

Exodus – Lesson 14

Israel Camps at Sinai

Read Exodus 19:1-25

1. (a) From Exodus 19:1, how *long* has it taken for the Hebrews to reach Mount Sinai? List some reasons why it took this long?

It had taken the Hebrews about three months to get to Sinai. Such a trip would only have been about 250 miles, but the Hebrews were hindered by a number of factors: 1) moving two million people even a short distance takes a great deal of logistics, so trying to get this entire group to this place would have taken a considerable effort, 2) the area of travel was difficult, given its condition as a desert wilderness, 3) the Hebrews were forced to overcome several difficulties along the way, including a battle with the Amalekites and the constant search for water and food, 4) the people were not *necessarily* in any big hurry to get somewhere, given that the end of their journey was virtually unknown to them. True, they knew that they were traveling to a “promised land,” and that this land was bountiful. But they were unsure of this place, and were unsure about leaving Egypt in some cases (note their response to adversity). So, they may have “wandered” somewhat aimlessly waiting for a clear direction from God.

- (b) What kind of *territory* surrounds Mount Sinai? Why might this be significant for this encounter?

Sinai is a mountainous wilderness; it is barren and dry, has little vegetation or food and water. Such a location would be *ideal* for a meeting with God: the people would not be distracted by anything else that might appeal to their senses, so they could concentrate *entirely* on the person of God and his word. It was also a place of *solitude*, a place where they could meditate on God’s word and be surrounded *only* by his presence. The people would be protected here, far away from any enemies (the only nomads in the area having already been defeated). This would make it a place of *sanctuary* at the foot of the mountain.

- (c) What *parallels* might be drawn between the events of the journey of the Hebrews through the wilderness and Jesus’ circumstances in Matthew 4:1-11?

In Matthew 4, Jesus is *led* by the Spirit of God into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. During this time Jesus experienced a number of things: 1) like the Hebrews, Jesus was sent into a wilderness, far away from other people, to a place of solitude where he could be alone with God, 2) like the Hebrews, Jesus had limited access to food and water, focusing him his relationship with God (note that this is the function of *fasting*), 3) like the Hebrews, Jesus was tempted (by the devil, in his case) to turn away from the *direct* provision of God for his sustenance to something else, and 4) like the Hebrews, the *purpose* of this time alone was to strengthen him and prepare him for the journey that lay ahead. In Jesus’ case, that journey included a public ministry and his death. For the Hebrews, that journey included obedience to the law of God and a trip to the promised land. However, even these *journeys* are parallel: in both cases, God required a time of preparation that led to obedience that led to the culmination of *his* purposes in them.

2. (a) List the promises and conditions of the *covenant* that God offers to the people in verses 4-5.

The promise that God gives to the Hebrews is to make them his “*treasured people*,” a people special to him “*among all peoples*” on the earth. This means that this people would be *personally important* to God: he would *protect* them and fight for them, he would give them his *law*, he would *prosper* them, and he would be personally *present* with them as a nation. However, this promise comes with a condition: the people must “*obey*” his voice (i.e. his word) and do what he commands of them. They must not stray from him, but must present themselves in obedience to all that he commands.

(b) Why might have been *premature* for the people to agree with this (see verse 8).

God has made a deal with them: he would be their God if they would obey all that he commands. Unfortunately, they have not yet *heard* what God would command of them. To jump to the point of agreeing with all of God's requirements *without having heard the conditions* may be a bit premature; what if God's requirements are *beyond* their ability? This becomes key to understanding the on-going relationship that Israel would have with God. By agreeing so quickly to God's opening words, the Israelites have "frozen" themselves under the law as the only way to have a relationship with God. Now, because of this "impetuosity," they are forced to attempt to obey God and all of his requirements, even though such obedience could *never* be truly accomplished, especially after they *hear* the exact requirements themselves. Maybe they should have waited to hear what God would say were the conditions, and then choose if they could follow them or not. Frankly, after hearing the full extent of the law (especially the moral code), they might have said to God that they were *unable* to keep such requirements, and would throw themselves on the mercy of God and beg for him to remain with them under a condition of faith. This is the *essence* of the New Testament gospel: people who now *realize* their own inability under God's unattainable standards throw themselves on the mercy of God as it appears in the cross of Christ and beg God to save them on *Christ's* merits, not their own!

3. (a) What does the *thick cloud* that descends upon the mountain symbolize (note verse 9)?

The thick cloud represents the *presence* of God himself *in a personal, visible, and audible way*. God comes to the people so that they can hear him and see him and know that he is there with them. God says that this is designed so that the people might "*believe [Moses] forever.*" God wants the people to *know* that Moses speaks for God and that they should believe his words because they come *directly* from God. Any rebellion against Moses is a rebellion against God, because God has *presented* himself before both them and Moses.

