

# Exodus 19-20:21

Study Outline

## Launching question

Try to draw up a Christian's Job Description.

## The story so far ...

What three things do Exodus 19:3b-4 summarise?

## Israel's job description

READ 19:1-6

What do these verses say about Israel's relationship with her God?

And what do they say about her relationship with the world?

READ 1 Peter 2:9-10 which applies this to us: what is a Christian's job in this world?

## God's appearance

READ 19:7-25 and 20:18-21

What is the purpose of all the 'fireworks' and all the various instructions (eg 19:12-13, 15)?

Given that God is so holy, what has Exodus told us so far about how we can approach him?

What difference do these verses make to the instructions in 19:3-6 / 20:1f?

READ Hebrews 12:18-29

How are we in a similar position to Israel as they gathered at Mt Sinai?

In what ways are we different?

How might we ignore God's words / 'refuse him who is speaking' (25)?

## The ten 'words'

READ 20:1-17

Why begin with v2?

Why is God giving these laws if he's already redeemed Israel without their obedience?

How are the Israelites to treat God?

How are the Israelites to treat each other?

Why do Christians so rarely talk about issues of practical holiness?

Should we?

## Thinking it through

Why do you think it is important for us to remember God's holiness when we come to talk about how God's people should behave?

In what ways do you think we might be too casual in how we treat God?

What are the dangers in this?

Draw up Israel's Job Description from Ex 19-20 and compare it with the one at the start.

What is the right way for saved people to respond to the God who saves?

# Exodus 19-20:21

Study 8

T H E G O D W H O I S H O L Y

## Summary

*Exodus* is the story of God showing us what he is like: he is the God who rescues his people. He does this in faithfulness to his promises, for his own glory, and out of sheer mercy and kindness to those he has chosen. We should expect to know our God better through reading this book.

## The story so far

God has dramatically rescued Israel from Egypt, keeping the promise that he made to their forefathers. But the significance of the rescue is far more than that. By a single act, Israel were redeemed from both bondage and the guilt of sin, set free from Egypt and from God's 'destroyer' who brought his judgment. And in this act of redemption God has made himself known. He is the God who rescues, and in particular he is the God who rescues by means of shed blood, and by his own glorious might.

God has claimed Israel for his own, a first fruit of the entire world which is all his. And as he releases Israel from Pharaoh, it is so that she may come to serve him.

At Sinai, Israel is constituted for the first time as a people (rather than as one hugely extended family), gathering here as the divinely-chosen and generously-privileged 'church'. To this congregation, God gives his 'words'.

## Theme Sentence

'You belong to a holy God; be a holy people.'

## Ideas for application

- Exod 19-20 are all about the right response that Israel should have to her salvation. This study is the application of all we've learnt so far.
- our God is a consuming fire. I ought to fear him, and in particular (according to Hebrews 12:25) 'not refuse him who is speaking'.
- God's task for his people is to advertise to the world how brilliant it is to be God's people. 1 Peter 2:9-10 applies Israel's job description directly to Christians. So the wonderful privilege of being 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession' brings with it a challenge '... so that they may see your good deeds and glorify God'. Do I strive to be different, as I should?
- do I love God enough to obey him? Or do I hang loose to his exclusive claims on me?

# Commentary

19:2b Sinai (= Horeb) is 'the mountain of God' (3:1; 1 Kings 19:8) because of what God did and said there. Their arrival here is a sign that Lord has been active throughout, fulfilling his promise to Moses (3:12).

3b-4 summarises the story of the book so far:

- redemption from Egypt (as the Egyptians are punished);
- God's direction and provision on the journey ('I bore you on eagle's wings' [or cf Deut 1:31 'as a man carries his son']; notice that the safe 'nest' to which God carries us, is himself!);
- the goal of the journey: worship at Mt Sinai ('brought to myself'). This is what God has done for Israel@ what will it mean to serve him?

5-6 This is Israel's job description. God makes a proposal whereby Israel have the opportunity to fulfil a very special task. If they obey him, they'll be marked out, distinct from every other nation. So ...

