

Exodus 19: My Treasured Possession

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight I would like us to spend a little bit of time looking at Exodus chapter 19, and in many ways we're going to look at the chapter as a whole, but we can read again verses 5 and 6.

Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, 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. This is a remarkable chapter in many, many ways, and I want us to spend a little bit of time looking at it together.

Inevitably we will only be able to scratch the surface, and perhaps we won't be able to go into as much detail as we would like in certain things. But in order to guide us through this chapter, we're going to ask four fairly simple, but four immensely important questions.

As I said when we were reading it, the Israelites are not long out of Egypt, but at this moment, in this chapter, they are going to meet God.

[1 : 24] And our first question tonight is simply this. What do you think of God? Or perhaps a better way to describe that would be what words come to your mind when you think of God?

And there are lots. We may think of God as the God who is loving, and of course that is wonderfully true. We may think of his power. We may think of his wisdom.

We may think of the fact that he is creative. We may think of his law. Indeed, the next chapter in this book is where the Ten Commandments are given. We may think of God's mercy of his grace. There are many, many things that we can think of when we think of God.

Exodus chapter 19 is an important chapter because here God reveals himself to the Israelites in a way that he had never done before.

As we said, the Israelites are about to meet God. Now we can use the term meeting God in a sort of a general sense, so the idea of having an encounter with God or thinking about God or contemplating your standing before God.

[2 : 39] But Exodus 19 is using that phrase in a literal way. They are standing at the bottom of the mountain and God says, behold, I am coming to you.

And so as these Israelites stand at the foot of that mountain and they look to the top of it, God is about to meet them there. And so this is an incredibly important moment of revelation and this is something that had never happened to the Israelites before.

It's important to remember that when the people of Israel were in Egypt, they were not a model of faithfulness to God.

It's easy to think that when the Israelites were in Egypt that they were sort of an oppressed religious minority. They were very faithful to God and yet they were being oppressed by the Egyptians.

That's not actually the way it was. When the Israelites were in Egypt, they lived more like Egyptians than like the people of God.

[3 : 50] And we know that's true because when they come out of Egypt, they very, very quickly start looking back. When they stand, when they lose patience with Moses up on this mountain, it's an Egyptian God, the golden calf that they want to build.

When God comes to Moses in Exodus chapter 3, Moses says to God, when people say, the God of my father, what should I say is your name?

And that's hinting towards us that these people weren't that familiar with God. And very, very quickly after God delivered them, they started to complain.

And so it's more accurate not to think of the Israelites as a godly nation while they were in Egypt.

They were far from what they should be as they were dwelling in Egypt. Yes, they were God's people by descent, but they were not living as God's people.

[4 : 55] Now that makes perfect sense because when they came out, God had to give them a huge list of instructions as to how they should be. And that of course emphasizes a more important point that God did not initiate the Exodus because the Israelites were good.

That would simply be the legalism that we were talking about this morning. It was nothing about the Israelites in terms of their conduct or their behavior that made them earn the Exodus.

God did not do it because of the goodness of the Israelites. God did it because of his covenant love and because he is a gracious God.

And so here are people who in many ways don't know God that well. And they are about to meet God in a way that they have never met God before.

They are standing at the foot of Mount Sinai and God is coming. And so that makes this an astonishing chapter because it makes us think, well, what did they discover about this God?

[6 : 15] And it's interesting that this chapter reveals some vital truths about who God is. And in particular, we can mention three things.

Number one, God is unseeable. That's probably not a word in English, but you know exactly what I mean. God cannot be seen.

And if you read through the chapter, there's this continual reference to clouds. The Lord said to Moses, behold, I'm coming to you in a thick cloud. And the language of clouds immediately sets before us the impression that something is hidden from sight.

If you think of a foggy day, even like today, there was heavy, heavy cloud today. And that means that there are all sorts of things around us that we know are there.

