

**Studies in Exodus No. 22**  
**Exodus 19:1-25**  
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**Text Comment**

Here in chapter 19 is the beginning of the covenant ceremony that will take us to the end of Exodus chapter 24. We would do well to remember that this event was not only the great event of the book of Exodus – the point and purpose of all that has happened so far – but the defining event of OT revelation. There would be nothing so important that would happen until the Son of God should enter the world.

- v.1 The opening two verses constitute a narrative opening full of portent, an introduction that leads us to expect something very important is about to occur. There are changes in the Hebrew grammar, changes that amount to “an elevation in style,” that indicate that still more clearly to a reader of that language. [Cassuto; Alter]
- v.2 It is a striking fact that we do not know where Mt. Sinai was. Elijah knew the mountain in his day (1 Kgs. 19:8) but there is no evidence of its location being preserved in Israel’s traditions after the Babylonian exile. The tradition that it is the mountain now known as *Jebel Musa* is very late. The rabbis of later times seem not to have cared where it was. This may explain why none of the Israeli protests against handing back the Sinai to Egypt under the Camp David Accords were based on the sacredness of Mt. Sinai. [Ellison, 98]
- v.3 The Hebrew suggests that Moses went directly to the mountain even while Israel was at the base pitching her tents. Moses was familiar with this place and knew very well that Israel’s arrival here was in fulfillment of God’s plan. Remember, when Moses met the Lord at the burning bush (which was near Mt. Sinai) Yahweh had told him: “I will be with you. And this will be a sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” So what happens now is the fulfillment of God’s promise. And it is unmistakably clear in all that follows that Yahweh is taking the initiative; he is the actor here. The people are receiving what the Lord is giving them. He is creating this covenant and imposing it upon his chosen people, however graciously.
- v.4 This lovely metaphor, “on eagles’ wings,” suggests the transcendent experience of deliverance that Israel had enjoyed – as if she flew out of Egypt, far above and so safe from her captors. How magnificently, how perfectly had she been saved!
- v.5 The covenant between God and his people was, of course, a major theme in Genesis as the covenant made first with Abraham and his seed was renewed with Isaac, Jacob, and his descendants. The idea of a covenant uniting two parties was a commonplace in the ANE and there was even an accepted form for the recording of covenants. We will discover as we move into this material that the covenant or treaty form employed in the ANE has been used in the Bible for the revelation of God’s covenant with Israel. It is an

important instance of God's accommodation to the culture, the literary forms, and the thought world of the men to whom he was disclosing his will. It is a lesser instance of that same drawing near that found its fullest and most important expression in the incarnation of God the Son. He came to inhabit and share our world. But, in the Bible, God had already done that in many different ways. We will have cause over and over again to note similarities between the covenant material in Exodus and especially the suzerainty treaties of the ANE (covenants imposed by a stronger king upon a weaker or conquered king). For example, "treasured possession" is found in ANE covenant documents. That is, the vassal, the weaker king or nation that is being brought into covenant with the more powerful king, becomes the cherished treasure of his new sovereign. In the ANE political treaties that is a conventional form of words only (and hyperbole at that insofar as the vassal state was made subject to the suzerain in the treaty and often in a way hardly calculated to make it feel "loved"); in Yahweh's case the language of the covenant invests a familiar form of words with new meaning.

What the concept of "covenant" does in the Bible is to provide a counterpoise to the doctrine and the reality of God's sovereign decree and will. It is in terms of God's covenant that the human response is found and it is in the covenant that we learn that human beings must act and that their action is a real cause of what comes to pass in the world and in the salvation of the world. "If you obey me fully..." That is the language of the covenant. I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will harden whom I harden is the language of the decree. Both are true, of course, equally true. How to reconcile the two emphases is not something even the wisest of human beings has ever discovered. We must simply believe both at once: decree and covenant; election and covenant; sovereign grace and covenant; or, as we often put it, divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

- v.6 The basic thought is that Israel is a people set apart to God and to his service with the privilege of free access to his presence. [Cole, 145] It never ceases to amaze me that time and time again I hear it said that one of the key differences between the ancient epoch and that introduced by Christ and his apostles is that in those days there was a priesthood, but now we are all priests. They take that teaching from 1 Peter 2 *which quotes this text from Exodus 19*. There is nothing new in the universal priesthood of God's people – either their free access to his presence or their being set apart to offer sacrifices to him and to serve him – *that* has always been the case. Nor does the fact that all of God's people are priests, that there is, in other words, a general priesthood mean that there is not such a thing as a special priesthood, as there was in the ancient epoch and as there is nowadays in the Christian ministry.

