

The Mountain and the Mediator

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[0 : 0 0] So this evening our reading is in two parts, and they're both in Exodus. So the first part is from Exodus chapter 19, beginning at verse 1, which can be found on page 76 of the Church Bibles.

So that's page 76, Exodus chapter 19, beginning at verse 1. On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt, on that very day they came to the desert of Sinai.

After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob, and what you are to tell the people of Israel.

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

[1 : 2 7] So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, We will do everything the Lord has said.

So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord. The Lord said to Moses, I am going to come to you in a dense cloud so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.

Then Moses told the Lord what the people had said. And the Lord said to Moses, Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Make them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death.

They are to be stoned or shot with arrows. Not a hand is to be laid on them. No person or animal shall be permitted to live. Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they approach the mountain.

[2 : 4 8] After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them and they washed their clothes. Then he said to the people, Prepare yourselves for the third day.

Abstain from sexual relations. On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning with a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast.

Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire.

The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up and the Lord said to him, Go down and warn the people so that they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish.

[4 : 03] Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves or the Lord will break out against them. Moses said to the Lord, And the second part of our reading is found just over the page.

Exodus chapter 20, beginning at verse 18. When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear.

They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not let God speak to us or we will die.

Moses said to the people, Do not be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.

The people remained at a distance while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was. Thanks be to God. Thank you. Thank you. Great.

[5 : 40] Thank you, Jack, for reading. Oh, I'm very loud there. Hi, I'm Jamie. I'm a member of the congregation here. It's a joy to be taking us through this passage here. It would be very helpful if you could keep your Bibles open at page 77.

And let me pray and ask for God's help as we hear what he's speaking to us today. Almighty God, we thank you that you have worked through your people for thousands of years.

We thank you that you spoke to them and that you speak to us today. Lord, help me to speak clearly now. We pray that you would give us a greater understanding of the gospel and a deeper desire to be with you.

Enlarge on our hearts now so that we might know you more. We pray this in Jesus' all-powerful name. Amen. Well, have you ever been on a journey where you thought you'd seen it all, but somehow the wonders kept coming?

I've been on a few, I think, and the best of them was Doubtful Sound. Now, those of you who know me and know about my year abroad will be not surprised to hear that Doubtful Sound is in New Zealand.

[6 : 53] And in fact, it's a fjord. And what was so amazing about it were the three stages of the journey. First, you cross Lake Manipuri, which despite not being a Scottish loch, is rather beautiful and full of all these little islands.

And then it got better as you reached the far side of the lake. And then you went on a bus journey up a mountain and through the valley. And there were these waterfalls on all sides and just glimpses of the fjord ahead.

And then finally, you reach the mouth of the fjord. You get on the boat and cruise down its length. You've got ginormous cliffs on either side. There were dolphins coming up to the boat. The wind was battering my face.

I could hardly believe it. The wonders just kept coming. Now, I mentioned this not as an advert for New Zealand, though, of course, you should visit. But I mentioned it because we're with the Israelites who have been on a phenomenally unusual journey.

A few months ago, they were slaves in Egypt. And now they're on their way to the promised land. Since leaving, they've followed a heavenly pillar of cloud and fire.

[7 : 58] They've drunk water from a rock. And every single day, they eat food that supernaturally appears on the ground called manna. It's strange. It's kind of epic.

But just you wait. For you see, we've finally made it. We're at the mountain. The rescue completes. God has kept his word and they're free.

So what now? What have they been rescued for? In verse 4, God states exactly what this whole exodus thing has been about.

Have a look with me. You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations, you will be my treasured possession.

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Four very quick things from these incredibly rich verses.

[9 : 03] First, the eagles. 26 countries today use eagles as a national symbol because they portray a majestic power. The exodus is a powerful rescue and they are majestically brought to safety, not on their own strength, but carried by him.

Second, the treasured possession. It means the precious royal jewels of a king, the crown jewels, the treasure of his kingdom. They are the things that above all other things display his wealth, his power and authority.

The king deeply values them. And so, the infinitely important living God infinitely values these people. The goal of this rescue wasn't aimless freedom, but for a people to be in an intimate relationship.

They belong to him personally. Third, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Holy means to be set aside. We often think of this as being set aside as in being pure when all else is impure.

It's having glory and mattering more than all the rest. God's holiness includes his inability to be with anything unholy. Especially sinful people.

[10 : 21] Those curled in on themselves. And so, this nation are to be set aside by God. To live in a way which shows the world what it means to be a chosen people.

