

Prayer

You have stored up great and wonderful things for Your people, Lord Jesus. Bring us into Your presence and show us the wonders of Your creative power, the glory of Your eternal plan, the abundance of Your love and compassion, and the strength of Your desire that all might turn to You. We rejoice in the wealth of Your provision and the glory of Your salvation, for You are both our Saviour and our Friend. ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Recall those people who have hurt you, in recent times. Ask Him to settle your feelings about what has happened, and seek His peace.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian speakers.** *Pray for high profile leaders who speak about God on TV and radio. Pray that they will keep close to the Lord*
- *Give thanks for laughter and joy*
- *Pray for those who design our towns and cities, and for the affect this has on people's lives*

Meditation

Do the Lord's will, and work to give others your blessing;
Do for others the things you would have them do for you.

Bless the needy with your assistance, your kindness and your humanity;
Bless the sick with your prayers, your empathy and your encouragement.

Bless the poor with your concern, your help and your money;
Bless the lonely with your company, your faithfulness and your assurance.

Bless the young with your interest, your sensitivity and your patience;
Bless the aged with your company, your compassion and your care.

Bless the bereaved with your sympathy, your presence and your time;
Bless the unhappy with your attention, your support and your affirmation.

For as you strive to bless others, you will yourself be blessed;
Liberated by the love given back to you by those whom you have blessed.

Bible passage - Exodus 19:16-25

¹⁶ Then it came about that on the morning of the third day there were peals of thunder and flashes of lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so very loud that all the people in the camp were terrified.

¹⁷ So Moses led the people from the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now the whole of Mount Sinai was covered in smoke, as the LORD descended upon it in fire; the smoke rolled upwards up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked violently. ¹⁹ Then, as the sound of the trumpet continued and grew even louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

²⁰ When the LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the peak of the mountain, the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. ²¹ The LORD said to Moses, 'Go down and warn the people not to break through to gaze at the LORD, lest many of them perish; ²² also, the priests who come near to the LORD must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them.' ²³ Moses said to the LORD, 'The people are unable to come up to Mount Sinai because you warned us Yourself, saying, "Set boundaries around the mountain

and keep it apart as holy.”’ 24 Then the LORD told him, ‘Go down, and you must come up bringing Aaron with you; but the priests and people must not break through to come up to the LORD otherwise He will break out against them.’ 25 So Moses went down to the people and he spoke to them.

Bible Study

Review

This is an extraordinary passage of Scripture, describing the coming of God to the top of Mount Sinai. God's people had followed their leader Moses, albeit with some difficulty, and arrived at the place where they had been told they would worship their God, and He came to meet them in awesome power and might. The description of this event sounds strange to our ears and is full of symbolism, but it does not take much to understand the impact of this great event. Sinai was the first great meeting place of God and His people.

God's presence on Sinai was accompanied by awesome sights and sounds (19:16-19), because of His pure holiness (see yesterday's reading). We go on to read about Moses' meeting with God in the midst of a cacophony of noise (19:19), at which further instructions were given about how to maintain the proper boundaries between God and the people (19:21f.). This much is clear, but there is more, and what follows is quite difficult to understand. Moses was given instructions about the consecration of priests (19:22,24), but this was at a point in the Old Testament story when no priests had yet been appointed in Israel! Secondly, the end of Chapter 19 describes Moses as standing at the foot of the mountain speaking to the people of Israel, and with instructions to return to the top (19:24). This is in fact surprising, because the very next words we read in chapter 20 (tomorrow) are those of God giving the Ten Commandments! So, was Moses at the top of the mountain when the Commandments were given (as everyone thinks), or at the bottom?

Now, God's coming on Sinai was real, but it was unlike anything Moses or the people of Israel had ever come across before. Those who wrote down what happened passed on what they knew but use words in a highly symbolic way, and the story does not fit with modern preconceived ideas about 'what happened next'. For them, nothing was more important than the dramatic appearance of God on Sinai, which is described as earth-shattering, loud and destructive, perhaps like the eruption of a volcano (19:16f.)! Neither should we think that the people of those days were simply mistaking a volcanic eruption for an appearance of God, as some have suggested. These people knew the difference between different natural and spiritual events. God had come to them in a unique way, and the only way they could describe this was to use the language they knew, about volcanic eruption, thunderstorms, smelting kilns, and musical extravagance (19:16-19)!