"Holy nation," means, in a similar fashion, a nation set apart to God, set apart for special purposes. And, of course, the sad lesson of the history of Israel and the church is that whenever she ceases to be holy to God, she reverts to the level of mankind around her. [Ellison, 101]

"These are the words," by the way, is a very common phrase in the ANE treaties.

In any case, as one commentator puts it, vv. 4-6 amount to “a poetic summary of covenant theology.” [Durham, 261]

- v.8     Following the pattern of ANE covenants, the people accept the terms of Yahweh’s covenant, even though these terms have not yet been specified. *There is something very important here.* It is in the nature of the case that a person who becomes a Christian accepts the terms of God’s covenant with him *before the implications of those terms are made clear to him.* No one can know what it is going to mean to follow Christ, to serve him, to obey his commandments until he is well along the way of the Christian life. But, at the very beginning, having encountered Christ, he knows that he is in for a penny, in for a pound.
  
- v.9     Again, following the pattern of covenant-making in the ANE, Yahweh’s covenant with Israel will be confirmed in a public ceremony. The particular reason given for the manifestation of the divine presence is that the people should believe in the reality of God’s communication to Moses, for the revelation of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel would be given *through Moses.* This is why, later, prophets and apostles would be given divine power to work miracles. They were, in that way, being accredited as spokesmen for God.
  
- v.11    The Greeks thought that their gods *lived* on Mt. Olympus. The Hebrews understood that God was everywhere but that he could choose any place to manifest his presence.
  
- v.12    Apparently Moses put markers around the base of the mountain to indicate the boundary that was not to be crossed and then gave the people stern instructions about where they were to remain and where they were not to go.
  
- v.13    So holy is the mountain because of God’s presence and, therefore, so defiled is the one who violates that holiness, that he must be put to death by some means that does not require even the executioners to touch the body of the man who has transgressed the holiness of the mountain.
  
- v.15    It is not that sexual activity is unclean but rather that in the prospect of an encounter with Almighty God their thoughts should be turned to higher things and because a bath was required afterwards for someone to be ceremonially clean before the Lord. [Ellison, 103; Cole, 146]
  
- v.16    Now comes the theophany itself with all the accoutrements of a great thunderstorm over the mountain. It is true that thunder and lightning, for example, are found in pagan literature of the period to be manifestations of Baal and other imagined gods. Baal was especially the god of lightning, for example. The Canaanites thought that thunder *was* the voice of Baal. Those gods were, in a real way, bound to the forces of nature; could hardly be distinguished from them. In the Bible God stands above those forces and uses them according to his will. The Lord’s voice *here* is not the thunder but sounds over and through the thunder. The fact that biblical writers used the same imagery in their descriptions of the majesty of God doesn’t prove they had the same theology. Milton’s

use of pagan epic poetry is a case in point. [Alter, 425] Still less, does God's accommodation to that pagan imagery in his own appearance to his people mean that it meant the same thing for him and for Israel as it meant, say, for the Canaanites. Fact is, thunder, lightning, wind, cloud, and earthquake, and so on are still some of the most overwhelming experiences men can have. The last time I was literally afraid for my life was in a terrific storm in the mountains near our cabin. I was caught out in it, the lightning was striking all around us, there was a roaring in the sky from the rain and wind.

