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Exodus 19:9-25

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Brian Morgan

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# ENGAGED TO THE HOLY ON A MOUNTAIN

*SERIES: HEARING GOD'S VOICE*

June is the time of year when you might find something in your mailbox other than bills, catalogues and credit card applications. In June you occasionally find a beautiful white envelope with your name hand-written on it. It's a wedding invitation. Each time I open one of these engraved invitations, I imagine the bustle of energy in the homes of the bride and groom. Perhaps no other event in a family's life demands more energy than preparing for a wedding. The very moment the couple announces their engagement, vast, unforeseen forces seem to emerge from nowhere, and then converge with such force and power that the idyllic dreams of the couple are overrun by the stress of wedding details. The strain can be especially heightened when two families of vastly different backgrounds have to cooperate on the same stage.

This is the kind of stress felt by Israel, following grueling weeks of camping in a wilderness, upon her arrival at the foot of Mount Sinai, and the invitation comes down from on high. Imagine Israel's double sense of shock after reading the wedding invitation and the pronouncement: "The KING is coming. The KING is coming." Then to their question, "When?" comes the answer, "The day after tomorrow!" Imagine the panic that caused in the camp. Why, Israel hasn't even had a bath in six weeks! They haven't even had a chance to unpack and set up camp, and now they have to make preparations for a wedding in just three days time. And not just any wedding, but a wedding to the KING. Never was there a greater chasm in background, moral character and essential nature than that which existed between this bride and groom.

What happens in this text is utterly amazing. It is designed to provoke profound awe, if not outright terror, even in the most casual observer. And yet, the author of Hebrews reminds us that this cataclysmic drama is but a mere shadow of what happens when God's new Covenant people assemble to worship (Heb 12:18-24). Our text, therefore, becomes a model meeting of God and his people, and addresses the fundamental issues that we need to be mindful of when we gather as a congregation to worship. First, what preparations, if any, should we make before coming to meet with the King? Second, what kind atmosphere should be set to give appropriate honor to the occasion? Third, when we gather, who are we actually meeting with? And fourth, why do we come? If we do not understand these fundamentals of worship, we might as well forget coming to church.

## I. The Announcement of the King's Arrival (19:9)

**The LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD. (Exod 19:9 NASB)**

After the Lord has heard Israel's initial vows, the King announces that he is coming to meet his precious bride. The stunning reason for this descent is so that Moses can be validated in the eyes of the people as God's elect representative to mediate his life on earth. This

action reveals both God's sensitivity to his servant, whose authority has been under severe scrutiny and constant criticism ever since leaving Egypt (16:2-3; 17:2), and the unprecedented nature of what is about to follow. God is now raising the bar far beyond what he has ever done before, giving Moses' status a timeless dimension, so that his authority and the relevance of his words (in the giving of the Ten Commandments) ought never be challenged.

Once the announcement is made, God commands Moses to consecrate the people for his arrival.

## II. The Consecration of the People (19:10-15)

### A. Proper Attire (19:10-11)

**The LORD also said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments; and let them 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." (19:10-11)**

Before this couple can meet and exchange vows, God instructs Moses that careful preparations need to be made to get the people in a proper state for his arrival. Like any wedding, this meeting will not be haphazard, spontaneous or casual, but methodically thought through and carefully choreographed. The reason for this is twofold: the first pertains to the historical significance of the event; the second concerns the holiness of the parties involved.

When ground-breaking events occur in a nation's history or a person's life, acknowledging them with little thought or preparation is an affront to their significance. After the events of 9/11, our entire nation stood at attention, waiting for our national leaders to speak a significant word that might sanctify our gaping sorrow. If no preparations had been made, if no stage had been constructed, and if speeches had not been carefully crafted word for word, there would have been an outcry. So it is on Israel's wedding day. This is the day that marks the successful liberation of God's people from four centuries of slavery, and the transfer of ownership from Pharaoh to the Lord. What is said on this day will forever be etched in stone, as Israel's declaration of independence on the one hand, and her supreme responsibilities on the other.

