

The Glory of the Lord

Exodus 19:9-24

You might think to yourself, what does this text have to do with me? What does the encounter of God with his people Israel at Mt. Sinai have to do with our church here and now today? My challenge this afternoon, and my goal, is for all of you to be able to answer to that question when I am finished preaching. Let me begin, however, by making that stated goal a little more difficult, by referring you to Hebrews chapter 12.

Heb. 12:18 “For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. 20 (For they could not endure what was commanded: “And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.” 21 And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.”)

Please note the contrast given by the writer of Hebrews, speaking to us.

Heb. 12:22 “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.”

So we have come to Jesus. You and I, together, have come to the city of living God. We have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, that Old Testament city used as a symbol for our gathering here today as the church of Jesus Christ. And to begin to answer that

question of relevance to our own situation, let me read the last two verses of that same chapter.

Heb. 12:28 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”

Do you see the connection? The New Testament book of Hebrews uses the language and the graphic descriptions of this Old Testament encounter between God and his people as the basis for the application for our worship today as the New Testament people of God. So we don't come to a literal mountain, what may be touched. We don't come physically to a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest. But we do come to the same God who revealed himself in those ways. And we have much to learn about how we ought to meet with him when we do come to him in worship.

Essentially, that is what this worship service is. It is a meeting with God. A meeting between God and his covenant people. It is a meeting in which we offer the sacrifices of our worship to our God. And that is precisely what is happening at Mt. Sinai here in Exodus 19. God is meeting with his people. So how does our this encounter apply to us today? It teaches us how to prepare ourselves to meet with God ourselves.

Preparation for worship. Have you ever thought about how to prepare yourself to worship God? Some of you have, and you take that responsibility seriously. You get here early. You sit down and prepare your mind to worship. You prepare your soul to recognize and honor the glory of God's presence.

There are so many distractions to that. So many ways we really don't adequately prepare for the presence of God in

worship. And that's the context in which I want to look at Exodus 19, and evaluate together the way in which God's people ought to prepare themselves to meet with God.

This meeting between God and his people comes at God's initiative, God's invitation. And that is why,

I. WE MUST BE PREPARED TO MEET WITH THE LORD.

Look at,
v.9

They were able to meet God because he was coming to them! The people of Israel have left Egypt—Independence Day. They have ratified the covenant—Constitution Day. And they are about to receive the Ten Words, the ten commandments, as the comprehensive summary of the whole law of God for their lives as his people. But they cannot come casually or carelessly. They must be prepared. They had three days to prepare, three whole days.

v.15 “Be ready for the third day.”

Verse 11 tells us why, “for on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.” The idea is of a military platoon standing at attention, prepared for orders. They are in formation, giving their absolutely undivided attention to their commanding officer. They are prepared to meet with him. They have prepared themselves to stand before God.

v.17

I believe this perspective is too often lacking in the modern approach to worship. Too often, we think of worship in terms of our own pleasure and entertainment. We think in terms of our own familiarity and comfortability. We think in terms of our own subjective experiences and emotions, and in terms of our own

traditions. We think in terms of ourselves. What we feel.

And when you do that, you miss the main point. This is a meeting with God. And everything surrounding this event at Mt. Sinai gives us the context to teach us how to be prepared to meet with God today. So what is needed, exactly? First, I would identify,

A. Consecration.

v.10

Consecrate means to set apart. “Sanctify them,” God says to Moses. It is the word for holiness. Set them apart as holy unto me. Even the priests had to do the same thing, according to verse 22. And the same word is used again, with more detail in,
v.14-15

The meaning and application of the word for consecration are made clear by the external actions the people took. They washed their clothes. Ceremonial cleanliness--that was essential in the Old Covenant. They had to show themselves outwardly clean. Old Testament worship required those outward washings, those external “baptisms”, from those who would worship God. God's own holiness required it! You had to be clean and pure to enter God's presence.

Thus we read in,

Lev. 11:44 “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. 45 For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

Included in that external cleanliness was the obligation to abstain from the physical act of marriage, as I read at the end of verse 15. And there are plenty of specific regulations in Leviticus to emphasize the importance of that external expression of sexual purity. Here, “the principle behind the prohibition is that the preparation for the covenant ceremony was a solemn matter that required the complete attention (physically and spiritually) of the people, and no diversions could be allowed.”

But what does that all mean for us? If the answer to that question is, “Nothing at all,” then why does Peter quote that very verse, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

Consecration means a commitment unto holiness. Preparation for worship means that you set yourselves apart to God. The necessary preparation for worship is holiness. Holiness of life. Holiness of heart and soul.

Ps. 24:3 “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. 5 He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation.”

And also,

Ps. 15:1 “O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? 2 He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart; 3 who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend.”

So what is required of you, for you to meet with God? The very same thing. Holiness. Consecration. Devotion. In other words, the commitment of your life. And then the commitment to

repentance, with the realization of your need for cleansing. The people of Israel had to wash their garments. Thankfully, you and I aren’t constrained by those outward actions and rituals, but their significance is an abiding reality.

So we hear through the prophet Isaiah,

Isaiah 1:12 “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? 13 Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. 14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. 16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.”

