

## Prayer

Thank You, merciful Lord, for Your forgiveness and saving grace, which sustains us each and every day. By forgiving people, especially those who have offended us, may we show that we have both received this gift from You and also practice it. May we put love into practice in every part of our lives, and so demonstrate to the whole world that the Gospel truth of salvation makes a difference to people's lives. We ask this to Your praise and glory: AMEN.

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Select a passage of Scripture, and use it as a basis for your prayer (for example, use Jude, verses 24 and 25)*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray about the use of the Bible.** *Pray about the manner in which the Bible is taught in your church, and also for those who teach it*
- *Give thanks to God for speech and the blessing of communication*
- *Pray for those who face each day without food, resources, or hope*

## Meditation

Shadows pass us by, almost unnoticed;  
The suffering of the victim of a rape; unspoken:  
The bullied child or office worker; petrified:  
The sick, whose pain is always there; constant:

But the shadow leaves its moment's mark;  
If it stirs up true compassion in a stony heart,  
If it switches on a light within a stubborn mind,  
If it shames a rigid man or woman into bending.

When the shadow moves, it has not entirely gone;  
For Christ has stirred the passions of a soul,  
For human hearts have felt the Spirit's breeze,  
For God has made His mark on consciousness ...

And something of the pain of those who suffer  
Will never be the same if someone truly notices,  
And if, for just one moment, the shadow of the Cross  
Reminds one human soul to stop and help another.

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## Bible passage - Exodus 24:12-18

<sup>12</sup> The LORD said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain summit and be there; for I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and the regulations I have written to direct the people.' <sup>13</sup> So Moses set out with Joshua his assistant, and climbed higher on the mountain of God. <sup>14</sup> He said to the elders, 'Wait here for us until we return to you. Now, Aaron and Hur are with you, and whoever has something to say can go to them.'

<sup>15</sup> Then Moses climbed up the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. <sup>16</sup> The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered the mountain for six days, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. <sup>17</sup> To the eyes of the Israelites, the sight of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the mountain top. <sup>18</sup> Then Moses went into the midst of the cloud as he climbed further up the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

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# Bible Study

## Review

The giving of the Law in Exodus concludes with this passage, which describes Moses' ascent to the top of Sinai to receive from God His '*tablets of stone*' (24:12). Of all the great events recorded in Exodus, most people remember that God gave Moses two tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments, or as the text puts it, '*the law and the regulations I have written to direct the people*' (24:12). This is a remarkable and significant moment in the life of Israel, but we must be very careful to follow exactly what happened, because popular versions of this story can be wildly inaccurate.

We already know that contrary to the popular picture of God giving the Law, the Ten Commandments were given to Israel while Moses and the people were at the foot of Sinai (19:25, 20:1). Moses had previously climbed the mountain for other reasons, meeting God there at least twice before the giving of the law in chapter 20 (see 19:3,20); and yesterday, we discovered that God had met with Moses and the elders and priests of Israel on the mountain and shared a remarkable meal (24:9-11). Now, if we look carefully at chapter 24, it becomes clear that God summoned Moses to receive the tablets of the Ten Commandments because they were His written guarantee of the covenant just agreed between Himself and Israel (see yesterday's study, 24:3-8). Moses had already copied this down, but Israel needed evidence that these laws did indeed come from God, and the tablets of stone fulfilled this need.

The whole of today's passage is dominated by Moses' climb to the top of the mountain to receive these tablets of stone; they would be a bold and unique sign of His faithfulness to the covenant agreement. When Moses began to climb the mountain (24:13), he took with him his young assistant Joshua (24:13). We who read this story later know all about Joshua, but this is only his second appearance in Scripture; his first appearance was as a commander, leading Israel against the Amalek (Exodus 17). Joshua was to become Israel's next leader, and it appears that Moses wanted to take Joshua with him on this most important of missions. However, we do not know how far Joshua went, for by the time we reach the end of our passage, Moses is alone with God at the top. It also seems that there was an issue about whether the elders of Israel should accompany Moses, for they had just enjoyed a meal with Moses and God on the mountain (24:9-11). However, they were told firmly that their work was to remain with the people and to give them guidance.

