

“A Meeting you won’t Forget – Encountering the Holy”

Exodus 19

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Do you fear God?

That is not meant to be a trick question.

Some would say they definitely fear God.

Meaning they have always been afraid of God and afraid of what he might do to them now and in eternity to come.

Others would say absolutely not, God is their all-powerful friend who would never harm them.

I know there are other possible responses but evangelicals tend to fall in the latter camp – we have been taught that God loves the world and each of us in particular.

Evangelists have worked for decades attempting to dispel the notion that God is angry with people, impatiently waiting to finally judge them for their failures.

For Jesus said, “God sent his son into the world not to condemn the world but to save the world.”

And in our haste to portray God as our friend and in some songs even as our lover (whatever unclear or inappropriate inferences can be drawn from that) we have tried to bring God down to our size.

Many of today’s Christian books and even commentaries on the Scriptures seem to border on what I would call an “evangelical political correctness.”

Any time the Bible speaks of God as a fearful or even fearsome being or of God as judge and one who will hold us accountable for our actions, it seems today’s authors rush to tell us not to fear God because God is love.

I get the impression that to many the love of God and the fear of God are opposite and contradictory ends of a spectrum.

But by saying that, I get ahead of myself by a week because it is next week that I wish to compare and contrast law and grace in the life of a believer.

In our study of the book of Exodus we are approaching chapter 20 wherein we find what the Bible calls the 10 Commandments.

I want to explore the question of whether Christians must obey the commandments, since as some say it, we are now under grace not law.

The following week, September 25, I want to address the issue of the role of the 10 Commandments and the law of God in our pluralistic culture.

Should Christians demand the Commandments hang in every classroom and courtroom in America?

Then in the weeks of October until Christmas we will deal with each of the Commandments individually.

**But back to the question, “Do we fear God?” We should!**

In both the Old and New Testaments, living in the fear of the Lord is a fundamental characteristic of a true believer.

Said more pointedly, if we don't fear God, we aren't Christians. Yes, I intentionally use such strong language in order to stir your thinking.

This question of “Do I truly fear God?” comes from pondering the text before us today – Exodus 19.

In an earlier chapter of the book of Exodus God confronted Moses at a mountain in the Sinai Peninsula and commanded him to return to Egypt to lead the Israelites (the 2 million or more descendants of Jacob) out of slavery and to a land that God would give them – the land promised to their forefather Abraham.

The chapters between then and the story we look at today tell of God's miraculous provision in their escape from Egypt and their march to the very mountain where God earlier confronted Moses.

Exodus 3:12 "And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the 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."

Please stand in honor of God's Word as I read beginning at Exodus 19 verse 1:

Exodus 19

In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt--on the very day--they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

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 house 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."

So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.

The LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you." Then Moses told the LORD what the people had said.

And the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, `Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. He shall surely be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on him. Whether man or animal, he shall not be permitted to live.' Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they go up to the mountain."

After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. Then he said to the people, "Prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations."

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them."

Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.' "

The LORD replied, "Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them."

So Moses went down to the people and told them.

The Ten Commandments given: 20:1-17

We pick the story up again in Exodus 20:18-22

"Then 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 will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

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."

The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites this: `You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven...`"

May God bless the hearing of his Holy Word.

Pray

Did the people of Israel fear the Lord?

**That** day they certainly did!

That must have been an overwhelming experience.

And I say "overwhelming" in the way we would use that term to describe actually seeing the tsunami wave approaching the Indonesian coast and realizing the disaster about to happen.

I can imagine it was the feeling that a few must have had 13 days ago when in the midst of deafening hurricane winds they saw the levy give way and realized the devastation that was imminent.

In the situation before us in Exodus 19 the people were even told God was going to visit them and they still weren't prepared for what actually happened.

It was like nothing ever before experienced by a group of people and will never again be experienced until the coming again of Jesus at the end of this age.

God used nearly every evidence available to express the grandeur of this event – thunder, lightning, massive thick clouds, smoke as from a furnace, loud and an ever louder trumpet sound, all of it shaking ground

While we cannot feel what they felt that day, we can easily understand that they were filled with fear.

### **Did God intend for them to fear him?**

Oh yes! Exodus 20:20 "God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

And lest we think such fear is not intended for NT believers listen to Luke's witness about the believers' response to God's capital judgment of Annanias and Saphira recorded in the book of Acts.

Acts 5:11 "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events."

And in Acts 9:31 Luke again writes approvingly of the fear of the Lord when he says (the church) “was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.”

This fear of God is both very intentional and very beneficial.