- v.18 There have been many attempts to explain what might be happening here – a terrific thunderstorm, a volcanic eruption – but these sorts of phenomena occur elsewhere in the Bible at moments when the Lord made his presence manifest.
- v.19 With the people in place and ready to behold the appearance of the Lord, they experience the demonstrations of the Lord's presence in rising intensity with the ram's horn perhaps either a symbol of the Lord's advent, an announcement of his coming, or a symbol of the sound of Yahweh's voice. The trumpet will also announce the Lord's coming at the end of this age, we read several times in the New Testament.
- v.20 The Lord actually came to the top of the mountain. The people did not see or here the exchange between the Lord and Moses there. They remained at the foot.
- v.21 The danger was that of idle curiosity. Remember, all through this history we are dealing with a faithless people, a people whose hearts are not right toward God.
- v.22 "Even the priests" must stand back. So holy is the Lord that even those who have been consecrated and have a particularly close relationship to God and enjoy an access other men do not, must purify themselves and take care not to transgress the boundaries.
- v.25 Now all is still and the Lord begins to speak and reveal to his people and to the world the fundamentals of his covenant. We will take up the ten commandments next time.

As I considered this text for preaching – asking myself what was the burden of this text; what was its great lesson for us today – it occurred to me, almost immediately, how remote this view of God and his drawing near to man is in our culture, even in our evangelical Christian culture.

And the difference lies primarily in this: that the active awareness of the divine transcendence, of the terrible holiness of God, has largely disappeared from even the evangelical mind. You know that there are two very different notes sounded in the Bible concerning the relationship between God and man, between the creator and those of his creatures whom he has made in his own image. There is transcendence and there is immanence; distance, great distance, on the one hand, and nearness on the other.

God is not always revealed in such a way as he revealed himself on the occasion narrated in Exodus 19. He is not so even in the Old Testament. He came to Abraham on several occasions

without any of these dramatic phenomena heralding the coming of Almighty God. And, of all the occasions in which the Lord came among men without clothing himself in the manifestations of his glory, supreme is the incarnation itself. Jesus came with his divine glory hidden. He was a boy among boys and then a man among men. He was near to us in every way as he shared our life and our experience, unrecognized as God the Son.

In the modern world and the modern church the divine transcendence has been largely forgotten and the divine immanence dominates our thinking about God. It is not that evangelical Christians don't believe that God dwells in unapproachable light or that no man has seen or can see his glory. It is simply that those ideas have become increasingly alien to us, unconvincing, even unimportant. There are many reasons for this.

One is, of course, that all forms of transcendence have been systematically removed from our public lives and so the idea of transcendence has become foreign to us. We have no kings. Our president wears a business suit or a jogging outfit. No one is ever beheaded for refusing to do his will. The very idea of someone far, far greater than ourselves, of a glory that we would need to fear and show very careful deference to, is actually offensive in our culture. We Americans positively dislike the thought that we should have to bow to someone else or consider someone else far greater than ourselves. The British do as well. Their deference to royalty now has the form of simply the modern worship of celebrities. And who are the modern knights of British society? Elton John and Paul McCartney. As Niel Postman showed us in his book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, even the distance that separated parents from children, which was the first form of transcendence that children learned, the first type of godly fear and reverence to which human hearts were exposed, has shrunk in our time to very little and, in many respects, American parents are simply older versions of their children. They wear the same clothes; they eat the same fast food; they entertain themselves with the same diversions; they talk the same way. Not much transcendence left there!

Another reason for the loss of a living sense of the glory of God is that in a relativist and therapeutic culture like ours, there is a strong tendency for us to think of others in reference to ourselves and our benefit. We tend to think even of God in terms of his usefulness to us. It is harder for us in our age, our society to face the fact that God exists for himself and we must adjust our reality to his.

Evangelicals tend nowadays to think that these more forbidding manifestations of God were peculiar to the Old Testament and that God is now a kinder, gentler force in our lives. We conveniently forget that it is this very history in Exodus 19 (and other nearby texts) that the author of Hebrews recounts in order to remind his hearers that we must fear God because he is a consuming fire. It is Paul, after all, who tells us that no man has seen God or can see him. It is John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, who warns us of a time when mankind will see the Lord Christ in his divine glory and call on the mountains and the rocks to fall on them to hide them from that consuming glory. There is as much of what theologians call the *mysterium tremendum* in the New Testament, as there is in the Old. It is as much a problem in the New as it was in the Old that for far too many generations of God's people there was "no fear of God before their eyes," a description of sinful men found both in the OT (Psalm 36:1) and the NT (Rom. 3:18).

