

# Deliverance From Slavery

Message 12

*An Awesome God*

Exodus 19:1-20:21

## *Free at Last!*

In two weeks it will be all over. The endless differential equations will never haunt you again. Sean's senior thesis – all 110 pages of it – will now keep his professor up at night. The terrible exams will all be behind you. And you will be basking in the pleasure of RUF's summer camp! It must have been like that for the Israelites. Never in their lives had they known a day of freedom. Brutal toil had haunted them from cradle to grave as they served their Egyptian masters. But now it was all over. Now they wake every morning to a new day – a life of freedom! I bet they had to pinch themselves to be sure it was not a dream.

But it was also just the beginning. For the people of Israel, four hundred years of slavery was over, but a new life as an independent nation – a people free to serve God – was just starting. It will take hundreds more years for them to learn who this Yahweh God is, what He expects, and how to serve Him. There will be plenty of bumps along the road. Already they have faced a severe water shortage, an attack by a desert tribe, and the problem of organizing several million people for a trip across the desert. Yahweh intervened and brought them through these troubles. He caused the rock to produce water, He gave Israel a victory in battle, and He sent Moses' father-in-law to help organize the nation. So far the Israelites have seen Yahweh meet every need they encounter. Are these three incidents sufficient to persuade them to trust God forever?

It has been three months now, and the people of Israel are approaching a special place. To the scorpions and birds that lived there it was just another mountain. But this mountain was different – not in its appearance, but because God appeared there. We have seen this mountain before. In Exodus 3:1 we saw Moses as he wandered this mountain. It is called Horeb, or Sinai. It is the mountain of God. Here is where God first spoke to Moses in the burning bush. And here is where God will reveal Himself to the people of Israel.

## *The God Who Speaks*

The Bible records many occasions when God spoke to people. Sometimes He appeared visibly. But this time when God appeared before the whole nation is the most significant. All other appearances of God either anticipate or reflect this event. From Exodus to Revelation God will reveal Himself in ways reminiscent of His appearance on Mount Sinai. This event is the paradigm of God's self-revelation, and thus it provides the most comprehensive picture of who Yahweh is.

We can consider each aspect of God's self-revelation – and we will – but first we must grasp the overall picture of God. At risk of sounding trite, God is awesome. This is a noble word which has been trivialized by overuse. What I mean is that the overall message of this passage is that God is overwhelming, awe-inspiring, too amazing for words or pictures to convey. The Israelites did not only hear the words of God – they saw the lightning, they heard the trumpet, they smelled the smoke, they felt the fire. They knew down into the depth of their bones that they were in the presence of the Creator and Master of the universe. And they knew that they were nothing before Him. It was an awesome experience because Yahweh is an awesome God.

This passage reveals God in eleven different ways. First, it reveals Yahweh as a God who speaks. This might seem like a trivial observation, for we have heard God speak all along. From the beginning of this book God has been speaking. But this is nevertheless an amazing and profound thing – for Yahweh is the only God who speaks. Other nations have their own gods. Egypt had numerous gods, which they depended on to provide for the nation and protect it from enemies. Sometimes the priests of these gods

would claim that their god had spoken, but they were lying or deceived. Yahweh is the only God who can speak, because He is the only true God. Psalm 115 mocks the fraudulent claims of other gods.

Why should the nations say,  
“Where is their God?”  
Our God is in the heavens;  
he does all that he pleases.  
Their idols are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.  
They have mouths, but do not speak;  
eyes, but do not see.  
Psalm 115:2-5

But just because God *can* speak does not mean that He will. God could just as easily have kept to Himself and not bothered with these troublesome Israelites. But this is not who God is. Our God is a God who can and does speak to us.

Our God is also a saving God. Yahweh reminds the people here that He set them free from their slavery and brought them safely through the challenges of the desert. This meeting would not have been possible if God had not delivered the Israelites. Yahweh called the Israelites into the desert to worship Him, but they could not. They were trapped in slavery. So God took the initiative and enabled them to do what they could not do on their own. He saved them so that they might worship Him.

The reason God speaks and saves is that He is a loving God. Some people obstinately refuse to see this, but it is as plain as the nose on your face. Richard Dawkins, in his recent best-seller *The God Delusion*, vividly expresses how many people see God.

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that Dawkins enjoys hating God, but the truth is far different than he describes. God did not have to deliver the Israelites. He did not have to fight the Egyptians for their freedom. He did not have to lead them carefully to safety. He did not have to speak to them. But for some reason – a reason we cannot fathom – God loved those Israelites. And here in verse five God says that He wants Israel to be His “treasured possession.” Of all the nations in the world – many more numerous, powerful, and civilized than Israel – God chose these people. And just as you will choose a mate out of all the thousands of people you meet because he or she alone delights you – so God chose Israel because He loved her and delighted in her.

