

Exodus 19:16-20:21

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[0 : 0 0] Well, the sun in the sky is our source of life in many ways, isn't it? The sun's light and heat and energy provide the perfect conditions for life on our planet where we live.

So did you know that the sun releases more energy every single second than the whole human race uses in a year? In fact, the sun releases that amount of energy several thousand times a second.

The sun's light allows plants to make food and provide us oxygen to breathe. And the vast gravity of the sun keeps everything in the solar system in place so that the planet doesn't just hurtle off into space.

The sun's mass is actually 99.86% of the total mass of the solar system. It's incredible. The sun is a giver of life to us. But actually, obviously, the sun is also incredibly dangerous.

At its core, the sun is about 15 million degrees Celsius. You couldn't even begin to get close to that without just burning up in an instant, being consumed.

[1 : 1 0] We all know, don't we, that even just lying on a beach, skin exposed for a few hours in the middle of the day, we know what that will do to you. And that's at a distance of 150 million miles away.

The sun is a giver of life, but get too close and it will bring you death. And in actual fact, it's exactly the same characteristics of the sun that do both. Well, in these chapters in Exodus, we have a similar kind of situation.

So back in Exodus 3, Moses was tending to his sheep one day out in the wilderness when God first spoke to him. And he came to the foot of Mount Sinai.

And God told him, Moses, I will be with you. And this will be the sign for you that I have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.

So 16 chapters later, fresh from their escape from the clutches of Pharaoh in Egypt, Moses leads the people back to Mount Sinai.

[2 : 1 4] And they assemble, they congregate on the plain in front of the mountain. And Moses leaves them behind to set up a camp. And off he goes, climbing up the rocky slopes to speak to God, to hear from God what he would have them do next.

And what God says to Moses in chapter 19, we heard it earlier, is beautiful, isn't it? Chapter 19, verse 3, let me read this again.

Then Moses went up to God and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel. You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. God wants to make these people his treasured possession. I hear that phrase and it makes me think of one of my girls and one of their teddies or something.

[3 : 29] You know, cuddling up to it in their sleep. Wanting to take it everywhere with them. Descending into fits of crying if their sister so much as looks at it. Treasured possession.

God's precious people. And so what's God's plan for making this people his treasured possession? Well, it's a covenant, isn't it? Verse 5, do you see that word there?

A covenant in the ancient world is a bit like a contract, but much more than a contract. A contract built on relational promises. The best example we have today is a marriage.

A marriage is a covenant, a contract made with relational promises. Well, the covenant that God makes with his people at Sinai is based on the law, isn't it?

That he gives to them to mark them out as his own. He speaks the Ten Commandments from the mountain. It almost seems like it's actually God's voice they can hear giving the Ten Commandments in the first instance.

[4 : 28] And then what follows our passage is several chapters of further law giving to kind of expand on it. And the first thing we need to see about the law is that it is good.

It's liberating for them. I think we often find that a hard idea to get our heads around because in our culture of independence and self-realization, we think of things like commandments as hemming us in, as a kind of stepping on our freedom and getting in our way.

Stuffy and boring. You've got to remember where the Israelites have just come from. They've just walked out of slavery. They've just walked from a culture full of oppression and injustice.

Where the strong trampled on the weak whenever they felt like it. Where those in power did whatever they wanted. The pharaohs could literally wake up one morning and change the laws on a whim.

And order all of their soldiers to throw Israelite baby boys into the river. Just because they wanted to. But here is the Lord. He is not capricious like Pharaoh.

[5 : 35] He does not make up laws on a whim. His law stands forever. And his law is good, isn't it? The culture and the society that he's shaping for them is full of faithfulness and justice.

Where the weak are protected from murder and from abuse. What's more, the law is missional. Do you see that? In chapter 19, verse 5.

God says he is the God of all nations. So verse 6. He wants to set apart this nation as a nation of priests. That's what he says. What do priests do?

They are mediators, aren't they? They represent the people to God. And God to the people. And so Israel is to be a nation of priests. They are to represent God to the whole world.

And in fact, that's what Peter says in his first letter. He applies that idea to us today as God's people. Our lives are to be so marked out, he says, that we represent God to those around us.

[6 : 38] We too, the same but different, are marked out by God's covenant. Well, how so? Well, the events of our passage this morning at Sinai happened 50 days after Passover.

