
The Fenced and Fearful Mountain

Exodus 19:1-21

Introduction The dangerous and deadly power of a volcano has brought awe and fear down through the centuries. On August 26-27, 1883, The eruption of Krakatoa, a volcano on a small island in the Pacific was the largest recorded explosion in history. It was heard and recorded as far away as Perth, Australia, a distance of 1,930 miles. Its eruption of lava, ash and smoke drifted across the globe bringing early darkness, late sunrises and some of the most violent and cold winters of modern times. Just last Friday and Saturday, Mexico's Popocatepetl volcano rumbled to life with six eruptions, spewing steam and columns of ash more than a mile into the air. There were reports of ash raining down on parts of Mexico state and in the capital 40 miles to the northwest. (Fox News)

The launch of a space shuttle is a bone jarring and awe-inspiring thing to watch. Television cannot convey the amazing, rumbling power of the mighty rocket engines as they crackle into life. Their roar and bright flame can be seen for miles as the launch curves its way into space.

We can experience more awe in a volcano or a shuttle launch than in our experience of the God of the universe. Our approach to God is often casual and carnal. God's people all through redemptive history have struggled to maintain a high view of God. Israel was just getting to know her God. He had revealed Himself as powerful and mighty for them in judgment on Egypt and in provision and protection along the way. Now, He is moving to reveal Himself more directly and personally as their King and Lawgiver.

We are coming to a significant place in Exodus. Into more sharp focus comes the first of the two great mountains in Scripture. Once again, let's focus the lens of our exposition camera on Israel as it comes to this important camp site.

The Summons to the Covenant (v.1-9a)

Our text opens with the God's summons to Israel to meet Him at the mount and receive the covenant.

By a Sovereign Call from God (v.1-6)

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ² They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³ while Moses went up to God.

Israel arrives at Mt. Sinai as their permanent encampment around three months after their exit from Egypt. Three full moons after Passover to the day, they are gathering and setting up camp at the foot of this place. This is the place where Moses met God in the burning bush. This the location of the rock from which the life sustaining river of water flows.

On morning after their arrival, Moses can be seen making his way up the side of the mountain. His white cloak billows in the wind. While very old, he walks upright with strength. He is on his way up to meet with God. The pillar of fire has come to rest, not in the center or at the head of the camp, but over the top of Mount Sinai. Moses will act as the formal mediator, the ambassador, the intercessor who will speak for God and represent God's people to Him.

In a Strategic Declaration by God (v.3-6)

The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people 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 therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all 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 people of Israel."

God makes a strategic declaration to Moses. In this God announces what He has done for them in delivering them, in caring for them and in what He requires of them and aims to accomplish for them.

First, they are reminded that God has delivered them from Egypt, from its slavery and its destruction. He has not only brought them out of Egypt, but He has moved in all His might and power to destroy Egypt. The way this is worded also has an ominous tone. There is a distinct sense of warning to Israel as well. God has delivered them – but they are still vulnerable.

In a wonderful image and metaphor, they are reminded of God's care and protection. He bore them on eagle's wings through the difficulties and dangers of the wilderness. He brought them safely to this place in their life and history. He brought them on eagle's wings to Himself. Being lifted up on eagle's wings speaks of the majesty of God and the stunning greatness of His care and concern over us. This metaphor is picked up all through the Bible. Moses sings of the tender and nurturing care of God in Deuteronomy 32. The Psalms often refer to God's care for His people in this way. Isaiah 40:31 looks back to Exodus and forward to a future day when "*but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; shall walk and not faint.*" In the book of Revelation, the woman who bore the man-child is carried to safety by the wings of a great eagle (Revelation 12:13-14).

Finally God declares His covenant purpose for them. If they will keep the covenant that they make, then this is what God will do. There is a definitive condition to the promises that God makes with them. They must keep the covenant. This is God's requirement. God promises that they will be a treasured people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They will have a special place among all the people groups if they will keep the covenant with God.

This sets the stage for God's covenant with national or ethnic Israel. Unlike the covenant that God made with Abraham and the future covenant with David which are unilateral and unconditional, *the Mosaic Covenant is a conditional covenant*. The promises God makes to Israel as a nation and as individuals are dependent upon their keeping the covenant. Israel would be all that God promised here if, and only if, she kept the covenant.