(b) Why were the people *prohibited* from touching the mountain (see verses 12-13)?

The mountain had become holy because of the presence of God; God's presence over the mountain had made the mountain itself sacred. To touch the mountain would be to touch the holiness of God, an act that would be considered deeply offensive to the perfect holiness of God. This is similar to the scene in Exodus 3 where Moses comes into the holy presence of God and is told by God to remove his sandals. Both are *symbolic* of the holy nature of God, set apart from *anything* that is corrupted by sin. No corruption can come into the presence of God, and God cannot be touched by any form of corruption. The symbolism of the mountain as holy and untouchable makes this point very clear to the Israelites, a symbolism that would not soon be forgotten.

(c) What regulations did God require before He would come down? Why were these imposed?

There were several limits imposed: 1) the people were to consecrate themselves by washing their garments (v. 10), 2) limits were to be set around the mountain so that no one could touch it and consequences were to be established for those who did (vv. 11-13a), 3) the people were to wait for the trumpet blast before coming to the mountain (v. 13b), 4) the people were to wait for the Lord to appear on the third day, and 5) the people were to abstain from sexual relationships during this period of consecration (v. 15b).

4. What does it mean that the Israelites were to be a “*kingdom of priests*” (Exodus 19:6)? How does Peter *contrast* this for the church in 1 Peter 2:9-10?

A priest acts as an *ombudsmen* between the people and God, as their *representative* before God. The people could not come *directly* to the presence of God, so the priest would act *between* them and God, drawing them to God. The priests did this through the *sacrificial system*: the people would bring their sacrifice to the priest and the priest would offer it to the Lord on their behalf. Thus, the people would “come” to God. In turn, the priests would bring God to the people through the teaching of the law and through the process of leading the people in worship. To be a “nation” of priests, then, means that the Hebrews (as a people) would perform a similar role *to the rest of the world*. The Hebrews would be ambassadors for God: having a personal relationship with God themselves, they would represent him wherever they went and to whomever they met along the way. The rest of the world would *not* have direct access to God, but could come to God through the Hebrews, who would reveal his words and his laws to the rest of the civilized world. Yahweh was only known to the Jews, and our knowledge of God comes *only* through them; being the first *elect* people of God, all other peoples would have to come through *them* to know God. This is carried forward by Peter when he says that the *church* has now become “the people” of God, a new “*chosen*” group whose purpose is to *represent* God before the world. The church is now a “*royal priesthood*” bringing the presence of God to the world. It is through the *church* now that direct contact with God is made available: as the church goes out into the world, it brings *knowledge* of God to all people through the proclamation of the gospel.

5. Compare Exodus 19:16 to 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, and Revelation 8. Who sounded the trumpet, and what did the sound represent before those who heard it?

In each of these New Testament examples, the trumpet blast comes from heaven, from an angel designated to do so. Given these parallels, it is *likely* that the trumpet blast that is heard by the Hebrews at Sinai is similar: an angel of God, designated by him to do so, makes a loud blast of the trumpet so that all the people can hear it. It is an *announcement* that God is about to *pass judgment*. In the first two N.T. passages above, the announcement is that God is about to raise the dead and begin the process of judgment. In the Revelation 8 passage, each angel blows a trumpet to announce a specific work (or judgment) of God upon the world. The trumpet blast indicates that God is about to judge people, and this is consistent in the Sinai encounter. The people are called to the presence of God so that he can “judge” them by establishing his law in them. This “judgment” is not one of condemnation, but of love, where God draws an elect group of people to himself and reveals his perfect standards to them in a deeply personal way.

6. Read Hebrews 12:18-24. What are the differences between the presence of God that the Hebrews experienced at Sinai versus what the Christian experiences with Jesus?

There are several differences between what the Hebrews experienced in the presence of God at Sinai with what we experience in Christ: 1) we are able to “*touch*” the presence of God in Jesus, whereas the Hebrews could not even touch the mountain itself, 2) we do not *fear* the presence of God as he comes to us in Jesus, whereas the Hebrews were deeply afraid of the presence of God at Sinai, 3) we come to “*Mount Zion*” (the heavenly Jerusalem) and to the city of the Living God, whereas the Hebrews only came to Sinai in the wilderness, 4) we come to a “*new covenant*,” one made with the sprinkling of a perfect blood, whereas the Hebrews came to an old covenant which was made with the sprinkling of imperfect blood, and 5) we come to a perfect “*mediator*” (Jesus) who is able to lead us *directly* to the presence of God, whereas the Hebrews could only come to imperfect mediators who could *never* lead people directly to God.