So 50 days after the lambs were slain in Egypt. They left Egypt. They were given the law 50 days later. And in the Jewish calendar today, that's still celebrated.

50 days after celebrating Passover, they celebrate Pentecost. Literally Greek for 50th. And so it's traditional if you're Jewish even today to stay up all night long, 50 days after Passover, and study the law.

But what happened 50 days after the death of Jesus Christ, the ultimate Passover lamb? God began his new covenant with his people, didn't he? At Pentecost, when the room shook, flames appeared above the disciples' heads.

Maybe you're seeing some of the same images from Exodus here. The Holy Spirit was poured out on God's people. And Peter quoted the prophet Jeremiah when he said that today, the law has been written on your hearts.

[7 : 52] We're marked out by the Holy Spirit now as he applies God's word to our hearts. But here's the big point, whether or not you live in the Old Testament or the New, God's covenant with his people comes through his word.

He speaks to his people. That's the big climax of this whole passage, isn't it? That's the big event of this passage. It's what God gets his people ready for.

God is about to speak to them. That's how God marks out his special people as his treasured possession. He gives them his word of life and freedom.

But just as the sun's heat and light and mass are the source of life for us on this planet, and the very same characteristics of the sun are what also are so very dangerous to us, in the same way, God's holiness, which is life-giving, is also fatally dangerous to us because of our sin.

And that's the big problem, isn't it? The big issue in this passage. Throughout it, the mountain, Mount Sinai, if you like, represents a big gap between God and the people, a big holiness gap.

[9 : 13] And multiple times in this passage, God effectively warns the people to mind the gap. Verse 10, God tells Moses he's going to come down and speak to the people, but they must prepare themselves for it.

He gives them three days to get themselves ready. Consecrate yourselves, he says. Wash yourselves. Get ready in holiness. In effect, stick on your factor 50 plus sun cream.

But notice, even that is not enough for them to approach God, is it? About as much as sun cream allows you to go to the sun. Verse 12, limits must be put around the base of the mountain so that no one can touch it.

Because anyone who touches the mountain, when God's presence has descended, will die. And you get this funny conversation, I find it funny anyway, between Moses and God in verses 21 and 25, where God tells Moses to tell them not to touch the mountain.

And Moses says, yeah, you already told us not to touch the mountain. We put limits around the bottom, like you said. And God effectively says, good. Now go down and tell them not to touch the mountain. Because it's a serious and persistent warning.

[10 : 23] Even then, even then, when God's presence comes down to the mountain, what's the people's response? Verse 16, there is thick smoke and thunder and lightning and the sound of trumpets.

The mountain trembles and so do the people. They are terrified at being even a bit close to the presence of God, of hearing his voice speaking to them.

It's the most remarkable, terrifying alarm clock, isn't it, to wake you up for a gathering of God's people on a Sunday. To wake up the Israelites for gathering as a congregation. I wonder how you responded to your alarm clock going off this morning.

It probably wasn't like a shaking, fiery, thundery mountain. But maybe church to you feels mundane and boring. You haven't come today because you particularly wanted to, but maybe because you've been dragged along by someone, like a friend or a parent.

Maybe church to you feels small and discouraging at times. You enjoy gathering with your church family, but you just, you long to see more happening.

[11 : 31] More people coming to know Jesus. More breakthrough in areas of lives where you or someone else needs to change. Maybe you just feel distracted. Maybe you haven't needed an alarm clock in years, like me, because your kids wake you up plenty early enough, as it is.

And your time at church is just trying to stop other people pulling each other's hair, or whatever it is for you that's distracting you. Well, let me point out the obvious this morning. That God that spoke to the Israelites at Sinai, on the shaking, fiery mountain, it's the same God, isn't it, that we gather before this morning.

In Deuteronomy, Moses refers back to Exodus 19 and 20 as the first ever assembly of God's people. The first congregation. It's a kind of prototype worship service.

And the people then trembled in fear, even at a glimpse of God's holiness. Because they knew themselves that they were not holy. Our relationship with the law at Sinai might not be exactly the same as the relationship of the Israelites, but it still teaches us, just as it taught them, that we are not holy.

That we are in need of a saviour. The fact of the matter is, if you look down at the Ten Commandments given by God here, the Israelites broke every single one.

