

God Claims a People for Himself

Exodus 19:1-19; 20:1-17

Fall Old Testament Sermon Series on Exodus

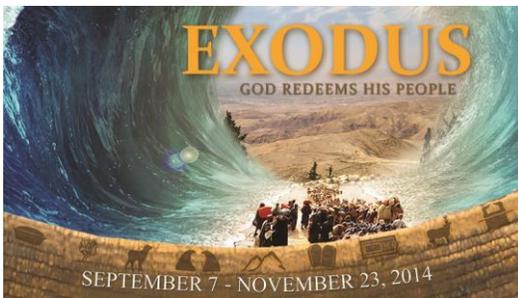
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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TEXTS: Exodus 19:1-19; 20:1-17

We return this morning to the Book of Exodus. As I have said many times, I love Exodus for many reasons: it's the Gospel of the Old Testament, God's great saving action; it's the literary center of gravity; it's the central section of the gigantic bell curve of the Pentateuch – there is



more time on Mount Sinai than any other place in the Old Testament in these first five books; here we find that God reveals His identity, we learn His name, we hear of His character; and this morning, we learn of His will. Exodus also defines our identity as the people of God, a redeemed people. We see that God's redeeming, saving actions in Egypt bring us to the

mountain where God enters into covenant with us. Redemption leads to covenant, and this morning we see that the exit from Egypt brings God's people to the mountain where He will dwell with them, where He will come in His visible glory, His own personal presence, and He will actually speak with them and reveal His will and character. There is really nothing else like this moment in the Bible. There is really nothing like Mount Sinai in antiquity, that God, the real God, would actually come, dwell visibly with His people and speak to them all. I remember talking with a woman who was learning to become a Rabbi. She was more liberal in her theology than I was, but we were having a great conversation. I just asked her directly: "Why do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?" I had my own catechism answer ready, and I wasn't prepared for what she said. She looked me right in the eye, and she said: "My ancestors heard God speak from the mountain." I thought: "That's good!"

This morning, there are three movements I want to look at in this great text:

- 1) God leads the people to worship Him;
- 2) Redemption leads to covenant-making in the scene of worship;
- 3) God comes in visible glory and He then personally speaks to the people in what we refer to as the 10 Commandments.

First I want us to see that God leads His people to worship Him. We've been saying all fall that the refrain of Exodus is: "Let My people go so that they may worship Me." In Exodus 19:1, we read:

"In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt--on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai."

It is this scene that begins to fill our imagination. It is this scene of God's coming in glory and revealing His will that forms the structure for what will later be called the Feast of Pentecost. We come out of Egypt to the mountain where God comes in fiery glory and reveals His will. That feast is remembered as the giving of the Torah. It is no mistake that Jesus, when He is slain as the Passover Lamb, tells His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Pentecost when He will come again with fiery glory and reveal His will.

The third month after the Israelites leave Egypt, they set out and come to the Desert of Sinai. The people camp in the desert in front of the mountain. Remember in Exodus 3, when God first came to Moses, he asked God: "How will I know that You are with me?" God's answer to Moses in Exodus 3:12 is:

"Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

How will Moses know that God has sent him? God says: "You will come back to this very place and worship God, although not alone, but with the people whom I have redeemed." The Lord tells Moses to gather the people and speak to them. He says in Exodus 19:4:

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself."

Then God speaks and defines our identity. In Exodus 19:5, the Lord says:

"Now if you listen to My voice and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession."

This is the first use of the word *covenant* in Exodus. It is an extremely important idea. Covenant is one of our most cherished words. The Bible is divided into Old Testament and New Testament, or Old Covenant and New Covenant. *Covenant* is a term that describes a real relationship of God with His people. It is one of the seminal terms of the Bible. The term *covenant* in the ancient world is used for international diplomacy; it is used for describing a compact between the king and his subjects; and it is also used to describe marriage. Marriage is viewed as a covenant, a binding relationship between two parties. Nahum Sarna says:

"The covenant designates the function and effect of the national experience at Sinai. The

Bible describes the covenant as a living reality, an actual legal circumstance, nothing less than an eternally binding pact between God and His people. The entire history of Israel as portrayed in the Bible is governed by this outstanding reality.”

