

## Promises We Can Count On

### Session 4

June 23, 2024

#### *God's Promise to Make a Holy Nation*

**The Point:** God's promise to set apart His people was conditioned on obedience.

**Session Passage:** Exodus 19:1-8

**The setting for Exodus 19.** God miraculously delivered the Israelites from Egyptian captivity. This deliverance is closely linked to the promises God made to Abraham (the Abrahamic covenant, Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-19; 17:1-22). God had promised He would be the God of Abraham and his descendants. They would be His people and would dwell in the land of Canaan that God was giving them. Now, after God had delivered the Israelites, the time had come for them to enter a new phase of this relationship—the establishment of the covenant conditions by which the Israelites were to live (the Mosaic covenant). They were to live holy lives in relationship with their holy God (Lev. 11:45; 20:26).

#### **Exodus 19:1-4**

**Connection to the Point.** Our commitment to God and obedience to Him is a response to what He has done for us.

**The Israelites** (v. 1). God had chosen and set apart the Israelites out of all the nations to be His people (Ex. 6:6-7).

**Left the land of Egypt** (v. 1). What God did in delivering the Israelites from Egyptian slavery was an act of grace. It was done before the law was given which they were told to obey.

**Sinai Wilderness** (v. 1). The Wilderness of Sinai is the region surrounding Mount Sinai. The Sinai Wilderness is part of the much larger Wilderness of Sin (Num. 33:11-15). The term *wilderness (midbar)* refers to dry, rocky, barren land. Areas of wilderness related to Canaan were located to the east (Transjordan), the south (Negev), and to the southwest (Sinai) of Israel. The wilderness experienced infrequent rainfall and there are wells/oases in the wilderness.

**They traveled from Rephidim** (v. 2). The people camped at a place called *Rephidim* upon entering the wilderness (17:1). They left Rephidim to go and camp at the base of Mount Sinai, a trip which may have been only a few miles. Since the area of Rephidim and Sinai were desert locales, they were not known as oases or sources of water. At Rephidim, due to the complaints of the people, God instructed Moses to go ahead to Horeb (Mount Sinai) and strike the rock for water (vv. 1-7). Because of the short distance between the encampment at Rephidim and the mountain the people would have been able to make the walk every day for water and lead the livestock there for watering. The move to the mountain would have eliminated the need for this walk.

**In front of the mountain** (v. 2). This refers to “the mountain of God” (v. 3), Mount Sinai. The exact location of the mountain has been debated. Most scholars identify Jebel Musa (“the mountain of Moses”) as the most likely location due to its close proximity to the plain where the Israelites were instructed to camp. It is one of three granite peaks on the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula and is the second highest of the mountains at about 7,500 feet above sea level. The term *Horeb* is also associated with the mountain (3:1). It is suggested that Horeb (“wilderness area”) is the general term for the area and Sinai as the actual mountain. The mountain stands as the symbol of covenant and a reminder that the Lord meets with His people.

**Moses went up** (v. 3). Moses literally went up the mountain. Figuratively, since God is higher in the sense that He is majestic and exalted, Moses went up to meet with God. In the ancient Near East, mountains were associated with deities.

**Mountain of God** (v. 3). Also known as “Mount Sinai” (vv. 11,18), the exact location of the mountain has been debated. Most scholars identify Jebel Musa (“the mountain of Moses”) as the most likely location due to its close proximity to the plain where the Israelites were instructed to camp. It is one of three granite peaks on the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula and is the second highest of the mountains at about 7,500 feet above sea level. The term *Horeb* is also associated with the mountain (3:1). It is suggested that Horeb (“wilderness area”) is the general term for the area and Sinai as the actual mountain. The mountain stands as the symbol of covenant and a reminder that the Lord meets with His people.

**The LORD** (v. 3). This term translates *YHWH*, which is known as the Tetragrammaton (meaning four letters). Since ancient Hebrew does not have vowels, the exact pronunciation of the four consonants is unknown. It was thought by the Jews that God’s name was too holy to pronounce, so the term *Adonai* (“Lord”) was substituted in *YHWH*’s place. Hebrew scholars believe the most likely pronunciation of *YHWH* is *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* emphasizes God’s eternity and self-sufficiency. It is God’s covenant name He revealed to Moses at the burning bush and by which He made His covenant with the Israelites (Ex. 3:13-15).

**Called** (v. 3). The Hebrew term (*qara*) means to summon, announce, or proclaim. Moses served as the mediator between God and the Israelites. God spoke to him alone “face to face” (33:11).