Ben Yever and the hills of Uigh are all there. But they're hidden from sight. Our vision is restricted.

[7 : 15] That's exactly what clouds do. They obscure our sight. Now, they don't obscure sound, which is why the people could hear their voice. And God said that he wanted the people to hear him in verse nine.

But the whole thing is shrouded in this mystery. Everything is hidden within this cloud. And the intensity builds up. Verse 16 talks about thunder, lightning, thick cloud.

Verse 18 says that Mount Sinai, the whole mountain was wrapped in smoke. And you can imagine this smoke engulfing everything. And all that the Israelites are looking at is hidden from sight and obscured from view because of these clouds.

God is coming. But all that the people are going to see is cloud and smoke surrounding the presence of God.

God is unseeable. He is the king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God. One thing this chapter emphasizes is that God is unapproachable.

[8 : 25] As the people stand at the foot of Mount Sinai and they see this cloud and smoke, they are going to hear things, but they are being told that they must not go anywhere near this mountain.

God's presence there meant that this place was now totally unapproachable. It's very powerful reading it from verse nine. The Lord said to Moses, behold, I'm coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe you forever.

When Moses told the words of the people to the Lord, the Lord said to Moses, go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day, the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai and the sight of all the people.

You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot, whether beast or man, he shall not live.

The people have to consecrate themselves to even be in the vicinity of this mountain. And as for coming up the mountain, that is totally out of bounds and it is a matter of life and death.

[9 : 42] God is unapproachable. And thirdly, God is uncontainable. As we get towards the end of the chapter, we reach the moment when God comes down and remember this is the most significant manifestation of the presence of God since the Garden of Eden.

God himself is on this mountain. And we read what happened from verse 16. On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast so that all the people in the camp trembled.

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire.

The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder.

The Lord came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. The volume and the intensity is increasing and increasing and increasing.

[10 : 54] You can imagine the smoke billowing up, the noise is increasing, the whole mountain is shaking and everyone trembled.

Now just imagine that you are standing there. Imagine a mountain in front of you shaking.

And the reason the mountain is shaking is because it is holding something that it cannot contain. I was trying to think of an illustration of this and in many ways every illustration is going to be so inadequate.

But I was thinking of a pan on the cooker and that pan has got water in it and as that water gets hotter and hotter and hotter and starts to boil, the intensity increases and increases and increases and as the boiling becomes more and more vigorous, the pan shakes, the lid rattles and it cannot contain the presence that is within it.

That is a hopelessly inadequate illustration of what this chapter is describing but it gives us a glimpse of the fact that God has come down and the earth is shaking.

[12 : 16] And so God is unseeable, he is unapproachable and he is totally uncontainable.

And that is what this chapter is emphasizing to us. And there is one word that captures everything that we have just been describing.

Do you know what that one word is? Holy. This chapter is a revelation of the holiness of God.

Now the word holy basically means set apart. It's the same idea of consecrating, setting yourself apart. When it's used in terms of God, it is emphasising the fact that God is set apart at a whole different level to anything else.

God is at a different level in terms of glory, majesty and power. God is just, he's at that immeasurable level.

[13 : 33] That's why God is all of these unwords. He's unseeable because he's set apart from what our eyes can take in. He is unapproachable because his purity is at a level that we cannot even begin to imagine.

He is uncontainable because he is God, infinite and immeasurable. The being and nature of God is something that is always beyond us in every single way.

We think about just one aspect of God. If we have a question box that we look at from time to time, and it's always a really good night at our midweek reading to look at our question box.

I'm probably going to attempt some people to do this when I say this, but if somebody wrote in that question box, what does the glory of God look like?

Then I would have no chance of answering. God's glory, God's moral perfection, God's wisdom, God's power are all at a level that we just cannot attain to.

[14 : 54] God is holy. Everything about him is set apart to a level that is beyond our understanding, beyond our description and beyond what we can really take in.