[12 : 57] And so have I. And so have you. You might literally have never murdered anyone or robbed anyone, but Jesus in his teaching made it quite clear, didn't he, that these commandments really are just indicators of what's going on in our hearts all the time.

And the brokenness and evil that is inside all of us. We could work through them. You might want to look down at Exodus 20 verse 1 as I do this and just scan down the page with me.

Number one, you have loved yourself or something else more than God. Number two, you have made God into a graven image. You've reimagined him or shrunken him down in your thinking.

Number three, you have misrepresented God's name. Number four, you have failed to rest in God, resting instead in your own work or strength.

Number five, you have resisted the authority of your parents or others. Number six, you have hated others, seeking their fall in some way. Number seven, you have lusted faithlessly after others.

[14 : 10] Number eight, you have acted and thought greedily and selfishly. Number nine, you have lied or gossiped or said untrue things about others.

Number 10, you have harbored bitter and jealous thoughts and not lived in contentment and gratitude. You and me, every one of us here today, we have failed God's standard on not just one or two of these, but on every single count.

If you secretly think that you're not that bad a person, and let's be honest, we all have way too high a view of our own holiness, don't we? Then hear this, you have not a single leg to stand on before God.

None of us do. And that is a problem, because left to our own devices, we should be trembling at the foot of the mountain before God.

Trembling in fear at the thunder and lightning and fire and smoke of his holiness and righteousness. God wants to call a people to himself, to mark them out as a treasured possession.

[15 : 32] But we can't even get near. 500 years ago, if you were a monk in a monastery, then something, part of your expectation every single day would have been to go to confession.

To contemplate and think about your sin, and then go to your line manager monk and go and confess your sin regularly. You know, I don't know how much trouble you could get up to in a monastery, but it might have gone something like this.

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. Last night at supper, Brother Andrew's bowl of parsnip stew looked bigger than mine, and I coveted it. Please forgive me. And you would have been, penance would have been instructed, pardon would have been given, and often you would have toddled back to your herb garden and prayers.

But there was one monk called Martin Luther, and he used to stay up reading his Bible for hours, studying the teachings of Jesus and the law, and he was driven to distraction with fear.

God terrified him. And so he would confess for hours and hours every single day, trying to make sure he didn't miss a single thing that he had done wrong.

[16 : 42] And it drove his head monk in his monastery to annoyance. Later, Martin Luther would grasp for himself the work of Christ, God's grace for him.

And I actually think that in all of his confessions, Martin Luther was possibly the only man in all Christendom who really took Catholic theology and practice seriously. Because he got the seriousness of his sin, and that would be the basis.

When Martin Luther went on to become one of the big-name reformers, of course, 500 years ago, his understanding of his sin and his problem would be a basis of him coming to know Christ for himself.

Our sin is serious. God's holiness is a problem for us. God is like the sun, in that he is the source of our life.

But because of our sin, his presence is also dangerous. So what do God's people need? Well, they need a mediator, don't they?

[17 : 47] They needed Moses. In this passage, when studying it, Moses' mountain climbing expeditions were what stood out to me most. I ended up having to draw a little up and down arrows in the margin just to keep track of it.

Do you know, Moses goes up a total of seven times in this passage and in the following chapters. And remember, this is in North Africa. It's not a kind of a cool Scottish mountain.

Thousands of feet high. And Moses is a man in his 80s at this point. Seven times. My favorite one is chapter 19, verse 20. Look at that. The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain.

So up he goes. I can imagine Moses standing there at the top, hands on his knees, chest heaving, having just dragged himself up to the top for the third time in three days. And verse 21.

The Lord said to him, go down and warn the people. And Moses probably felt like saying, hold on, go down. I've just got here. Is that all you have to say? Couldn't you have sent a pigeon down or something?

[18 : 52] Just up and down. Is that all you want me to do all the time? But joking aside, this is actually the point, isn't it? Moses has to go and meet God halfway.

The top of the mountain is halfway between heaven and earth. That's the image here. And Moses needs to be a mediator. And if you'll pardon the pun, Moses is fit to be the people's mediator.

Literally fit because he has to climb a mountain seven times to do it. But he's the man for the job, isn't he? And the good news for us this morning is that we too have a mediator who is perfectly fit, perfectly right for his role.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate mediator. The ultimate Moses ascending as our representative.

Now, why can Jesus be our representative? Because he is fully human. He was born of a woman, Mary. He had a childhood. He had to grow and learn.

