

# Ground Zero: Mount Sinai (Exodus 19)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Exodus

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## I. Background for this Lesson

- a. It says in **Exodus 19:1** that the Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai and camped there “in the third month” after they departed from Egypt.
- b. Since the Passover Lamb was sacrificed on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month (**Exodus 12:1-3**), the first day of the third month would be six weeks later.
- c. Rough timeline for the 40 years wandering in the Wilderness:
  - i. About 2 months traveling from the Red Sea crossing until arriving at Mount Sinai (otherwise known as Horeb, or the Mountain of God).
  - ii. About 2 years camped at Mount Sinai. During that time Moses received the 10 Commandments, other laws, and instructions to build the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was set up before they left Mount Sinai.
    1. This covers through the end of **Exodus**, and the book of **Leviticus**.
    2. A census is taken before the people leave Mount Sinai, which is recorded in the beginning of **Numbers**. (This is the reason for the name of that book.) The people depart Mount Sinai in **Numbers 10**.
  - iii. A couple of months from departing Mt. Sinai until arriving at Kadesh Barnea, near the border of Canaan, at which time the 12 spies were sent out for 40 days.
    1. Moses sending out the 12 spies is covered in **Numbers 13**.
  - iv. Finally, the remainder of the 40 years (about 37-1/2 years) was wandering in the Wilderness until:
    1. The adults from the first generation died off (except for Joshua and Caleb).
    2. Moses and Aaron died.
    3. Joshua (same name as Jesus) takes over, to lead the people into the Promised Land.

4. This part of the journey is covered in the later part of **Numbers**. Then, before Moses dies, he recounts the story and issues a number of warnings and prophecies in the book of **Deuteronomy**.
- d. Bringing the Israelites to Mount Sinai was fulfilling a promise that the Lord had made to Moses when He first appeared to Moses in the burning bush incident at Mount Sinai, before Moses went back to Egypt.
  - i. Read **Exodus 3:10-12**.
  - ii. “This shall be a sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt you shall serve God on this mountain.” (**Exodus 3:12**. LXX, OSB)
- e. I consider **Exodus 19** as “ground zero” of the Old Testament. This is the place where the Lord descends to earth in a manner so dramatic that everyone is traumatized.
  - i. The term “ground zero” originally referred to the spot on earth directly under where a nuclear bomb is detonated.
  - ii. The same term was later applied to the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, where the planes hit on September 11, 2001.
- f. The significance of this event, for Christians:
  - i. It is the introduction to the giving of the 10 Commandments (which we find in **Exodus 20**, repeated in **Deuteronomy 5**).
  - ii. The New Testament writers refer to this episode as a backdrop to explain at least three foundational concepts for Christians.
    1. Here God’s people described as “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (**Exodus 19:5-6**; compare to **1 Peter 2:9-10**).
    2. The people fear the Lord, and this is held up as a good thing (**Exodus 19:16-19, Exodus 20:18-18-21, Deuteronomy 5:22-29**; compare to **Hebrews 12:18-29**).
    3. In this story the people are described as “the assembly” in the LXX, and as quoted by Stephen in **Acts 7**. This is the same Greek word that Jesus and the apostles would use later, referring to “the church” (**Deuteronomy 4:10, Acts 7:38, Matthew 16:18**).
  - a. We cover this third point in the *next* lesson.

- iii. At least one early Christian writer saw an important prophecy hidden in the details of this story.

## II. The Meaning of the word 'Exodus'

- a. Read **Exodus 19:1-2**.
- b. The Israelites arrived and encamped before Mount Sinai "in the third month" after departing Egypt. Therefore, this could have been as soon as six weeks after departing Egypt (recall that the Passover occurred on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month).
- c. Here is a "Bible trivia" **Question:** How did the book of Exodus get its name? Actually, "*exodus*" is a Greek word that first appears in this passage, in the Septuagint (LXX).
  - i. In the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament version generally quoted by Jesus and the apostles (and used extensively by the early church for the first 300 years), the Greek word "*exodus*" is found in **Exodus 19:1**.
    - 1. The LXX text reads, literally, "in the third month *of the exodus* of the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt".
    - 2. In the OSB English translation they render "*exodus*" as "departure from", which is a decent translation of the word in this context.
    - 3. When Jesus says "I am the way" in **John 14:6**, the Greek word in the New Testament is "*hodos*".
      - a. Also, the Greek prefix "*ek/ex*" means "out of".
      - b. Therefore, the word *ex-hodos* means literally "the way out" or "the way out of (someplace)".
    - 4. Years ago when I was very sick in Eastern Europe, I ended up in a hospital in Athens, Greece. At the time I knew the Greek alphabet and just a few words, and I had been teaching the 5 Books of Moses. I looked out my hospital window and saw, painted on the parking lot pavement in Greek letters, the word "EXODUS" with an arrow pointing out of the parking lot, to the street.
      - a. I quickly grasped the meaning of the Greek word "*exodus*". It simply means "*the way out*".
      - b. This is similar to our English word "exit".

