



Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text
Exodus 19:1-25

Topic
The infinitely holy God makes a way
for His chosen nation to approach Him at Mount Sinai

Title
“Ain’t No Mountain Holy Enough to Keep Me From Jews”

He’s called *Super Sherpa*.

No man has climbed Everest as many times as Phurba Tashi Sherpa Mendewa. He holds the record at twenty-one.

Besides Everest, Tashi has climbed nine other peaks in the 8,000 foot category. He retired in 2014.

Moses was quite the mountain climber. The Bible records him making at least nine trips up and down Mount Sinai.

The traditional site of Mount Sinai has paths that take about four and one-half hours round trip to the seven-thousand five-hundred foot summit.

That's a lot of climbing - especially in chapter nineteen where Moses makes the round trip four times.

It was necessary because God was going to visit Mount Sinai and reveal Himself to the Israelites. They needed to be *ready* and *responsive* when He did.

We're not Israel, but it's always good to be ready for, and responsive to, the Lord. I'll organize my comments around those two points: #1 It's Good To Be Ready For The Lord, and #2 It's Good To Be Responsive To The Lord.

#1 It's Good To Be Ready For The Lord

(v1-15)

The rest of the Book of Exodus, the entire book of Leviticus, and the first nine chapters of the Book of Numbers, record the events that took place at Mount Sinai. That's a lot of ink.

Exo 19:1 In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, they came *to* the Wilderness of Sinai.

Moses was a shepherd, not a Sherpa, but he had to wear mountaineers sandals once the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai.

We don't know where Mount Sinai is; not for sure. Little or no evidence supports the traditional site in the south central Sinai Peninsula. In fact, it seems the only reason that the traditional site is designated "Mount Sinai" is that Helena, mother of Constantine I, decreed it as such in the early 300s AD.

There is evidence that points to a peak in Saudi Arabia; but we just don't know.

Israel came to Mount Sinai seven weeks after the Passover. This timing is reflected in the feasts of Israel. Pentecost is seven weeks after Passover. Thus the Jews celebrate it as commemorating the giving of the Law.

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit came upon the believers on the Day of Pentecost. As the Jews were commemorating the giving of the Law, the church was receiving the new covenant, having the Law written on their hearts.

Exo 19:2 For they had departed from Rephidim, had come to the Wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness. So Israel camped there before the mountain.

The term "wilderness" doesn't always mean a dry wasteland but sometimes uninhabited grazing country.

This is the same as the mountain of God, also called Horeb, where God appeared to Moses in a burning bush.

Exo 19:3 And 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 children of Israel:

The “house of Jacob,” i.e., Jacob and his sons and their families, had settled in Egypt some 70 persons. Four hundred years later, the “children of Israel” were millions of people.

Exo 19:4 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and *how* I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself.

What God “did to the Egyptians” was more than a show of power:

- It was a show of His compassion as He invited Pharaoh to repent.
- It was a show of His patience as He waited nine times for Pharaoh to repent.
- It was a show of His protection as He kept unrepentant Egypt from overwhelming Israel at the Red Sea.

God reveals Himself; He works at revealing Himself to mankind, so that we can seek after Him, and find Him. His dealings with Israel weren't meant to exclude Gentiles from knowing Him, but rather to give them a witness through the Jews.

“Eagles' wings” is one of the great illustrations in the Bible of God's watchful care for His people. It is repeated in many different places. You probably have it on a wall in your home.

Too bad we've ruined it in our commentaries. Here is an example:

All at once the mother eagle pushes the little one out of the nest, and the eaglet falls down the face of the cliff, surely to be destroyed. *But not so.* In a flash the great mother eagle flies down, catches the little one on her back, and flies up and deposits

it in the nest. The mother bird pushes the little one out again, and again, over and over.

The eagle's behavior is then applied to your walk with the Lord - how that God pushes you out of your comfort zone for your own good, to teach you to soar spiritually, with Him always ready to swoop under you and catch you before you hit hard.

You already know what I'm going to say: **It's not true.** *Eagles don't do that.*

According to eagles.org, "Eaglets spend 10-12 weeks on the nest, do all of their own flight training, and fledge from the nest on their own, gradually gaining strength and honing their flight skills over the next month or two."

An ornithologist writes,

Some eaglets take their first flight and have no issues, but some may go crashing through the branches and injure their wing and won't make it. Sometimes eaglets will fall out of the nest, due to some disturbance like fireworks, or a rogue puff of wind, and fall from the nest before they are ready or even able to fly... If they are forced from the nest too early, they just can't fly... and usually will not make it.

So what *does* God intend from the illustration of the eagle? I think in this case it's as simple, but as beautiful, as God depicting His sovereignty as if He were an eagle soaring.

The eagle effortlessly soaring high above on the thermals, looking down with proverbial “eagle eyes,” was like God overseeing the Israelites on their exodus. While they were in the throes and thick of it, God was watching their every move.