### ***The Unapproachable God***

It is important to establish these points – which we find in the opening verses of chapter 19 – because now God’s self-revelation takes a different turn. Yahweh is not only a speaking, saving, and loving God – He is also an unapproachable God. We see this in the verses that follow and in the rest of this chapter. God brought the Israelites to this place to meet Him, and then He tells them not to come too close, lest they die. And the way God subsequently reveals Himself – in fire, lightning, and earthquake – would hardly encourage anyone to mess with Him.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (New York, NY; Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006) p. 51.

It is passages like this that provoke people like Richard Dawkins to so much hostility against God. Part of the problem is a root hatred of God. People who refuse to worship God cannot stand God's demand for obedience, backed up by His claim to have created them, and reinforced by His promise to judge them. So when they open the Bible, they read it through a lens of antagonism to God. But another part of the problem is misunderstanding. If all we knew about God were this chapter, He might seem a capricious character. First He calls Israel to Him and declares His love, then He tells them to back off and clean up, lest they die. We have to read the rest of the Bible to understand what is going on here.

The fundamental reality which affects everything in the universe is man's sin. Sin has broken our relationship with God, damaged all other relationships, and critically harmed the universe. Ever since Adam rebelled against God by eating the forbidden fruit, man has been under a death sentence. But God is merciful, and God promised to save mankind by a child who would be born some day. So we live with this dual reality – of man's sinfulness, which makes him subject to God's anger – and God's love, which welcomes man in spite of his sin.

What we see starkly illustrated here is that sinful man cannot approach God. The problem was not that the Israelites got dirty traveling from Egypt – and even less that sex is dirty. All this washing is a reminder of this fundamental reality – that man is polluted by sin and unfit to approach a holy God. The washing was a physical illustration of the necessity of an internal, spiritual cleansing. Until sin is rooted out from the heart, man will never be able to approach God.

### ***God of Fire and Cloud***

God gave the Israelites three days to get ready to meet Him. Then the universe convulsed! Two weeks ago we saw God reveal Himself in fire and cloud. That was the pillar that led the nation through the desert. By day it appeared as a tall cloud, and by night it was a huge flame of fire. Today there were also thunder, lightning, a trumpet, smoke, and an earthquake. This is what God is really like! When God comes in all His power, even the universe quakes in awe.

From now until the end God will reveal Himself in thunder, lightning, cloud, trumpet, fire, smoke, and earthquake. At the most pivotal moments in God's dealing with us, most of these signs appear together. But all through the Bible you see these signs of God's presence and power at work to save His people and to reveal His glory. Let us look at a few passages, beginning with a verse from the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. This is the song that Hannah sang to God after he opened her womb and gave her a boy.

The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. (1 Samuel 2:10)

Here Hannah picked up one of these metaphors for God's saving power and incorporated it into her song of praise for rescuing her from shame and humiliation. Psalm 77 is a prayer for God to deliver Israel like He did in the past. The psalmist reminds God how He showed His power when He rescued His people from Egypt.

You are the God who works wonders;  
you have made known your might among the peoples.  
You with your arm redeemed your people,  
the children of Jacob and Joseph.  
When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you,  
they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled.  
The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder;  
your arrows flashed on every side.

The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;  
your lightnings lighted up the world;  
the earth trembled and shook.  
Psalm 77:14-18

Here the psalmist uses cloud, thunder, wind, lightning and earthquake as images of God's redeeming power. The prophet Isaiah warned Israel to turn from her sins and predicted disaster if she would not. Then after Israel's punishment, God will return and save her again from her enemies. Notice how Isaiah describes the visit of the Lord of hosts.

But the multitude of your foreign foes shall be like small dust,  
and the multitude of the ruthless like passing chaff.  
And in an instant, suddenly, you will be visited by the LORD of hosts  
with thunder and with earthquake and great noise,  
with whirlwind and tempest,  
and the flame of a devouring fire.  
And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel,  
all that fight against her and her stronghold and distress her,  
shall be like a dream, a vision of the night. (Isaiah 29:5-7)

Our God speaks to His people. And when He does, it often sounds like a trumpet or a roar. All through scripture trumpets signify God speaking through His word and prophets. Listen to Jeremiah.