We know that Israel did not keep the covenant. They swore by God's Name to enter it and promptly broke it. All through history, Israel as a nation broke God's covenant and God's laws over and over again. They finally were implicated in crucifying their promised Messiah. It is no wonder then that the promise here of being a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and holy nation is picked up by the Apostles and applied, not to national or ethnic Israel, but to all, Jew and Gentile, who are in Christ. Since He is the only one who kept the covenant, then only those who are in Him can receive the fulfillment of these promises and its accompanying blessings.

I want to emphasize this again. We should not miss the significance of what is being said here. As they came to Mount Sinai and the nation was being summoned to feet of the throne of the King, we have the framework for God's covenant with national Israel. All through the Mosaic Covenant, there is a clear, "if you do this, then I will do that." The blessings of life are promised to those who keep the covenant and the laws of God. The curses are promised to those who break the covenant and the laws of God. No one did. The provision of sacrifices made individual salvation possible for covenant-breakers. Faith in what that sacrifice pointed toward saved the Old Covenant person who stood condemned before God as a covenant-breaker whether Jew or Gentile (Romans 1-3).

Only the Lord Jesus Christ perfectly kept the Mosaic Covenant and the laws of God. He did so not just as the new Israel, but also as the second Adam. The curse of the Law was nailed to the cross so that our law breaking and its just punishment was meted out there. The blessings of this covenant are in Christ and for all those who are in Him.

Therefore, we are the people in these two paragraphs in 1 Peter 2:4-10.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in Scripture: "I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." ⁷ So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," ⁸ and "stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So, God had purposed to set Israel aside from the nations and for the nations. They were to mediate the way to God. They were to be a kingdom of priests. Already, their failure is being anticipated. Christ would come and inaugurate in His own person as King and Priest the kingdom of priests. We do not provide the access to God, Jesus does. But we do preach and proclaim the access to God through Christ alone. Thus, we carry out the grand purpose of God established here.

With a Submissive Response by the People (v.7-9a)

⁷ So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸ All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. ⁹ And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever."

Moses makes his way down from Mount Sinai. He has the summons from the King. He gathers the elders of the people and lays out before all what God had said. He faithfully transmits the revelation of God and the summons by God to enter into the covenant with Him. It is evident that the elders then communicate this to the nation. All the people respond by committing themselves to do what God had spoken. They will come to the feet of the King ready to hear and heed His Word and His will.

So Moses takes the commitment of the people back up the mountain to God. I want you to see the intention of God to publicly show the important role of the mediator. In covenant making with the nation, God spoke through His mediator, His ambassador. He received back from Moses the nation's reply. There is a distinct since of entering into a formal treaty or covenant.

God responds to Moses with the words of verse 9. He will come to the people in a thick cloud. From out of the cloud, He will speak with Moses. He will declare the covenant. He will do so in such a way that authenticates the ministry of Moses. The purpose of this public declaration and authentication is so that the nation will believe Moses. In other words, they are required to believe Moses when God speaks. This is picked up on in the sad story in the gospels of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man is suffering in the torments of hell. He wants no one to come there. So he proposes an evangelistic strategy – send Lazarus back with a first-person account of the blessings of Abraham's bosom and the horrors of hell. What is the response to this? *"But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"* (Luke 16:29-30, ESV).

This is why God speaks from heaven to authenticate the ministry of Jesus as the new Moses, the authorized mediator. At Jesus' baptism, God authenticates Jesus as His son, the one sent to His people. At the mount of transfiguration, God further speaks from heaven and calls on the apostles to hear Christ. This *from heaven voice* over the life and ministry of Jesus authenticates Him as the New Covenant mediator. The direct voice of God says, "This is my son, hear Him."

The King has issued His summons through His mediator. The people have responded. The meeting place is set. The purposes of the covenant and its primary conditions have been declared.

The Preparation for the Audience (v.9b-15)

Now it is time for the preparation of the assembly. Everyone who is going to enter into the presence of royalty must be instructed on what to wear, how to approach, what be careful of and where the boundaries are. This is still true for anyone who is going to have a personal audience with the Queen of England. Israel as a people are about to be ushered into the presence of the King of the Universe. Here are the instructions for their audience with the King.

