

Exodus 19:1–8

Introduction

Remember that Exodus divides pretty naturally into four main parts. In **Part I** we saw that Yahweh is the God who *delivers* His people from *Egypt* (1:1-15:21) That's what the first fifteen chapters were all about (the calling of Moses; the Ten Plagues; Cover-over, Unleavened Bread, and consecration of the firstborn; the crossing of the Red Sea).

In **Part II**, we saw that Yahweh is the God who *provides* for and *protects* His people in the *Wilderness* (15:22-18:27) This is what the last three and a half chapters have mainly been about (the bitter water made sweet; the bread from heaven; the water from the rock, the defeat of Amalek). Of course, we've also seen how each one of these accounts is full to overflowing with Christ and the Gospel. In chapter eighteen the Midianite Jethro comes on the scene not only as a sign of God's plan for the nations (Jethro's conversion), but also as another means of God's provision for his people (Jethro's advice to Moses).

And so, this morning, we come to **Part III**: Yahweh is the God who makes a *covenant* with His people at *Mount Sinai* – chapters 19-24.

I. Exodus 19:1–3a — On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God.

We get a very clear sense here that Israel has finally *arrived*. The specific day is noted: “On the third new moon... on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.” The itinerary of the last leg of their journey is specifically described: “They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai.” The specific place where they encamp is carefully noted: “They encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain.” And then the grand finale and climax of this arrival at the destination is given in these words: “There Israel encamped before the mountain, *while Moses went up to God*.”

It seems like ages ago, now, that Moses was last here – at this very mountain. This was where Moses was pasturing his father-in-law's flock. This was where Moses saw a bush on fire, but not consumed. This was where the angel of the Lord spoke to Moses from out of the bush and called him to the task of bringing Israel out of Egypt. This is the place where the Lord said to Moses:

- Exodus 3:12 — “I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

We may think of Canaan as the destination, but in a very real sense, Israel's destination has always been *Mount Sinai*. Mount Sinai, and what's about to happen at Mount Sinai, has always been the goal. And now Moses and the Israelites have finally arrived.

II. Exodus 19:3–6 — The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying,
“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant,

[then] you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

So what was it that Moses was to “say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel”? What were the “words” that Moses was to “speak to the people of Israel,” on behalf of Yahweh? We’ve obviously come to something *big*.

In other Ancient Near Eastern literature we find examples of a certain kind of “covenant” that were made between two different parties. On the one hand, there was the “*suzerain*” overlord, and on the other hand, there was the “*vassal*” underling. So the suzerain was the superior party to the covenant. He would have been the king of the nation who had just conquered you, or who had just conquered the ones who were ruling over you. He was the one defining all the terms of the covenant and calling all the shots. The vassal, of course, was the nation who *agreed* to enter into this covenant relationship with its suzerain overlord. There were some very definite and fixed ingredients that made up these ANE covenants between the suzerain and the vassal.

PREAMBLE

First, there was the *preamble* which clearly identified the parties to the covenant: Who’s the one giving the covenant? Who’s the one receiving the covenant? This *preamble* is exactly what we see in verse three, when *Yahweh* calls to Moses from out of the mountain, saying: “Thus you shall say *to the house of Jacob*, and *tell the people of Israel...*”

Clearly, the suzerain here is Yahweh, while the vassal is the nation of Israel. But here, already, we see that the similarity with other ANE covenants only highlights the *difference*. Yes, we have a suzerain and a vassal, but never was there a suzerain like this one. This suzerain party to the covenant is no man or human king; He is Yahweh, the only true God, and the creator of heaven and earth. As soon as we understand this, we ask ourselves, can this really be the beginning of the making of a covenant? Would Yahweh really enter into covenant with Israel?

PROLOGUE

After the *preamble* would come the *prologue*, which reminds the vassal nation of how in some way or other it’s in a position of *obligation or indebtedness* to its suzerain overlord. We could imagine examples like these: “You yourselves have seen how I utterly overwhelmed and conquered you, and how I could have destroyed you completely.” Or, “You yourselves have seen how I utterly overwhelmed and conquered those who formerly ruled over you.” And so this is exactly what we find here in Exodus 19: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”

Yahweh has conquered the Egyptians—who formerly ruled over Israel. That obviously puts Israel in a position of obligation and indebtedness to Yahweh. But the astonishing thing, here, is what else this suzerain can say that the vassal has seen and witnessed with its own eyes. Israel has seen how Yahweh bore them on eagles' wings and brought them to Himself.