To describe what this fear of the Lord is I want us to note three things from our text:

- 1. The prohibition of presumption.**
- 2. The prerequisite of preparation.**
- 3. The proof in obedience.**

### **I. First of all, God was very clear about the dangers of presuming on his presence:**

Exodus 19:12-13 “Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, ‘Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. <sup>13</sup> He shall surely be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on him. Whether man or animal, he shall not be permitted to live.’ Only when the ram’s horn sounds a long blast may they go up to the mountain.”

A second time God warns them:

Exodus 19:21-22 “the LORD said to him, “Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. <sup>22</sup> Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them.”

Yet a third time God says,

Exodus 19:24 “The LORD replied, “Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them.”

To presume upon God is to assume without justification.

- It is to assume that on my own I may march into the presence of the Holy.

- It is to act as if there is no great difference between God and others.
- It is to treat God no differently than others or maybe not even with as much respect.

I was surprised the first time I heard my then preschool nephews call their parents by their first names.

Greater surprise came when I heard my sister and brother-in-law encourage it.

My sister and her husband are products of this egalitarian age that tries to erase all vestiges of class distinction.

By showing no deference to elders or superiors we think we make ourselves equal with them.

Many young people today, with their parent's disregard, or worse yet with their blessing, take pride in calling their pastors, doctors or teachers by their first names.

Children call adults by first names or even nicknames.

To you adults – you do my son no favor when you allow him to call you by your first name.

We rightly loathe the artificial and meaningless hierarchies set up by the world that suggest that someone is more important or more worthy of respect just because they were born into a certain family or have much money.

But in our drive for a completely egalitarian society we tend to wash out the real distinctions between parents and children, teachers and students, judges and citizens, and leaders and followers.

And that egalitarian spirit has infected even how we think about God and how we treat him.

God has become our “pal,” our “buddy”, or with a casual familiarity he is called “my best friend.”

A book title many years ago asked with great impertinence: “Are you running with me Jesus?”

One pastor recalls sitting at a restaurant and asking a friend to ask the Lord's blessing on the food only to have the man pray:

"Yo, God, slap some blessings on these cheeseburgers." (from sermon by J Ligon Duncan III from First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS)

God is not some overindulgent uncle or permissive grandfather.

He truly **is** our Father in heaven but he **is also** still the terrible, formidable, awesome, great, holy God, exciting intense fear.

Even in that great Hebrews passage where Israel's frightening experience on this mountain is contrasted with our experience now that Jesus has come the author ends it with this encouragement and warning:

Hebrews 12:28-29 "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."

What is prohibited here in Exodus 19 is presumption.

- Someone daring to intrude into the presence of God uncalled and unprepared - A careless, thoughtless, presumptuous, rush into the presence of God.
- Someone who takes his or her access to God for granted.
- Someone who speaks and acts as if God owes them his presence.

F.B. Meyer wrote, Knowing the difference between God and us "is always the first step in the soul's deepest union with God. We must somehow be brought to the point of realizing and admitting the awful contrast between God and ourselves. There must be the bowed head, the hushed voice, the reverent obeisance, and the broken heart. We must see ourselves, because we have seen God. We must see the King in his (awesome otherness) and cry, 'Alas, I am (unworthy).'

(F.B. Meyer [Studies in Exodus](#) 223)

We must never forget **Who** we are dealing with.

Yes, we want intimacy with God (Our **Father** who art in heaven) but it must always come with reverence (**Hallowed**, holy, be thy name).

**Yes, God has come down to us but never forget that he stooped to do so.      God prohibits presumption!**

## **II. But notice also the prerequisite of preparation.**

Yes, my Bible teaches me that I may come boldly into the presence of God but not presumptuously and certainly not without preparation.

If we truly fear the Lord we will prepare to meet him in our worship and elsewhere.

Exodus 19:10-15 “And the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people... After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. Then he said to the people, “Prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations.”

An unholy people could not come into the presence of Holy God without preparation.

Only two preparations are specifically mentioned but there may have been more.

They are commanded to wash their clothes and to abstain from sexual relations.

Why is sexual abstinence commanded?

We don't know!

Perhaps it is related to single-minded attention to communion with God similar to the way Paul speaks of it in 1 Corinthians 7:5 “Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.”

But the washing of the clothes and the washing of the body are often cited in the Scriptures as part of preparation for the worship of God, for being in the presence of God.

But the physical washing wasn't the point in and of itself.

The outward washing was to symbolize an inner preparation – confession of sin, repentance and cleansing from sin.

To come into the presence of a holy God today we need that same preparation, that same cleansing.