That preparation for worship is just as valid today as it was on that day at Mt. Sinai. So when you gather for worship week by week, please prepare to meet with God. Consecrate yourselves by the commitment of your life to obedience, and as you meet with God, come to him to be washed. That’s really what you ought to be doing before the worship service starts, examining your hearts, confessing your sins, so that you will be prepared to ascend the hill of the Lord and worship him in this place.

And then, notice the,

B. Limitations.

v.12-13

Think of those orange tape barriers that are hung around

crime scenes and buildings burned in a fire, or construction zones. You are prohibited from entering. So no man could touch the mountain. You could not even touch the man who had touched the mountain. The judgment of death would be inflicted, so great was the glorious majesty of God.

But again the question, how does that apply to us today? In one sense, this boundary is fully removed, for Jesus has obtained for us the freedom to enter God's presence. And what a glorious privilege it is, what amazing confidence and boldness we are able to have, to do something that would have caused an Israelite worshiper to die. We can come.

But there is something to be learned from this setting of a limit around the mountain, namely to emphasize for us the glory of the presence of God. And to remember the requirement of,

Heb. 12:28 "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire."

So we must be prepared to worship with the Lord with the awareness that our God is still a consuming fire. You must worship him with reverence and awe, for the great and awesome glory of God demands nothing less. So worship ought never to be flippant or irreverent. It ought not to be trivial or trite, nor should it ever be casual, or informal. It isn't even really supposed to be comfortable! We are meeting with God. And,

II. WE OUGHT TO TREMBLE WHEN WE MEET WITH THE LORD.

Trembling with godly fear, with reverence and awe. Trembling with the awareness of God's presence.

v.16

And, v.18

Why this trembling? And what does this trembling represent? It is the acknowledgement of God's presence. And with that, the awareness in worship of,

A. The manifestation of the glorious majesty of God.

Beloved that's the point of all this, to emphasize not simply the presence of God, but the glory of God. And that is what is here for you and me today to observe, and to learn. The glorious majesty of God. Just look at the words.

v.9 The thick cloud.

v.16

v.18

Beloved, the point of all of those words is to emphasize the greatness of God's presence, and that is the inducement to our trembling. The manifestation of the glorious majesty of God.

Now, let me encourage you to consider that to be your main focus, to consider the glorious majesty of God. The glorious, transcendent, majestic, overwhelming, and awful sense that God is here in our midst meeting with us. With this further thought and reminder of God's authority.

v.19

B. A manifestation of the absolute authority of God.

God answered Moses with thunder! He was introduced with the sound of a trumpet getting louder and louder, perhaps even unbearable. Therefore, beloved, when we are assembled here to worship, God speaks. When the preacher is preaching, by the blessing of God's Holy Spirit, God is speaking. God is speaking through his word, with total and absolute authority.

To realize how important it is to hear God speaking, listen to what Moses would later write about this meeting with God at Mt. Sinai,

Deut. 5:23 “And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders. 24 “And you said, ‘Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man and man still live. 25 Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die.”

Beloved, when God speaks, we ought to tremble in the presence of his glory and his authority. “Thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

Please don’t relegate all these things to irrelevant Old Testament shadows. The outward forms are just that, but the significance of the meaning of those outward forms is unchanged. That’s what all of this has to do with us! It is here at Mt. Sinai that we learn how to worship, because it is here that we learn about the God whom we worship. And you can’t separate those two things, how we worship is determined by knowing and understanding the object of our worship.

Now, having said all of that, let me say one more thing.

III. THE LORD GRACIOUSLY CONDESCENDS TO MEET WITH US.

That’s why there were priests. A way which God has arranged for his people to be able to meet with him. A mediator. A go-between.

The people of Israel in the Old Testament had Moses, here acting in a priestly function.

v.17

Moses brought the people out. Further, he acted as a spokesman for God,

v.21

That is,

A. The mediation of Old Testament priests.

And there were more priests as well.

v.22-25

The whole point of that was that God made a way for a fallen, sinful people to meet with him. Through the intercession of priests. There had to be priests. You couldn’t come to God any other way. You couldn’t meet with God any other way. And that is still true!

After all, the nature of God has not changed. The glory of God has not changed. The authority of God’s words have not changed. This passage rightly teaches us about all of those things. But the glorious thing for us is that we now have a new mediator. We have,

B. The mediation of a New Testament priest.

So let me move past Mt. Sinai, and rightly and fully enter the New Covenant. It is where I started this morning. You and I are not worshiping God at Mt. Sinai. But the symbol of Mt. Sinai remains. So how is our meeting with God described?

Heb. 12:22 “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to

the spirits of just men made perfect.”

And we come with a mediator, too. The mediator of the New Covenant, the only mediator between God and men. You have come...

Heb.12:24 “...to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.”

You and I have come to Jesus. Together, we have come to the city of living God. We have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, that Old Testament city used as a symbol for our gathering here today as the church of Jesus Christ.

So a simple answer to my question. What does this scene of a thick cloud with fire and smoke have to do with us today? It is here that we learn how to worship our God.

The external form has changed! Praise the Lord. We come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, not to a God hidden in smoke upon a trembling mountain. Yet here in this church, this afternoon, here we are to meet with God. The same God who revealed himself to his people at Mt. Sinai.

Heb. 12:28 “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”