- they are to keep the covenant (= the covenant yet to be given in Exod 20, which is the same covenant made with their forefathers [cf 6:5; 3:13-15]). They must show their redemption is not just outward but of the heart, and they'll do this by obeying God's word.
- they are God's 'treasure', specially chosen by him. The reason for this specialness is 'for all the earth is mine'. The point is that Israel's choosing is motivated by God's longing to bless the rest of the world (cf Gen 12:2b, 3b and Luke 2:32a). Their priestly role will be to mediate the knowledge of God to the world.
- as a 'priestly royalty and holy nation' (- the two phrases are probably parallel), Israel is to be the model society for the world. Like a priest, Israel serves her world by maintaining her distance and difference from it; living life under God's kingship will show what God intends for all (cf 1 Kings 8:41-42, which actually happens in 1 Kings 10). This is our role too (cf 1 Peter 2:9-10).

7-25 God's appearance is awesome. This time it's not just a bush (3:1-5), but the whole mountain that's ablaze (19:18). This is the reality of a holy God, and indicates the threat which that holiness constitutes to the trespasser. So although he comes to meet the people (9, 17), he remains remote and none other than Moses can approach him, on pain of death (12-13, 21-22, 24). One reason for God's appearance like this is to authenticate Moses (9) for God will speak to him, and he in turn will speak to the people. Our God is no less 'a consuming fire' (Heb 12:29), and we too should fear him.

Theologically, Exodus sets out to solve the problem of how sinners can be brought into the presence of such holiness and live. The solution began (and really was completed) at the Passover. Israel is constituted here at Sinai as the OT church, with a burning fire placed at the heart of their community (Lev 6:8-13) to be the solution to that problem: sacrifice will deal with our sin.

20:1f Here in ch 20, God gives ten 'words' (lit.) to direct the nation to maintain the revelation of himself given through their redemption.

We often think of the law as rules which establish the relationship between Israel and the Lord. But 20:2 makes it plain that it already exists: God has saved them, so his commitment to them will not change. The commandments copy the form of an ancient-world treaty imposed by a conquering king on a subdued people already his subjects, assuming God's exclusive claim over Israel (cf 20:3).

Given what we've already seen in 19:5-6, these 'words' spell out the boundaries of the relationship established by grace ... if they live distinctively like this, the rest of the world will see how good it is to be in relationship with this covenant God. God will be made known. So God teaches Israel how to express the relationship faithfully: 'I love you, I've redeemed & will bless you; so live as loved, redeemed and blessed people'. We should respond: 'we love you and appreciate that you've brought us out of bondage. You're a great king. We'll serve you.'

20 'God has come to test you' (cf 15:25; 16:4; Ps 81:7; Deut 8:2-5): he longs not to destroy, but to keep them from rebellion, to serve him.

## New Testament commentary: Hebrews 12:18-29

Sinai is a mountaintop in God's revelation! Elijah will run here for a new revelation later, but he will be pointed back to what God had said here now (cf 1 Kings 19:9-18). But despite the great significance of this moment, when Jesus is later transfigured in front of these two Sinai greats, the voice from heaven will point out Jesus as the one to be listened to now (Lk 9:35).

This supremacy of Jesus underlies Hebrews 12. There's clearly a contrast here (cf 12:18, 22) which we'll come to below, but first see 2 **similarities**:

- it's the same God (23b, 29). He was so unapproachable at Sinai (18-20) that even Moses, the mediator of the old covenant was frightened (21). We too need a mediator before such a fire, and in Jesus we have one far superior to all that the OT offers, from Abel onwards.
- Israel here at Sinai were 'church' (just as we are). When, later, Israel assembled in Jerusalem to celebrate the feasts, they were recalling this great assembly at Sinai. In Deut 33:1-5, Moses describes it as God enthroned as king surrounded by his angels and Israel gathered at his feet to receive his words. That is the Bible's picture of what 'church' is.

But the bigger point in Heb 12 is the **contrast** between the old and new covenants. Sinai and Zion represent two qualitatively different ways of encountering God. At Sinai, it was all tangible and sensory, but incomplete and unclear. Christians on the other hand are part of the true church gathered around the real throne of God in heaven (= 'Zion'). We are not yet in heaven with them (of course!), and are only joined with them by faith. BUT, our experience is far more real than that Israel experienced at Sinai: we really approach the real God in his real home. Let's treat him right (25).