When Moses told the words of the people to the LORD, ¹⁰ the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments ¹¹ and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³ No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." ¹⁴ So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. ¹⁵ And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman."

For their Drawing Near to the Lord (v.9b-10)

They can only draw near to the Lord as a consecrated and as a clean people. This is the standard set for them. This is a practical necessity as they have been journeying through a wilderness with a minimum of water. If they are going to have an audience with the King, at least clean up! There is also a spiritual significance to this instruction for drawing near to God. Those who draw near must be consecrated or sanctified and washed clean. Hebrews picks this theme up in several paragraphs where God's New Covenant people have been sanctified and have been cleansed and therefore can draw near to God.

For the Descent of the Lord (v.11)

Three days are given for them to be prepared for the descent of the Lord. He will come down upon the mountain. There will be a personal manifestation of the presence of God to His people on the mountain. He will descend in their very sight. Whatever is about to happen will be something of a magnitude greater than His leading them in a pillar of fire and cloud. This will be a visible *coming down* by God. He comes down from His throne to meet with His people. His coming to His people is always a descent for Him and an ascent for them.

With their Distance from the Lord (v.12-13)

But then the people will be kept a distance from the Lord. Barriers are to be erected to keep the people away. The place where God will descend and give the terms of His covenant with His people is fenced. They cannot come near. They cannot touch. In fact, the barriers are erected at the base Mount Sinai. They must not even touch the mountain on which God is descending.

Why is this so? Because of the majesty of God. It is not just His holiness that is in view here. Nothing is said about His holiness. The fearsomeness and dangerousness of God is simply because He is God. Israel needs to sense the awesome deadliness of trifling with God. They are not to come to this covenant promise

with a sense of casualness. They are entering into a covenant relationship with God. That is dreadfully serious business.

How serious? The death penalty will be meted out for anyone who disobeys God and crosses the boundary. One of the meanings of sin is being graphically taught here. This is no yellow crime scene tape around a protected place. This is a high fence with razor concertino wire packed with high voltage and “Deadly Force in use upon trespass” signs. But the sense of “trespass” is being taught. Sin is a transgression of boundaries God has set. It is to trespass where God has forbidden.

The penalty for sin is also being taught. Anyone who goes through the barrier or touches the mountain will be summarily executed. They will be stoned or shot by bow. The penalty for sin is death. Disobey God’s Word and you will die. Cross the boundaries set by God and you will suffer the ultimate consequence.

Phil Ryken helpful notes, “It is not wrong to want to know God. What *is* wrong is to demand entrance into the secrets he has not chosen to reveal. It is part of the very Godness of God to remain a mystery to mankind. On Mount Sinai God kept his mystery on the mountain.”¹³

With their Devotion to the Lord

(v.14)

Moses then does all God told him to do. He communicates to the people what is required of them. He ensures that they carry through. Then that sentence that sounds odd in our ears, “Do not go near a woman.” No insult to ladies is intended here. There is no contaminating affect for being near a female. What he is referring to is marital intimacy. In other words, focus your attention through this evening solely on being ready to meet with God. There are several times in the Bible that short periods of abstinence from sex for married partners is commended or allowed for the sake of spiritual exercises. The point in all of these is to have an undistracted devotion to the Lord. It seems to me this is what is alluded to.

Can you imagine the conversations around manna the next three days! God is going to come down to us. We are to draw near. But we can only come that close. There, see those fences going up? To there, but no closer.

The Descent of the King

(v.16-25)

Many of us have watched the British royal weddings. There the public regality of the monarchy is maintained, even in the modern day. There is such a sense of tradition in the pomp and majesty surrounding the arrival of royalty. Much of the tradition and the pomp and circumstance are designed to elevate the king and queen above the ordinary. In much the same way, there what will transpire in these verses is intended to convey something of the transcendent majesty of God, the King. So the moment has arrived. It is the morning of the third day. Listen to the account of the descent of the King.

¹³Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus : Saved for God's Glory*, Includes Bibliographical References (P. [1165]-1202) and Indexes. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2005), 504.