You see, what's happening on this mountain is nothing less than the living God entering into a sacred binding covenant with us as His people, and within the safety and security of that covenant, there is promise and blessing. The covenant means that God is committed to us as our God. It means that our basic identity is found in being a people in covenant with God. It means that within the covenant there is love exchanged between the parties, as God calls us first His treasured possession. Isn't that a remarkable thing for God to say about us? God binds Himself to us in this sacred agreement, and it is like the commitment that we make in marriage. It is an exclusive love, a committed love. It is like the dedication that we must show as parents to our children. Though you can say generically, "I love children," it's a different thing to say, "These are my children, and I have a responsibility to them." It doesn't fly very well when men say, "I love women in general," but it's profound and meaningful to look at one woman and say, "You are my spouse and I'm committed to you in covenant." It is totally different, and that is what is happening here. God says: "You are My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This description of us as a kingdom of priests means that we have a special relationship with God. Priests are set apart from the rest of the people by dedication to the service of God, by consecration to a distinctive way of living, to special duties and responsibilities, and also special restraints and obligation to serve the people. God says you will be like that in relationship toward the rest of the world. Just as priests are set apart within a society, you are set apart to God within the whole world. A priest has a function to mediate the presence of God to the world and the world to the presence of God. These categories define the people.

In Deuteronomy 7:6, the Lord says:

"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."

Isaiah 62:12 says:

"And they shall be called The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD; and you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."

Lest you think this applies only back then, Peter applies this to believers in Christ in 1 Peter 2:5:

"You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

And then in 1 Peter 2:9, we read:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession.”

We uniquely belong to God. Revelation 1:6 says:

“[Christ] made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever.”

That is who we are; that is who we were called to be. God brings us out of Egypt, not for freedom, but for the real freedom found in a binding covenant relationship with Him. None of us is free when we are autonomous. Autonomy in the Bible is tyranny, but real freedom is found in following the Lord. Beginning in Exodus 19:9, the Lord then tells Moses He would come in glory:

“I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear Me speaking with you.”

The Lord tells Moses in Exodus 19:10-11:

“Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.”

Can you imagine that? They should be ready, because God will come personally and dwell before them on the mountain, and they would hear Him speak. Can you imagine those three days of anticipation? God will come in His own glory, and, in fact, He does come. In Exodus 19:16, we read:

“On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.”

The Bible strains language to describe the appearance of the glory of God: thunder and lightning; a cloud of God's personal presence over the mountain; a loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Remember, that is 600,000 families, at least 2,000,000 people gathered at the base of the mountain.

Benjamin Franklin went to visit at the Boston Commons because he heard that George Whitfield had been given a voice that he could project so that 10,000 people could hear him without amplification. Ben Franklin stood at the edge of the crowd listening and came back and said, “Yes, I heard him.” This, however, is One who has a voice that speaks and two million people can hear: the voice of the living God. He comes, and Mount Sinai is covered. The Lord Himself comes in fire, and we must remember that Mount Sinai now is the burning bush turned

into the burning mountain. The Sinai bush of Exodus 3 is now the Sinai mountain of Exodus 19: it is the same location. God was speaking to Moses, and now God is speaking to two million people. The holy ground on which Moses stood is now the holy mountain; the revelation of God's name now is the revelation of God's will; and the calling to Moses of a unique mission from God now is given to the entire people as their mission in the world to reflect the character of the living God.

God comes and speaks in Exodus 20, beginning in verse one. It says:

“And God spoke all these words:”

We call this section the Ten Commandments, though that phrase is not actually used. The Hebrew tradition calls the section: *The Ten Words*; the Greek translation of the Old Testament calls it *The Deca-logue*, where we get the expression *The Decalogue*. *The Ten Words*. The distinctives of the Ten Commandments are many, and I wish that we had two hours to explore these.



Let me tell you just five things that are utterly unique about this moment.

- 1) The first distinctive is that, though we have covenant treaties from the ancient world in abundance, this is the only example of God's taking a whole people into covenant relationship.
- 2) The second distinctive is that the 10 Commandments are spoken in a narrative context. It's not bad to have a plaque of the 10 Commandments on the wall of your office. I have one, but it's not good to pull the 10 Commandments out of the context of redemption from Egypt and God's claim upon us. The 10 Commandments are not floating rules for all of humanity. These are the covenant stipulations of a God who has claimed your life and revealed His character.
- 3) The third distinctive of the 10 Commandments is that every other treaty that we have or covenant from the ancient world deals with affairs of state, but only in this covenant are interpersonal relationships addressed. The God of covenant cares not just that we love Him but that we reflect Him to the lives around us.
- 4) The fourth distinctive is that the Word of God is spoken in this passage as the expression of God's divine will. This is unique. For example, Hammurabi, the great Mesopotamian lawmaker, promulgates the laws of Hammurabi. They come from the mind and will of the human king. The laws of the Bible, however, come from God; they are expressions of His will.
- 5) The fifth, and for me the most thrilling distinctive about the 10 Commandments, is that the