Someone is going to come up and quote Deuteronomy 31:11, which says,

Deu 32:11 As an eagle stirs up its nest, Hovers over its young, Spreading out its wings, taking them up, Carrying them on its wings,

- Eagles **do** stir their nests and hover and spread their wings over their young.
- They **do not** take up their young; they do not carry them in any manner.

Is the Bible wrong? *Of course not.* This verse divides into two very different halves:

1. The first half refers to the image of the eagle and its loving care for its young.
2. Then the focus shifts and in the second half, God Himself is the subject of all three verbs.

The carrying on the wings, then, is not something the eagle does; it is something God does for Israel. The eagle cares for its young and hovers over them. In the same way, God himself spreads His wings over his people, sheltering them under his protection. But what the eagle cannot do, that the Lord *did* do. In the face of enemies and danger, God took Israel and put them on His wings and carried them through.

J.R.R. Tolkien captures some of this the way he portrayed the eagles in *The Lord of the Rings*.

I'm sorry if I've ruined this illustration for you. On the other hand, *we can't go around making things up*.

Exo 19:5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth *is* Mine.

“Treasure” can be translated *jewels*. God was inviting Israel to hold a special place among the nations of the world; to be His crown jewel.

Exo 19:6 And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These *are* the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."

A “priest” represents God to people, and people to God. God’s intention for His crown jewel was that Israel (and each Israelite) represent Him to the rest of the world.

To that effect they were to be “holy,” meaning *set apart*. The ceremonial laws, the rites and rituals, the diet and days they were to observe - all these set them apart from Gentiles to the end that they would be asked “Why?” and be able to share the Lord.

Exo 19:7 So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the LORD commanded him.

Exo 19:8 Then all the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." So Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD.

Israel has been criticized for too quickly promising "all that the Lord has spoken we will do." Maybe; but we do something similar. As a Christian, you have an imperfect knowledge of God. You will never have a perfect knowledge of God until you are out of your mortal body and in His presence. Nevertheless you regularly commit to obeying God - no matter that you don't have all the facts about His Word or your life.

Exo 19:9 And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I come to you in the thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever." So Moses told the words of the people to the LORD.

The people needed to know that Moses would continue to speak for God. He was their leader. This wasn't going to be a democracy. They would get a visual representation of Moses' delegated authority by hearing God speak to Moses from the "thick cloud."

Exo 19:10 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes.

Exo 19:11 And let them be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

"Ready" is the key word. Their readiness would be symbolized by two things:

1. They would show they were ready by *waiting* until the third day.
2. They would show they were ready by *washing* their clothes.

Waiting with washed clothes meant nothing. It's important to understand the rituals themselves were powerless. These things Israel was told to do to be ready were symbols that communicated they were willing to obey the Lord. They were an *outward* show of their *inward* beliefs.

Exo 19:12 You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Take heed to yourselves *that you do not* go up to the mountain or touch its base. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death.

Exo 19:13 Not a hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot *with an arrow*; whether man or beast, he shall not live.' When the trumpet sounds long, they shall come near the mountain."

Although there was obviously a lot of terror at this event, don't lose sight of how glorious it was. It reminds me of C.S. Lewis' description of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*:

"Aslan is a lion - the Lion, the great Lion," [said Mr. Beaver].

"Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Who said anything about safe?"

'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

YHWH was coming to enter into a covenant elevating this insignificant nation.

He had redeemed them mightily and would now make them His crown jewel. They would be looked upon as those who had knowledge of the one true God. All the nations of the world would seek them out.

“Don’t touch the mountain” sounds reasonable to me. It emphasized His holiness, while simultaneously communicating that God made a way to have a personal relationship with them.

Exo 19:14 So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and sanctified the people, and they washed their clothes.

Exo 19:15 And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not come near *your* wives."

In addition to waiting and washing, they were to abstain from normal sexual relations within their marriages. It was a temporary fast, intended to focus the mind away from self and onto God.

This is the point in our study that we make application to ourselves. But before we do, there is a passage in the New Testament we absolutely must read. If we don’t, we’ll for sure get this wrong.

In the New Testament Book of Hebrews, the writer was exhorting persecuted Christian Jews to not return to Judaism and thereby avoid martyrdom. He told them they had Someone better. To make his point, he used Mount Sinai as an illustration:

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,

Heb 12:19 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.

Heb 12:20 (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.")

Heb 12:21 And so terrifying was the sight *that* Moses said, "I AM EXCEEDINGLY AFRAID AND TREMBLING.")

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,

Heb 12:23 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,

Heb 12:24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant...

You and I no longer approach God as if He were thundering from Mount Sinai. We are already citizens of the New Jerusalem, the future city Jesus is away building that comes out of Heaven to hover over the earth.

We should not take from this that you have to wear your 'Sunday best' in order to come to church. Or that you cannot immediately approach the Lord, but must somehow wait to prove your sincerity.

God's dealings with Israel at Mount Sinai were glorious. But they fade into shadows when compared with what we have in Jesus.