After God, the second most important character in this chapter is Moses, a man who towered over all other people. His name is written 14 times in chapter 19, which is twice the 'perfect' number of seven, and this demonstrates how ancient people explained things in more ways than mere narrative. As the representative of God's people, Moses was told by God to 'go up' the mountain (19:20f.) to hear Him speak. However, if we read through all of chapter 19, we will find that he went up no less than three times (19:3,7,9,14,20,24), though it is hard to track when he came down! All this, and probably far more than we can spot today, was symbolically important to ancient people. We may be unfamiliar with the way the story is told, but we can be in no doubt about what it meant. God's coming on Mount Sinai was the most awesome coming of God on earth recorded in the Old Testament.

When events occur in our world, we call them 'earth-shattering', and nothing could be more earth-shattering than God's coming on earth. When He came, He spoke through His own chosen servant, Moses, and He revealed Himself as an awesome God, shielded from view by cloud, and separated from humanity by His pure holiness. He came to speak to His people and to give them His laws, it was an event that would change the world forever. Still, this was only God's first coming to earth. Centuries later, He came to reveal His complete saving Word, in Jesus Christ (John 1).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Why are priests mentioned? (19:24)
- What does this description of God's coming mean? (19:16-19)
- What was Moses doing? (19:16-25)
- What were the people doing? (19:17-24)
- Who was where when the 10 commandments were given? (19:25)

Notes on the text and translation

- V16** *'then it came about that ...'* Some translations omit this part of the verse. This is because the Hebrew often begins with a small word 'wayhee' which was translated 'behold' in the Authorised Version, but this is normally just a connecting word that holds sentences together. However, our sentence here begins with two separate clauses beginning 'behold' ('wayhee ... wayhee'). This is an emphatic form of Hebrew and I have chosen to represent this with the phrase 'then it came about that ...', which is as close as I can get to the equivalent emphasis in English.
- V16** *'peals of thunder and flashes of lightning'* Some translations struggle with the plural Hebrew here which says literally 'there was thunders and lightnings'. It is simple for us, really, because more than one clap of thunder is 'peals of thunder ...'
- V19** *'Then, as the sound of the trumpet continued and grew even louder'* The Hebrew reads literally 'the sound of the trumpet proceeded and grew exceedingly', and yet most versions translate 'the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder'. There is not much difference between this and my translation, but it is worth keeping close to the Hebrew here to give the sense of the continual nature of the trumpet sound as well as its increase in volume.
- V22** *'break out against them'* This phrase refers to the breaking of barriers between the holy and the profane (see study), and the Hebrew word 'paratz' is used for a child being born and breaking out of the womb, for example, or an army making a hole in a city wall so that an army can storm a city. It describes a critical point of action.
- V25** *'... and he spoke to them.'* The end of this verse is peculiar. In Hebrew the verse ends with these words; 'and Moses said to them ...' as if what he said would come next. However, the beginning of the next chapter (20) begins with the instruction for the 10 Commandments given by God! We must therefore assume that the sentence means that Moses simply told the people what the Lord said.

Going Deeper

Why are priests mentioned? (19:22,24)

It is certainly a mystery as to why priests are mentioned in 19:22 and 24. God gives an instruction to priests to consecrate themselves before coming up the mountain (19:22), but then they are required to stay put at the foot of the mountain (19:24)! The only mention of priests in the whole Bible before this point in Exodus is of the two priests Melchizedek (Genesis 14) and Jethro (Ex 3:1, 18:1). Some scholars suggest that the elders appointed in chapter 18 (18:21f.) performed the duties of priests because of their representative function, but there is no real evidence of this and the text uses no words associated with priesthood in describing their selection and commission (18:21-23).

There is however one interesting comment in chapter 19 itself which may help us. In verse 6 the text reads, 'You will be a kingdom of priests for me, and a holy nation', and you will recall that the people (19:8) accept this. It is just possible that the instruction about priests and consecration in our passage is simply parallel to the instruction of the people to be consecrated (19:10f.). If this is the case, the comment in verse 24, 'but the priests and people must not break through ...' speaks not to two different classes of people, but to all the people, who are priests! The idea that Israel has a priesthood as a whole is one that quickly disappears even within Exodus (see Exodus 32:26f.), but it is one that becomes very important in the New Testament, of course!

What does this description of God's coming mean? (19:16-19)

Scholars have argued for centuries about the meaning of the peals of thunder and lightning described in our opening verses (19:16f.). Frankly, it is rather simplistic to suggest that the presence of God is merely like a storm or a volcano. People have been describing cataclysmic events in terms of natural disasters for centuries. One nineteenth century historian described the effect of the American Revolution in these terms: 'Public commotion in human affairs, like the shocks of nature, convulse the lofty mountains, which have arisen for ages above the clouds, beneath the skies ...' (Mercy Otis Warren – History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American revolution: 1:216).

