

EXODUS Chapter 19:1-6 1-28-18

What Could Be

Exodus 19:**1-2** *In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. 2 When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain.* Notice, they didn't camp in front of **a** mountain. The text says they camped in front of **the** mountain. This is it. This is the special place, not because of any geographical greatness; there were other factors which made it special. It is called Mt. Sinai. Also known as Mt. Horeb. The Bible calls it the Mountain of God and today it's known as Jebel Musa, Moses Mountain. It was there we read that **3-6** *Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: 4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. 5 Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; 6 and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'* *These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.*" Has anyone here ever been to an NFL game in Washington D.C.? Now, the Redskins play at FedEx Field, but they used to play at the historic RFK stadium. Do you folks under forty know who RFK was? He was known as Bobby Kennedy, brother of John F. Kennedy. When Bobby Kennedy was shot I was a little kid. I didn't know much about RFK, but for some reason I remember his funeral. I doubt if I heard it live but I do remember hearing the speech which Teddy Kennedy made at his brother's funeral. All I remember from it is one line. Funny how that happens. I'll be gratified if you remember one line from this sermon fifty years later – or fifty minutes later for that matter. But it was one line which really struck home with me. Ted Kennedy said, *Most people in the world see what is and ask "why?" My brother Bobby saw what could be and asked, "why not?"* Did you get that? The point was that Bobby Kennedy was a man of vision and dreams and ideals. He saw in his mind what America could be and he worked to make the vision a reality. Whatever you think of the Kennedy family, this you must admit, their men have been motivated to make a difference. And one of the most powerfully motivating things I know of is a vision of what can be. When you think of RFK another name that comes to mind is Martin Luther King, Jr, who was killed in the very same year as Bobby, whose life we celebrated 13 days ago. And what was it that motivated King? What did King use to motivate others? It was a dream. He had a dream of an

America in which white and black and rich and poor would respect each other, and recognize the dignity of every man and every woman. A dream, a vision is a motivating thing. I hope you have one. I hope you have a vision of the future that grips your imagination and challenges your will. I hope it's more than the American dream of a nice house, nice car and 1.6 kids. I hope it's a vision which fits the values of Scripture. But there must be something to which you press, for which you strive, towards which you pray. Do you see the things which can be?

That's what our text talks about today - what can be. In fact, it talks about what will be, but it's a conditional hope. We read of what can be but we see there a condition for it. The sentence which encompasses all of verse 5 and half of 6 is what you learned in school to call a conditional sentence. It is an "if-then" sentence. If you do A, then B will come to pass. And what is A? What is the condition? Obedience. "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant." We will come back to that later but as we look together at what could be you remember the "if". But let's focus now on the vision. Let's look at what God sets before Moses as the potentially glorious future of his people.

There are three things God says will be true of Israel. The first is that she will be God's special treasure. The New American Standard translation says, *you shall be my own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine*. The term *own possession* is rendered by the New International Version as *special possession* and that's clearly what it means. It is talking about much more than ownership. Technically speaking God owns what? Everything and everybody. Psalm 24:1 *The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it*. Here God simply says, "all the earth is Mine." This isn't the main point He's making but please note, please recognize the claim of God over everything which is. The comedian Stephen Wright says *you can't have everything, where would you put it?* But hey, God does have everything. It is all His by virtue of creation. That is a basic point of a Biblical world view, but I find few people who have really processed that internally. God's ownership is the foundational principle of stewardship. It means we are caretakers of what belongs to another. What I call my house, my car, my books - aren't really mine at all - they are loans from God. As a steward, I manage what belongs to Him in the awareness that I will answer to Him. Now, I don't know about you, but I tend to take better care of stuff when I borrow it. I may drink coffee in my car but not if I'm borrowing yours. You understand that. None of you wants to face a friend whose borrowed car you damaged. I remember many years ago I went jogging around a lake and I noticed something odd. This small pick-up truck was gradually sliding down a boat ramp, into and under the lake. The young man driving the truck

could only watch and cuss as the truck went under. Being right there, I joined the small crowd which was gathering to watch this and I heard enough to realize that the sunken truck had been borrowed from a roommate for a date. The girl was laughing, but the guy wasn't. Can you imagine breaking the news to your roommate? "Hey, George, I drove your truck into the lake." Oh, my! Low feeling. But it's nothing compared to what some of you will feel when you try to explain to God how you handled His loans. What have you done with His children? With His wife? With His money? Some of you are have talent on loan from God. In fact, you all do. What have you done with it? The first principle of Christian stewardship is that God owns it all.