We believe in what theologians call *dispensations*. William MacDonald has a great section on this in his *Believer's Bible Commentary*. Here is just a brief portion:

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Exodus 19:1-25

*"Ain't No Mountain Holy Enough
to Keep Me From Jews"*

... It is very helpful to see that there are different dispensations [in God's historic dealings with mankind]. The distinction between law and grace is especially important. Otherwise we will take portions of Scripture that apply to other ages and refer them to ourselves. While all Scriptures are profitable for us (Second Timothy 3:16), not all were written directly to us. Passages dealing with other ages have applications for us, but their primary interpretation is for the age for which they were written. We [could cite] the dietary restrictions of Leviticus 11. [According to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark 7:18-19] this prohibition is not binding on Christians today. [But] the underlying principle remains - that we should avoid moral and spiritual uncleanness.

Every Christian holds to some form of dispensationalism. For example, no one brought a lamb to church for a sacrifice. We no longer sacrifice lambs as in former times because Jesus was the lamb Who took away the sins of the world. We thus live in a different dispensation, and we must be careful making application to ourselves from previous ones.

How, then, does Israel at Mount Sinai minister to us? **In their being ready.** The New Testament encourages us to be ready in at least two ways:

1. We're told to "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always *be ready* to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (First Peter 3:15).
2. We're told in Second Thessalonians 3:5, "And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ."

Don't look back to Mount Sinai, and the keeping of the Law with its rules and rituals, diet and days.

Look forward to the imminent coming of Jesus. Our waiting, and washing, and fasting, is spiritual and Holy Spirit empowered. Ours is a freedom in Jesus no previous dispensation experienced. We should revel in it.

#2 It's Good To Be Responsive To The Lord

(v16-25)

We're having a baptism today, but it won't be a spontaneous baptism.

A large, outwardly successful megachurch was busted for its practice of what they called "spontaneous baptisms." The pastor would announce a baptism, and people were immediately 'moved' to come forward, with no advanced notice.

Turns out the supposedly spontaneous baptisms were carefully planned ahead of time, with people planted in the congregation to encourage the response of others. Fifteen people planted in the service would be the first ones to move when the pastor gave the call. They were to move intentionally through the highest visibility areas and take the longest walk. Their supposed spontaneous response to be baptized encouraged others to do the same.

It's important we respond to God - **but that we do it without stunts or gimmicks.**

Our chapter continues with the response of the Israelites to God's invitation.

Exo 19:16 Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who *were* in the camp trembled.

The Lord manifested Himself by sights and sounds, but it wasn't a gimmick or a stunt. It was an appropriate representation of His glory.

Exo 19:17 And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.

The people responded. It was genuine. They chose to be there; they wanted to be there.

Exo 19:18 Now Mount Sinai *was* completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.

Exo 19:19 And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice.

This was maybe the worst venue ever. It was too dark and much too loud. If we ran church like this, no one would come back.

Exo 19:20 Then the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

Exo 19:21 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down..."

Stop there for a moment. "Go down?" *He just went up.* It had taken him hours. God could have spoken to him anywhere, at anytime.

Sometimes God seems inefficient. I say that reverently; but it's true. For example: Using you and I to spread the Gospel is terribly inefficient when you consider the resources at God's disposal. But it is how the Lord has chosen to reveal Himself.

Exo 19:21 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to gaze at the LORD, and many of them perish.

These Israelites who were willing to ignore God's warnings would have made great California drivers. We regularly ignore all kinds of warnings. "Street Closed" means less traffic. "Carry Chains" means call Triple-A.

Exo 19:22 Also let the priests who come near the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them."

A formal priesthood did not yet exist. Apparently each family had someone designated to perform sacrifices and make offerings to the Lord.

It sounds like these guys needed some extra consecration. We're not told what it was.

Exo 19:23 But Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for You warned us, saying, 'Set bounds around the mountain and consecrate it.' "

Moses assumed the people would obey due to the severity of the warnings. But some might not.

Exo 19:24 Then the LORD said to him, "Away! Get down and then come up, you and 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."

Go down; come up. If God wants you to spend most of your day climbing, that's His call.

Exo 19:25 So Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

- Moses responds obediently throughout.
- The people respond - not perfectly, but enthusiastically.

We ought to respond to God. Thankfully, He's not manifesting Himself like at Mount Sinai. But He is present - both as we gather, and everywhere.

Isaiah's famous declaration upon seeing God is still applicable: "Here am I God; send me." It rings true with the exhortation in our dispensation that we offer ourselves living sacrifices and thereby serve the Lord as He directs us.

We all, daily and weekly, need to ask ourselves, "How am I responding to God's through my life?"

If you're not a believer in Jesus... You respond to Him knocking at the door of your heart. Open it; let Him in, to share eternal life with you.

We're not called upon to be spiritual sherpa's, making rigorous climbs to be near to God, and to hear God.

Thanks to Jesus, our ascent is more like that of an eagle. We are "those who wait on the LORD Shall [who] renew their strength; [We] shall mount up with wings like eagles, [We] shall run and not be weary, [We] shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).