Those already freed. And finally, the order of these events is crucial. We have a rescue done fully by God. Then a call to follow the way God has called them.

Then the joy of being a kingdom. This is always the gospel order. You can't change it. Grace, obedience, blessing.

Now, I would love to spend more time thinking about these verses. They are worthy of a sermon on their own. But we swiftly move to the epic mountaintop experience.

Our first of two points this evening. The mountain of the holy God. God is coming.

[11 : 24] And in verse 9, we see that they need to prepare. Now, we all understand that you want to prepare for the arrival of someone important. How would you get ready for the arrival of royalty?

Yet here it goes much further. See what they have to do before God comes in verse 10. They must be consecrated by Moses. And they must be clean. Now, being consecrated is again being set aside.

Being made pure and holy. Because proximity to God requires not simply outward cleanliness. It requires a pure heart. And so God's people need purified.

Though it isn't specified, the rest of the Torah would assume that Moses performed a sacrifice. Putting the sin and impurity of the people onto an animal. But even with this cleansing and consecration, there's still a marked distance from God.

If you have a look at verse 12 with me, you'll see clear boundaries. Put limits for the people around the mountain. And tell them, be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it.

[12 : 34] There's a barrier. God fiercely loves these people. He has freed them and now he wants them close. He comes down to the mountain and calls them. They are treasured intimately and beautifully by God.

Yet, there is a vast distance between the people and God. They can't get too close. For God is terrifyingly holy.

In fact, he's dangerous. We sometimes seem surprised by this. But funnily enough, the one with the power to create the entire universe. The one who has just thrashed the most powerful ruler of the ancient world is dangerous.

We've seen the devastating power of his plagues. We've seen his ability to bring death and destruction to his enemies. Even as he brings freedom and victory to his own.

And so it is clear that you can approach God only on his terms. That's always the case. He is holy. People aren't. He's gloriously up there.

[13 : 36] We are pitifully down here. And even though he descends and comes so very close, there is still an entire mountain between us. Yet, see the kindness.

For he gives these terms. He wants the people. And so he gives them a way to approach him. But do not step over that limit. See, at the end of that verse, in verse 12, that the one who defiles himself by coming close to God, when unauthorized, they forfeit their life.

They have claimed a holy status that they do not own. And as with any defilement, the unholy state is contagious. And so shooting an arrow from distance is the only way to remove them from God's glorious presence.

And so Moses goes down the mountain, and he does as commanded. And with the preparations in place, we come to the day itself.

And as we do, I ask this. What do you expect an encounter with God to be like? Now, picture it. You're one of these people here.

[14 : 45] You've seen God do incredible things. Not least, he drove back an entire ocean to let two million people walk through on dry land. But what now? And you, my fellow 21st century Glaswegians, what do you expect?

Because I think most of us are slightly too chummy with God. I think we treat him as cuddly or maybe even bear-huggy. But while God is kind and gentle, we allow this to minimize our view of him.

We make God small. A friend who helps us when we need something. Just a nice guy that smiles at us no matter what we're doing. Contrast that with the experience they get here.

They get something slightly more overwhelming. Read verses 16 to 19 and picture it. An earthquake trembles at your feet.

Thunder and lightning flash in the sky. A blazing fire and a blasting trumpet. You've got the thickest, darkest, most powerful cloud you've ever seen. The entire mountain is shaking under this mighty earthquake.

[15 : 55] A roar of sounds is deafening your ears. You're not even sure what you're seeing. There's a storm cloud looming above. And yet the brightest, deadliest fire from the hottest, furious furnace is burning and burning.

And it's producing billowing smoke who is choking you. Did I mention the lightning? You quake in your sandals as the Lord Almighty, the defeater of armies, the king of all creation.

He descends onto this holy mountain. And you experience just the tiniest snippet of who this guy really is. God is a person, but he is nothing like anyone else.

Sensory overload has gone to the extreme, hasn't it? And the sky is darkened as it's dominated by the thunder's cloud. The land is shaking and you little old you, you're quaking too.

Did you see that in verse 16? The people tremble. And that's before Moses leads them to the appropriate boundary. Around the foot of the mountain.

[16 : 57] Their fear is only going to increase. And I wonder if their trembling is not just at the sights and sounds, but something more. For shrouded by this almighty cloud is the glory of the living God.

And he is so gloriously wonderful that coming face to face with this much of him, even covered by the cloud, is an experience so much better than yourself that you feel so frail and weak that you are mortified, afraid that if you see any more holy, your sinful self will die.