**Say to the house of Jacob and explain to the Israelites** (v. 3). This is Hebrew parallelism, where the same idea is expressed in two different ways. The *house of Jacob* is another term for the *Israelites*. Jacob was an Israelite patriarch, the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham. The twelve tribes of Israel were descended from Jacob’s twelve sons (Gen. 35:22-26).

**You have seen what I did to the Egyptians** (v. 4). This begins God’s summary of the covenant He was now entering into with the Israelites. God would explain this covenant later in great detail, and Moses would record God’s words as found in Exodus 20 to Leviticus 27. The verse encapsulates what God did to Pharaoh and the Egyptians in delivering the Israelites from slavery (Ex. 5:1–14:31).

**You . . . I** (v. 4). The use of these pronouns sets forth the parties to the covenant. The covenant that was being initiated by God with the Israelites is known as the Mosaic covenant.

**I carried you** (v. 4). God emphasized that it was He who delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. Nothing was accomplished by their own might or intellect. It was all because of the grace, mercy, and power of Almighty God.

**On eagles’ wings** (v. 4). This serves as a metaphor for the exodus itself. It is developed further in Deuteronomy 32:11 where God’s attributes are compared to those of a great eagle. In essence, their flight from Egypt was like that of an eagle soaring and carrying them on its feathers. When young eagles are taught to fly, if they struggle their parents swoop under them and carry the young.

**Brought you to myself** (v. 4). God had lovingly and tenderly carried Israel to freedom and provided food and water for them in route to Mount Sinai. What God did was evidence of His grace; the Israelites were rescued from slavery before they were given the law and called to obey. He had brought them to Mount Sinai to meet with Him, and they were now ready to receive the laws of God and become the nation God had promised Abraham (Gen. 15:5,13-16).

## **Exodus 19:5-6**

**Connection to the Point.** Our obedience to God reflects our relationship with Him as His special possession.

**Now if** (v. 5). This indicates that what God was about to declare were the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant the Israelites were to obey.

**Carefully listen . . . keep** (v. 5). The covenant that God was establishing with Israel was unconditional in its initial stage when God delivered the people from Egypt. However, at this new stage God introduced covenantal obligations. There were two emphases. The first word in Hebrew is *shama*, which means to hear in a way that leads to understanding and obedience (*carefully listen*). The second term is *shamar*, which means to keep, watch, observe, or guard.

**My covenant** (v. 5). God had entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants. Known as the Abrahamic covenant, God had promised to bless Abraham, to be His God and that of his descendants, and to give them the land of Canaan in which to dwell (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:13-16; 17:1-8). God was now making a further covenant with the Israelites (the Mosaic covenant), by which the Israelites would know how to faithfully live in covenant relationship with the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

**You will be my own possession** (v. 5). God had reminded the Israelites who He was and what He had done for them. Now He defined who they were in relation to Him—His own possession. The conditions of listening and obeying were accompanied by a gracious promise. God's *own possession* is the first of three titles bestowed upon Israel related to their covenant faithfulness ("kingdom of priests" and "holy nation" are the others). The Hebrew term for *possession* (*segullah*) refers to a personal possession or a unique treasure.

**Out of all the peoples** (v. 5). In the land of Canaan, Israel would be surrounded by various peoples. To the north were the Phoenicians and Arameans. To the east were the Ammonites. To the south were the Moabites, Amalekites, Kenites, and Edomites. And to the southwest were the Philistines.<sup>2</sup> Out of all peoples and nations and tribes, God had chosen Israel to be His special, covenant people (see the Table of Nations in Gen. 10). The Israelites had been separated from all the nations of the world to be God's chosen people. Furthermore, it would be through the people of Israel that God would bless the world by sending His Messiah, Jesus Christ, to accomplish His redemptive plan of saving people from their sins.

**Although the whole earth is mine** (v. 5). God is the Creator of all, so everything that exists—including people—belong to Him. This is one of the earliest and most clear expressions of monotheism (belief in one God) in Scripture. No doubt it sounded a little strange to the Israelites because most of them had grown up in the polytheistic atmosphere of Egypt and some may have even worshiped the many Egyptian gods. But now, the Israelites were God's people. Believers today are also God's chosen people and treasured possession (1 Pet. 2:9-10). When times get difficult and we feel discouraged we can always remind ourselves of that fact and go to God in prayer seeking His help and comfort.

**My kingdom of priests** (v. 6). As God's precious people, the Israelites also had a special purpose. This is the only place in the Old Testament where the phrase *kingdom of priests* appears. God's covenant with the Israelites had an intercessory and intermediary aspect. They were not just chosen out of the nations but also for the nations. Israel was to represent God faithfully to the other nations. As *priests* the Israelites would stand between God and people to help their fellow humans draw closer to God and to help put forth God's truth and holiness. Israel was called to do this (see Gen. 12:3). The Levites performed this task at the tabernacle and later the temple. As Christians, we have the same calling to proclaim the message of salvation through Jesus Christ to the world (Matt. 28:18-20; 2 Cor. 5:11-21).