Secondly, because of the vastly different natures of the parties involved, far more preparation and protocol is required to bridge the moral chasm that lies between them. This is not a meeting between equals or buddies, but between the Holy Creator, whom no man has seen, and the nation of Israel, who after six weeks in the wilderness, is battle-worn in body, bitter in spirit and unclean in heart. The purpose behind Israel's preparations will be to make them "holy," so that they will be able to stand in the presence of this God who is wholly Other. Precautions therefore have to be carefully observed on both sides, lest God's holiness break out and, like hot lava from a surging volcano, consume everything in sight.

As with any wedding, both parties need appropriate attire. God will clothe himself in a dense cloud, designed to create a thick barrier to protect the people from his holiness. They will hear him speaking with Moses, but no one will be able to see him lest they die. While God is dressed in his formal black attire, the people are commanded to consecrate themselves by laundering their garments. This act is symbolic of cleansing from sin, since their cloaks were most likely the “ones they took off the backs of Egyptian idolaters”<sup>1</sup> as they fled from Egypt. Taking off unclean garments and putting on new ones will become a common metaphor in the New Testament for putting off idolatrous habits and putting on our new nature of godly character in Christ (Rom 6:1; 13:12, 14; Eph 4:24; Jas 1:21; 1 Pet 2:1; 3:3). This is the kind of preparation we need to consider before entering into worship together.

Once the attire is set, a proper stage for the wedding must be constructed.

### B. Setting Strict Boundaries (19:12-13)

**“You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, ‘Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the ram’s horn sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.” (19:12-13)**

Even though clothed in the proper attire, Israel must still maintain extreme caution not to intrude too closely into “holy” space. On the third day, when Lord makes contact with the mountain, the all-consuming power of his holiness will descend with such force that the entire mountain will quake in an upheaval so great that it will be transformed from the realm of the ordinary to the holy. Therefore distinct boundaries must be set up around the perimeter of the mountain; and only at the designated time, by personal invitation, may Israel enter this holy space. If anyone violates this command, whether deliberately or inadvertently, the congregation is to set that person apart and kill him at a distance, by stoning or arrows, since he has desecrated what was holy.

How does that strike you? Such severity rings strange to our sensibilities, but to scientists who deal with the uncompromising physical properties of the universe, like attempting to harness the energy within the atom, or seeking proximity to an active volcano, or cultivating intimacy with a tornado, it has a familiar ring. Even in the field of medicine, no doctor is casual in his handling of human blood. He knows that without proper barriers, one misstep can lead to contracting the deadly virus of AIDS.

Those who think we can manage God’s inviolable holiness need to take a sobering look at the list of names on Israel’s obituary page. At the top of the list are the names of two priests, Aaron’s own sons, Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-2; Num 3:4), who got careless and offered “strange fire” in their incense offering. They died instantly. Before Aaron can even express his grief or put forth a pained protest, Moses quickly seizes the initiative away from him and sides with the Holy, leaving Aaron with no words:

**Then Moses said to Aaron, “It is what the LORD spoke, saying, ‘By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, And before all the people I will be honored.’”  
So Aaron, therefore, kept silent. (Lev 10:3)**

A little further down the list is Achan (Josh 7). After the battle of Jericho, he thought he could use the first fruits of God’s spoil for personal gain. Once the item under “ban”<sup>2</sup> came into his home, it cost the lives of his entire family. Later, during David’s reign, comes Uzzah. Acting with the best of intentions, he reached out and inadvertently touched the ark of God to prevent it from falling off an ox cart, and died instantly. If we think that God preserved his holy honor only in the Old Testament we are in for a shock, as the list continues with the names of Ananias and his wife Sapphira. They had the misfortune of being the first to introduce the leaven of hypocrisy within the newly established church (Acts 5:1-11). When the Corinthians inquired for the many who had fallen sick and even died in the church, Paul responded with the hard facts that God was preserving the honor of his name, for they had desecrated the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper by using it as an opportunity to feed their own appetites to the exclusion of the poor (1 Cor 11:19-34).