Moses climbed the mountain, and as he did so, God came down on the mountain in His glory (24:15). The awesome sight of this was like a cloud and an '*all consuming fire*' (24:15,17), so it seemed to the Israelites looking on from below that the presence of God that had led them through the desert now rested on the top of the mountain. The presence of God is described as 'settling' on the mountain; this Hebrew word is pronounced 'Shekinah', and it means 'dwelling'. The whole of the Old Testament speaks of God's purposeful intent to live amongst His people, first in this mysterious 'Shekinah glory' of the cloud and the fire, but eventually by 'living' in the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle and then the Temple. Eventually, the New Testament describes God's dwelling on earth in the person of Jesus, and He is the fulfilment of the promise of all the stories of God's Shekinah glory in the Old Testament.

God's glory took six full days to come on Mount Sinai, and eventually Moses reached the top and was sustained there by God for forty days and nights. At this point in Exodus, we think we know what is about to happen. Certainly, God did indeed give Moses the tablets of stone as expected, but at the foot of the mountain, events were taking a different turn, as we find out if we continue to study the book of Exodus.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Why did God need to give Moses 'tablets of stone' (24:12)?
- What is meant by Moses' instructions to Aaron and Joshua (24:14)?
- What is the 'glory of the Lord', and why does it settle on the mountain (24:16,17)?
- Why did Moses take six days to go up the mountain, and spend 40 days there?

## Notes on the text and translation

**V12** '*on the mountain summit*' Most Bible versions simply say '*on the mountain*', but the Hebrew word has an unusual ending, and this could be a shortened version of the word for 'high point'. Given the context and the importance of the event, it seems likely that we have a reference here to the mountain top.

- V12 'and be there'** Most Bible versions read 'and wait there', which is a reasonable assumption, but it is still an assumption. The Hebrew word used here comes from the word 'to come to pass' or 'to happen', but in the form of a command! It is therefore a divine command for Moses to come and present himself.
- V12 'I have written to direct the people'** This whole sentence is rather vague, but the Hebrew word for 'to direct' is the one used elsewhere for taking aim to shoot an arrow. The context clearly means that this is about instructing the people, though the concept of enabling the people to 'aim straight' is certainly interesting (see study).
- V14 'whoever has something to say'** You will not find it translated like this in most Bibles! Most have 'whoever has a dispute ...'. However, the Hebrew says this, quite literally; 'whoever is a lord of words'. Therefore, it is unwise to talk simply of disputes, because the term is clearly colloquial and refers to a wide variety of circumstances. This is what I have attempted to convey.

## Going Deeper

### **Why did God need to give Moses 'tablets of stone' (24:12)?**

So far, we have noted that the tablets of stone were needed to complete the visible 'testimony' to the covenant of Law (see above). Much attention has been given to the phrase in verse 12, 'I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and the regulations I have written to direct the people'; this is because people want to know what was actually written on the tablets of stone that God eventually gave to Moses. Was it just the Ten Commandments, or did it include the 'regulations' as well?

Scholars have looked extensively at whether the Hebrew text has a pause or a break after the word 'law', which would suggest that the tablets contained the Ten Commandments only, but not the 'regulations'. However, the Hebrew Bible that goes back to the fourth century is not clear, and the lack of punctuation suggests that the tablets contained both the 'Law' and the 'regulations'. However, the Jewish 'Masoretic Text' of the Old Testament, a Hebrew text created over many years by Jewish scholars of the eighth to tenth centuries, suggests otherwise. This quite simply omits the sentence about the regulations!

Later in Exodus (34:1,26,27), we will find more about what was written on a second set of stone tablets. These were created after Moses smashed the first set in fury at the sins of the people of Israel (32:16-19), and they speak of the law as being 'ten words' which were 'written by the finger of God'. Because of this and despite the linguistic uncertainty, it is best to conclude that the tablets contained the Ten Commandments alone, and the 'regulations' were written on other documents. This also makes sense of the story, and the need to get a written form of the words spoken uniquely by God and not communicated through Moses.