**My holy nation** (v. 6). To be *holy* (*qadosh*) is to be sacred or set apart by God for His plans and purposes. By obeying the Mosaic covenant's stipulations as God's chosen, treasured people, the Israelites would be to Him a *holy nation*. Just as the Levitical priests would later function as mediators of God's grace to the Israelites, Israel was to perform a similar function in relation to the peoples of the world. They were to fulfill this purpose in several ways. First, Israel should be an example to the other nations by how they faithfully lived and interacted with God. This would move others to desire a similar relationship with God. Second, they were to evangelize by sharing God's truths and calling people into a relationship with God. Finally, Israel should be faithful to preserve the Word of God in the holy Scriptures.<sup>3</sup>

**These are the words that you are to say to the Israelites** (v. 6). Moses was God's chosen leader of the Israelites and their intermediary with God. He had heard God's words and was now to deliver those words to the people waiting at the bottom of the mountain.

### **Exodus 19:7-8**

**Connection to the Point.** Our relationship with God as His special possession is dependent on our obedience to Him.

**After Moses came back** (v. 7). Moses "went up" the mountain to meet with God (v. 3); after God was done speaking with him, he then came back down to the people in order to relay God's words. Moses was acting as a true and faithful prophet of God.

**Summoned the elders of the people** (v. 7). Israel had a clear leadership structure (3:16,18; 4:29). Moses summoned the elders who would receive God's words from Moses and then relay those words to the people. As Moses was the Israelites' representative before God, the elders acted as Moses's representatives to the people. The elders were the clan leaders in Israel's leadership hierarchy. They functioned as a ruling body with oversight of the community.

**Set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him** (v. 7). Moses acted as a true prophet. He faithfully and accurately delivered God's words to the Israelites through their elders.

**All the people responded together** (v. 8). When the elders delivered God's words to the people, the people responded corporately. However, there was still an individual component of obedience to God's words. Each person was to be held accountable for how they lived.

**We will do all that the LORD has spoken** (v. 8). The people committed to entering into the covenant with the LORD (*Yahweh*). In the book of Deuteronomy's account of God giving the law to Moses, Moses warned the people, "Be careful to do as the LORD your God has commanded you; you are not to turn aside to the right or the left. Follow the whole instruction the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live, prosper, and have a long life in the land you will possess" (Deut. 5:32-33, see vv. 28-29).

**So Moses brought the people's words back to the LORD** (v. 8). God established a system as to how the Israelites were to interact with Him (vv. 9-25). He was not approachable by just anyone at any time. Even though God knows all things, working in this system He would wait for the Israelites' response to be relayed through the delegated spokesman, Moses. "The formality of the process kept the people reminded that they were not dealing only with their elders or Moses or both but with the universe's only God, who was not approachable by just anyone, who was greater and more dangerous than any force they had ever otherwise known, and who was requiring of them in a patient, cadenced process their assent to the most important commitment they could make."<sup>4</sup>

**The Ten Commandments.** God was about to speak again through Moses by delivering the foundation of the law, the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17). Since the commandments came from God, it is important to note that they reflect His character. Each of the commandments has at its center the attributes of the God who spoke them. The first four deal entirely with humanity's relationship to God—the vertical relationship (vv. 3-11). Then God gave six commandments concerning how people were to relate to one another—the horizontal relationships (vv. 12-17). The Ten Commandments together encapsulated God's plan for Israel to live faithfully in covenant relationship with Him, as well as living harmoniously with each other in their community. Unfortunately, as the history of Israel demonstrated, living in obedience to God proved to be far more challenging for the people than they had expected.

**A New Testament Perspective.** No human being can perfectly keep God's law. Because of this, God in His mercy sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world to be our Savior (John 3:16). Jesus did in fact perfectly obey all that God commanded. He met all the demands of the law for us (Rom. 10:4) and became the atoning sacrifice for the sins of all who repent and place their faith in Him as their Savior and Lord (Rom. 3:25; Eph. 1:7; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). Under the new covenant in Jesus Christ, believers have direct access to God (John 14:6; Eph. 3:11-12; Heb. 10:19-22), and He serves as our intermediary/advocate with God the Father (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1-2).

1. See also Stephen J. Wellum, "Covenants," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 355–360.
2. See map 38 in Thomas V. Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 1998), 82.
3. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 423.
4. *Ibid.*, 424–425.