EXODUS 17-20: God Speaks From Sinai

When last we left the children of Israel, God’s covenant people, they were in the wilderness on a journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. We have seen along the way God demonstrating His love and compassionate care for His people. He set them free from Egyptian bondage. He continues to guide them by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. He miraculously delivered them from Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea. He has on several occasions provided water, food and rest for His people. God wants His covenant people to KNOW Him, to know that He loves them and will provide their physical and spiritual needs. God wants to bless His people and in turn He wants them to be a blessing. And because any relationship is a two-way street, God’s wants His people to love HIM and to trust HIM.

But, as we have seen in our previous lessons, the people of Israel grumble and complain constantly. Their complaint is really against God. They have short memories – can’t seem to remember anything that God has done for them. Yet God is so patient! He continues to work on His people. By the time they arrive in Canaan, if they can learn the lessons that God is trying to teach them, the people will be adequately prepared to take possession of the land God has prepared to give them and to become the great nation that God promised to Abraham way back in Genesis 12.

Our quarterly skips from the middle of Ch 17 all the way to Ch 20 but we aren’t going to do that. Let me just briefly mention several events that occur in these chapters. One day while they are on their journey, Israel is attacked from the rear by the Amalekites. These are descendants of Esau and they are fierce warriors. Moses calls upon one of his generals, Joshua, to lead a group to fight against the Amalekites. As Moses holds his hands up during the battle, Israel prevails. But when his hands are lowered, the Amalekites prevail. So, Aaron and Hur get on either side of Moses and support Moses’ hands, holding them steady. At the end of the day the Israelites rout the Amalekites. God shows the people that He will fight for them against their enemies.

Next, the people enter the land of Midian. This is territory that Moses is quite familiar with having been a shepherd there for 40 years. The people camp out in close vicinity to Mount Sinai, also known as the mountain of God. Here Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, comes to visit Moses. It’s a wonderful reunion and Moses shares with Jethro all that the Lord has been doing for His people. But Jethro’s visit serves a greater purpose. It teaches Moses a lesson he needs to learn. As God’s appointed leader of the nation, Moses is bogged down presiding over various civil matters that occupy much of his time. Jethro gives Moses wise counsel. He tells Moses he needs to divide the responsibility (delegate). He suggests that Moses choose capable men who are morally qualified and to share his workload of civil cases with them. Moses heeds Jethro’s advice.

The people of Israel now have everything they need to become a nation. They have the people – some 2 million strong. They have the land, which they’re on their way to possess. They have strong leadership. God is the Head, with Moses and other men leading as God directs them. They have an army that has seen God help them fight. The only thing missing are laws. And with Mount Sinai as the backdrop, the stage is set for God to give His Law to His covenant people.

Before we look at the 10 Commandments I feel it’s important to understand the setting. In Exodus Chapter 19 and 20 God displays His holiness. The people are encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai. God comes down in the form of a cloud and rests on top of the mountain. The people are not allowed to go anywhere near the mountain. God has set strict boundaries. In Exo 19:12 God tells Moses, “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.’” Mount Sinai is a sacred mountain and the people are not to come any closer than they already are. God is trying to protect them.

READ Exodus 19:16-21 and 25

So this is the setting for God’s giving of the 10 Commandments. As Ch 20 opens, where is Moses? He is with the people at the base of Mount Sinai.

God’s presence is manifested in fire at the top of the mountain. Hebrews 12:29 says, “our God is a consuming fire.” Here the holiness of God is on display. There is thunder, lightning and a loud noise of a trumpet. The entire mountain shakes. Moses is at the base of the mountain with the people when God speaks in a thunderous voice. We’ll look at what God says in a moment but I want you to notice how the scripture further describes the setting for us in Exodus 20, verse 18…

READ Exodus 20:18-21

The people are gripped by fear by the awesome holiness of God. The fear of the Lord was in the hearts of the people and they fall on their faces trembling. They think they’re going to die! Even though they’re a safe distance away from the mountain they can feel the ground shake. God’s awesome holy presence causes great fear among His people. There is nobody like God. He is holy. So that’s the setting.

The 10 Commandments summarizes God’s moral and ethical Law, His requirements for holy living. *[Note: Whenever we talk about “the Law” in the Bible we need to define our terms. Law can be (1) God’s moral law (behavior, ethics, personal conduct), (2) God’s ceremonial law (sacrifices, religious ceremonies), (3) God’s judicial law (governs civil matters, settling of disputes, etc)]* The 10 Commandments is a part of God’s moral Law.

READ Exodus 20:1-2

God reminds His people who He is. The people have shown they have short memories and so God reminds them who He is – “I am the LORD your God” – and reminds them what He’s done for them – “[I] brought you out of the land of Egypt.” From the time God brought Israel out of Egypt (Exo 12:36) how many times in the Bible do you think God’s people are reminded that God brought them out of the land of Egypt? I personally counted 132 times and that includes 4 NT references (1 in Acts, 2 in Hebrews and 1 in Revelation). Twenty-three of the O.T. books at some point remind the Jewish people of what God did.

READ Exodus 20:3-7

The first 3 commandments deal with our relationship toward God. Deut 6:5 summarizes the first 3 this way: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Jesus Himself quoted this verse. (1) V 3, He is the one and only God. He is the one true God. He alone is God. And as such, we are to worship Him only. (2) V 4-6, We are NOT to worship any other so-called gods. That obviously includes idols, images or likenesses. Remember that God is invisible, He is not material, He is Spirit. The only time we’ve ever actually seen God was when Jesus came and even then He was veiled in human flesh. And of course God has periodically manifested Himself in various forms. In Colossians 3:5 Paul expounds on this idea some more: “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” So basically an idol is anything that has your heart, soul or mind other than God Himself. (3) V 7, God’s name is holy and we are not to profane it in any way *[give examples of taking the name of God in vane]*. What Jesus taught in Luke 6:43-45 is that the way a person speaks reveals what’s in their heart. If someone were to slander your name, do you think it would impact your relationship with them? Sure. It affects your relationship with God as well.

