
He Draws Us In

Exodus 19

On the edge of the Sinai wilderness, on what later became known as “the mountain of God”, minding his own business, which was herding sheep and goats for his father-in-law, Moses experienced a life-changing encounter with God. Appearing as a flame in a wilderness bush, God captured Moses’ attention and redirected his life in ways that have been profound for humankind. We call this burning-bush encounter a “pivotal point” in Moses’ life.

You know what a pivot point is right? It’s a mechanical term for the point of rotation in a lever system. More generally, the center point of any rotational system. Take for example these scissors. There are the handles and the blades; and between them a point at which the handle and blades turn. A pivotal point.

Historians have identified certain events in history, called “pivotal points,” that had crucial importance in relation to the flow of human history. They would say, that these pivotal points turned humanity in certain directions.

Here are a few of those pivotal points in world history:

THE PRINTING PRESS

Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press with replaceable/moveable wooden or metal letters in 1436, and revolutionized the production of books, fostering rapid development in the sciences, arts and religion through the transmission of texts. It played a key role in the Protestant Reformation, via distribution of pamphlets in an effective, yet inexpensive, way. It also helped fuel the Scientific Revolution. With the ushering in of the “Printing Revolution”, the Gutenberg Printing Press laid the material basis for the modern, knowledge-based economy and the spread of learning to the masses.

WATT’S STEAM ENGINE

Although there had been other kinds of engines around, James Watt added a separate condenser, thereby reducing by almost 75% the fuel that had been used by previous engines. Watt’s addition to the steam engine caused its production and overall usefulness to skyrocket in the 1800s, and the development of a practical, efficient steam engine and its application to industry and transportation caused a great leap for industrialization. Its application was virtually limitless; it was used on railways, paddle steamers and steamboats and was not only used to move goods from place to place, but also to move people. The development and subsequent application of steam power was undoubtedly the greatest technical achievement of the Industrial Revolution, and was responsible for lifting industries from infancy to adolescence.

SMALLPOX VACCINE

Smallpox has been, without doubt, the deadliest disease in the history of humankind. Smallpox was greatly feared, as one in three of those who contracted the disease died, and those who survived were often badly disfigured. During the 18th century, small pox killed an estimated 400,000 Europeans per year, and was responsible for an estimated 300–500 million deaths during the 20th century. With the arrival of European Settlers in the New World, the outbreak of small pox wiped out 80-90% of the Native-American population. A cure was strongly needed. Englishman Edward Jenner had observed that milkmaids did not generally get smallpox and theorized that cowpox, a disease contracted by milkmaids, similar to smallpox but far less virulent, protected milkmaids from smallpox. Jenner then tested his hypothesis by inoculating 8-year-old James Phipps, and from there on several other people, and discovered that those inoculated with cowpox were immune to smallpox. His discovery and research eventually led

to widespread vaccinations, and to this day, smallpox remains the only human infectious disease to have been eradicated.

You might have thought of a few more, and we could list others, like Luther's 95 Theses, the Black Plague, The French Revolution, and others. But let's get back to Moses, and our study of the Book of Exodus.

We've been traveling with Moses and the Hebrews out of Egypt. It's been a rough journey, accompanied by hard-hearted Pharaoh, frightening signs and wonders, a night-time escape, caught between the elite Egyptian forces and the Red Sea, passing through that sea on dry land, wondering every step how long the walls of water will remain wall; there were water shortages, meat shortages, surprise attacks — amazing, scary, thrilling, wondrous, so far. As we open chapter 19, we are camped with them in the Sinai wilderness in the shadow of that very mountain — the mountain of God in the Sinai — where Moses experienced his pivotal point in life. What happens in this chapter is the pivotal point, not only for the Hebrews, but this chapter is a pivotal point in the book. In striking similarity to Moses' experience, the Hebrews experience a pivotal experience with God. They will no longer be the same people who came out of Egypt. The story takes a turn.