These people in Exodus 19 are meeting God and it is an overwhelming scene.

Imagine you could go up to one of them and say, what do you think of God?

What would they say? They would say, he is unseeable. He is unapproachable.

He is uncontainable. He is holy. And I think they would be trembling while they said it.

[16 : 02] And of course we have to ask, is that how we think of God?

That's a really, really interesting question. We'll keep that question in our minds as we go on to the second question.

What do you think of yourself? John Calvin begins his remarkable book, The Institutes of the Christian Religion, by setting out a basic principle that shapes the whole book.

Don't ever be afraid of John Calvin. Some people might think, oh, reading Calvin, that's only for really knowledgeable people. Not at all. Calvin is quite easy to read and very, very worthwhile reading.

And he basically sets out at the very beginning of the Institutes of the Christian Religion, he says, the more we learn about God, the more we will learn about ourselves.

[17 : 10] Knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves go hand in hand. And so when we see God in Exodus chapter 19, we are learning more about him, but we are inevitably learning more about ourselves.

Because whilst on the one hand a passage like this takes our breath away in terms of who God is. It also just takes our strength away and takes our sense of pride away in terms of who we are.

Even a glimpse of the holiness of God will leave people like you and me immediately aware of our nothingness.

And we feel like Isaiah felt when he had a similar experience. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings. With two he covered his face. With two he covered his feet. And with two he flew. And one called to another and said, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts.

[18 : 37] That's the God who came to Sinai. The whole earth is full of his glory. And the foundations of the threshold shook, just like Sinai shook, at the voice of him who called.

And the house was filled with smoke, just like the smoke that enveloped Sinai. And I said, that's Isaiah, I said, War is me.

For I am lost. For I am a man of unclean lips. And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

Now, I don't know what you think of yourself. When we're asked the question, what do you think of yourselves? There's, there's, I suppose, two extremes that we can go to.

Some of us are constantly oppressed by a sense of our own unworthiness. We are a continual source of frustration to ourselves.

[19 : 36] And we are crippled by the fact that we are so acutely aware of our failure. Others are the opposite. And they're constantly battling their own pride and an unhealthy self-satisfaction and self-confidence.

And so, by and by, we think that we're great and we have no sense of humility. So, you've got some people on this side and you've got some people on that side. Those who are oppressed with their sense of unworthiness, those who are exalting themselves with a sense of pride.

You get some there, you get some there. Most of us are probably like me. One minute you're there and the next minute you're there. You are so aware of your faults and your failings.

And then before you know it, you're slipping into foolish pride and self-glorification. We can slip into both of these traps all of the time.

The key point for us though is, what does Exodus 19 make you think of yourself? What does this chapter here make you think of who you are?

[20 : 46] What are you and what am I compared to this God? What are you and what am I compared to this holiness?

Now, always remember, it's easy to compare well to other people and lots of people do that.

They compare themselves to others and they think, well I'm not as bad as them. But the Bible does not compare you to other people.

The Bible compares you to God. And the moment we grasp that, we realise that we are empty, that we are nothing, that we are just tiny before God.

And so although Exodus 19 is the place where the Israelites and God are meeting geographically, the abundant truth of the chapter is not that God and these people are close in terms of who they are.

[22 : 15] The overwhelming emphasis of this chapter is that God is holy and the Israelites and us along with them are nothing.

The meeting of God and people at Mount Sinai just puts the gap between God and humanity at the widest level.

And all of that is very humbling. Well I hope it is, it should be. If that was all that the Bible taught us, then it would leave us feeling hopeless.

But thanks be to God, that's not all that the Bible teaches us. Now so far we've asked two questions about this chapter, but both of these questions are in terms of what we think.

What do we think of God? What do we think of ourselves? But ultimately what we think is not what matters. And that raises a third question which in many ways is the much more important one.

[23 : 32] What does God think of you? What does God think of his people? Well it's interesting, Exodus 19 gives a series of instructions to the people that are consistent with the holiness of God.