These deaths become exemplary of how God wants us to zealously guard his holiness. Had God continued with such severity, I would have been dead on four counts! As Moses faithfully consecrated the people to meet with God (vv. 14-15),<sup>3</sup> so we should never enter his presence with casual indifference, but as we would a wedding, with joyous anticipation and reverential awe.

Israel is now prepared for the third day.

## III. The Presentation of the Bride (19:16-20)

### A. The Bridal Procession (19:16-18)

**So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. (19:16-18)**

Now we come to that magical moment in the wedding when the bride and groom leave their respective chambers and the bride is escorted in solemn procession into the waiting assembly. On the morning of the third day, Mount Sinai is lit up with flashes of lightning and plumes of smoke billowing out like a volcano in the onset of labor. To complement the fireworks display, God has spared no expense. The musicians he has hired for his orchestra come from the most famous voices of creation’s heavenly realms. For the call to worship, he enlists the deafening voice (Heb. *qolot*)<sup>4</sup> of his thunder, and in antiphonal response there is the piercing cry of a mysterious shophar (ram’s horn), perhaps trumpeted by an angel. This massive display of sight and sound causes Israel to tremble with fear. Despite her terror, Moses leads the bride in the processional from the camp to the foot of the mountain.

### B. Holy Descent and Human Ascent (19:19-20)

**When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder. 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. (19:19-20)**

The sound of the shophar gets louder and louder, announcing “the awe inspiring descent of the King of all the earth to deliver the

Ten Words to His people.”<sup>5</sup> Alter attempts to capture the significance of the moment as the creation itself mirrors the trembling emotion of the bride: “The Sinai encounter is imagined as the decisive moment in human history when the celestial and terrestrial realms are brought into panoramic engagement, and as God comes down on the mountain, every sort of natural fireworks is let loose, so that trembling seizes not only the people but the mountain itself.”<sup>6</sup>

After the shophar has practically broken the sound barrier with its piercing cry, everyone is seized by the throat and paralyzed by awe. Out of the silence speaks a lone human voice in answer to the shophar’s call. It is Moses, unafraid to address deity in familiar tones. Like an old friend, he is summoned to cross the threshold of holy space to meet God at the summit of the mountain. What a sight this must have been, as Israel witnesses its leader by personal invitation going where no man had ever gone. In shaping the nation of Israel, Moses is raised to a status that will be unsurpassed until the coming of Jesus Christ.

#### IV. Final Check Before Countdown (19:21-25)

**Then the LORD spoke to Moses, “Go down, warn the people, so that they do not break through to the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, or else the LORD will break out against them.” Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us, saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and consecrate it.’” Then the LORD said to him, “Go down and come up again, you and Aaron with you; but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, or He will break forth upon them.” So Moses went down to the people and told them. (19:21-25)**

God’s words seem surprising, since he is repeating what he has already commanded the nation to do—a fact of which Moses reminds him. But God’s chief concern seems to be to ensure the safety of his people, and that Moses has made it crystal-clear to them just how dangerous is this holy venture. Just as a good demolition expert makes a final check and recheck of all his fuses and timers, so God asks Moses to recheck everything to make sure all boundaries are secured and strictly enforced. Moses knows that when the people hear God’s voice, the temptation will be great to transgress the barriers to get a glimpse of the Holy. Moses is also to warn the priests, who might feel confident to function in the realm of the holy, not to be careless or complacent. They are not exempt from its dangers; one misstep could cost them their lives. God coming down to dwell with his people is no easy or ordinary undertaking. The narrator gives us the sense that God’s nerves are a bit on edge as he attempts this experiment.