Despite our great interest in what was written on the tablets, the phrase about the regulations is fascinating. Here, God says quite clearly that the regulations (chapters 21 to 23 of Exodus) are for the 'direction' of the people. The meaning of this is not immediately obvious to us in English and we might imagine this would be about teaching. However, the Hebrew (see notes above) suggests that the purpose of the Law is to give the people moral guidance, or to keep them 'straight' about what God requires.

### **What is meant by Moses' instructions to Aaron and Joshua (24:14)?**

If you read Exodus carefully, then all the details of the story concerning 'what happened and when' begin to make sense. Moses was now justified in leaving the general running of the Israelite community to Aaron, because there were laws by which to abide and leaders appointed to enact them. It would have been catastrophic for Moses to have left the people for forty days before these things were in place. In the event, we will discover that Aaron was not up to the task and the people of Israel went astray whilst Moses was with God on the mountain (see chapter 32). However, it is important to note that Aaron had all that was required to run the people of God; they only strayed because they wished to.

Joshua went up the mountain with Moses (24:13), but it is not clear how far he went up. By the end of our passage, Moses alone is invited into God's presence, and we do not hear about Joshua again until Moses comes down from the mountain (32:17f.). At this point in the story, it is assumed that Joshua has been waiting for Moses part way up the mountain and joins him on the way down. Consequently, Joshua was not personally involved in the sins of the people whilst Moses was at the top (32:1-6).

Aaron and Hur appeared earlier in Exodus (17:10f.), where they were the two who held Moses' arms whilst the battle raged. It appears that Hur was an assistant to Aaron, but he does not appear in any other story of the Bible, only later lists of ancestors.

### **What is the 'glory of the Lord', and why does it settle on the mountain (24:16,17)?**

The phrase 'the glory of the Lord' is important, and it appears many times in the Old Testament. The first we hear of it is in Exodus 16 (16:7-10) where the glory of the Lord is seen coming to the Israelites through the desert in the form of a cloud, just before quail come and cover the camp of Israel. In this passage however, the glory of the Lord comes to 'settle' on the top of Mount Sinai. The Hebrew for this is 'shekan', and this is a very important word in the Bible because it describes God's desire to be with His people, from Old Testament times to New.

The whole concept of God's 'settling' or 'dwelling' amongst His people is important here, because the Hebrew 'shekan' is the one from which we get the phrase the 'Shekinah', and here in this passage it is, for the first time, linked with the glory of God. In the years before Christ, the Jewish people developed the whole idea of God's Shekinah Glory as a means of speaking about God Himself. This, they believed was what dwelt on the top of Mount Sinai (as here), and then in the Tabernacle and the Temple; it later departed when the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. To this day, many Jews believe that the Shekinah Glory of God is present in the last remaining fragments of Temple western wall, called the 'wailing wall', which is why Israelis to this day hold the site as holy.

Christians today are familiar with the concept of God's presence with His people, in particular through the Authorised Version translation of the word 'shekan', which is 'abide', meaning 'to dwell with' or 'to remain'. It is important for us to remember that this word represents the active presence of God however, and not some settled or fixed state. Christians know this idea from the famous chapter in John's Gospel in which he speaks of 'abiding' in Christ, and Christ in us (John 15), and the very use of the word links strongly to the many Old Testament texts which speak of God's 'abiding' presence with His people, of which this passage is one.

In addition to this, the word 'shekan' is also the basic word used in Hebrew for the Tabernacle, in Hebrew 'mishkan'. Shortly, we will read about the creation of the Tabernacle, which was a tent complex designed specifically by God and conveyed to Moses, as a 'dwelling place'. For centuries, it was the visible presence of God amongst His people.

### ***Why did Moses take six days to go up the mountain, and spend 40 days there?***

Numbers are symbolic in the Bible, and whatever actually happened to Moses as he climbed the mountain this time, it is described as an epic climb (see above). The text describes the whole journey as taking 6 days, with Moses being invited into God's presence at the top of Sinai on the seventh. It is just possible that this parallels God's work of Creation, for Exodus describes the creation of God's Law, and its delivery to Moses on the seventh and subsequent days of his time on Mount Sinai.