- ii. The other place in the LXX where we find this word “exodus/departure” is in **Exodus 23:16**.

### III. A Royal Priesthood, A Holy Nation

- a. Read **Exodus 19:3-9**.
- b. Storyline:
  - i. Moses ascends the mountain alone.
  - ii. God speaks to Moses.
    - 1. He says “You saw what I did to the Egyptians” (referring to the 10 plagues, followed by drowning the Egyptian army in the Red Sea).
    - 2. He says He had brought the people to Himself “*on eagles wings*”.
      - a. This is a beautiful picture of God lovingly and protectively bringing His children to where He is.
    - 3. He says *IF* the people obey His voice and keep His covenant:
      - a. They will be a special people to God, above all other nations.
      - b. Although all the earth belongs to the Lord, they shall be to Him, “a royal priesthood” and “a holy nation”.
    - 4. Moses explains the words of the Lord to the elders of the people.
      - a. The people say they will do whatever the Lord says.
    - 5. Moses reports this back to the Lord.
      - a. The Lord says He will descend in a cloud and speak to Moses in the sight and hearing of the people, so that they will believe Moses “forever”.
- c. Notice that this is a wonderful promise, but *it is conditional*. The Lord says “*IF* you obey My voice and keep My covenant...”.
  - i. One of the greatest problems in the modern Christian world is that so many believers embrace the wonderful promises, but ignore or mentally block out the *conditions* that God includes with them. Consider just a few of the many conditional promises in the New Testament:

1. "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, '*If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.*'" (**John 8:31**, NKJV)
  2. "But *if* we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." (**1 John 1:7**, NKJV)
  3. "This is a faithful saying: For *if* we died with Him, We shall also live with Him. *If* we endure, We shall also reign with Him. *If* we deny Him, He also will deny us." (**2 Timothy 2:11-12**, NKJV)
  4. "But *he who endures to the end* shall be saved." (**Matthew 24:13**, NKJV)
- ii. All these point to a *partnership* we have with God. We cannot claim the promises without doing our part, which God expects and requires.
- d. Peter draws from these very words to paint a picture of who we Christians are as a people of God, and how we should live as a result.
- i. Read **1 Peter 2:1-3** and **2:9-12**.
  - ii. Peter calls us to put away malice, deceit, hypocrisy and evil talking (*primarily addressing sins of the heart and tongue*), because we are "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people".
  - iii. Peter roots his appeal not on just a list of rules (do's-and-don'ts) but on something much more sweeping: a picture of who we are supposed to be, as God's people.
  - iv. He goes on to describe us as "sojourners and pilgrims" (NKJV);
    1. also rendered "aliens and strangers" (NASB),
    2. or "sojourners and exiles" (ESV).
  - v. The idea: This world we are in *is not our homeland*. We don't belong here. We are temporarily passing through a land where we are not its citizens; we are aliens. Again, this points back to the picture of the Israelites in the Wilderness.
    1. Don't tie your hopes and expectations into the material blessings and comforts from this world.
    2. Our hope is to get home, to where we really belong, the heavenly reward at the end of our journey.

3. Therefore, we should not let the *snakes, scorpions and Amalekites* of this world discourage or surprise us.
- vi. Peter, building on this foundation, goes on to say something that many would find challenging today: submit to the government.
1. Read **1 Peter 2:13-17**.
  2. We may not have *kings*, but we certainly do have presidents and *governors*.
  3. We have to treat them with respect, even *with honor*.
  4. We are called to be a submissive and respectful people. That does not mean we will obey absolutely everything they tell us to do. We are God's people, and we don't want to bring reproach on God.
    - a. Nevertheless, we must obey God rather than men when the Word of God contradicts what the governing authorities tell us to do.
      - i. We must obey God rather than men (when we get contradictory orders).
      - ii. When the rulers told Peter and the apostles to stop preaching, they refused to obey. Instead, the apostles prayed, quoting from **Psalms 2**, "The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ." (**Acts 4:26**, NKJV)
      - iii. The early Christians would not obey the edicts of the government when they contradicted a command of God. For example, they would not:
        1. stop spreading the faith;
        2. nor would they offer sacrifices to Caesar;
        3. nor would those converts who were in the military kill others (in war or capital punishment).
    - b. **Conclusion:** We are to be a submissive people, but we are called first and foremost to be *obedient to God*. Whenever the commands of God conflict with human commands, we will must follow the Lord over any human authority.