Each of the four different features of this description of God's coming is distinctive; thunderstorm, volcano, smelting kilns, and music. Two of these are 'natural', and two are 'man made' (itself a form of balance), and each description covers some characteristic of God's 'presence' as found elsewhere in the Old Testament. We are used to the imagery of God as being like a thick cloud, and this relates to the thunderstorm, the volcano and the kiln. God guided the people of Israel through the early phases of their wilderness wanderings by a cloud (Ex 31:21f. 14:19f.), and in the picture presented here, the cloud seems to become

bigger and bigger, covering the mountain top, containing a storm and rising like the smoke from a kiln (19:16,18). The kiln imagery is new to the Old Testament, but it becomes an important representation of the purifying presence of God (e.g. Malachi 3:1f.), and purification is clearly an important feature of this chapter (19:9-15). The violent quaking of the mountain may seem to indicate an earthquake (19:18), but its purpose is to add to the 'earth-shattering' imagery of God's presence as used elsewhere in scripture (see Psalm 99:1, Isaiah 64:1 etc.). Lastly, the extravagant and deafening noise of trumpet blasts is used throughout Scripture as an indication of God's summoning people for judgement, and as we saw yesterday, chapter 19 is the most dramatic use of this imagery apart from the Second Coming of Christ.

People today might ask 'was it like this?' The only answer is 'Yes it was', for by whatever means the event was passed down and recorded, this is how the people remembered and recalled it. The Bible is not a novel, so we must accept that those who wrote this would naturally use language that reflects both the reality of the event and what they felt it signified. They knew that this was earth-shattering, and the overlapping imagery may be confusing to us, but it represents the powerful and awesome presence of God come to earth for a reason, which will unfold in the rest of the book of Exodus.

What was Moses doing? (19:16-25)

It is difficult to work out the sequence of events by which Moses went up or down the mountain. Previously in chapter 19, he went up to speak to God (19:3) and went down to speak to the people (19:7f.); then we find the Lord speaking to Moses again (19:9f.) and then Moses going down the mountain later, at the Lord's specific instruction (19:14). In our passage today (19:16-25), Moses brought the people to see God on the 'third day' (for the meaning of the third day, see yesterday's study). Presumably, whilst they stood at the foot of the mountain as instructed, we hear that in the midst of the noise of thunderstorm, volcanic eruption, smelting and blowing of trumpets, *'Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder'* (19:19)!

Moses was acting like a priest by standing between God and the people; he was the person who was able to communicate with God, and he had achieved this honour through obedience to God's commands over many years. It is fascinating to see that before Moses communicates God's words to the people in this passage, we read that he *'spoke'* to God (19:19). True communication is always two-way, and without this comment, Moses would seem like a mere puppet. However, God always seeks a true relationship with people, for He is only interested in having a relationship with people, not in controlling them.

In the second part of our passage today, Moses went up the mountain to speak with God (19:20-24), and received further instructions about consecration (19:21,22), but also presented to the Lord a concern about the boundaries (19:23). Earlier, God had set a boundary around the mountain (19:11,12) and forbidden people to touch the edge of it; but he had also said that at the sound of the trumpets the people could come up the mountain (19:13). But how far should they go? Clearly, Moses was allowed to go all the way to the top, but what about the people? It appears that the answer given by God was that Moses was allowed to bring Aaron up the mountain with him, but the people could should stay where they were at the foot and come no further (19:24).

What were the people doing? (19:17-24)

Earlier, the people had come to the foot of the mountain (19:17), to the very edge that they had been told not to touch (19:12). It appears that in this part of chapter 19 the people were indeed so afraid of the threat of death given earlier (19:13) that they would not go further, hence Moses' request. This is a fascinating instance of genuine uncertainty, for what should the people do? They had been told they could advance up the mountain at the sound of trumpets, and the trumpets were indeed blaring (19:16), but they exercised caution rather than presumption, and remained where they were. Moses' task was to obtain the correct answer about what they should do, and therefore enable the people to remain secure.

The people of Israel are often presented as worshipping the Lord at the foot of the mountain prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments, but it is worth noting that in this case, their worship consisted not of exuberant praise, but of careful approach. It is noticeable that the positions held by the people at this point are similar to those found in the worship of God in the later Jerusalem Temple. In the Temple, God was in the 'holy of holies' at the centre of the Temple, and priests, like Moses, acted for the people and for God by ministering in a courtyard between the holy of holies and the outer courtyards where the people stood. Large curtains made the divisions between the holy of holies and the priest's courtyard, and between this and the outer courtyards where people worshipped. These were the same curtains symbolically 'torn in two' at Jesus' death (Matt 27:51).

