

## **Life With God: On Eagles' Wings**

**Exodus 19:1-6**

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 19. In chapters 1 through 18, the story has been recounted of how God has rescued Israel out of Egypt for four hundred and thirty years. Israel had been in Egypt for many of those years. The people of Israel had been the slaves of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Now, in God's mercy, He has redeemed His people. He has bought them out of bondage. He has rescued them and is in the process of bringing them across the wilderness to worship at the Mountain of Sinai. He had told Moses that this was His aim when He first sent Moses down into Egypt to speak to the children of Israel. He said, I will save you to worship Me, I will bring you out to worship at My mountain, and lo and behold, we're there. We come in Exodus 19 to the mountain of God and the children of Israel have come there.

There have been many bumps along the way. The children of Israel weren't very enthusiastic when Moses first showed up. Moses himself spent forty years in exile away from Egypt before coming back as the messenger of God and the leader of His people. Already the Children of Israel, in crossing the wilderness since they crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, have gone through many dangers, toils, and snares, and so there is much history already before they get to the mountain of God.

Exodus 19 has been called by some the most important chapter in the Bible. I'm not sure I would go quite that far, but there is no question that Exodus 19 is one of the most important chapters in the Bible. If you don't understand Exodus 19, you won't understand Exodus 20, which contains the Ten Commandments, and you'll misunderstand the whole function in of the law in the life of Israel, and hence in the life of the believer.

So Exodus 19 is that which gives us the context to, and sets the stage for, the giving of the Law and the confirmation of the covenant at Mt. Sinai. It is a very important passage, but it's not just important historically. You know that good Christians can know their Old Testament history but not understand the doctrinal importance. What Exodus 19 says about grace and law is just as true for believers today as it was when it was first spoken. It's important for us as

believers. There is no subject more important for a believer to understand than the relationship between grace and covenant and law and that is precisely what Exodus 19 explains. So, let's hear God's holy and inspired word beginning in Exodus 19:1.

In the third month after the sons of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. When they set out from Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; and there Israel camped in front of the mountain. And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons 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 then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the people, 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 sons of Israel.

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word, may He add His blessing to it, let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, teach us of law and of grace and of faith and of obedience, and of Christ. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

It was November of 1640. For a number of years, the English king had been having difficulties with his parliaments. The parliament of England held the purse strings. The king wanted to fight a war. The parliament was ready to give the king money as long as he was willing to grant and protect certain civil liberties for the English people. The king wanted the money, but he was not willing to grant those certain civil liberties to the people of England. So, the parliament and the king squabbled back and forth. In April of 1640, the king called a parliament. War was on, he needed money for his coffers to fund a military campaign. He asked for the money, and once again the demand came, "Grant us the liberties, we'll give you the money." Within hours of calling that parliament the king dissolved it. It was known as the Short Parliament. About six months later, the king was in dire need of funds, so he called another parliament, and once again the members of parliament said, "We are ready to grant your request after you grant our request," and once again, for the second time in six months, the king dissolved the parliament.

Then something happened that had not happened in a half of a millennium of the existence of the English parliament. The parliament that had been dissolved by the king refused to be dissolved. They constituted themselves and they continued to do business and for the next thirteen years, that parliament met. It was known as the Long Parliament. It was absolutely crucial for the history of England and for the next dozens of years, and for the history of Britain to this

day, and we might say for the history for the free democratic world to this day, the principles that they established, the procedures, judicial rights and such. It was a crucial time. A long period of time, a long period of time that had a dramatic impact on everything that followed it.

The same thing might be said about this meeting of Israel with God in the wilderness of Sinai before the mountain of God. We might in fact call it the Long Campsite, for the children of Israel would be parked in front of Mt. Sinai for eleven months. But what God taught them in that eleven months would have radical implications for the rest of the history of Israel and indeed for the people of God down to this day and to the coming of our Savior.

So I'd like you to study with me some of the wonderful truths we find here. In verses 1 and 2, we see the long campsite described. In verses 3 and 4, we see grace as the context of the law, and in verses 5 and 6, we see the covenant as the context of the law.

### **I. The Importance of the Law.**

In verses 1 and 2, we see how the story of God's dealings with Israel impacts their understanding of the law. We've already said, what happens to the children of Israel here before Sinai, will have implications for them of lasting significance for the rest of their history. These two little verses, verses 1 and 2 tip us off to that. In verse 1 we are given a chronological caption to the rest of this chapter which serves as a caption or a prolog to the law of God. Notice that the beginning of the third month is the day that they have gotten there. They are on a lunar calendar; they are roughly fifty days way from the crossing of the Dead Sea. They are roughly fifty days away from the Passover. That's the origin, by the way, of the timing of Pentecost, fifty days after the Passover. After the crossing, after the Passover came, fifty or so days later came the giving of the law at Sinai. So, these are origins of the feast of Pentecost. This serves as a chronological caption to the giving of the law. It tells you the timing of it.