And it is fundamental to our faith that we acknowledge the divine transcendence, the unapproachable glory of God, the majesty of the divine being, and weave that active realization into all our thinking about God, about the world, about man, and about our salvation. Otherwise we will not be as serious as we ought to be about our lives, we will not give God the reverence that is due him, *and we will not rightly appreciate the divine immanence*, because we will not appreciate how far it was that he stooped down to meet us in our smallness and our need.

We need, all the more in our culture and in our spiritual culture, we need to be reminded, we need to remind ourselves that our God is a consuming fire, that he dwells in unapproachable light, that he makes the winds his chariots, and that he inhabits eternity. We need to take steps, as God's people always have, to keep in our minds and hearts a living sense of the greatness and majesty of God that we might fear and reverence his name always and that we might never doubt his power or his rule.

There is so much to be said about the fear of God. Too much to be said this evening. So I want to conclude with a short piece of ethical, theological, and liturgical reasoning that comes out of our text and represents an application of this teaching. This application of our text will also remind us that there is not a phrase in Holy Scripture that is not profitable for training in righteousness. Every statement of God's Word is relevant to us today. It is not the most important one by any means. But it is not unimportant for that reason. It is something I have often thought to say and have always refrained, partly because I fear that you will misunderstand me and partly because I wonder if it is worth the effort so to swim against the stream of our spiritual culture. I have sometimes thought that talking about this piece of Christian ethics would not be so different from attempting to convince people in our germ conscious day to drink the wine of the Lord's Supper from a common cup as Christendom did through ages and until very recently. People won't stand for it and so, no matter that I think it preferable to our practice, we do not urge it upon people. You will have to decide if what I have now to say about dress in church belongs in the same category of topics best left unmentioned, whatever the biblical argument that might be made.

I take my conclusion from the simple statement in v. 10: "Have them wash their clothes." It is not denied that this requirement belongs in some way to the symbolic practices of ceremonial or ritual cleanliness we find throughout the law of God. For example, in Numbers 8:7 and 21 the Levites, "washed their clothes" in order to be pure before the Lord. It was part of the ceremony of being set apart to God. Well, here a nation of priests is being set apart to God in a ceremony and they also wash their clothes. But the laws of ritual cleanliness did not come from nowhere. There was a logic to them, an obvious principle. Indeed, the commentator most sensitive to such things, the brilliant Jewish scholar Umberto Cassuto, explains the command that Israel wash her clothes in this way: "...for it is not seemly to come before the King in unclean dress; moreover, the cleanness of the clothes would symbolize the inner purity of soul." In other words, there is a trans-cultural, trans-temporal significance to this act. Its signification is as obvious as that of baptism, another ritual cleansing. There is an obvious and important connection between the thing and the thing signified. It is as appropriate and important a gesture of respect and reverence when we use it today as it was for Israel. The body counts. The outward is also important; not just the inward.

Interestingly, this is the only place in the Old Testament where the people of Israel as a whole are commanded to wash their clothes or are said to have done so. All the other instances of this right have to do with some particular form of ritual uncleanness or have to do with the consecration of priests. In other words, this act here in Exodus 19, is not a ritual act prescribed in the Law of Moses. This is a more general symbolic act of purity and of reverence. This fact makes it still more relevant to us and to our situation. What happens here is not quite one of those arcane and long-ago superseded regulations of ancient Israel's worship. This is an act for all the people having to do with the expression of their reverence for God and his holiness.

I am speaking of that way in which God's people have historically shown a careful reverence for the Lord when they have come to the Lord's house on the Lord's Day. After all, the hour in our lives each week in which formal, serious acknowledgement of the divine transcendence is made and acted upon is that hour of the church's high worship on the Lord's Day morning. It is here that we stand and kneel before God. It is here that we confess his holy name and sing praise to him as Almighty God. It is here that we act in ways that convey our sense that we have come into the presence of the divine majesty and that is ours, therefore, to revere as well as to love him. And so what have God's people done when coming to the Lord's house? *They did what we read God's people doing here, in v. 10 and again in v. 14: they prepared to look their best. They washed their clothes. They prepared themselves appropriately for their encounter with God. They showed their respect outwardly as they should show it inwardly; with their bodies as with their hearts.* You can pray to God standing on a bus or lying on your bed; but that fact does not make it unimportant or unnecessary that we kneel before him in church. We can come to God in gym shorts or overalls, but that fact does not make it unimportant or unnecessary that we look our best and demonstrate in outward ways, including our clothing, our reverence before him in church. The church has always understood that the fundamental principles of Israel's worship come over into the new epoch. We may not distinguish between clean and unclean foods, but we are to eat and drink to the glory of God. We may not have vestments for our priests but the idea of a clerical uniform is trans-temporal and trans-cultural because the fundamental principle behind clerical clothing – which Moses defines as giving the office of the priest dignity and honor – is as important today as it was then.