5. **Question:** Where, in the current Coronavirus pandemic crisis, does obeying the government cross the line in terms of disobeying the Lord?
- a. Bans on gathering for a baptism?
  - b. Giving up meeting together as Christians, including taking the Lord's supper together?
  - c. Greeting one another with a holy kiss (perhaps while *wearing a mask*)?
  - d. Visiting the sick (instead of putting them in isolation!) and those in prison? Laying hands on the sick?
  - e. Not doing anything to contaminate body nor spirit? Protecting our children and others who may be vulnerable (if, for example, the government starts pushing mandatory vaccinations that some see as unsafe).
6. Some Christians may start to question these things, especially if our current situation is extended indefinitely or is recurring. However, things we know for sure:
- a. We are to be a distinct people within this world.
  - b. We are to avoid any disrespect toward governing authorities. In fact, we must treat them with *honor*.
  - c. If we believe the word of God is directing us to do something banned by the government, we must follow God over men. However, must remain a respectful and submissive people.
    - i. I think of the example of David Lipscomb and others in the early Disciples movement living in Middle Tennessee in the 1860's who respectfully explained to the governments of both the U.S. and the Confederacy that as Christians they were commanded by their king, Jesus, to refrain from participating in the war *on either side*.
      - 1. (Source/Reference: David Lipscomb, *On Civil Government*, Appendix; Stone-Campbell Tradition Series vol. 4, Library of Radical Christian Discipleship, Doulos Christou Press, 2006)

- d. We need to try as much as possible to not bring reproach on God or on the people of God, in the eyes of the world (without violating commands of God).
- e. Some Christian groups may approach the situation differently, at different times, than we do. We must accept that there will be differences in judgment, and strive to remain unified!

#### IV. The Fear of the Lord

- a. Read **Exodus 19:10-24**.
- b. Storyline:
  - i. Moses is told to tell the people to prepare themselves for an encounter with the Lord on the third day. He tells the Israelites:
    - 1. Wash their clothes.
    - 2. Set boundaries around the mountain. Any man or animal violating those boundaries and touching the mountain must be killed.
    - 3. The men are not to have intimate relations with their wives during this time of preparation.
  - ii. The Lord descends on the morning of the third day.
    - 1. People stand at foot of the mountain. The Lord calls Moses, and he alone ascends.
    - 2. The people are trembling in fear, amazed.
    - 3. Thunder, lightning and dark cloud. Mountain enveloped in smoke.
    - 4. Smoke ascending like smoke from a furnace.
    - 5. Loud blast of trumpet.
  - iii. The Lord speaks to Moses, and tells him:
    - 1. Make sure none of the people try to come up the mountain.
    - 2. Come back up with Aaron alone (no other priests).
- c. "On the morning of *the third day*..." Is there any significance in that statement?



- i. We see in this discussion that the phrase “on the third day” refers to *the day after tomorrow*. The text says, “today...tomorrow...and on the third day”.
- ii. Something unusual (God visiting the earth) to happen on the morning of the third day?
- iii. Cyprian (bishop of the church in Carthage, North Africa who died c. 258 AD) saw this as one of three foreshadowings of the resurrection of Jesus on the third day, in Scripture. (The other two being: Jonah in the whale (as explained by Jesus in **Matthew 12**); and **Hosea 6:2**). Cyprian writes in a section he entitles: “That He should rise again from the dead on the third day”:
  - 1. “In **Hosea**: ‘After two days He will revive us; we shall rise again on the third day.’ (**Hosea 6:2**) Also in **Exodus**: ‘And the Lord said unto Moses, ‘Go down and testify to the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow; and let them wash their garments, and let them be prepared against the day after tomorrow. For on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai.’ (**Exodus 19:10-11**)
  - 2. “Also in the gospel: ‘A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it but the sign of the prophet Jonah: for as Jonah was in the whale’s belly three days and three nights, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.’ (**Matthew 12:39-40**)”
    - a. (Source: Cyprian, *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 525)
- d. The aftermath (after the 10 Commandments given the first time)
  - i. Read **Deuteronomy 5:22-29**.
  - ii. The people are terrified and essentially ‘throw in the towel’.
    - 1. They believe that *they will die* if they hear any more words from the Lord.
    - 2. They tell Moses to approach God and speak with Him. They insist that *whatever* the Lord tells Moses, *they will do*.

3. The Lord's response: this is great. I only wish they would always keep this attitude of fearing me and to keep my commandments, that it would go well with them.

e. **Question:** What about fearing God today?