They are to consecrate themselves, they are to make sure they don't do anything out of line, they are to be incredibly careful and these people are to make sure that they are not casual with this God who they are going to meet.

And they also have to make sure that they are not careless with sin. And that of course fits the holy character of God and we must strive to follow the same instructions ourselves, to never be casual with God and to never be careless with sin.

But chapter 19 does not just give instructions for this encounter. Chapter 19 also reveals what God wants his people to be.

In other words in the midst of all this holiness and all of this overwhelming wonder and awe we are being shown what God thinks of these people.

[24 : 58] And that's what we find in verse 5 and 6. Therefore if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant 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.

We have seen the awesome holiness of God and we have seen the helpless nothingness of these people and yet God says you are my treasured possession.

Now you have to grasp the gap between God and humanity to understand how utterly astounding these words are.

You are my treasured possession. God's message to these people is you are mine.

[26 : 07] And in saying that God is not saying that he is conquering them or dominating them. God is rather expressing the deepest covenant love.

It all makes perfect sense because if you think about it the Israelites are standing at the bottom of Mount Sinai.

What are they doing there? How did they get there? Why are they at this point? How are the Israelites standing at Sinai at this moment?

And the answer is very simple because God wanted them as his own people.

God wanted them. These chapters that lead up to Exodus 19 talk about many remarkable events but every one of them is God's doing.

[27 : 19] The Exodus was God's doing. The leading of the people through the Red Sea and through the wilderness was God's doing. The provision of food and water is God's doing.

The protection from enemies is God's doing. As God says himself, you yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself.

All of this is happening because it's what God wants. These people are special because they are special to God.

And so whilst in one sense this chapter is setting God and humanity so far apart, in another way and in a wonderful way, these people could not be bound more closely to God.

God is meeting these people because they are so precious to him. They are his treasured possession.

[28 : 30] When you think, wow, how amazing must it have been to have been an Israelite? Imagine being in that crowd and God said to them, you are my treasured possession.

Well, do you know the amazing thing is that the New Testament uses exactly the same language to describe you.

This is how Peter describes Christians. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

And I'm sure you can see the similarity in the language. As God's people, as a Christian, you are God's treasured possession.

And just as that was the reason why the Israelites came to Mount Sinai, that is the reason why you are here because God wants you to be his.

[29 : 54] And so we have this incredible contrast within us. We are totally unworthy of God, totally.

And yet we are being told that we are immensely precious to him.

In all of our nothingness, we are everything to God.

And that takes us to our last question, because how can we be nothing and yet everything to God?

What makes the difference? The answer is because of Jesus Christ.

[30 : 52] Exodus chapter 19 comes immediately after the Exodus when they went out of Egypt. And it becomes immediately before the giving of the Ten Commandments in chapter 20. And if you read on, you will then come to the instructions for building the tabernacle.

All of these are big, crucial moments in the history of the Old Testament. And all of these are shadows pointing forward.

And they are pointing forward to the ultimate reality, to the completion of the plan, to the perfect work that is to be done in Jesus Christ.

The Exodus is just pointing towards the fact that we are redeemed from sin, brought out of slavery to sin, just as the Israelites were brought out of slavery to Egypt.

The law serves a purpose. Its purpose is to lead us to Christ as a schoolmaster. God's presence here on Sinai and then in the Tabernacle is pointing us towards the fact that in Jesus Christ, God became flesh and dwelt among us.

[31 : 59] All these things in the Old Testament are pointing us forwards. They are pointing us to the ultimate act of salvation, to the ultimate Exodus, to the fact that God is going to deliver his people from sin through Jesus Christ.

And because of Jesus, we become the precious children of this holy God.

Think of the God that shook Sinai, if you are trusting in Jesus, that God is your Father.