The number of days and nights spent by Moses on the mountain top is given as forty, to tell us that this was no quick event. Up to this point in the story, Moses has appeared to be rushing about, conveying messages from the people to God and back again, but now, Moses spends significant time with God. Time was required, because as we will find out shortly, Moses was given instructions about a whole series of issues. He learned about building an 'ark', a mercy seat, a table (for the bread of presence), a lamp stand, a tabernacle, an altar, a priestly breastplate, priestly clothes such as an ephod, a robe, a chequered tunic, a turban, a sash, and much more besides (25-31)!

It is worth noting that in ancient times, the relationship between a god, a king and the people was organised like this. The king organised the people and managed the communal life, giving laws as he saw fit. The role of the god was simply to deliver good fortune in return for the offerings and sacrifices made to it. Here in Exodus, the roles are completely different, and unlike anything described anywhere else in other ancient texts. God Himself gave the laws, and even when Moses was the one delivering them, it is made clear that they came from God. In the light of this, it is understandable that the people of Israel were very protective about the 'Law' they received. No other people claimed to receive law from God.

## **Application**

This passage of Scripture reminds us of the need to do things 'God's way'. In the Christian church, we often act as if we are at liberty to organise ourselves as we wish providing we are worshipping God and seeking to do good things within the world. God has indeed given us great liberty in Christ, but the issue is surely this, how can God bring about His plan for the whole world unless we are willing to do what He says even in the minutiae of issues such as how we organise ourselves and what rules we adhere to in our church fellowships? Surely, we do not exist for ourselves, but in order to do God's will!

The impressive things about what Moses and the people of Israel do in this whole story (up to this point, at least), is to be obedient. Through their obedience, God is able to bring to fruition His plan to make a discipline people out of Israel; they must live according to His law, not their law. The Christian church is frequently dismissive of 'the law', because salvation by God's grace through Christ is at the heart of its

message. However, it must learn that all God's people need to be people who are obedient to His moral law, and everything we have learned about God's laws up until now have been applicable to our own day. We have yet to read the laws about sacrifice or priesthood in Exodus, those laws that are strange to us and have been superseded by Christ. Surely, part of being a Christian is to be a disciple, who is 'disciplined' to do God's will and keep His moral law as a testimony to this immoral world of what is right and what is wrong; and part of that discipline must surely be following His way of life, and seeking to do His will at all times.

Many Christian today seek to do God's will, but the very fractured nature of the church should testify to us that our super-churches and denominations are far from God's will. If we were, we would find our common ground in Him and testify to it together, without hesitation. The fact that one will have little to do with the other is evidence to the world that we are far from God, and far from being a disciplined moral people.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. Does the idea of God's 'Shekinah Glory' have any meaning for us today, now that Jesus has come?
2. Is there any reason for us to suppose that Mount Sinai is a special place to this day, because of God's 'presence' there?
3. Discuss in your group whether you have experiences yourself of the presence of God. What words would you use to describe God's presence?

### **Personal comments by author**

*This passage of Scripture has brought me back to a theme you have heard from me so many times; the unity of God's people. I cannot avoid this, because God's Word seems to make little sense to me unless His people are one, and willing to demonstrate this as a priority, not the lowest and last item on a church agenda. Yes, we are saved through Jesus, but He did make it clear that the laws of God stand, so the revelation of God on Mount Sinai has an important message for us today.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *What issues within this passage of Scripture catch you attention? Perhaps the Lord is calling you to make a tough journey of faith, up some spiritual 'mountain', or perhaps even a physical one. Let God lead you to spend time with Him, so that you can be His servant.*
- *Pray for the churches of God, pray for those you do not know about as well as those you do, and seek the Lord's will for the work and testimony of His people today. He may have some important things to say to you.*

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## Final Prayer

Lord God of all glory, open up our hearts to all the possibilities of faith, both within this life and beyond it. Help us to trust you for the past, the present and the future, so that we are at peace with You, and do not lack any good thing You would do either through us, in us or for us. We praise You, Lord God: AMEN