Ten Commandments are spoken to each person. Though there are two million people at the base of the mountain, the Ten Commandments are expressed in the second person singular: *you*. Commentators throughout the ages have noticed this, and the inescapable conclusion is that, though we are gathered as a multitude, God addresses us individually. The word is spoken to each heart at the base of the mountain: **you**. I am the Lord **your** God. Each one, hear the Word of the Lord this morning as coming just straight into your heart. When we were singing the praise song, *Ancient Words*, "We've come with our hearts open," I found myself standing here just pulling the doors my heart open. "My heart is ready; speak right into my heart." God said: "I am the Lord **your** God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." We must always remember that God's covenant will for us comes after His saving actions, not before. Israel was not given the Ten Commandments to see how she does, and then to see if God really likes her in the end. No, God claims her for Himself and then reveals His will. The earliest commentary we have on Exodus, one of the earliest commentaries on the Bible from the time of Jesus, is called *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael*, and it's a collection of reflections on Exodus. When they read this verse, these ancient readers said: "Why were the Ten Commandments not stated at the beginning of the Bible?" They recognized this is a really important passage. Why isn't it the first passage in the Bible? They give an answer, probably in the way Jesus would have done. They told a parable.

"To what may this be compared?" they say. "To the following: to a king who entered into a province and said to the people: 'May I be your king?' The people said to him: 'Have you done anything good for us that you should rule over us?' What did he do then? He built a city wall for them; he brought in water supply for them; he fought their battles; and then he said to them: 'May I be your King?' They said him: 'Yes, yes!' In the same way, God brought the Israelites out of Egypt; He divided the sea for them; He sent down manna for them; He brought quails for them; He fought for them the battle with Amalek; and then He said to them: 'I am to be your King,' and they said to Him: 'Yes, yes!' and they stood before the mount to receive His word, and they resolved in their mind to accept the reign of God with joy."

The law comes after redemption, and so God speaks a revelation of His will. Then He gives these ten statements which are sublime, that this would be the will of God. Of all the things that God could command, these are the things He commands. He says:

First: Exodus 20:3 "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" The Hebrew says *have no other gods before My face*. Let nothing come between you and Me. It's a statement of exclusivity; a relationship of one.

Second: Exodus 20:4 "*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.*" God preserves His absolute

transcendence. He says there's nothing that you could ever make that would adequately represent Me, because I have made you. God guards His image jealously, for He will one day step Himself into this world in the Person of His beloved Son.

Third: Exodus 20:7 *"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name."* You should not lift up the name of God to vanity or worthlessness. Do not invoke God's name without regard for the holiness and gravity of God. This guards us against all forms of speculation, sorcery, deception, or practices where we seek to manipulate the heavens by invoking God's name.

Fourth: Exodus 20:8 *"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy."* God tells us this pattern of living which we in Christ celebrate on the first day of the new creation, Sunday. We live our lives in a pattern of weeks in imitation of God's redeeming, His saving, actions. In Exodus, God says to keep the Sabbath in imitation of the work of creation. In Deuteronomy, the Sabbath is said to be kept in imitation of the redemption from Egypt, so there is a day set aside for worship. That is the goal all along. The goal of missions is worship.

Fifth: Exodus 20:12 *"Honor your father and your mother."* We practice in our homes how we are to live in the world, and the way we treat our parental authority guides how we relate to God in His parental authority over us.

The last of the 10 Commandments move out horizontally in our relationships with one another. God, first guards life.

Sixth: Exodus 20:13 *"You shall not murder."* He says you shall not murder because God is the giver of life. In the human heart, we sometimes struggle with taking vengeance. I will decide; I will execute vengeance, but God preserves that right. The modern problem, though, is often not one of vengeance, but the modern problem is one of convenience. That is our highest value. If you have personal convenience as your highest value, then you will kill a child that is inconvenient for you. If you have convenience as your highest value, then you will take the life of an aging parent when caring for them is inconvenient or burdensome. God says: "No! Life belongs to Me. You shall not murder."

Seventh: Exodus 20:14 *"You shall not commit adultery."* We do not commit adultery because God is faithful. That is why we are to be reflecting this in our lives.

Eighth: Exodus 20:15 *"You shall not steal."* We do not steal because God is our provider.

Ninth: Exodus 20:16 *"You shall not give false testimony."* We do not give false testimony because our God is one who speaks the truth.

Tenth: Exodus 20:17 *"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to*

your neighbor." Again, I want to stress that there is no example like this in any covenant that we have, where the terms of the covenant deal with the desires of the human heart.