See the danger of the holy in verse 18. The whole mountain trembled violently. Terrifying. Overwhelming.

God is good and God is dangerously holy. So do you think verse 21 is a bit redundant at this point?

I mean, surely no one is going to come close after that display. Who would dare cross this God? And yet somehow the repetition is necessary.

[18 : 10] Somehow the people are still drawn closer. Somehow we too are drawn to this dangerous God. I think deep within ourselves we seek things greater than ourselves.

Humanity is always looking for more. We explored the earth, then went to the moon, maybe someday we'll make it to Mars. And as individuals we pursue relentlessly. Why else would explorers climb active volcanoes?

Why else would we seek to watch natural disasters even as they horrify us? Part of being human means wanting to be part of the greater thing. And so for the Israelites nearly 4,000 years ago, they are within touching distance of the greatest possible thing.

They see the fire, they hear the thunder, and without thinking they find themselves swept up. They want to get past the cloud and see God in the full.

And don't we all want the fullness of God? Don't you want to get through the cloud into the pure light beyond? Just once and for all see him completely. But the problem is we can't handle God full force.

[19 : 24] There is a boundary. We can't be with the holy God unless we ourselves are holy. And so we see a reminder that even the priests need to be consecrated before coming closer.

No one can cross the limits. We are here, but God is there. See verse 24. Go down and bring Aaron up with you, but the priests and the people must not force their way to come up to the Lord, or he will break out against them.

You might be safe some places inside a nuclear power station, but no amount of personal protective equipment means that you would go into the reactor itself.

You just don't do it. Now there's something remarkable about God being described as breaking out. I mean, it sounds like he's just a force waiting to be unleashed.

But I think it's not quite that. It's more that God, his thoughts are so in line with his character that his passionate, dangerous, beautiful, overwhelming, holy glory demands nothing less than breaking out against those who unworthily encroach on his presence.

[20 : 37] Even after he has rescued his people, even as he calls them to be his most treasured possession, even after God descends to the top of the mountain and the people are consecrated and cleansed, they still cannot ascend this mountain.

Even though he's shrouded in a thick, gloomy cloud, they can come no closer. The God of the Exodus is a mighty warrior. His very presence is deadly, and he looms over the entire nation of people.

No wonder they can't go up this mountain. And that's our first point, the mountain of the holy God. And yet, did you notice the weird thing?

The weird thing isn't that these people can't meet their God. In fact, when we remember God's holiness, that's to be expected. Now, the surprise, the really weird thing is that there is one who can.

And this is our second point, a mediator for a holy people, Moses. He is absolutely remarkable. While limits are being set and boundaries drawn, he is doing the impossible.

[21 : 54] He goes back up and down the mountain at least three times in our passage. Verse 3, he goes up. Verse 7, down. Verse 8, he's straight back up again.

Verse 14, down again. Verse 20, he goes up. And verse 25, he comes down again. Given what we've just seen about the transcendent, ferocious holiness of God, this should be impossible, right?

And yet, here he is, going between God and the people. And that's exactly his role. Moses is the mediator, the bridge between a people and their holy God.

Do you see, in verses 7 and 8, that Moses is a messenger who allows the people to speak to their God and allows them to hear from him? And this role is so massively important.

You've seen what God is like. What hope do they have without someone in between? And astonishingly, this is the very reason this entire display happened.

[23 : 00] Why did God appear in a thundercloud of fire? Read verse 9 with me. The Lord said to Moses, I am going to come to you in a dense cloud.

Why? So that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you. Is that how you expected that sentence to end?

The key reason here for experiencing the epicness of God is verifying Moses as the mediator. Now imagine you're the next generation.

You're the ones about to swoop in and conquer the promised land. You're going to begin life as a nation under the law of the Lord, Yahweh, the living God. What difference does it make if you trust Moses as mediator?

Sorry, my voice is completely going. It makes all the difference. If Moses isn't trustworthy, then the law you have in front of you isn't a divine guide on the best way to live.

[24 : 06] It's just some stuffy rules made up by an old guy with a big beard. I mean, could you even trust that there is a land flowing with milk and honey? Moses being trusted as the chosen mediator matters so much that God displays himself in smoke and lightning to authenticate Moses' role.

They hear God speaking to Moses. They know he's legit. And now Moses as mediator makes many things possible. Moses is the one who gives them a way to approach this terrifying mountain.

Moses consecrates them so that they can witness this marvelous display, experiencing God's holiness and trembling for themselves. In fact, we've already seen his mediation time and again when he went to Pharaoh and warned him of God's coming plagues.