And all of that is summed up quite amazingly in Hebrews chapter 12, because here we see the difference that is now ours in Jesus and its pointing us back to Exodus chapter 19.

Let's read this passage together, Hebrews 18. And think Exodus 19 as you are reading this passage. For you have not come to what may be touched a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages would be spoken to them, for they could not endure the order that was given if even a beast touches the mountain it shall be stoned.

[33 : 25] It so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I tremble with fear. That's what the Israelites experience. But now you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and to innumerable angels and festival gathering and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and to God the judge of all and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

That passage is emphasising the fact that in Exodus 19 the people had to keep away. But now we are being brought in to the city and into the presence of God himself.

And it is all because of Jesus that mediated of the new covenant, the perfect reality of all the shadows that Moses and the Old Testament gave us.

Through Jesus Christ we are able to become the treasured possession of God.

Now remember our first question, what do you think of God? The reason I asked us that question is because I want Exodus 19 to be part of what you think of God.

[35 : 02] Because God is still the same God, exactly the same. He is exactly the same as he was in Exodus 19.

But now in Jesus Christ the unseeable has become one of us. In Jesus we see a God who cannot be seen.

That's why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, God who said that light shine of darkness has shone into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

God can be seen in Jesus. And not only that, the unapproachable God is saying, come to me. In Jesus we can approach God.

Hebrews 10, therefore brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh.

[36 : 07] And since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

That verse is putting you on the top of Mount Zion, the top of Mount Sinai with God. Saying you can be that close to him.

And so the unseeable is seen in Jesus Christ. The unapproachable is calling us towards him in Jesus Christ. And in and through Jesus Christ, the uncontainable God who shook Zioni, where is he now?

He is in your heart as the temple of God. Jesus said, I will ask the Father and he will give you another helper to be with you forever, even the spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him.

You know him for he dwells with you and will be in you. If you are a Christian, the God whose presence shook Zioni is dwelling in your heart.

[37 : 35] And I hope that that is in a way just stretching your mind to its limits.

Because what we have in Jesus Christ should stretch our minds to its limits.

All of this is because God wants you as his treasured possession.

God wants you as the one who can look upon him. God wants you as the one who can be so close to God that you can be in his hands, in his arms, in his bosom.

And God, the uncontainable God is looking for a place to dwell and he wants that dwelling place to be in you.

[38 : 45] Now that makes the people of God an incredibly special people.

And I want to close by just reminding you of two very, very simple but very, very important things.

Jesus Christ means that we are special to God. That's how you know that you are special to God because God sent his Son.

God did what needed to be done and God provided a saviour for you and for your salvation. So by the fact that Jesus has come, you know that you are special to God.

Jesus means that you are special to God. But Jesus also means that you are special for God.

[40 : 00] Jesus has come to do that work that purifies you, that cleanses you, that sets you apart as well and makes you perfect through his blood.

Jesus means that you are special to God. Jesus means that you are special for God.

And when I talk about God, I'm talking about the God that shook Sinai. The God of immeasurable holiness.

The God who we have no right to go anywhere near and yet in Jesus Christ we are being told that he loves us with every ounce of all that he is.

God is a holy God. That means that everything about God is set apart. His righteousness set apart to another level.

[41 : 21] His wisdom set apart to another level. But that also means that God's love for you is a holy love.

A love that is set apart to a level that goes beyond anything that I can describe and anything that you can imagine.

And he has proved it because he has sent his Son, Jesus Christ.

And so Exodus 19 is an astonishing chapter. Reveals to us what God is like. It reminds us what we are like.

It points us towards Jesus and what he has done. And it reminds you and me what God really wants for us.

[42 : 33] What does God want for you? He wants you to be his treasured possession. Now if you are a Christian, that is a wonderful word of encouragement.

If you are not yet a Christian or if you are seeking, that is a wonderful word of invitation because God wants that for you too.

And he is laying it before you tonight. All he asks is that we put our trust in him.

Amen. Let us pray.