It is my prayer, as we embark on today's study, that this can also be a pivotal point in our experience and journey with God. And I hope to make it very clear, at the end, how that pivotal point takes place in people who live 3,000 years later. So let's dig in.

A DESERT

This dramatic event in Israel's journey takes place in the Desert of Sinai. Now, just to clarify, "desert" in this text is a bit different from our understanding. When we think of a desert, we picture the Sahara with miles and miles of nothing but sand, or at least, very little vegetation. But in the biblical world and text, "desert" simply meant any kind of unpopulated place — a wilderness. Sinai leads us to believe that this was somewhere on the Sinai Peninsula, a land-bridge between Africa and the Middle East. That is, historically, where we place this event. Unfortunately, the biblical writers were not always concerned with accurate chronology or geography, so some have suggested this event happened in what is now Saudi Arabia. But the exact location is not the point. What the real point is, is two-fold:

First, God has rescued Israel out of Egypt, and has drawn them toward Himself, and to a place that is isolated and uninhabited; a place where God and Israel can experience each other without distractions. This is a very intimate place, and as we will discover, a very intimate event.

Second, as mentioned earlier, God has led them to the very place where He first introduced Himself to Moses. This is the location of the burning bush. This time the fire will be much bigger and God's revelation of Himself and His plans for Israel will become much more clear.

A REMINDER

After locating the setting of the scene, the story begins with a reminder of God's recent actions on Israel's behalf. The reminder, first spoken to Moses, who then relayed God's message to all the people, included three facets:

First, there is a reminder that Israel saw what the Lord did. The word used here — "seen" — includes more than eyesight; it also includes experience and perception. Many had heard what the Lord did. The stories of God's deliverance of Israel from Pharaoh traveled fast. But Israel experienced it. They experienced and perceived the blood; the hail; the lightning; the frogs, and locusts, and flies; they heard the cries of mothers and fathers at the death of the firstborn. There was no doubt that God did all of that, and more.

Second, God reminded them of the personal care He provided, first with their deliverance, and then in their journey to this very spot. They saw the cloud and the fire, the sea divide, and a dry pathway between the waters; and they saw the Egyptian army drown in the sea — they saw, they experienced, and they perceived who was doing it. There was no doubt that God accomplished their deliverance. And there was no doubt that God provided water in strange ways, and strange bread from heaven, and quails to eat every evening. God's provision was evident. God described His care as that of an eagle caring for her young. When eagles are carrying their young, they don't claw them like other birds, they put the young eaglets on their wings and carry them swiftly away. Suppose an archer sees the eagle on the wing and shoots his arrow. The arrow must pass through the adult to hurt the young. Such had been God's powerful, yet tender provision for Israel.

Then, God reminded them, "I brought you to myself." This was so unique to ancient people that the reality of this concept would have been almost beyond belief. There are dozens, hundreds of stories of pagan gods rescuing the people who worshiped them; but those gods never "came down"; those gods did not draw people to themselves. That God would come down to Israel's rescue and then bring them, purposely, loving to Himself, was unprecedented. It is remarkable.

Today, you may be feeling far away from God. He might seem to you a very distant God, a mystery, beyond your comprehension; a God so big that you cannot imagine that He would care about your tiny life. I hear you. We've probably all felt that way. But that is not God's desire. He desires to draw you close. He desires for you to perceive how occupied He has been in your life from the very moment you were conceived. He desires to be than Eagle who carries you away to Himself.

A NEW DESTINY

In verses 5 and 6 we come to a powerful moment in Israel's life: a personal revelation from God, delivered personally by Himself, through His spokesman, Moses, outlining a surprising new destiny for the people of Israel. This destiny builds on the covenant God made with Abraham, but enhances the covenant in ways that Abraham probably could have never imagined. Moses probably didn't see this coming either. There are three parts to the covenant and Israel's new destiny:

Part 1: God revealed His plan for Israel to be His "treasured possession." A couple of remarks in relation to this. First, this does not mean that God is going to only love the Israelites and hate everyone else. This does not mean that God was playing favorites. This simply means that of all the nations in the world, that are in reality also God's possession, He chose in His sovereignty to treasure this nation for His glory and purpose. And what is God's purpose? I'll answer that in a moment, but let's just hang out here a moment longer. From the very beginning of this story, the focus has been on God's power and sovereignty, God's mercy, God's response to a desperate people in slavery, and His rescue. His promise was to rescue them from Egypt and lead them to the land He had already promised them; I'm talking about the covenant with Abraham. God would give them a possession; they would possess their promised inheritance. Now notice how the use of the word "possession" shifts here. Not only are they going to be given a promised possession, but God promises to make them His treasured possession. The word *treasure* here means "something of great value that is protected and secured." God intended for Israel to be a special treasure unto Him. He wanted them to be a people with a unique place in His great plan, a people of great value and concern to God. Again, it's not as if God ignored the rest of the world (they belong to Him too), but that He was determined to use Israel to reach the rest of the world with His grace and mercy. God

is ready to rescue all people from slavery and plant them in a place where they can experience His justice and His peace. This becomes more plain in the other two parts of the covenant.

Part 2. God revealed His plan for Israel to be a kingdom of priests. Now let's step back from the story a moment and undo our own cultural and personal understandings of "priest", which may or may not have anything to do with what God is talking about in this story. So clear your own perceptions of the office and hear this: What God meant here by "priest" is very simple. Priests mediate God's law and God's grace. The idea here is two parties in conflict. Party A has been offended by Party B and has a case against Part B. A priest, arbitrates a resolution between the two parties. In our case, because of wickedness, all humanity are in conflict with God, who is holy, while we are evil. We have offended God, who has a case against all of us. But since God is perfect, holy, sovereign, and creator, He has the right to judge the case, pronounce the sentence, and then order the sentence into effect. And of course, we are all guilty of sin, for which the sentence is death. But in this very rare and unprecedented act of jurisprudence, God has chosen arbitration. He loves humankind too much to let us rot in jail. So He commissioned His treasured people to arbitrate the terms, which are, unbelievably, grace and mercy. All this to say, that in God's economy of spiritual justice, priests mediate God's law — the terms are clear: obedience or punishment — but also His grace and mercy, which includes complete forgiveness and acquittal from guilt. How about that justice? There is none like it. And God's treasured possessions are a kingdom of priests. In other words, all of the people are to serve as God's arbiters — agents — of grace and mercy to a fallen world that deserves the death penalty. That is incredible! That is Israel's new destiny. This does not mean that as priests Israel pronounces grace, or dispenses grace, or is the proprietor of grace. Grace belongs to God. What it does mean is that priests carry that grace to those who are willing to drink it. The container in which God's grace is carried is understood in the next part of the covenant.

Part 3. God revealed His plan for Israel to be a holy nation. The container of grace must be a holy container, for grace is holy and it is a gift from a holy God. This treasured possession, who are a kingdom of priests, carrying God's holy grace to the world, must be a holy people. I think by this time in our study of Exodus, we know what the word, *holy*, means: "set apart." And when we come to chapter 20, we will start seeing just how set apart they are to be. Not perfect, but different from all other nations. Not idol-worshippers, but God worshippers. Not sensual, but spiritual. Not greedy, but self-giving. Not hurtful, but helpful. Not rebellious, but submissive. Not proud, but humble. How can anyone carry God's holy grace to the world if they are just like the world. Holy nation means holy container. This is Israel's God-designed destiny. Holy nation. Holy containers of God's grace.

I think I'd like to stop a minute, and let that sink in. Holy container of God's grace. That gives the word *holy* profound significance. That gives God's treasured possessions, a kingdom of priests, profound honor and obligation.

Now we see why this event is a pivotal moment in Israel's history. They've been given a new destiny: treasured people, priestly people, holy people. And this new destiny they were entering is exactly why God instructed three days of consecration. Unholy containers, need cleaning up. This is why the condition of this God-given destiny is obedience. "If you obey ... if you will keep" (v. 5).