Declare in Judah,  
and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say,  
"Blow the trumpet through the land;  
cry aloud and say,  
'Assemble,  
and let us go into the fortified cities!'" (Jeremiah 4:5)

Notice the parallelism in the first two lines of Jeremiah's message. "Blow the trumpet" and "cry aloud" are parallel. Blowing a trumpet is a metaphor for proclaiming the word of the Lord. Now listen as Zechariah alters and combines these metaphors.

Then the LORD will appear over them,  
and his arrow will go forth like lightning;  
the Lord GOD will sound the trumpet  
and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south. (Zechariah 9:14)

Moving to the New Testament, Jesus' death and resurrection were accompanied by an earthquake.

When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54)

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. (Matthew 28:1-2)

And when we get to Revelation, these images burst forth from practically every chapter. It all began

with a trumpet. This is not surprising, since Revelation is the word of Jesus, the Word of God in flesh. And God's word comes to us as a trumpet call.

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet. (Revelation 1:10)

And when we get to chapter four we see the throne room of heaven itself. If you thought Mount Sinai was impressive, listen to this!

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne...From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God... (Revelation 4:1-2, 5)

Throughout Revelation, when God acts in some decisive way, these signs burst forth upon the earth. We will read only one such passage.

Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. (Revelation 8:5)

So what is the purpose of all this? Why the repeated use of these signs and symbols for the work of God? It is to show in the most compelling way possible the power, holiness, and glory of God. Usually you are safely inside when there is thunder and lightning. Perhaps you have never been threatened by a fire or an earthquake. But if you are caught in a burning forest, or suffocated by smoke, or rocked by an earthquake, or hit by lightning – you will be terrified by the power of these forces. God is a spirit. He does not inhabit a created body as we do. People constantly forget His presence and power. It is by these images that God reminds us not to take Him lightly. Just as the Israelites would die if they got too close to God, you also will die if you trifle with Him.

But this awesome power of God also comforts us with the knowledge that God is able to protect His own people from all enemies. If God controls the earth and the sky, what is there in heaven or on earth that can harm us? As Paul said in his letter to the Romans,

I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

When you hear thunder or trumpets, see lightning or clouds, fire and smoke, or feel the earth quake – remember the one true God who created and rules the universe – the God who saves His people and destroys His enemies – the God who loves His people, but will not tolerate sin. Remember and love and fear Him.

### ***Life in the Covenant***

The ten commandments form the heart of true morality and are the basis of western civilization. This is not the place for an exploration of the ten commandments. Instead we will simply observe their place in the life of God's people.

Since the ten commandments are the basis of our moral system, people assume that the purpose of

these laws was to create a moral nation. They further assume that these laws formed the basis of God's relationship with Israel. Both of these assumptions are false. Israel was not saved by the ten commandments, and these laws do not express the heart of God's relationship with Israel. In other words, God's supreme goal for Israel was not that they keep these laws. Rather, God's supreme goal for Israel was that she be His "treasured possession." Later in the Bible God uses marriage language to describe His relationship with His people. The most succinct description of the nature of God's covenant was this phrase, "that they should be my people, and I should be their God."

Notice that God did not give the law until He had expressed His love for Israel and Israel had accepted His offer of love. *Then* God gave the ten commandments. He gave the law *after* He saved Israel as a rule for maintaining an existing love relationship – not for creating it. Here God is saying, "I made you and I know how you operate. Here are instructions for life. If you live this way, your life will go well."

### ***God With Us***

This passage in Exodus is the paradigm for God's revelation. Here we see in fullest form the nature and character of God. But there came a time when God revealed Himself in far greater fullness and glory – when God revealed His love and power far better than in fire, cloud, earthquake, and trumpet. There came a time when God revealed Himself in human flesh. And as of old in the Sinai desert, God came in order to save His people. Listen to the announcement of the coming of God.

...behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:20-23)

Jesus is supremely God with us. In Jesus God is not far away, high up on a mountain, but near us, rubbing shoulders with us, eating and laughing with us. The apostle John tells us that Jesus reveals God far better than Moses did.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (John 1:14, 16-18)

And the writer of Hebrews tells us that we who believe in Jesus worship at a place far more awesome than the smoking, quaking mountain of Exodus.

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:18-24)

And finally, Jesus shows us that in the New Covenant He established through His death and

resurrection, the hope of fellowship with God is fully realized.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away...and I will be his God and he will be my son." (Revelation 21:1-4, 7)

Jesus has accomplished this for you – you who believe in His name. Your exile is over. Your slavery has come to an end. Jesus has brought you into the promised land of fellowship with God. You are the bride of Christ – the delight of His eyes. You are God's precious son – His firstborn – the one He loves more than Himself. Now go. Rejoice in His love, and serve Him in love.

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April 22, 2008