The only modern parallel I can think of that comes close to this event is the testing of the first atomic bomb in Alamogordo, New Mexico on the fateful morning of July 16, 1945. None of the scientists who had spent six years of their lives and \$2 billion dollars harnessing U-235 uranium really knew what would happen when the bomb was detonated. Would it be a grand dud, or would it alter the very fabric of the universe? As the atomic fireball began shooting upwards, so powerful was the light emanating from the explosion that a blind girl is reported to have seen the flash 120 miles away. It was then that the creators of the atomic bomb knew that the universe would never be the same.<sup>7</sup>

God is impressing upon his people that so Other is his holiness, it is dangerous. It is raw and ragged, wild and untamable. It is not available for domestication. Get too close without proper protection or transgress its inviolable laws and it will break out like radiation and destroy. Armed with God’s final warnings, Moses heads back down the mountain to secure the safety of the sacred site. The stage is set. Israel is now prepared to hear God’s voice and live to tell about it.

This text is so vastly different from our modern conceptions of corporate worship that we hardly have categories to fit it. Many of you may be wondering what relevance does God’s cataclysmic appearance on Sinai have for us today. Hasn’t the work of Christ removed all barriers to God’s presence? Shouldn’t God’s love and acceptance revealed in the New Testament remove all fear and change the atmosphere of our worship settings?

## V. Reflections From the Mountain

### A. Mountains of Holiness

First, we must understand this text in the context of what I call “Mountain Theology.” This isn’t the only time God will descend on a mountain to unloose his holiness upon the earth. The next occurrence came in the life of Jesus. After Peter made his confession that Jesus was the Messiah, the Lord took three of his disciples to a high mountain, most likely Mount Hermon, whose snow-capped summit reaches some 9,000 feet into the heavens. Once there, Jesus was transfigured before the three disciples, and Moses and Elijah appeared. Terrified by the holiness of the sight, Peter doesn’t know what to say. Unaccustomed to silence, he suggests that they build three tabernacles, one for each leader, to capture the present glory. Then the unimaginable occurs:

**Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!” (Mark 9:7)**

Here we have the New Sinai. Once again God must veil his holiness in a dark cloud to prevent the death of the onlookers. Just like the nation of Israel, the disciples will hear the voice but they will not see his form. Also, just as with Moses, the purpose of God’s descent is to elevate the status of his servant Jesus in the eyes of the disciples, so much so that even Moses’ former glory will appear as if he had none in comparison to the Son. Then, instead of Ten Words to obey, there is but one word, “Listen to Him!” With such an emphatic endorsement, we are filled with anticipation. What will be the content of Jesus’ teaching in the rest of the gospel of Mark? The answer rings out as clear as a church bell, but nobody gets it. Three times Jesus teaches the disciples that the Son must die. So unlike Moses, who warns the people not to come too close lest they die, Jesus warns the disciples that he must die.

Without understanding the raw power of God’s holiness at Sinai you will never appreciate the magnitude of what God announced on Mount Hermon. One of the reasons many of us do not experience the depths of the love of God is that we do not comprehend his holiness. On the cross, Jesus mysteriously absorbed God’s incomprehensible holy energy which paid for the sins of the world.

But there is still one more mountain where God descended to unleash his holiness on the earth. The place was a home in Jerusalem. The date was Pentecost, 50 days after Passover, the day Moses received the Law from God on Sinai:

And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. (Acts 2:2-4)

Just as at Sinai, creation announces the arrival of God's holy descent with the heartstopping sounds of a violent storm. But to our absolute amazement, the place that will experience holiness is not the temple mount, but an ordinary home which housed Jesus' disciples. Fire comes as well, yet in a form that purifies, not destroys. In Isaiah's opening vision of the Lord, he is awestruck with the holiness of the Lord and terrified by his own uncleanness. In response, an angel takes a burning coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips, purifying his speech (Isa 6:6-7). At Pentecost, every disciple's tongue is purified with the gift of holy speech.