But even though God owns it all, the Bible makes it clear that He does not value everything equally. Some of your possessions are more precious to you than others, and it is likewise with God. Now, what He promises here to Israel, what He sets before them as their great hope is that they will be his *special* treasure. He says that if they obey Him they will be his favored son, among all the nations of the world they will stand out as the apple of his eye. God had already showered enormous favor on Israel. Verse 4 *You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself.* A beautiful picture there, a picture of God's tenderness and strength. When I was a little kid my dad would tell stories about flying to Africa on an eagle. For a while I believed him. But an even greater, sometimes harder-to-believe story is the one about God bringing sinners to be His friends, and this one is true. God doesn't here just talk about delivering them from Egypt. He says, "I brought you to myself. I protected you, kept you, watched over you and brought you home to Me." You know, God did that for me. Did He do it for you too? Praise the Lord! That is His electing, rescuing love. And He doesn't save us just to make us respectable, He makes us glorious. We were like the tainted harlot whom the Prince has chosen for a bride, out of all the women of the world. Think of what it means to be His Special Treasure. Talk about a healthy self-image. Talk about a reason for joy. You have heard of teacher's pets. We are Creator's pets. We are His favored ones. That accurately describes what God is saying. And that is a very good place to be.

Look at Titus 2:14. The idea that God relates to all men the same just doesn't square with Biblical teaching. It seems God actually seeks out individuals and groups who will belong to Him in a special way. Verse 14 here speaks of Jesus **14** *Who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.* What was Jesus out to get when He laid down His life? He was out to get a people for His

possession. This is the same language as Exodus 19. It means we are called to be His special treasure, so valuable to Him that He shed His blood to make us His own. That is the relationship God offered to Israel thru Moses. That was the vision of what they could be which Moses held out to them. That same vision I can hold out to you. I am God's ambassador and He says you, even you, can be His special treasure, the Creator's pet, the favored of God...if....

After that God said **6a** *You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests.* That's the second thing God holds out before Israel. They can be a kingdom of priests. Now first you'll notice they would be a kingdom. To have a kingdom you have to first have a what? A king. And there is no ambiguity about this. God Himself was to be King. Israel was under His rule, His law, His jurisdiction. They were not a democracy, or an oligarchy, or a republic, they were a theocracy. I have a cartoon which pictures a pastor standing before His people announcing that, "From now on we are going to have a theocracy around here, and I'm Theo." *Theos* means God. A theocracy is divine rule. God is King. And the Lord made that abundantly clear in His covenant. They were to be a kingdom, but no ordinary kingdom. They could be a kingdom of priests. Let's talk about what that meant. First, it did not mean that everybody would have to wear their collars backwards. What it did mean is that everybody would share in priestly functions. A priest is someone who stands between God and man. He functions as an intercessor who offers sacrifices to the Lord. And his work assumes that he has a special access into the presence of God and special knowledge about God. The priests were expected to be the religious instructors of God's people. Therefore, when God says that you will be a kingdom of priests, He is saying they will all be brought into a special relationship with the Lord. They will all be His worshippers and they will all minister on His behalf. Now wouldn't that be great? What an incredible impact the people of Israel could have when everyone was walking with God and teaching His word. But there was that "if" part of the promise. Once again the condition wasn't met and what could have been never came to be. The prophet Hosea later had this to say to the nation of Israel 4:**6** *My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest.* The impact they could have had was gone. They were rejected as priests - why? Interesting. It says it was because they rejected knowledge. They were too ignorant to be like priests and boy does that ever describe the church in our day. Our impact is stunted, in part, because we are ignorant. Why are we? Because we watch Netflix instead of reading the Scriptures and the counsel of wise men. Ignorance disqualifies from the priesthood and so does moral impurity. When you fall into grievous sin and obliterate your Christian testimony

you can be forgiven by God. Forgiveness is one thing, but the privilege of being His minister is another matter. I know a man who is a financial consultant to churches. He has a fine job and does a good work; but the first time I saw this man was in 1982, he was in his 40s and the pastor of the largest church in the state of Mississippi. Guess what happened? Like so many it seems, he fell into immorality. Thankfully it didn't destroy his marriage. Thankfully God forgives such sin as that, but the privilege of ministry is gone. To think of what Israel could have been! To think of what the church could be - serving as a priest, as a teacher, and spiritual guide to the world, if....if....

