

Privileges and Responsibilities for God's People: *Moses at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:1-8)*

“Exalting Christ, then, by worship, witness, and service, as the main focus of our uplifting up the triune God, should be our constant aim. Failure here means missing the path of holiness, for a life commitment, deliberate, zealous, and daily renewed, to glorify the Lord Jesus is the dedicatory basis of holiness.”

~ J. I. Packer

I. Investigation: An Examination of Exodus 19:1-8

Israel's arrival at Mt. Sinai serves as the high point of Exodus. As noted by Ryken in his commentary on Exodus, “It marks the achievement of God's plan to save a people for His glory” (*Exodus*, 491).

Rehearsing the past, the Lord indicates His love and purpose for His people—a desire to create a holy nation who would exalt His name on the earth. In the previous six episodes, the Israelites encountered danger or difficulty and found deliverance from the Lord. This time the Israelites find danger in God Himself. Under this Covenant, the Law serves as either a source of joy and life or a means for cursing and death.

v. 1 - There is some confusion as to when the Israelites arrived at Sinai. “The most reasonable interpretation is that they arrived on the fifteenth day of the third calendar month, that is, two months to the day after their departure from Egypt” (Garrett, *Exodus*, 458).

vv. 1-2 - More than a mere travelogue, these verses should recall God's provisions for the Israelites during their journey from Egypt to Mt. Sinai.

v. 3 - The presence of the terrifying sights and sounds further established Moses as the mediator between God and the Jewish nation.

The poetic oracle of the Lord in verses 4 through 6 form a chiasmic structure:

A: The command to speak to Israel (v. 3cd)

B: The Lord's past grace towards Israel (v. 4)

C: Condition of obedience contained in the covenant (v. 5ab)

B': The Lord's future grace towards Israel (vv. 5cd-6ab)

A': The command to speak to Israel (v. 6cd)

As the Lord makes this covenantal relationship with His people, He requires obedience.

v. 4 - The imagery of the eagle indicates not only protection, but also one of nurturance and care. Moses utilizes this same image in Deuteronomy 32:9-11 to describe God's love for the Israelites. The imagery will also be used to describe how the Lord delivered Israel from Babylon in Isaiah 40:30-31.

The Lord “carries” His people, while idolaters “carry” their gods. The truthfulness of this statements is clearly depicted in Isaiah 46:1. The Lord declares: “The images [of the Babylonian gods] that are carried

about are burdensome, a burden to the weary” (also, observe verses 3-4). Unlike other gods, the Lord is with His people and for His people. He is intimately involved.

v. 5 - The Lord tells the Israelites who He is in verses 3 through 4. In verses 5 through 6, the Lord tells the Israelites who they will be. The use of the personal pronouns (e.g., “my”) indicate the personal nature of this relationship.

The purpose of offering the Covenant was not to make Israel God’s people. Already in Exodus, the Israelites were identified as such (cf. Exod 3:7, 10; 4:22, 23; 5:23). The offering of the Covenant was the opportunity to enter into a new relationship. “A covenant is a means by which two parties enter into a new relationship with each other, or more often, a covenant elevates to a more intimate, dynamic level an already-existing relationship between two parties” (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 301). This new relationship would ensure grace, mercy, joy, peace, and ultimately, life, for God’s people.

The basis for this covenant is obedience. Compromising behavior, half-hearted devotion, and a *laissez faire* attitude toward the spiritual walk was, and is, unacceptable.

“all the earth is mine” - “The Book of Exodus is not meant to be interpreted in isolation. Its relationship to Genesis is especially important. Exodus must be interpreted as the second chapter of a drama begun in Genesis. This means, at the least, that the themes of creation, promise, and universal divine purpose, set in place by the Genesis narrative, constitute lenses through which Exodus is to be read” (Fretheim, “Because the Whole Earth is Mine,” *Interp* 50 [1996]: 220-230). Indeed, “God’s redemptive activity on behalf of Israel is not an end itself; it is in the service of the entire creation, for ‘all the earth’ is God’s God’s initially exclusive move is for the sake of a maximally inclusive end” (Fretheim, 237).

The Lord identifies the Israelites in three ways:

(1.) “treasured possession” - The term indicates royal property (cf. 1 Chron 29:3; Eccles 2:8)—a king’s most prized possession. The positioning and meaning of this phrase highlights Israel’s uniqueness and the special affection the Lord has for Israel (Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 85).

Interestingly, this phrase is always coupled with holiness in the Pentateuch (cf. Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18). As noted by Hamilton in his commentary on Exodus, “the coupling of these two phrases is a deterrent against emphasizing ‘unique treasure’ to the exclusion of holiness, and thus sliding into lawlessness, or emphasizing holiness to the exclusion of ‘unique treasure,’ and thus sliding into legalism” (*Exodus*, 302).

(2.) “kingdom of priests” - This term carries two ideas. First, Israel was called to serve and worship the Lord (cf. Isa 61:6). They were to be holy, just as He is holy (cf. Lev 11:45; 19:1, 2). Second, Israel will serve as God’s priests to the world. This priesthood does not eliminate the need for the Aaronic priesthood. But rather, it indicates the special relationship Israel will have with God in contrast to the other nations. One scholar writes, “The Levitical priesthood as portrayed in Exodus is not seen as diminishing or supplanting the collective royal priesthood, but as providing a visual model of that vocation, and secondly as facilitating it” (Davies, *A Royal Priesthood*, 240). As stated in the Abrahamic covenant, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3b; also, cf. Isa 49:6).

(3.) “a holy nation” - This phrase occurs in Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; 28:9. Rather than interpret “holy” as pure, it would be better to render the term as “consecrated” or “devoted.” The term operates

“within the context of covenant relationship and expresses commitment” (Gentry, “The Meaning of ‘Holy’,” *BibSac* 170 [2013]: 400-17). In other words, Israel has not only been set apart from other peoples, but they have also been set apart for a specific purpose.

Why did the Lord prize the Israelites?

v. 8 - Israel’s resounding affirmation of obedience is quickly curtailed based upon their utter failure (Exod 32). Ultimately, only God can change the heart (Psalm 51:10).

II. Intersect

A. If you are struggling with feeling unsatisfied and unfulfilled, reflect on the fact that if you know Christ as your Savior you are His “treasured possession.”

Ephesians 1:3-8 -

B. As believers, we are called to live holy lives as we serve as a royal priest under the New Covenant.

1 Peter 2:9-10 -

C. As priests under the New Covenant, we have the blessing of serving as a light to the nations.

Matthew 28:19-20 -

“The law was given to teach sinners their sin . . . the law, able to condemn but unable to save, sends the convicted sinner looking for salvation in the only place it can be found. It sends him to Jesus Christ who, in His perfect law-fulfilling life and perfect law-fulfilling death, gave Himself to redeem helpless sinners.”

~ Thomas Ascol