This is truly unlike any other prologue to any other ANE covenant. The parallels with other ANE covenants help us to see more clearly the true nature of what's happening here. But these same parallels also serve to shine a bright light on the *differences* between what's happening here and what happened in other ANE covenants. We read in Deuteronomy:

- Deuteronomy 32:9–11 — The LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions.

No other suzerain king ever took such an interest in his vassal underling. No other covenant prologue was ever to be seen like this. So we have a whole new meaning brought to the terms "obligation" and "indebtedness." This isn't obligation to a dictator overlord who would only use you as a pawn to further his other agendas. This is obligation to a fatherly, gentle, caring overlord who rescued you from a former ruler in order to *bear you on eagles' wings* and bring you *to Himself*. This is a glad, exhilarating kind of indebtedness and obligation. And yet it's still no less an *obligation* – if anything, it's even more so an obligation than ever before.

TERMS

After the preamble and the prologue would come the covenant *conditions*, or the *terms* of the covenant. If the *prologue* shows how the *relationship* of the vassal to the suzerain is one of obligation and indebtedness, then the *terms* spell out exactly how this obligation and indebtedness is to be fulfilled. "**Now therefore, if** you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant..."

So the "terms" and "conditions" of this covenant relationship between Yahweh (the suzerain) and Israel (the vassal) are simple: absolute and total *obedience* to *whatever* Yahweh's voice commands. Once again, the similarity with other ANE covenants only highlights the *extreme differences*. No other suzerain really cared about the day to day living of his subject's lives, and so his covenant terms would only dictate a few, specific areas of life. But the covenant terms and stipulations of Yahweh will be all-encompassing – they will require obedience in every part of life.

We saw in the preamble the unparalleled nature of Israel's suzerain (Yahweh). We saw in the prologue the unparalleled nature of Israel's relationship to its suzerain (Yahweh carried Israel on eagles' wings and brought them to Himself). And now we see that these things are to be matched by the unparalleled nature of the terms and obligations ("if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant...").

Now there's a sense in which *all* nations on earth are *always* obligated to obey the laws of God – whether they want to or not. But there's more *than that* going on *here*. The parallels with other ANE covenants between a suzerain and a vassal help us to see more clearly what's really happening here. Yahweh is laying out for Israel not just His law as something equally binding on all humanity (which it is), but rather His law *as the terms for* an exclusive and unique covenant relationship. It's desperately important that we see that *difference* here. So: while Israel was never “*free*” to reject God's law (no more so than any other nation), they are “*free*” at this moment to reject God's law specifically as the “terms” of a formal covenant relationship. We say that Israel was “free to reject,” and yet no other nation was ever under a greater obligation to wholeheartedly “accept” than Israel is now! Let me say it one more time: This isn't just the law of God as something equally binding on all nations, but rather the law of God *offered uniquely as the terms* of a formal *covenant* relationship.

SANCTIONS (BLESSINGS and CURSES)

After the terms, one of the ingredients of the ANE covenant was the *sanctions*, or: promised blessings and curses as incentives for obedience. And so we read in Exodus 19: Now therefore [in light of the prologue], **if** you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant [the stipulations], [**then**] you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Never were there any covenant blessings in any other ANE covenant even remotely like these. That word for “treasured possession” actually refers specifically to a king's treasure. (1 Chron. 29:3; Eccl. 2:8) So out of all the nations on earth, Israel is to be the royal treasure—the most valued and cherished possession—of the King of kings and Lord of lords. And it's this position as the chosen, treasured possession of Yahweh that leads to even *more* infinite privilege.

If Israel will accept the covenant terms and keep them, then Israel will be to Yahweh “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” As a holy nation *distinct* and *set apart* by their conduct and by their worship, Israel will be the priestly vessel that God uses to represent Him to the rest of the world – to spread His glory and the blessings of His rule throughout all the earth.

It's almost too much to process. It's too vast to fully grasp and understand. And yet all this God promises Israel will be *if* they commit themselves to Him in this formal covenant relationship.

“IF... THEN...”

But then we ask: Isn't this “works”? Isn't this “earning” salvation. What about the covenant God already made so long ago with Abraham and with his offspring? Wasn't that completely free and unconditional? And the answer is “yes” *and* “no.” Look at Genesis 17:

- Genesis 17:1–8 (NRSV) — The LORD... said to [Abraham], “I am God Almighty; *walk before me, and be blameless*. And... I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, *to be God to you and to your offspring after you*. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after

you... all the land of Canaan... *As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you* throughout their generations.”