[19 : 56] He had to sit under the authority of his parents. He had to face suffering and temptation so that he fully knows what it is to be human.

He is one of us. And he, like Moses, ascended on our behalf. Except unlike Moses, who ascended into the thick clouds, reached the top of the mountain and stopped there.

Jesus' disciples watched Jesus as he rose into the sky and broke through the clouds. And so now Jesus, a human, one of us, stands before our Father God on our behalf in heaven.

Representing us before the Lord. Taking us fully into his presence. Keep a finger, if you can, in Exodus 20. But turn with me to Hebrews chapter 12.

I want us to read a part of this together. And to let it change our perspective on what is going on when we gather to worship together. Hebrews chapter 12 and from verse 18.

[21 : 07] This is what the writer to the Hebrews says. You have not come to a mountain that can be touched. And that is burning with fire. To darkness, gloom and storm.

To a trumpet blast. Or to such a voice speaking words. That those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them. Because they could not bear what was commanded.

If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death. The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, I am trembling with fear. Referring to Exodus 19 and 20.

Verse 22 of Hebrews. But you have come to Mount Zion. To the city of the living God. The heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels.

In joyful assembly. To the church of the firstborn. Whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God. The judge of all. To the spirit of the righteous made perfect.

[22 : 06] To Jesus. The mediator of a new covenant. And to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. This is what the writer of the Hebrews says about our passage in Exodus.

In Christ, we too are gathered to a great assembly. But it's not at the foot of Mount Sinai. It's at the foot of the throne of the living God.

And we worship not just here in the flesh on Sunday mornings. But in Christ, we simultaneously worship in heaven. With Moses and the 12 apostles and Christian saints from every past generation.

And surrounded by angels. There are angels shoulder to shoulder with us as we worship this morning. As we sing and as we pray. As we hear God's voice speaking to us in his words.

All of this is happening because Christ is taking us there in the spirit. We ascend with him. Our ultimate mediator.

[23 : 16] It's not just a picture for us. It's in some way the mind-blowing, wonderful spiritual reality. Of what is taking place when we gather. When we assemble with God's people.

There's more though. This is only half of it. Because Christ is not only Moses going up the mountain for us.

Christ is also the Lord himself. Coming down, isn't he? Jesus Christ is the one who perfectly ascended up the mountain.

And broke through the clouds beyond the peak. And Jesus Christ is also the one who perfectly descended the mountain. And beyond the foot of the mountain.

Onto the plain where the people are. Because Christ himself is the Lord. He is the great I am. Yahweh himself.

[24 : 14] Christ is fully God. God in flesh. He was born not just of a woman, Mary. But also of the Holy Spirit. He is the Son of God.

Paul wrote in Romans 10. Do not say in your heart, who will ascend into heaven? That is to bring Christ down. Or who will descend into the abyss? That is to bring Christ up from the dead. But what does it say?

The word is near you. That is the word of faith that we proclaim. Sorry, the word is near you. In your mouth and in your heart. That is the word of faith that we proclaim.

Because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. And believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. You will be saved. The word is near you.

You don't need to go anywhere. You can camp there at the foot of the mountain. Because Jesus Christ is God come to you. God hasn't looked on humanity in our sin and in our brokenness and in our trembling.

[25 : 21] And just barked orders at them like an angry personal trainer. He has done the work himself. He has come down the mountain, so to speak.

Not just so that people would tremble in fear. But so that we might be comforted from our suffering. And cleansed from our sin. Forgiven our failure. In Christ, God has come to us in person.

The voice of God was terrifying for the Israelites. But if you want to hear God's voice now. Then you have it. In Christ.

John 1. The word was God. And the word took on flesh. In Jesus Christ. We have God's word. We have Jesus held out to us. To nourish us.

And to feed us. And to lead us. And to guide us. To bring us life. When Joe. Or one another of your elders. Or someone else. Preaches to you. The gathered church.

[26 : 22] It's not just someone explaining a Bible passage. Jesus Christ himself is being held forth to you. Why? Because you've been marked out as God's treasured possession.

Don't underestimate the spiritual reality that is occurring. As the word is read and heard and preached and sung. Christ is the one who is right.

Who is fit to mediate God's word to us. Because he's fully human. The one who can go up the mountain on our behalf. And because he's fully God. He's the word of God. Come down the mountain to us.