He has already been the one to raise his staff and part the Red Sea. And now Moses, he's the one who delivers God's beckoning call to his people.

They cannot go beyond the foot of the mountain but he calls them right to the edge. See verse 17. Moses leads the people, leads them not simply by giving commands but by bringing them to meet with God.

[25 : 28] And as they meet with God, we have this remarkable little comment in verse 19. Amidst the blasting trumpet, we have Moses speaking and God answering. What kind of human can speak to this kind of God and get a response?

Well, it's the one chosen by God to lead his people. God calls Moses in verse 20 not just because he wants Moses but he wants Moses as the representative of the people.

He wants this entire nation, these descendants of Abraham. God already owns every atom of existence yet he chooses people, these people, to be his above all.

And so though there is a boundary, he makes a way for one to go past the limits and come before him. Glance down the column and see what the words are that God speaks to the people in chapter 20.

It's the Ten Commandments. We'll get there next week. This is what God speaks through a dense cloud ablaze with holy. And then over the page, look to 20 verse 18 after God finishes speaking.

[26 : 41] What is their reaction? They trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, speak to us yourself and we will listen but do not let God speak to us or we will die.

They know they can't handle God full force but they trust they can handle him through his mediator. Moses is what allows these weak and feeble people to be the people of the living God.

Verse 21 concisely summarizes all we have seen of Moses and how he bridges the gap. The people remained at a distance while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

Amazing. But we need something better. I mean, is this all we get? A terrifying experience of God's holiness and a mediator who can approach but he's also in a state of fear?

It is an excellent illustration of what we need but we need something better. Now the writer to the Hebrews explains to us what's happened through Jesus is better.

[27 : 56] Turn with me to page 1211 in the church Bibles as we see what this terrifying mountain experience points to. In chapter 12 verse 18 we see that he is pardon in chapter 12 verse 18 we see that he is comparing what happened to these people of God back then to what happens to the people of God today through Jesus.

Have a look. Hebrews 12 verse 18 You Christians saved by faith in Jesus 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 begged that no further words be spoken to them.

We know that Moses and the whole assembly at Sinai were terrified by an encounter with the holy God. We however verse 22 have come to Mount Zion to the city of the living God the heavenly Jerusalem you have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven.

Do you see the difference? Where they had angelic trumpets blasts deafening them we have angelic choirs. Where they had a mountain in the wilderness we have a city brimming with life.

Where they had fear we have joy. And how is this possible? To whom have we come? See verse 24. We have come to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

[29 : 41] Jesus. He's a better mediator than Moses. He relates to us more intimately and brings us to God more fully. Jesus Christ has done great things shedding his precious blood and in doing so bringing us to a better mountain.

One that is like the first and that is epic home to a holy dangerous almighty God but we can now approach it without boundary lines. We don't just watch Jesus ascend the mountain for us we have a path forged for us through the fire and cloud and he brings us the whole way right into the glorious overwhelming ferocious presence of the Lord who reigns over heaven and earth.

Moses merely brought the word of God. Jesus is the word. Jesus is not the one who consecrates the sacrifice but is the sacrifice himself. He doesn't just go past the limits he is limitless in every way.

Jesus is God descended not just to the mountain but descended to become fully human. Fully human and so able to bring the needs of people before God but also fully God so able to go and stand before the Father interceding for his own.

And through the Lord Jesus our mediator whom we trust we finally become this kingdom of priests and this holy nation. If you here tonight trust Jesus' blood as what bridges that enormous gap between you and your holy God then you are a member of the church.

[31 : 14] The assembly of believers greater than the assembly at the bottom of the mountain. You are living stones being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.

We offer spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through our mediator Jesus. We live set aside not in cliques away from society but living radically different and obedient lives right in amongst the rest of them.

Jesus' covenant has been kept in full by himself and so we are holy. We are clean and represent him before the world. We are citizens of his kingdom and he is our ferocious untamed yet compassionate king.

Praise God for his holy mountain. Praise God that we can approach him through Jesus our mediator. Praise him for the day he comes again and takes us to dwell as his precious people forever.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father almighty one we thank you for the Lord Jesus.

[32 : 24] We thank you that he allows us to approach you. Lord we thank you for how terrifyingly holy you are. We thank you for these sights and sounds which give us a picture of your glory your holiness.

We pray that you would help us to leave here with a greater view of you a bigger view of you. Lord one of fear and awe but Lord one of amazement at the Lord Jesus who allows us to come right before you and stand in your presence.

We praise you for him in his name. Amen. Amen.