Amazing! God says: You shall not covet, and lists things not to covet. He begins with not coveting your neighbor's house, wife, manservant or maidservant. Don't look across the street and think, "Boy, that's the life I want," because when you do that, you call into question your covenant God and His leading of your life. When you say, "I wish I lived across the street, I wish that person were my wife or husband, you call into question this great covenant-redeeming God. Then He says not to covet your neighbor's ox or donkey. The cover of the *USA Today Weekend Edition* this weekend had at the top the new BMW i8 with the question: "Is this the best car ever?" The subtitle was: "Doesn't have much room to store things and it's \$136,000, but who cares?" The ox is the ancient version of the BMW i8. Coveting is when you look over and you think, that's the ox I need: that thing can move; that thing can haul. The donkey is the equivalent of the hybrid vehicle, and coveting is when you look over and you want something other than what God has given you. Do you see how that is a radical indictment of God as the covenant-keeping God? He is our Shepherd; He is our Father; He has bound Himself to you and to me, and that's why we do not covet.

I want to apply this tremendous text in two ways.

The first is that **redemption leads to covenant**, and this is the safest place in the world. If you are lonely, if you are fearful, if you are uncertain about your life, then enter into the security of the covenant bond. Come inside the covenant by faith in Jesus Christ, where you have the eternal God committed to you. It's inside that space that all things work together for good, not outside that space. Covenant is a place of safety and commitment and security.

Second, **true freedom is found only within a covenant bond**. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, said: "An enlightened human being is one who trusts his or her own power of thinking rather than an authority or tradition." That is Kant's definition of freedom, and I think it's *totally* wrong. Tim Keller says: "Freedom is not found in the absence of restrictions but in finding the right ones." Our kids wake up early. Friends taught us to do this, and we been doing it for years now. They wake up early, real early, and they go the piano. Every morning they practice for 45 minutes. You can look at that from the outside and say: "Oh, what a loss of freedom, the freedom to sleep in, the freedom to roll out of bed, the freedom to be rushed, the freedom to run late, but that obligation, that restraint of freedom, actually opens freedom: the freedom of playing beautiful music. That's where the joy is. It's not the absence of restrictions, it's having the right ones. Brothers and sisters in Christ, these are the right ones: the covenant restraints on our freedom. These are the right ones; they are the liberating restrictions. Keller adds: "A fish, because it absorbs oxygen from water rather than air is free only if it is restricted

and limited to water. If we put it on the grass, its freedom to move, and even its freedom to live, is not enhanced, but it is destroyed. The fish dies if we do not honor the reality of its nature.”

What then is the restriction that we must have to thrive? What is the environment that liberates us if we are to confine ourselves to it like the water that liberates the fish? The freedom, the restriction that liberates us, is love. Love is the most liberating freedom-loss of all. One of the principles of love is that to love a friend, or to love a spouse, you have to lose independence to gain greater intimacy. If you want the freedoms that love brings, the fulfillment, security, sense of worth, you have to limit your freedom in many ways. You cannot make unilateral decisions. To experience the joy and freedom of love, you give up your personal autonomy, and this is the beauty of a covenant with God, driven and motivated by love. C.S. Lewis put it this way: “Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, then you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully roundabout with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness, but in that casket, safe and dark and motionless and airless, your heart will change. It will not be broken. Unbreakable it will become, impenetrable, and irredeemable. The alternative to love is damnation.”

God calls us this morning into covenant, and it is a covenant motivated by love. We respond to God in covenant, and this is the freedom of the people claimed by God. This is what Paul meant in 2 Corinthians when he says the love of Christ constrains us. When we realize what God has done for us, how He has claimed us for Himself, then we gladly lose the illusion of self-autonomy, and the promises of such joy to the restriction of the covenant that intimacy with God to know Him and be known by Him.

Father in heaven, we thank You for this morning. Lord, these are precious promises of Your commitment to us, and Lord, as we are where here today, I ask that the original speaking of these words would go into each of our hearts. I thank You, Father, that You addressed us each. I pray that you would speak anew. I pray, Father, for those who are fearful this morning, that they would run to You, hurl themselves upon Your grace and mercy and love in the safety and protection of Your covenant. I pray, Father, for those who are wrestling with really being committed to You, that you would open up the path of freedom, that You would transform us, Lord. Help us then to reflect Your character in the world, to be united, one with another, in this covenant bond of the different vision of living as a redeemed people claimed by God. So, Lord, would You speak to us now. Take Your truths and plant them deep in us. Fashion us in Your likeness that we would speak and live and act in a way that brings You glory and pleasure.

In Jesus' Name and for His sake we pray, Amen.