It seems that later generations saw in this event a pattern for their worship of God, but one that has now been broken open by Jesus Christ. By combining the language of this story and that of Matthew's Gospel, we can appreciate that Jesus has opened up the way for all people to ascend to the top of the mountain with Moses and see their God!

Who was where when the 10 commandments were given? (19:25)

There is no doubt that Moses was, according to the sequence we have read, at the bottom of the mountain at the end of Exodus 19, and the Ten Commandments were declared by God at the beginning of our next passage! In order to keep the necessary space in tomorrow's study for the Ten Commandments themselves, we will look at this issue here.

Two things should be said about the mental picture we all have of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. Firstly, it may be stretching things too far to say that we know exactly where Moses was when the Ten Commandments were given. Some have speculated that Exodus 19 describes Moses as speaking to God on the mountain a number of times, and it has been suggested that he received the Commandments on one of these occasions, but delivered them 'in the name of the Lord' like a prophet, as recorded in Exodus 20 (which begins, 'then God spoke all these words ...'). Secondly, we should recall that the first set of Ten Commandments were received by Moses when he went up the mountain at a later date and stayed there for forty days to receive the commandments in tablet form, written with the 'finger of God' (24:18f. 31:18). When he came down, he smashed the stone tablets in anger when he found that the people had made a golden calf and had begun to worship it (32:1f.)! He then needed to go up again for a second period of forty days to receive the final set of stone tablets containing the Commandments (34:1f.). The story of the Ten Commandments is not as simple as we might think, and this is what we will explore next in our studies!

Application

It can be difficult for us to know what to make of this astonishing passage of scripture. The people of Israel came to Mount Sinai supposedly to worship God, but as they came close they found that meeting their God was a far more awesome experience than they may have imagined. Moses himself had met the Lord before, in particular at the 'burning bush' (3:1f.), and both Moses and all the people had experienced the power of God in the crossing of the Red Sea, but none of them had experienced anything like this before. God came on the mountain with awesome and authoritative power, and He came to change people and to change the world.

This passage suggests to us that if we are to meet God, then we must expect Him to be an awesome God who is no less powerful and majestic today. We therefore need to prepare to meet Him, and not simply imagine that we can come into His presence when we feel like it. Much Christian worship today celebrates the risen Christ with rejoicing and joyful singing, and there is every reason for those who have been saved to worship God in this manner. However, we should not forget that although we have the privilege of access to God, He is the same God who came in awesome power on Mount Sinai, and seeks to come into this world today in power to do His will.

We hear stories today of occasions when the Lord has come to His people in the midst of worship, and people have been silenced or impelled to fall on their knees in adoration and worship. I have known the presence of God to come and convicted people of sin not just as individuals, but as a group, and in this setting, people have responded with extraordinary confessions of sin and powerful demonstrations of forgiveness. We should surely make sure that our worship is not tied to human expectations, liturgies or patterns (even if it is just singing songs!), for then, we give the Lord the space to break into our human agendas and do with us what He wants. We cannot presume upon God for what He will do with us when we worship Him, but we must surely be ready for Him to work through us to change the world according to His eternal plan. This is the nature of His will and His ways.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss the passages of scripture that suggest Moses went up the mountain three times; do you agree with this assessment?
2. How did the people of Israel worship the living God at the foot of Mount Sinai, and what was its consequence?
3. How may we prepare to meet God? Is it necessary for us to prepare for worship in any special ways?

Topics covered by this text

- *The presence of God in power*
- *The holiness of God*

- *The authority of Moses as Israel's leader*

Personal comments by author

It is very hard to write about this passage, because of the nature of the whole event. It is almost too awesome for words; yet without words, where would we be in trying to pass on the amazing truths of God's revelation? Words are an enigma; they appear to be exact, and yet a sentence will communicate far more than the individual words suggest. Words that describe meetings with God always lead us on further, and we should rejoice that a chapter such as Exodus 19 is such an amazingly rich text. What it says about coming near to God will always inspire people. I know of some writers who suggest that Exodus 19 has in fact had a far more lasting impact upon God's people than the well known words of Exodus 20, but I leave you to consider whether you think this is true!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through Exodus 19 and let the Holy Spirit reveal to you whatever He will. You may discover something about God, about worship, about service or about discipleship. Be open to be led by the God who came to Sinai.*
- *Pray for the churches you know, and ask the Lord to inspire them in worship. Pray and seek the guidance of the Lord about the feelings you have in worship, and let Him tell you what He can do in and through you.*

Final Prayer

You are the one and true God, Almighty Father and Lord of all. Within Creation, You have marked the world with the signs of Your ownership, and You hold the secrets of how to overcome evil and You can rectify the way it distorts what is good within the world. Praise be to You, our one and only true and living God. AMEN