Thirdly now we see that Israel was to be a holy nation. Like we saw in Titus 2:14, those whom God chooses to be His special treasure He also purifies to become like Him. To be holy fundamentally means to be different, to be set apart for God. God is saying here that if they obey they will be a standout nation. They will be like a shining star among the peoples, and they will shine for Him. It is a privilege to be holy. Sometimes we see it as a burden, I think. We forget what a cruel master sin is, and we look with envy on lost people. What a distortion! Dear friend, stop and think what a privilege it is to be called unto holiness of life. You see the world doing things that look attractive and pleasing, you see certain Christians doing things which allure you but God says, "No, they may but you cannot." For you are my holy one. I expect you to be different. In Deuteronomy 7 Moses repeats himself on this and warns the people not to flirt with the nations of Canaan and intermarry with them. And He says Deuteronomy 7:6 *You are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.*

Did you read this week about the judge who signed the death warrant of a convicted murderer with a happy face? Yeah, this judge, on the death warrant signs his name and puts a happy face above it. The attorneys of the accused said they were appalled and asked a mistrial to be declared because of the happy face. Can you believe it? The judge claims he always signs his name that way as a testimony to the Lord. It's a Christian witness happy face. I've heard worse ideas. There is a church in Denver which calls itself the *Happy Church*. Isn't that precious? Problem is that God wants us to be the Holy Church. Once we are holy we will be very happy, not the superficial, pasted smile kind of happiness, but the deep abiding satisfaction of being and doing what you were made to be and do. Holiness is the calling of every man or woman of God, Old Testament or New Testament. I Peter 1:15-16 *Like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; 16 because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."*

You see, our holiness is to mirror, to reflect the holiness of God. By being like Him in purity of heart we declare His glory to all who see. I Peter 2:9 brings together all that we have been saying **9** *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.* That is what I want my life to do, to proclaim the excellencies of my Redeemer. O For a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemers praise! You may not have a thousand tongues but you do have one life which can declare with brilliance the excellencies of Christ or can muffle the sound of His praise. It all depends on the if....

How bout it? Are you able to see what could be? Can you see the magnificence of the offer of God? Hey, this promise was not just for Israel. Peter applies it to us. Paul applies it to us. We are the redeemed of the Lord. We are the ones He has carried on eagles wings and brought to Himself. We can be His special treasure, we can be a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. God doesn't hold this out to torment us, these things are within our grasp. Can you see it? Listen to me! I'm afraid most people, many of you, don't believe it is possible to be so blessed as our text describes us. You don't believe you can be holy, you don't believe you can minister, you don't believe you can be close to God. You listen to God's promise. Put Him to the test by obeying His word, by fulfilling His condition. Be courageous enough to look at what isn't and say, "Why not?" This really hits home for me. I think of what I want my life to communicate to people and this is it. I want my life to say, "Jesus, really can save." I know, I know how true it is. I want to live in such a way that shows people what could be..."if"..... The "if" is simple. I didn't say it was easy, but it isn't hard to grasp. To know the incredible blessing of God you embrace His authority like you embrace His salvation. He says, "I carried you on eagles wings, brought you to myself, now if you obey my voice, and keep my covenant....you will be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and the prize possession of the Almighty God. If that sounds good to you then I ask with Bobby Kennedy, "why not?" What would keep you from the promises of God? Are your little lusts so precious they are worth such a forfeit? Are your temporal treasures more valuable than your soul? Is your pride that dear and sweet and satisfying to you? AW Tozer writes this haunting word: *It is difficult to take our cross and plod on to the dark and bitter hill of self-renunciation. For every one that actually crosses over into the Promised Land there are many who stand for a while and look longingly across the river and then turn sadly back to the comparative safety of the sandy wastes of the old life.* So, feast your eyes on the table God sets before you. Fill your thoughts with the riches

of His grace. Set your vision on what could be so that nothing will stop you from making it yours. I dare you, I challenge you to get alone with God, face His word honestly, and ask yourself, *Why not? Even, Why not today?*

Prayer: Mighty Lord, the devil would love to snatch away the planted word, so drive him away. Do heart business with many here today. Prove Yourself true and fulfill the longing of every hungry soul.