- i. I once heard a preacher state that since "perfect love drives out fear" (based on **1 John 4:18**), *we don't need to fear God any longer*.
  1. This is typical of the message preached in so many churches today.
- ii. Many Evangelical Protestants see the faith as an *unconditional guarantee* of heaven that a believer can't lose. Therefore, after they believe and "accept Christ", they see *no need to fear God* anymore.
- iii. Others see fear of God as an *inferior type of motivation*.

f. Fear of God in the New Testament

- i. Peter apparently *didn't get the memo* that we no longer need to fear God.
  1. "Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king." (**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV)
- ii. The reason Peter didn't 'get the memo', was because *Jesus never sent the memo*. Jesus Himself preached the fear of God even more than any of the Old Testament prophets! He said:
  1. "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (**Matthew 10:28**, NKJV)
  2. ""But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—where 'Their worm does not die And the fire is not quenched.'" (**Mark 9:42-44**, NKJV)
- iii. Paul also didn't 'get the memo' that we don't need to fear God any longer, either. Recall that he wrote to the Philippians:
  1. "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, *work out*

*your own salvation with fear and trembling..." (Philippians 2:12, NKJV)*

- g. Fear is often a good thing. It can save our lives.
  - i. In my career as a civil engineer who had to work at construction sites on occasion, I was required to undergo safety training before I was allowed to go to any jobsite. One of the first things they did in the safety courses was to instill fear in our hearts regarding the various hazards that could be present at the jobsite (including falling from heights, high-voltage electricity, confined space entry, etc.).
  - ii. Similarly, in the subways of places like Boston and New York they have signs posted that say, "DANGER – High Voltage!". This is to put a healthy fear into the commuters, so that they stay far away from the "third rail".
  - iii. The reason to instill a healthy fear in us: to motivate us to stay clear of dangerous hazards. A healthy fear of real dangers can save one from death or debilitating physical injury.
  - iv. Likewise, a healthy fear of the judgment of God and of the fire of hell *can keep us from sin and spiritual death!*
- h. An old friend of mine who lives in the Greater Toronto Area in Canada, Ashley Hockenberry, recently shared with me his concern that most churches today no longer teach the fear of God and the fear of hell. He shared with me an article from the LA Times that was written in 2002, almost 20 years ago; and things have gotten much worse since then. From that article (Source: Anton, M. and Lobdell, W., *Hold the Fire and Brimstone*, Los Angeles Times, June 19, 2002). Excerpts from that article:
  - i. "...There has been a shift in religion from focusing on what happens in the next life to asking, "What is the quality of this life we're leading now?" said Harvey Cox Jr., an eminent author, religious historian and professor at the Harvard Divinity School. 'You can go to a whole lot of churches week after week, and you'd be startled even to hear a mention of hell.'
  - ii. "Hell's fall from fashion indicates how key portions of Christian theology have been influenced by a secular society that stresses individualism over authority and the human psyche over moral absolutes. The rise of psychology, the philosophy of existentialism and the consumer culture have all dumped buckets of water on hell.
  - iii. "The tendency to downplay damnation has grown in recent years as nondenominational ministries, with their focus on everyday issues

such as child-rearing and career success, have proliferated and loyalty to churches has deteriorated.

- iv. “‘It’s just too negative,’ said Bruce Shelley, a senior professor of church history at the Denver Theological Seminary. ‘Churches are under enormous pressure to be consumer-oriented. Churches today feel the need to be appealing rather than demanding.’
- v. “A 1998 poll by Barna Research Group, a Ventura company that studies Christian trends nationwide, found that church-shopping has become a way of life: One in seven adults changes churches each year; one in six regularly rotates among congregations.
- vi. “That fickleness has helped give rise to ‘megachurches’ --evangelical congregations of more than 2,000 people that mix Scripture with social and recreational programs in a casual atmosphere.
- vii. “Megachurches routinely pay for market research on what will draw people to their ministries and keep them coming back.
- viii. “‘Once pop evangelism went into market analysis, hell was just dropped,’ said Martin Marty, professor emeritus of religion and culture at the University of Chicago Divinity School. ‘When churches go door to door and conduct a market analysis ... they hear, “I want better parking spaces. I want guitars at services. I want to have my car greased while I’m in church.”’
- i. Certainly some forms of fear can be *paralyzing*, to no good effect. However, that is not what we are talking about here. We are talking about life-saving fear that motivates us to avoid dangers; the fear of God held up throughout the Scriptures, including by Jesus, Peter and Paul in the New Testament.
- j. Fear of God, tied back to the encounter at Mount Sinai, is seen in a positive light for Christians, in the book of **Hebrews**.
  - i. Read **Hebrews 12:14-29**.
  - ii. Don’t be like Esau. We must pursue peace with all people and live a *holy life*: a life that is *set apart for God*.
  - iii. We Christians have come to an *even greater* assembly than the one that took place at the foot of Mount Sinai in **Exodus 19**.
  - iv. We have come to One who speaks to us from heaven (Jesus), rather than one who spoke to the people from earth (Moses).
  - v. We have come to a greater kingdom, one that cannot be shaken.
  - vi. We still need to serve God with reverence and godly fear.

1. Our God is still a *consuming fire*!