The fires, that rushed on Sinai down  
In sudden torrents dread,  
Now gently light, a glorious crown,  
On every sainted head.<sup>8</sup>

Purified speech, fiery speech, Spirit speech that both purifies and consumes what it cannot cleanse, will now be the instrument that transforms the entire earth into a holy place. And the Ten Words that Moses wrote on tablets of stone will now be written on the tablets of human hearts (2 Cor 3:3). Holiness will be democratized and internalized.

What does this mean when we gather to worship?

## B. When we gather together...

### 1. We come for the same reason as Israel: To hear the voice of the King

If I were to announce that the president of the United States would be speaking to us next week at church, none of you would be late. You would be anticipating the event all week, and most of you would be here early. But in comparison to the One we come to hear, our national leader has no rank. God is the King of the Universe, our Creator and Redeemer. This is the supreme reason we gather: for the privilege of hearing his voice above all others. It is because of this supreme privilege that this church is committed to expository preaching as the primary way to hear his voice (1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:1-2).

### 2. We come in the same spirit as Israel: Holy awe

The writer of Hebrews explains that if there was fear and trembling at Sinai, there should be even more reverence and awe when we gather:

For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire...But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:18, 22-24)

Do have any sense of this? Do you realize where we are and who is present when we gather? Coming into such a holy gathering, how could we dare enter casually, or late, or keep our cell phones on? If

Israel was consumed in awe, how much more should we be? Because of the work of Christ we also have a confidence and indescribable joy for our free access into God's presence. Joy does not diminish awe; it increases it. Our joy is akin to a mountain climber reaching the summit of Mt Everest, knowing the mountain is inaccessible to most, and many who attempted to scale it paid with their lives. But by God's grace we are here! Indescribable joy and awe: this is the attitude we are to have in preparation for our worship.

### 3. The stakes are higher

See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. (Heb 12:25)

Those who refused to heed Moses' warnings paid with their lives. What happens if we refuse the One who warns from heaven? Last week I watched Larry King interview a pastor of one of our nation's largest churches. King immediately attempted to maneuver the pastor into a corner by asking: "Don't you think if people don't believe as you believe, they're somehow condemned?" The pastor smiled and said that he didn't have it in his heart to condemn people; that he was for everyone and wanted to encourage all. "To me it is not my job to straighten people out. The Gospel is called the good news. My message is a message of hope; that's God's for you. You can live a good life no matter what's happened to you. And so I don't know. I know there is condemnation but I don't feel that's my place."<sup>9</sup>

I couldn't disagree more. As God's representatives it is our job to warn those entrusted to our care that the stakes are higher in the New Covenant. God's grace has been intensified, but so has holiness. Those who refused to heed the words of Moses paid with their lives. Those who chose to refuse the warnings of Christ and his Spirit from heaven will pay with their eternal souls.

By God's grace may we worship the Holy One with the honor he is due.

1. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), 424.

2. "ban" meant devoted to complete destruction.

3. "Upon his return to the people Moses interprets 'to consecrate them' to entail, 'to abstain from sexual intercourse,' which, by the emission of semen, was regarded as making one ritually unclean, not sinful (Lev 15:16; 1 Sam 21:4). With the preliminary consecration complete, Israel is now ready for the third day." Bruce K. Waltke, "Gift of the Old Covenant," *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

4. "The word for 'lightning,' *qolot*, is not the usual *ra'am* but the word that generally means 'voices' or 'sounds,' and so it is orchestrated with 'the sound of the ram's horn (*gol hashofar*) that reverberates so strongly against the ground-base of the thunder." Alter, *The Five Books*, 425.

5. Alter, *The Five Books*, 426.

6. Alter, *The Five Books*, 425.

7. <http://inventors.about.com/library/weekly/aa050300a.htm>.

8. John Keble in his Whitsuntide hymn, F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 60.

9. <http://transcripts.cnn.com/transcripts/0506/20/lkl.01.html>.