Verse 2 gives you a geographical caption. It tells you that they are before Sinai now. They are parked here in the wilderness of Sinai. They left the wilderness of Rephidim, they came before Sinai, and they met there with God. Now, remember this meeting is a long meeting. It lasts eleven months. It's not nearly as long, though as their wanderings in the wilderness. They will wander in the wilderness for 38 years or so. Isn't it interesting, friends, that of those 38 years, we are only told about a very small amount in the books of Moses, but of these eleven months, you know what we get? Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers through chapter 10. These eleven months are less than one fortieth of the time that Israel would be in the wilderness, but these eleven months occupy the focus of three entire books of the Bible, or major portions thereof, happens right here from Exodus 19 on through Leviticus, and Numbers through chapter 10.

What's going on? Do you think God has something significant to say to us here? Do you think there is something of lasting importance being said here? Is that why he's spending so much time cataloging for us what happens at this great camp site. That's exactly what's going on. Why are long stretches of the history of Israel in the wilderness skipped over and there is all this focus on this meeting? Because the giving of the law is the great distinctive of God's covenant with Moses. This covenant is a covenant of grace. You need to understand that. Moses has made that clear in Exodus 2, God Himself made it clear with His own mouth in Exodus chapter 6. This covenant with Moses, this covenant with the people of God announced by Moses, is a continuation of the grace covenant which God made with Abraham in Genesis 12 and confirmed in Genesis 15 and reconfirmed in Genesis seventeen.

It's a grace covenant, but the distinctive point of it, the unique thing about it is the unveiling of God's law. God's law is unveiled with a clarity and a comprehensiveness in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers and of course repeated in Deuteronomy in a way that is never transcended in the history of redemption. Even Jesus doesn't come along and give a more comprehensive cataloging of the law. Jesus interprets the law definitively, but He doesn't add to the catalog of the law. The great distinctive of this great mosaic covenant is God's revelation of His law.

So in verses 1 and 2 with the children of Israel plopped down in front of Sinai, we see God highlighting for us the importance of the law, but in verses 3 through 6, he wants to put our understanding of the law in proper perspective. He does that first by talking about grace and then second by talking about the covenant.

## **II. God gives the covenant in a framework of grace.**

Look at verses 3 and 4. Here the law is given a grace framework before the covenant commands are given, before the requirements of covenant relationship with Him are spelled out, He first gives this redemptive prologue. Isn't it interesting before God speaks the Ten Commandments to the children of Israel, and He'll do that Himself beginning in Exodus chapter 20 verse 1, He wants Moses to remind the people of these words in verses 3 and 4. Why? Because God wants you to understand that the covenant relationship which He is confirming with Israel is a gracious relationship. Israel did not earn this relationship, Israel did not deserve this relationship, and this relationship was given to Israel by grace. Look at the words. Moses went to God. God called to Him from the mountain and said, "This is what you should say."

Look at verse 4. Three things He tells Moses that Moses needs to tell the people. "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself." Three things are emphasized. God

wants the children of Israel; He wants you and me, to remember three things in particular. Here they are: divine judgment, divine deliverance and divine drawing. Divine judgment, He wants the children of Israel to remember what He did to the Egyptians. That's not a cheerful thing to think about is it, but it's very important, because when they remember what God did to Egypt, they will realize what God could have done to them. He had every right in His justice to do the same thing to Israel that He did to Egypt because Israel was not righteous. The difference between Israel and Egypt was not that Israel was better; the difference was His mercy. So God says, "Remind the people what I did to the Egyptians." He reminds the people of their need and it reminds the people of how God dealt with them in mercy.

Then He says, remind them of how I bore them on eagles' wings. Remind them of the divine deliverance. They didn't rally together, engage in 40 years of terrorism which unsettled the Egyptian government, form their own army, overthrow the Pharaoh and launch out in a military expedition into the wilderness. I delivered them. They had very little to do with it. At the Red Sea, I told them, stand still and watch what I do for you. In the wilderness they wouldn't have survived unless I had provided food and water and had spared them from their enemies. So remind them of the divine deliverance. Remind them that they did not earn this deliverance. Remind them that they did not gain this deliverance. Remind them that they did not gain this deliverance, that I bore them on eagles' wings.

It's a beautiful picture; all the people in the wilderness would have recognized the image. The mother eagles would have no doubt been above them from time to time off in the mountains and elsewhere and they knew how mother eagles taught their eaglets to fly. Kick them out of the nest, let them fall, and before they hit they the ground swoop down under them, pick them up take them back up again. There is the picture. You have not flown on your own. You've been riding on the back, My back, as a chick on the back of a mother eagle. I've borne you out of Egypt. You haven't done it on your own. The message is grace, you see.

