sides of the Mountain = Holy Place = Clean

The second zone begins immediately past the fence and extends halfway up the mountain. The elders are allowed here, along with the future priests Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu. This corresponds to the holy place within the tabernacle, and to the status of being clean (like a clean animal, for instance). God specifically states the elders are allowed to worship at a distance. It is a lesser distance than the distance from which the people are allowed to worship, but it is still a distance.

3. Mediator at Top of the Mountain = Most Holy Place = Holy

Finally, the mediator alone is allowed at the top of the mountain, in the immediate presence of God. This corresponds to the high priest alone being allowed into the Holy of Holies, and then only once per year. This spot is not merely clean, like a sheep or goat. It is holy, like the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place. Only Moses is allowed to be here. The others are explicitly told to stay away.

What do we make of these three levels of holiness? They are present here on Sinai and replicated in the tabernacle. They teach us something about God. He is holy — that is, He exists to glorify Himself. The closer you get to Him, the more the holiness increases — and the more your holiness has to increase. Without holiness, no one will see the Lord.

B. Being in God’s Presence Demands Worship, v. 1c

The other thing to notice about the invitation is that it is an invitation to the 73 to “worship at a distance.” To come into God’s presence without worshiping is unthinkable. To come anywhere close to His presence without worshiping is unthinkable. When you get an idea of how majestic, glorious, and beautiful God Almighty is, you fall on your face before Him.

II. The Ascent, vv. 9-15

We turn next to the way in which Moses and the 73 answered the invitation.

A. They Went Up

First of all, they went up. God was to be found on the mountaintop, not down in a hole. Does this mean that God actually loves mountains and cannot be worshiped on the flatlands? Of course

not. Jesus actually spent a lot of time on the Sea of Galilee, which is definitely down in a hole. But mountains are clearly symbolic for the elevated place of communion with God.

B. The Purpose of the Trip: To Receive God's Instructions, v. 12

Why? Well, God says that the reason He invited Moses to the mountaintop was to pass on to him the Ten Commandments and the other commands and instructions. This group of 74 that accompanies Moses as far as they can is something like Israel's official delegation to go up and receive the stone tablets from the hands of God Himself. God had instructions for Israel, including the Ten Words that He had written with His own finger in stone. Moses alone went that far, though; before he ascended the rest of the way to God, he dismissed the elders and told them that Aaron and Hur were in charge while he was gone.

C. They Saw the God Who Is in Covenant with Israel

Again, as we noted last week, the elders who ascended with Moses saw God. That was the major breakthrough outcome of making the covenant.

D. They Saw the Pavement Under His Feet

They also saw the sky-like pavement beneath God's feet. It's as though God is saying "Earth is my footstool. Where the sky ends is where my feet begin."

III. The New Creation and Sabbath Revelation, v. 16

Well, anyway, Moses continued on up the mountain, right into the glory cloud that showed and concealed the presence of Yahweh.

Now, why did Moses have to wait six days for God to start speaking? Some point to this as a time of spiritual preparation for Moses. But I think it is better to see where else the text uses the phrase "six days." Immediately we are reminded of the original creation: "For in six days God created the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all that in them is," as ch. 20 puts it. In other words, just as the narrative of the Red Sea crossing invoked several words and motifs from the creation account, so does this account of Moses' climb up the mountain — especially the themes of six days and God speaking.

God spent six days because that is the length of a creation week — or should I say new creation week? Israel was reborn in a sense through their journey through the Red Sea. Now Moses is reborn in a sense through his ascent to the divine presence. We can also see that God started speaking to Moses on the seventh day. This is a sabbath revelation — a revelation that brings rest to God and to the people of God. After all, the revelation is going to be about a place for God to rest, *shakan* or settle down. On the seventh day God rested, and He also spoke to Moses about a place of rest in the midst of His people.

IV. The Glory, vv. 17-18

Well, at this point the camera pulls back. We don't get to see the conversation between Moses and God, though we do get to hear what God said. But we are shown an exterior shot for just a moment.

A. The Fire: Israel Beholds Their God

We see the glory of God, His beauty and power, the fullness of His being, blazing like fire on the top of Sinai. Presumably the mountain is still smoking and the odd lighting flash is smiting its

peak to add to the general drama and grandeur. Well, Israel sees God in the form of this fire, or more probably in the form of cloud shot through with fire. We saw already in Exodus that God appeared as a self-feeding fire in the burning bush back in ch. 3. Now we see that God continues to appear as a fire — indicating His energy, His un-pin-downable nature, and His power to destroy whatever exalts itself against Him.

B. The Cloud: Moses Encounters the Mystery of the Divine Being

We also see the symbolism of the cloud. We have talked about both fire and cloud, but again I want to mention that the cloud hides the glory of God so that it doesn't break out and kill the viewers on the plains below. The cloud also shows the mystery of God. He is not perfectly open and comprehensible to the human intellect as symbolized by the eye. Ultimately, He is incomprehensible and mysterious, above all in His Triunity. How God can be three persons in one being is beyond our ability to comprehend, even more than how He can create the world but not sin, or how He can be eternal yet also interact with us in time. All this is to say that Moses entering the cloud to commune with God is not only literal, but also deeply symbolic of Moses' encounter with the mystery of the Divine Being, and specifically the mystery of the Holy Trinity. From this encounter sprang the text of the Torah which is before us today. Surely this document is a powerful and overwhelming witness to the reality and goodness of God. And clearly it has its roots in the forty consecutive days that Moses spent in the presence of God.

C. The Word: God Speaks for Five Consecutive Chapters

What happened during those forty days? One thing certainly happened: God spoke, and Moses listened. At the heart of their time together was the Word of God. God hid His face in cloud, but He revealed Himself through an abundance of words that together make up at least the next five chapters of Exodus. The Almighty is fire, wrapped in cloud; but He is also the Word, the God who speaks and reveals Himself verbally.

D. The Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant: Moses Encounters the Mystery of the Divine Presence

Through those words, of course, He describes the tabernacle and its furniture, including the ark of the covenant. Moses encounters not just the mystery of the being of the God who is three in one, but also the mystery of His presence. That's what the tabernacle is about. It is about God dwelling with His people, giving them permanent residence in His presence. In other words, it is ultimately about the Incarnation, when the Son of God became one of us.

The Trinity is here on the top of Sinai, wrapped in the cloud. The Pre-Incarnate Christ is here too, wrapped in the tabernacle.

Do you know this God? Do you see the glory of His presence? Above all, do you realize that you are now welcome there through the death of His Son that tore the veil, dispersed the cloud, and showed the world the face of God? Brothers and sisters, we are welcome in the holiest place. No longer do we have to stay beyond the fence at the mountain's foot, gated out of the presence of God just like Adam and Eve. Instead, in our worship right now we have come to the New Jerusalem, to innumerable angels in festal gathering, to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect. Rejoice in that; believe in that. Live for that. You don't

need to sin. You don't need the cheap thrills of the world, the flesh, and the Devil, for you have the Son of God, and therefore you have His Father and His Spirit. Believe; trust; live. Amen.