And the word of God. In this instance. The Mosaic law. The word of God. Not only teaches us. Our need of Christ. But also what Christ is like.

We won't do it now. But you can go through the Ten Commandments. And ask not only of them. What does this tell me about my own sin? But you can ask. You can ask of the Ten Commandments. What does this show me about Christ's righteousness?

[27 : 30] He alone has fulfilled every single one of these laws perfectly. He loved his father perfectly. Obeying his will. He loved others perfectly too.

Ultimately he laid down his life. In love. This law shows us Christ. If you still have Hebrews 12 open.

Then keep a finger in that. Because we'll come back to that right at the end. But first just go back to Exodus chapter 20 with me for a moment. Exodus 20 verse 18. Exodus 20 verse 18 again says this.

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke. They trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses.

Speak to us yourself and we'll listen. But do not let God speak to us or we will die. And Moses said to the people. Do not be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.

[28 : 37] So God spoke to them and they still trembled. And so they say to Moses. You speak to us. But then Moses says something a bit weird I think. Moses says basically. Do not fear. For God wants you to fear.

And all of God's people scratch their heads in confusion. But what I think Moses is basically saying is this. Don't worry about being afraid. Don't fear your fear.

Because it's right to fear God. It's right to take God's holy voice with this level of deathly seriousness. Because here's the fact.

We all fear someone. We all fear the voice and commands and opinions of someone. The question is who?

Is it God? Or is it our friends? Or our boss? Or our spouse? Or our parents? Or the community in general? Whose voice is it that you fear?

[29 : 43] Whose word matters most to you? You can only answer that question by thinking about how you react. When people express pleasure or disappointment in you.

Whose voice affects you the most? Is it the voice of the Lord? Are you most invigorated by his pleasure? Are you most joyful from his declarations of love?

Are you most bothered by his disappointment? Or most driven to change by his discipline? What moves you most? We'll finish by...

Just look at the rest of Hebrews 12 with me. If you can turn back there. Verses 25 to 29. And we'll finish on this. Hebrews 12 verse 25 says this.

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth.

[30 : 41] How much less will we if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth. But now he has promised once more I will shake not only the earth.

But also the heavens. The words once more indicate the removing of what can be shaken. That is created things. So the what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Let us be thankful. And so worship God acceptably with reverence. And awe. For our God is a consuming fire. As we finish how are we to approach God in worship as we gather together?

We are to come with a healthy and serious fear. We're to come in reverent awe. Do you see those words in verse 28? We don't come to church just because it's what we do.

Or because the biscuits are nice. Or because our friends are here. Or because we haven't got anything else to do. The God who shakes mountains with lightning and thunder and fire and smoke.

[31 : 50] Calls us to hear him speak to us. Speaking to us in Christ. And so we fear God with reverent awe.

But we also come with confident gratitude. That's also in verse 28. Because in Christ we have a kingdom that cannot be shaken. This kingdom of God.

This new world order. It can't be shaken around just like a poxy several thousand year old several feet high mountain can be shaken. Way more secure than that. We didn't be afraid of the voice of anybody else.

Because we come to the Lord. The great I am. To worship him. To hear his voice. We are more than rock solid in Christ.

And so we come eager and ready to hear God speak in his son. As the Bible is read and preached and sung and prayed back to God. Reverent awe.

[32 : 52] Confident gratitude. Are they your attitudes each and every Sunday? Friends we are his treasured possession. Brought to the father by our perfect mediator.

Mediator. The son. Marked out as holy. As his. By his spirit. And so we gather. At the foot of the mountain to worship him.

With the holy angels. Will you pray with me? Let's pray. Father we worship you with reverent awe.

This picture of you. Calling to us from a mountain of thunder and lightning and smoke and fire and trembling. Father it gives us.

A closer glimpse of just who you are in your majesty. In your holiness. In your holiness. And so we come to you in reverent awe. Aware of our sin. Aware of our brokenness and failure.

[33 : 55] And yet father we are so thankful. That we can also come to you to worship together with confidence. In gratitude because of Christ. Because of our perfect mediator.

He who went up. He who came down. Father we love Christ. We thank you so much for him. We thank you for what he has done to mark us out.

And we pray that you would make us more and more reverent. More and more awe filled. More and more confident and grateful. As we gather together each and every Sunday.

Amen.