Did you see Yahweh’s promise to be God to Abraham and to his offspring after him? But Yahweh’ can only be a *covenant* God to those who are righteous and holy. That’s why when He makes His promise, God also says to Abraham: “Walk before me, and be blameless.”

So there is a condition, and that condition is obedience and righteousness. And yet it’s also clear that God *will*, absolutely, bring to fulfillment all of His promises to Abraham (cf. Gen. 15) – which *means* that **God** *will* see to it that all the conditions are met fully, finally, and completely. Yes, there are conditions, and yet the focus and the emphasis of God’s covenant with Abraham is that the *promises* of God remain wholly unconditional. Here was a mystery to Abraham. How could this be? And so now we can appreciate a little better what we read in Genesis 15:

➤ Genesis 15:5–6 — And [the Lord] brought [Abraham] outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And [Abraham] ***believed the LORD***, and [the LORD] ***counted it to him as righteousness***.

Wait a minute! Whose righteousness is this? Not Abraham’s! Where did this righteousness come from? Not from Abraham! And yet this righteousness has now been counted to Abraham. On what basis? On the basis of his faith in the promise of God as something absolutely sure and certain – *no matter what the conditions might ever be*. So maybe now this helps us to understand what’s happening here in Exodus 19.

Did you notice in Genesis 17 that God kept making His promises to Abraham *and to His offspring after him*? (Four times!) Here, now, are the *offspring* all gathered at Mount Sinai. It has always been God’s purpose not just to be in covenant with various, individual children of Abraham, but with his *offspring* (**SINGULAR**) as a community – as a people joined together in covenant relationship with Yahweh. And so now that the offspring are here and gathered at Mount Sinai, God offers to them (as a corporate **people**) the fulfillment of all His promises to Abraham.

Can you see how this covenant with the *offspring* flows directly out of the earlier covenant with **Abraham**?¹ There’s a sense in which we could say that they’re one and the same – just at two different stages. In this second covenant, God is taking the offspring of Abraham and making them into a **single whole**, joined all together in covenant.²

¹ “What is about to transpire on Mount Sinai is *not* a new covenant, but the continuation and deepening of an existing covenant, the covenant God made with Israel’s ancestors long ago. Hence, the giving of the law does not represent the initiation of God’s relationship with his people but a heightening of that relationship.” (Enns) While I agree with much of Enns’ overall point, it seems he is minimizing the reality that the “offspring” formally and fully became a “people” only at Mount Sinai.

² “An affirmative response to Yahweh’s ‘if’ on the part of the people of Israel will mean the birth of ‘Israel’ as Yahweh’s people. Without that affirmative response, indeed, there would have been only ‘sons of Israel,’ the descendants of Jacob. With the affirmative response, ‘Israel,’ a community of faith transcending biological descendancy, could come into being.” (Durham)

But there's also another difference between these two stages. The focus and the emphasis of God's covenant with Abraham was that in spite of any conditions the promises of God still remained wholly unconditional. The focus and emphasis of God's covenant with the offspring is the reality that in order to experience the fulfillment of God's promises as a *corporate people*, the conditions *must all* be met – by *all* the people.

Are you beginning to see how *big* is what's happening here in Exodus 19?

“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel [preamble]: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself [prologue]. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant [terms], you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation [sanctions/blessings]. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

So what will the “offspring” say? What *should* they say?

III. Exodus 19:7–8 — So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD.

So what do we feel now? Euphoria? Or do we feel dread. *Should* the offspring have answered like this? Well, *yes*, they *should* have.

Notice that “*all* the people answered *together* and said...” Remember, that's the *point*. This isn't various individuals agreeing in private and only for themselves. This is *all* the offspring agreeing *together*.

So the question is, are *all* the people *together* answering *by faith*—with the same kind of faith that their forefather Abraham had—the faith that God will count to them as righteousness even as He counted it to Abraham as righteousness? After all, the covenant with Abraham cannot be voided by this covenant at Mount Sinai. So even as the offspring are confronted with the conditions of the covenant, their ultimate faith and confidence should be in the *promise* of God—the promise guaranteeing that no matter what the conditions may be, *He* is the one who will see to it that the conditions are fully and finally met and the promises all fulfilled.

But do we have much reason to hope that the people have this kind of faith? Yes, there certainly would have been individuals (just think of the Psalmist who wrote Psalm 119); but remember, that's not at all the point here. God's zeal at Mount Sinai is for the offspring (**singular**) as *one* people joined together by the covenant. So: Will the offspring *all* have faith *together*?

