



THE BOOK OF EXODUS

LESSON 17– STUDY QUESTIONS EXODUS 19:1-19; 20:18-21

DAY ONE

1. What thought from the reflection or commentary inspired you this week, and what did you do as a result?

Read Exodus 19:1-4

2a. Verse 1 speaks of the new moon. How many new moons had there been since the Israelites left Egypt and what length of time would that indicate?

b. According to verse 2, from where had the Israelites come, what area had they entered and where did they camp?

3. Where did Moses go and what happened there, according to verse 3?

4. In verse 3, God commanded Moses to speak to the Israelites. What three things does God command Moses to say to the people, according to verse 4?

5. The eagle is often used in scripture as a symbol of God's strength, protection and /or comfort. Look up the following verses and record what you find that references one of these.

Deuteronomy 32:9-11

Psalm 91:3-4

Isaiah 40:29-31

6. CONNECTION: This passage contains an encounter between Moses and God in which God reminds His people what He has done for them against the Egyptians. He has freed them from the bonds of slavery. He has freed them and borne them on eagles' wings to bring them to Himself. Because, we are also God's people, we can take comfort in these reassuring words. God has not only saved us from slavery to sin, but also, He has freed us to soar on His wings about the things that enslave us, to bring us to Himself. What does this freedom, which God has brought to you, mean to you?

Let this prayer from the Diocese of Liverpool England lead you into God's enfolding eagles' wings: "Christ, who by his death and resurrection has set you free from sin, redeem your hearts and minds from all that holds you captive and grant you grace and strength to walk with him into the fullness of his promises to you and blessing of God Almighty ..."

DAY TWO
Read Exodus 19:5-8

7a. As yesterday's passage closed, God reminded His people of what He had done for them and what He had done to the Egyptians. Now, in verse 5, God sets out the terms of His covenant with the Israelites. What is required of them?

b. If they do this, what will be the result?

NOTE: The chief characteristic and the main tenet of the Jewish religion to this day, is covenant. The word "covenant" has been defined as the agreement between God and the ancient Israelites, in which God promised to protect them if they kept His law and were faithful to Him.

8a. In verse 5, we learn that God has indicated He wants the Israelites to be His treasured possession out of all the peoples on earth. Since all of humankind is God's creation, God could have chosen any people on earth. What phrase indicates this (verse 5)?

b. Refer to Exodus 4:22 and record what God told Pharaoh about Israel.

9a. According to verse 6, how does God describe the Israelite people?

b. These words are familiar with Catholics. When do we hear these words spoken?

10. Authors in the New Testament also refer to God's people (we are included) using similar terms. Read the following verses and record the words from Exodus 19:6 that you find in each.

1 Peter 2:5 and 9

Revelation 1:6

Revelation 5:9-10

11a. Moses is directed to take this message back to his people. How did Moses begin the process of spreading this word (verse 7)?

b. How did the people respond and what did they say (verse 8)?

12. CONNECTION: This passage contains a series of events that is spectacular in the history of the Jewish people. They have been CHOSEN by God. They are a treasured possession out of all the peoples of the earth. They are the objects of God's special favor. You might ask why. Are they genetically or morally better than other peoples? Why didn't God pick the Egyptians or the Assyrians for His special people? Refer to Deuteronomy 7:6-9. What help, if any, does this give you?

There may not be a clear-cut answer to this question, but just as the Israelites were chosen as God's treasured possession, we, too, can claim that honor. The key is our response to God's love. Can you say with the Israelites, "Everything that You desire, God, I will do."?

Read 1 Peter 2:9-10. What were Peter's words to his Christians which assured them (and continue to assure us) that God's promises to His people continue forever? Take each of those personally as you begin to pray.

DAY THREE
Read Exodus 19:9-12

13a. As the Israelites camped in the wilderness of Sinai, they once again listened to Moses relay God's message to them. In the first part of verse 9, the Lord speaks to Moses. What is the Lord going to do?

b. Up to this point, Moses has served the Israelites as God's messenger. What does verse 9 say to indicate that this will change and how will this affect the relationship between Moses and the Israelites?

14a. The Lord continues giving instructions to Moses. What is Moses to do (verse 10)?

b. Record the dictionary definition of the word "consecrate."

15a. How are the people to prepare for the consecration and what could be the symbolic significance of this?

b. Read Revelation 7:13-14. Record any similarities you see with today's passage.

16a. According to verse 11, what will the Israelites do and why?

b. Read Luke 18:33. What comparisons can be made between this verse and Exodus 19:11?

17a. What is Moses instructed to do next according to the first part of verse 12?

b. Moses goes on to give the people two warnings. What are these warnings and what will be the consequence for failing to heed them?

18. CONNECTION: Just as the Lord told Moses to set limits for the people, we are often required to set limits for ourselves (i.e. how fast to drive, how much to eat or drink, how late to sleep, how often to pray). It is seldom an easy task, but if we do it prayerfully, God will help us make wise choices. Think of a time when the limits you set were determined by prayer. Think of another time when your decision was made with no prayer involved. Compare what happened in each situation. What differences can you note?