READ Exodus 20:8-11

Does this 4th command still apply to us? In Christian circles there are a variety of opinions on this issue. Charles Ryrie’s commentary on this passage summarizes well what I believe so let me just share what he says with you: “The Sabbath served as a holy day and a day of rest… commemorating God’s rest after the work of creation. This is the only one of the 10 Commandments not repeated after the day of Pentecost. The Church *[a reference to the 1st century church]* made Sunday her day of worship (Acts 20:7), commemorating the resurrection of Christ.” I would only add to what Mr. Ryrie said that Sunday is a holy day to the Lord and should be a day of rest.

READ Exodus 20:12-17

These final 6 commandments have to do with our relationships toward each other, toward our fellow man. Leviticus 19:18 summarizes these 6 as follows: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” And again Jesus quoted this verse.

(5) V 12, Obey your parents while you are under their authority and later, you continue to honor them. In Eph 6:1-3 Paul says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” (6) V 13, Murder, which is the unlawful and intentional killing of a person. Jesus adds that this would include not just the physical act of taking someone’s life but also hating or insulting others. (7) V 14, Adultery, the act of unfaithfulness to a spouse, not just the physical sex act, but also includes emotional feelings. Jesus adds that this would include lusting after someone other than your spouse. (8) V 15, Stealing, dishonest or criminal taking of someone else’s possessions. (9) V 16, Lying, deceit, gossip, slander, dishonest testimony. (10) V 17, The internal longing for that which belongs to someone else – possessions, spouses, etc. Hebrews 13:5 tells us to keep our life free from the love of money and be content with what we have.

So the 10 commandments are given by God here at Mount Sinai to His people and they are basic moral laws to live by. They deal with all aspects of society and its protection – theology, worship, family, life, marriage, property, truth, honor and virtue. The obvious question we need to ask is “Do the 10 commandments still apply to us today?” Christians are split on this issue. Some say NO, because we are no longer under law but under grace. We have the H.S. and the whole canon so we don’t need to follow the 10 commandments. Others say YES, because they do reflect God’s heart and are reaffirmed in the N.T. and by Christ.

Just remember what I said earlier. The 10 commandments are part of God’s moral law and reflect His desire that His people have holy behavior. If He is going to use them as an instrument of divine blessing then they need to be holy as He is holy. So in that sense, yes. Jesus Himself said, ““If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15). The Apostle John writing to the church late in the 1st Century said, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” (1 Jn 5:3) And then again later he wrote, “And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.” (2 Jn 6)

Application: What does Jesus save us from? From hell. From eternal damnation. And what sends a person to hell? Violating, transgressing God’s moral law (which includes the 10 commandments). For a person to be saved they must realize their need to be saved. The Law then serves a purpose in that it reveals God’s holy and perfect standard and it shows us that we are sinners. And if we’re going to be saved, delivered from condemnation, from hell, then that will come only by God’s grace thru faith in Christ. Contrary to a lot of people’s opinion, grace is not just a NT concept. It runs throughout the OT as well. Salvation has always been by grace thru faith. We see God’s grace with Adam and Eve in the garden as He clothes them in animal skins; Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Moses in Exo 33 found grace. In Habakkuk we see that the just shall live by faith. So grace is not just a NT truth, it runs throughout the Bible.

Romans 3:20 says, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” That was the whole purpose of the Law. The Law did not save. Romans 3:21-22 tell us that “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it - the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” Romans Chapter 4 tells us that the Law brought about wrath. Romans 5:13 says, “For sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.” We know that sin existed prior to the Law because death reigned from Adam even before the giving of the Law. But there was not a full understanding of God’s moral law until the written Law was laid down, though the consequences for not keeping the law were already in place because of the reality of death. The Law came so that our understanding of sin might increase. There was an understanding of sin in the Garden, but there was an increased understanding of sin when the Law came through Moses. And sin produced death (both spiritual and physical). In Romans 7:7 Paul says, “For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” The law shows us that we fall short of God’s standard, which is perfection. So the Law shows us that we are sinners. And only then are we ready to receive the Gospel.

Illustration – you’re sick and you go to the doctor. The doc says we need to take some x-rays and run tests. At that point you don’t throw up your hands and say, “It’s over! I’m a dead man!” No, the x-rays and tests are done to determine what your problem is. And when they show you what the problem is, you don’t just stop there. You get the proper treatment to take care of the problem. At Mount Sinai we see the holiness and we understand the requirements of God. At Mount Sinai we find out we have a problem and that problem is sin, violating God’s holy standard. Oh, but it is at Mount Calvary that we receive the treatment for our sin problem. At Mount Calvary we experience God’s love and mercy. At Mount Calvary we are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus.

It was Martin Luther who said, “The first duty of the gospel preacher is to declare God’s Law and to show the nature of sin because it will act as a school master and bring him to everlasting life which is in Jesus Christ.”

Charles Spurgeon who said, “They will never accept grace until they tremble before a just and holy Law.”

John Stott wrote, “We cannot come to Christ to be justified until we’ve first been to Moses to be condemned. Once we have gone to Moses and acknowledged our sin, guilt and condemnation, we must not stay there, we must leave Moses and go to Christ.”

To get a full understanding of God you must not only recognize His love, His grace and mercy, but also His holiness. Sing: “Grace Greater Than Our Sin”