In the Fearsomeness of His Arrival (v.16-20)

¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. ¹⁹ And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. ²⁰ The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

This is no quiet moment in the life of God's people. God arrives on the mountain top with great noise, smoke, lightening, and a loud blast of trumpets. The laser lights are glittering. The smoke is billowing. The mighty roar of God's movement and the braying blast of trumpets announce and accompany His descent. It shook the mountain and the plains. It was a trembling causing event. Think of the reverse of the lift off of one of our space shuttles. Think of gout of flame. See the billowing smoke. Hear the mighty roar that shakes you all the way to the bone. Along with it a trumpet fanfare that gets louder and louder.

At the moment of touchdown, Moses speaks and God answers. Moses' voice rings out across the mountain. And a thundering voice rolls back. "Come up here, Moses." And he steps out in faith that the invitation from God is to life, not death.

In the Fencing out of His People (v.21-25)

²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish. ²² Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them." ²³ And Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.'" ²⁴ And the LORD said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest he break out against them." ²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and told them.

That God's people have no access to the immediate presence of God to view the glory of God directly is repeated. The people are to be warned that they must not break through the fences and look upon God. God is there; He is inaccessible. Moses responds with pointing out that the people have been warned and will not break through. You can almost hear the, "Yeah, sure" from God. These people will disobey no matter how great the danger, no matter how great the consequence. If it is something they really want, they just assume they can have it. God sternly declares that anyone who does break through will die. The consequence is immediate and final.

God sends Moses back down to warn the people one last time. He is also to bring Aaron back up the mountain with him, but the rest of the priests and the people may not come. Moses and Aaron may come near. No one else is to break through lest God break out against them. To me, there is a ferocity to the language here. God is not one to be trifled with. He is no tamed lion. Only to the called to come near is there safety. To all else, the glory of God is a grave danger. To look upon it uninvited, to press up close when forbidden is invite damning judgment.

This is what it means to draw near to God at Mount Sinai. The Law will be handed down here, not as an act of grace by which men could come near to God, but accompanied with a fearsome aspect and an impenetrable fence. **Conclusion**

Hebrews 12:18-29 refers to this terrible and dark day. Listen to the Word of God.

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

So, we in the New Covenant do not come to Mount Sinai, to a fearsome and fenced place where God may be present but we may not draw near. We come instead to Mount Zion, to the living God into the very presence of the throne of heaven to gaze on the Redeemer's face in the company of the souls of saints and angels.

In other words, in the New Covenant, a great change has taken place. Chapter 19 of Exodus is a massive reversal. Up until now, we have seen how the history of Israel points us to Christ and profits us for practical daily living. Now, Hebrews tells us that beginning at this point from now on, there is a distinct change in the use of Exodus. From here on, you will hear "That was then, but this is now." In the Old Covenant, under the Law, coming to God was fenced and fearful. Now, in the New Covenant under grace the way is open and free. So the way we will handle the rest of Exodus will be markedly different. It will point us to Christ and show us how His doing and dying *now* opens the way that was *then* closed. The Old Covenant mount was a fenced and fearsome place. But that was then, and this is now. We now come to the New Covenant mountain.

But one thing though has not changed. Listen to the next paragraph.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. 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. [ESV]

Regardless of the Old or the New, we had better not refuse the One who is yet speaking. Then, He warned from earth. Now He speaks from heaven. Then it shook a mountain, now it will shake the earth and the heavens. So, here it is. We no longer come to this fenced and fearful mountain. We come to the living God who is speaking through His Word.

Are you hearing and heeding? Are you refusing Him? Turning away from Him? Be cautious my dear friend. That the way is now open and free, that God is now speaking from heaven through the Word, *makes you even more responsible*. When you refuse to hear God speaking, you are rejecting the God who speaks. That is peril to your soul.

Beloved, indeed what a grand and glorious privilege we have. Does this kind of access and attitude mark your Christian life? Do you crouch in fear and tremble under the weight of sin? Do you feel as though freedom in drawing near is the exception in your worship and your walk? Why is that? May, as we move through the last half of Exodus, become more and more a people of the New Covenant, of Christ our King, the blessedness of not coming to a fearful and fenced mountain.