And from that time to this God's people have done this in the way they have come to church on a Sunday morning. If they were people for whom taking a bath was a project, they were careful to bathe. The Saturday night bath became an institution, the practice of centuries in Christendom, precisely because they went to the Lord's house on Sunday morning. They knew they should be clean above all for that! And they dressed as well as they could.

Now hear me. Don't impute to these remarks a meaning that they do not have. If a people wear the same thing all week long, wear the same clothes or type of clothes at all times – to work, at home, when visiting, for public occasions – then they wear those clothes to church as well. There is no uniform for Christian worship. There was none in Israel so far as we know. They simply make sure their clothes are clean and neat. But in cultures where people demonstrate a measure of regard, or the seriousness with which they take a certain activity, or respect for a certain person *with the clothing that they wear*, then we should not have difficulty recognizing that there is a problem if they dress up for work and down for God. *That violates not so much the specific regulation of Exodus 19 as it violates the principle behind that regulation.* It is not

what anyone would do who was preparing for an audience with some important personage – the Governor or the President – still less if he were preparing for a visible and physical meeting with the Almighty. One would instinctively understand the need to dress so as to demonstrate a proper respect, a sense of one's place before the Almighty himself. As Malachi would put it, to the one who comes to church dressed in a way that shows no reverence for God, "Try that on the governor!"

To be sure, we want the unbeliever who has no thought of these things to feel welcome in our services. But we are rightly unwilling to make that unbeliever feel that our worship services are as comfortable to him, as familiar as any other place he might be. We continue to stand and kneel, which he never does otherwise. We sing praises to God quite unlike anything he is used to singing. We welcome him, but we fully expect that he will find himself in a strange place coming into divine worship here; we want him to feel that he has entered a world that is both very real and one with which he is quite unfamiliar. In both cases we are demonstrating visibly the nature of what we doing invisibly, viz. presenting ourselves to Almighty God as his people. To know the living God is a life changing, a culture changing, a behavior changing knowledge. There is a similarity between dressing appropriately for church and kneeling for prayer or singing magnificently literary expressions of the glory of God.

It is typical of biblical instruction that Israel and then the church *demonstrate* the nature of her worship in outward acts. The clothing worn, in whatever way meaningful in any culture, is one such way that reverence for God is demonstrated. We don't know what clothing Israel wore as she gathered before the mountain. But we know it was clean. We know she dressed in a way that was designed to show reverence to God. If we show our respect by dressing in a certain way for a job interview or for work in general, or at a wedding or funeral, or for certain types of public events, then how much more for God himself when we come before his presence as his people.

I won't tell you what to wear to church. But I will say this. When you are here, whether you are conscious of this fact or not, you are especially in the presence of the Living God who made heaven and earth; you are in the most concentrated and formal way in the presence of the God who is angry with the wicked every day; the God whose eyes are too pure to behold iniquity; the God who dwells in unapproachable light. Do not dress, do not act in any way in his presence that suggests that you are making light of his presence.

You wonder why the instructions that Israel not approach, still less touch the mountain when God's presence was upon it, why those instructions are repeated in some detail. We have them first in vv. 10-13. We have the report that Israel behaved accordingly in vv. 14-15. Then we have the instructions again, with a new emphasis and full of warning in vv. 21-24. The repetition is for emphasis; to underscore the importance of our recognizing the divine transcendence, the glory of God, and behaving reverently before it. It is ours to translate that recognition and the behavior appropriate to it into the forms of our own culture. It is in this way, among many others, that we revere the holy God.