He's not done. I drew you here. I brought you here. He's reminding them of how He brought about when He sent Moses to Egypt to do. Remember he said, Moses, you will bring the children of Israel out of Egypt and they will come into the wilderness and they will worship Me. God is saying, by the way it's Me. I'm the one who drew you to Myself. I didn't wait for you to find your way, I drew you to Myself. All of these things you see, all three of these things highlight the grace of God. Isn't it interesting, that before God speaks the law, He says, "Moses, you must explain to them My grace again." Because He is going to spend three books on the law and somebody might start scratching their head and think, "Well, maybe since God spent so much time on the law it means that we're saved by law. We're saved by law keeping, we're saved by obedience to the law." And before anybody can get that in their mind God says Moses, "Tell the people, remember that I saved you by grace so that they won't forget that when I

announce to them my household law. This law is not the means of their salvation. It is the goal of my redemption. It's not the cause of their deliverance, it's the goal of their deliverance."

There is absolutely no idea of salvation by works in God's covenant with Moses. Many Christians don't understand that. There is a famous Christian commentator who gets to Exodus 19 verse 8, and says, "The children of Israel should never have said, 'This we will do.' They should have said, 'We don't want law, we want grace.'" But they weren't being offered law as an alternative to grace. They were being offered law as the expression of grace. You need to understand that there is not the slightest hint of the idea of salvation by works in the covenant of Moses. It's not that salvation is not by works in the Law of the Old Testament and it's by grace and faith in the New Testament. That is a false dichotomy and God tried to lay that false dichotomy to rest in Exodus 19, and He did it absolutely clearly, and the fact that we don't understand that means that it's not His fault, it's ours. Here in verses 3 and 4, and Paul, by the way catches this in Romans beautifully doesn't he, for Paul's words in Romans are no different from what Moses is saying right here in Exodus 19. It's not that Paul comes along and says, "Now, it used to be that you were saved by law, now you're saved by ...." No, Paul is saying the same thing. So here in Exodus 19, God is setting His law in the framework of grace. The law is important, and we see that in verses 1 and 2. Here we see the law in the framework of grace verses 3 and 4. Now, we see the law in the context of the covenant, verses 5 and 6.

### **III. The Law in the context of the covenant.**

You may be saying to yourself, "I like what you're saying. I can go with you on this, but you know, I am looking at verse 5 and it sure does sound to me like God is saying, 'If you obey, then I will bless you.' It sure does sound to me like God is saying, 'If you obey, then you'll be My people, then I'll redeem you.' Obey equals salvation. It sure does sound like conditionality. I'll bless you on this condition. You do what I want; I'll give you something that you want."

What do you say? Here is what I say. Having just dispelled the possibility that salvation is by our own efforts in verses 3 and 4 it is impossible to interpret Moses saying the opposite in verse 5, unless you think Moses was the biggest dithering idiot of all times. He's not going to say one thing in verses 3 and 4 and turn around and say the opposite in verse 5. So, we can dispel with that particular interpretation. Moses is not contradictory, and Moses is not saying the opposite of what he said in verses 3 and 4.

There are lots of other options and mistakes on the market. Let me just remind you of a few of them. There are some people who say, "We are saved by works." Usually those are non-Christians. It's usually non-Christians who tell you, "Well, I'm trying to live a good life and I figure if my good things outweigh my bad things,

then at the end when I get up to Ole' St. Pete, he'll let me in." It's usually said just that flippantly. That's when you get really worried. If you're a non-Christian and you say that to a Christian that does not set out heart at ease. You haven't helped us. Clearly that can't be the way to salvation if what Moses says is right. There is nothing of salvation by works in the wilderness experience. It's God redeeming the helpless children of Israel. So there is false answer number one. We do not save ourselves by works.

However, Christians over the centuries have developed false answer number two. "Yes, you're not saved by works, you're saved by faith plus works. You have to believe, but you also have to obey and then you're saved." What's the emphasis of God in verse 4? I bore you on eagles' wings. The rest of Israel's history is not going to encourage you if you think that you're saved by faith plus perfect obedience. The history of Israel is not a history of perfect obedience. In fact, it's not just a history of imperfect obedience, it's a pretty lousy record. So the idea that Moses is teaching salvation by faith plus obedience here won't work either.

Then there are others who do it this way. You are saved by faith, but then you're kept in your salvation by obedience. Once again, Israel's record on that isn't going to encourage you if that's your particular view. It certainly is not Moses' emphasis in verses 3 and 4, and again, there is a false answer. Saved by grace, saved by faith kept by obedience, wrong answer number three.

Now there are others who come along and say, "Oh no, the answer is, 'You're saved by faith and you're done with works and obedience, they don't matter, they are optional.'" Wrong answer number four.