And we have it in Jesus.

The New Testament is loaded with this same symbolism of clothing and washing and cleansing from sin.

Speaking of certain believers John writes:

Revelation 7:14 "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The author of Hebrews speaks of our access to God because of the washing that has taken place:

Hebrews 10:22 "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Again in Revelation we see the same symbolism:

Revelation 22:14 "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to" the presence of God.

Our access into the presence of a Holy God has been prepared for us; it has been purchased for us at great price.

By God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ our very hearts have been washed clean of the pollution of sin by the blood, the death of Jesus.

We come into the presence of the Father in the merit of the Son.

The Bible speaks of us as clothed in Jesus' clothes, his robes of righteousness become ours as his holiness prepares us!

We don't deserve the presence of God.

Our access to God has been made possible because of preparations made over a period of centuries and culminating in the sacrifice of Jesus.

To live in the fear of the Lord means we come to the Father prepared - remembering the price paid, and coming humbly in Jesus' name.

Did the Israelites have to literally wash their clothes?

After all wasn't it simply symbolic of their heart attitude?

So if they had the right attitude, did the clothes really matter?

### **III. That brings us to the third issue in the text – the proof of the fear of the Lord is in obedience to the laws of the Lord.**

I ask you, what do you think God would have done if some of the Israelites had said, "We don't really need to wash our clothes – that's just symbolic?"

I think God would have judged them on the spot.

Why?

Because the proof, the evidence of their fear of the Lord is in obedience.

Exodus 19:5 "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

James said it this way, James 2:26 "Faith without deeds is dead."

And James 2:18 "I will show you my faith by what I do."

The fear of God is evidenced in obedience to God's laws.

For an Israelite to say he feared the Lord but then not obey the Lord would have been seen as a contradiction.

For us to say we trust in Jesus but then not obey him is equally a contradiction.

To fear God means to acknowledge his power **and** his authority in our lives and to trust him.

At conversion we **made the decision** who is Lord – obedience is simply the detailed outworking of that decision.

I will speak to this much more next week – the relationship of God's laws to the Christian today.

To live in the fear of the Lord is to come thoughtfully, seriously into the presence of the Lord.

It is to consider the preparation that gives us this access to the Holy.

And it is evidenced, proven by our obedience.

Let me close with what I think are some implications of having a right “fear of the Lord” especially as it relates to our worship.

How do we come not presumptuously but reverently into the presence of God?

How do we prepare, think, act and even dress in ways that acknowledge his holiness, humbly admit our unworthiness, and joyously accept his provision of Jesus as our access into his presence?

What does it say about the way we prepare for worship?

- Are we rested and ready?
- Do we rehearse the truths that give us this privilege?  
     This table set before us each Sunday (referring the Table of the Lord’s Supper) is a visual reminder of the price paid to prepare us for the presence of a Holy God.
- Do we come seeking an audience with the Holy One?
- Do we come having already committed to obeying him because we fear him and trust him?
- Do we take God seriously?

Let me run the risk of offending another evangelical political correctness.

Those born in the last 40 years may well be the first generation in human history where this needs to be addressed.

I am not an anthropologist but I think I can safely say that there has never been a culture that did not use clothing as symbolical of the seriousness of an occasion.

This has been especially true of religion – one’s meeting with God.

Washed clothes, special robes, “Sunday go-to-meetin” clothes, were assumed because they symbolized the importance of the occasion.

It is noteworthy that even in our culture we likewise see clothing as a very important indicator of the respect we show for an occasion or a person.

With one exception – God.

In our egalitarian, iconoclastic age we don’t dress up to be in the presence of God, we dress down.

In our reaction to those who equated special clothing with right religion, we went to the other extreme trying to prove that disregard of dress, even to the point of sloppiness, was an indication of right religion.

So as not to go off the road into one ditch we drove into the other one.

I’m not arguing for clerical robes or suits and ties.

I have no desire going back to people trying to outdo each other in Sunday finery.

But I do believe that we should consciously use every physical means available to express our hearts.

That same principle is why we encourage you to kneel with us when we pray – there is something about bringing the body into conformity with the heart that validates.

On the mountain that day the people of Israel were reminded in a very vivid way that God is holy, that they must be prepared to meet with God, that obedience is the proof of a genuine relationship with a Holy God.

They were to take God very seriously.

Moses said to the people, Exodus 20:20 "**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."

Interesting – The way to not be afraid is to fear!

Fear of the Lord removes all other fears.

Do we fear the Lord? Is it demonstrated in our actions, our faith in Christ and our commitment to obedience?