Conclusion

We're going to come back to this question next time when we move on to the rest of chapter nineteen. But for right now, it's enough to say, simply, that the answer is “no.” The offspring

will not *all* have faith *together*, and so even from the very, very beginning, they will **break** the covenant. And then after that, over, and over, and over again.

So *what about* the offspring (*singular*)? And do we even care? **Really**... *care*? Aren't I happy just so long as **I** have believed God's promise – just so long as **I** have salvation? But here's the thing: apart from the offspring (*singular*), apart from the corporate people, no single individual would ever be saved. And how do we know this? It's simple! Because the promises *were all given* to Abraham *and to his offspring* (*singular!*) after him. Because God's promises *will all be fulfilled* not for random individuals, but only for a *people all bound together in covenant* with God. If you want to know what a big deal the offspring (*singular*) is to God, all you really have to do is listen to the word that God spoke from Mount Sinai.

So *what about* the offspring (*singular*)? **Who** is the offspring, **really**, to whom the promises were made? Listen to what the Apostle Paul says:

- Galatians 3:16 — Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.

All the promises were ultimately made to Christ because it's ultimately only God Himself in Christ who fulfills all the **terms and conditions** of the covenant. And so Christ, the son of Abraham and the son of God, *is* the true and ideal offspring (*singular*). Christ is the one whom God ultimately intended when He said to Abraham: “To you **and to your offspring after you.**”

So, then, where does that leave all those individuals *within* the offspring singular at Mount Sinai who truly did put all their confidence in the promise of God – the promise guaranteeing that no matter what the conditions may be, *He* would see to it that the conditions were fully met and the promises all fulfilled? Paul goes on to explain:

- Galatians 3:17–29 — This is what I mean: the law [as the terms of a covenant], which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void... Why then the law [as the terms of a covenant made with the offspring]? It was added because of transgressions, *until* the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made [namely, Christ]... Now before faith came, **we [the offspring]** were kept in custody under the law, being confined until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was **our** guardian until Christ came, in order that **we** might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, **we** are no longer under a guardian, for **in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God**, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for **you are all one in Christ Jesus**. And **if you are Christ's, then you[!!!] are Abraham's offspring [SINGULAR], heirs according to promise.**

Christ, the son of Abraham and the son of God, *is* the true and ideal offspring (*singular*) – the one whose righteousness is **counted to us** by faith!!! And so now the Apostle Peter can write to **all of us together** who are **in Christ**, quoting Exodus nineteen:

- 1 Peter 2:9 — But you [plural] are a chosen race [singular], a royal priesthood [singular], a holy nation [singular], a people [singular] for his own possession, that you [plural] may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you [plural] out of darkness into his marvelous light.

The ramifications and implications for life and godliness could not possibly ever be exhausted. But if I were to pick two things to focus on right now, they would be these: First of all, have you put all your confidence and hope in the promise of God? Has the perfect righteousness of Christ (who fulfilled all the terms of the covenant) truly been counted to you by faith?

And second of all, do we *care* about “the offspring” (singular). Because if anything is clear from these verses, it’s this: **God** does – passionately, zealously, more than anything. It’s only *within* this offspring—within this *people*—that you and I can be *in covenant* with God. (New Covenant)

If we love the offspring (singular)—if we love the church—what will this mean? What will it mean for our entire approach to these Lord’s Day assemblies? What will it mean for our attitude toward our gatherings to pray? What will this mean for how we look at one another and how we love one another? What will this mean for our fervent desire to serve in any of the practical needs associated with meeting together each week? What will this mean for our desire to see others added to Christ’s church? Do you and I really care about the offspring (singular)? I believe that one way to know is if we can sing this closing song with all of our hearts:

I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord (Timothy Dwight)

I love Thy kingdom, Lord, the house of Thine abode,
The church our blessed Redeemer saved with His own precious blood.

I love Thy church, O God. Her walls before Thee stand,
Dear as the apple of Thine eye, and written on Thy hand.

If e’er to bless Thy sons my voice or hands deny,
These hands let useful skills forsake, this voice in silence die.

For her my tears shall fall for her my prayers ascend,
To her my cares and toils be given till toils and cares shall end.

Beyond my highest joy I prize her heavenly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows, her hymns of love and praise.

Sure as Thy truth shall last, to Zion shall be given
The brightest glories earth can yield and brighter bliss of Heaven.