Wrong answer number five, "You're saved by faith, you're saved by God's grace, but if you're a new covenant Christian, you don't have anything to do with the law anymore, it's the Spirit that guides you." Old Christian law, new covenant Christian spirit, wrong answer number five.

Now all of those are wrong answers to what verse 5 is saying. Two things need to be kept in mind when we are asked the question of Exodus 19, "What does Moses mean when he says, 'If indeed you will obey My voice and keep My covenant, then You shall be My own possession.'" When he says, *if then*, does he mean that Israel is not a treasured possession, not a kingdom of priest, and not a holy nation, but if she will obey she will become a treasured possession, a kingdom of priest and a holy nation, or is he saying something else? Two things need to be kept in mind. First, every covenant has its responsibilities. There is no such thing as a relationship with no responsibility. As a husband, I know there are a lot of men who are questing for a *nirvana*, where there are no responsibilities in a relationship. I understand that. It doesn't exist. Every relationship has responsibilities and that is what Moses is going to begin to talk about in this great passage. So bear that in mind.

Secondly, in God's economy responsibilities are always blessings. Notice in verses 5 and 6 what are the responsibilities that are spelled out? We are to be His treasured possessions, we are to be a kingdom of priests, and we are to be a holy nation. Those are our responsibilities, but they are simultaneously blessings, the greatest blessings. Who would have dared in the garden, in the face of Adam's sin, not only to go to God and say, "O.K., Lord, why don't You give Your Son in our place so that we can have redemption and, in addition to that, why don't You make us to be Your treasured possession in all the earth, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation? Just throw that in for no extra charge." Who would have said that? Yet the Lord is saying that right here. In Exodus, in the Law of Moses, in the Old Testament, responsibilities are blessings, you don't even have to get to the New Testament. In other words, God so orders the things that He requires of us that they not only bring Him glory, they do us good; good beyond our wildest dreams.

So, bear those two things in mind and then let me give you an understanding of verses 5 and 6. Moses is not saying, keep God's law and He will make you, in return, a treasured possession, a kingdom of priest and a holy nation. Friends, they already were, He had already born them out on eagles wings. Who's *them*? His treasured possession, His kingdom of priests, His holy nation. He had already shown them grace. He's already constituted them to be His people. He had already embraced them, distinguishing them from Egypt and from the nations. Moses is not saying, "Keep the law and I will make you to be what you are not yet." Moses is saying rather, "Keep God's law and you will be what He made you for. He made you to be a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. Now keep God's law and you'll be what He made you to be."

Then you immediately respond to Him, "This is beyond my wildest dreams. How could I be that? How would I go about living like that," and He says, "Glad you asked. Exodus 20, Leviticus, Numbers. 'You shall have no other Gods before Me. You shall not bow down to an idol. You shall not take up My name in an empty and vain way. Remember My day and keep it holy. Honor your father and mother.'" He says, "Keep God's law and you will be indeed what He made you to be." When you say, "How can I be what You made me to be," the law is repeated in our ears: You shall have no other gods before Me, It's the expression of how to be what God made us to be.

Notice these beautiful blessing and responsibilities that are listed in verses 5 and 6. Notice the blessing are responsibilities, and the responsibilities are blessings. The privileges are responsibilities, and the responsibilities are privileges.

"You are My own possession." God announced in verse 5 that He owns the whole earth, but you are His treasured possession. This is a word that refers to a special item or object, or possession that a king delights in above all else. It's a phenomenal thing for God to say, that "everything in the world is Mine, but you



are the thing that I have chosen to delight in the most.” That's why Calvin can say, “We are not our own, we belong to God, therefore let us live for Him and die for Him.” Because He's chosen His people in His grace and mercy. You are a kingdom of priests.

Did you catch that? The priesthood of all believers is not a New Testament doctrine. It's an Old Testament doctrine and this doctrine is the foundation of missions. You don't have to wait until Matthew 28 to get a foundation of missions. You actually find it in Genesis 3:15, but you really find it clearly in Genesis 12:1-3, and you certainly find it here.

If the entire nation is to be a priest, what does a priest do? A priest intercedes for people. Well, if you have a nation of priests, who are they interceding for? The nations. “You are a holy nation,” He says. Set apart, chosen, a people appointed to holiness. My friends, these words are not just words for Israel. We don't have time to look, but you'll remember in I Peter 2:9, Peter talking to a congregation of Christians like yourself, and he says, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood a holy nation, a people for God's own possession.” Here we see the importance of the law, we see law in the context of grace and we see law in the context of the covenant and it is this that we will be unfolding in the weeks to come. For a Christian to understand the relationship between law and grace, faith and obedience, is one of the most important things that we can possibly know to live a fruitful and assured Christian life. Continue with me on this adventure. Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, teach us Your truth and exalt Your name in our lives. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.*

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