But first, let's look at Israel's response. Moses took God's plan to the people and they, in a unison voice, said, "We will do everything the Lord has commanded" (v. 7). Let me ask you a question: Just what did God ask them to *do*? Before you answer, look back at verses 5-6, to check your answer. What was it? Trick question. God did not ask them to *do* anything. He asked them to *be* someone. God's destiny for the lives of His treasured people is not based on

performance, it's based on faith. I know what you're thinking: But God said, "if you obey." I know that's what God said. But what did He say next: "You will be" not "you will do". Absolutely as a kingdom of priests there will be plenty of things to do. But everything they do is preceded by who they are. Yes, holiness includes righteousness, which includes doing only what pleases God and abstaining from doing what is sinful. I get that. But again, let me say it another way: doing is fruit of being. Already, we see Israel focused on performance and self-righteousness, when God is focused on character and relationship. And besides that, their answer betrays a horrible sense of self-awareness. There's no way any people can *do* everything God commands. We don't have the character. These same people who said "we will do everything ..." are the people who, 40 days later, will construct a golden bull as an object of worship. When we focus on performance, we will fail. When we focus on character, we will become holy containers of God's grace.

In the next episode in this drama, the Israelites follow God's instructions to prepare themselves as holy containers of grace, but we'll pick up that theme next week. We are not in a hurry to finish this book. Finishing the book is not our goal. Our goal is the finished work of Christ in us as we learn His truths planted in this Book of Exodus. So, let's stop here for now and review what we've learned and then apply it to our lives.

- We've learned that God intervenes in our lives in ways that are so meaningful that they turn our lives in a new direction — pivotal points in our own personal history.
- We've learned that God desires to draw us to personal, private locations — desert camps — where there are no distractions, only God and us, so that we can experience Him more fully, and hear from Him more clearly.
- We've learned that in these desert camps, what God often reveals to us is a new and exciting destiny for our lives; and if we will obey Him, which is faith in action — that is what obedience is, faith in action — we will experience His destiny for our lives, that will ultimately have impact for others.

Let's imagine for a moment that we are camped in an isolate, secluded location and God is speaking directly to us. It's easy, really for us to imagine, because we have come into this place, called a sanctuary, away from the tensions, and frets and worries, and hurriedness of life to worship God, and He really is speaking to us, directly, by His Word. What is He saying?

And let's make it personal. Here's what God is saying to you, to each one of us.

He is reminding us of our history.

- He redeemed you from "Egypt", that is the slavery of sin. He did it with the death and resurrection of His firstborn, Jesus.
- He has provided for you, taken care of you, fed you, protected you. No, there was no water from a rock, or manna from the sky, or evening quail that landed in your place, but in so many ways, God has demonstrated His tender-loving care for you.
- And He has carried you away from that awful life of sin on wings of an Eagle, to Himself, to live in personal relationship with Him. And it is a relationship not built on performance, for He loves you. It is a true relationship built on love, trust and commitment.
- And all of this history He has done in ways that you saw, experienced, felt, perceive. You know it was God that did; there could be no one else who could do it. He did. Grateful. Humble. Surrendered. That should be our response.

He is turning our hearts toward a new destiny, a destiny we can flesh out in three ways:

- As God's treasured possession, God has put you in a unique place in His great plan to bless others. You are valued, but not simply for yourself, but also for your role in God's redemptive plan for the world.

- As God's kingdom priest, you are a container of His grace. And He wants to pour you out into the lives others who are thirsty and hungry and desperate for this same grace that rescued you from "Egypt."
- As God's treasured priest, a container of His grace, being poured out into the lives of others, God calls you to holiness. He calls you to a life that is set apart from the world — in the world to pour out grace, but not like the world.

What an incredible God, who comes down to us, rescues us, call us out of bondage and into Himself. What a loving God who does more than rescue. He gives us new life, meaning, purpose, significance — a destiny that has tremendous impact on the world.

What is your response? Are you ready, are you willing, for your life to pivot in a new direction?