Read and record Matthew 7:7 (good memory verse) and let those thoughts lead you into prayer.

DAY FOUR
Read Exodus 19:13-15

19. Yesterday in verse 12, God set limits for the people at Sinai. In verse 13, to whom does this restriction apply and what will be the consequences for those who disobey and touch the mountain?

20a. In the first phrase of verse 12, God restricts the kinds of execution that may be employed. What does He say?

b. Refer to Leviticus 21:1 and Numbers 19:11 for possible insight as to why God included this stipulation. What do you find?

21. At the end of verse 13, the ban is lifted. What is the signal and what may the people now do?

22a. When Moses comes down the mountain what does he do and what do the people do, according to verse 14?

b. It was part of the Israelites' belief that after sexual relations, one must be ritually cleansed before one could partake in sacred activities. How does verse 15 indicate this?

NOTE: You can refer to Leviticus, chapters 15 and 18, to learn more about this restriction.

23. CONNECTION: God has set His people apart and holds them as a precious possession. They are a holy priesthood. Now He is preparing them to hear His voice. All these elements have liturgical connotations: From the answering in unison to the blast of the trumpet, to the ritual cleansing and abstinence, the Jewish liturgies are filled with formal ceremonial rituals, prescribed readings and prayers recited from the Torah (God's Word). Sometimes we may feel impatient with our church's liturgy—the long readings, the rote prayers, and the formal rituals; yet, like the Jewish services, each element has a sacred purpose and meaning. How do you feel about the liturgy of your Catholic faith? How do you prepare to meet God in liturgy?

Spend some time today reflecting on the Mass. Ask God to open your heart to the beauty, wonder and majesty of this awesome celebration.

DAY FIVE

Read Exodus 19:16-19

24a. On what day does verse 16 open?

b. Name the four things that could be heard and seen that morning.

25. What was the effect of the trumpet (end of verse 16)?

26. Where did Moses lead the people and for what reason?

27. Describe what the people saw when they reached the mountain (verse 18).

28. Describe the interaction that occurred between God and Moses (verse 19).

29. CONNECTION: Again today we see Moses' amazing courage and faithfulness. Moses took the lead and brought the trembling people out of the camp "to meet God". This moment of witness of God's greatness was a moment of conversion for the people. Have you ever brought someone to meet God – the mighty and glorious Ruler of All? There are many ways one could show them our God. OR...Who has brought YOU to meet God? How were you shown God, the awesome Creator of the Universe? Record some details here of whichever situation connect you with this passage.

Read and record Psalm 8:1. Set aside some time this week to spend in contemplation of your awesome God- perhaps in nature, perhaps in the Blessed Sacrament, perhaps in His Word, perhaps in prayer.

DAY SIX

Read Exodus 20:18-21

This week's commentary skips the end of chapter 19 in which God continues to speak with Moses to the top of the mountain and the first part of chapter 20 in which the Ten Commandments are handed down. These verses will be studied in Lesson 18. Today, we continue with the Israelites at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

30. According to verse 18, what do the people witness and what is their reaction?

31a. What did the people say to Moses & why do you think they made this proposal (verse 19)?

32a. What were the first four words of Moses' answer to the people (verse 20)?

b. This message is repeated throughout Scripture. Read the following references and record who was speaking and who received the message in each passage:

Genesis 15:1

Numbers 21:34

Mark 6:49-50

Luke 1:30

33. In Exodus 20:20, there are two kinds of "fear" mentioned. How would you explain the difference between them and what impact might each have on a person?

34a. According to verse 21, what did the people continue to do and, what did Moses do?

b. What do you think Moses' action showed about his character?

35. CONNECTION: Moses spent time on the mountain alone with God and then came down the mountain to tell God's people, "Do not be afraid." It is clear from the above references that God is caring and compassionate. Over and over in the Bible we hear the words, "Do not be afraid." In his encyclical, "The Splendor of Truth", and on his many journeys around the world, John Paul II tells us to "be not afraid." Be not afraid in pursuit of the life of faith, to trust God, to stand for the right values, to be faithful to your spouse, or unselfish to friends, etc., etc. Of what are you afraid? What message do these words have for you personally, in your life right now?

Refer back to the verses you looked up about "fear" in Question 32b. Record the phrase or verse from the passage that is most comforting and "en-courage-ing" for you. Then let that fearlessness lead you into prayer.



THE BOOK OF EXODUS

LESSON 17– COMMENTARY
By Rev. Paul J. Niemann, D.Min
EXODUS 19:1-19; 20:18-21

Exodus 19:1-4

With chapter 19 we begin *Part II* of the Book of Exodus. We have learned of Israel's bitter experience in Egypt, their miraculous liberation and their journey through the wilderness. Now they will arrive at Mount Sinai, the mountain of God, and will remain there for all that is recounted in the remainder of the book of Exodus, all of Leviticus and Numbers 1:1 - 10:10.

On the third new moon: the first new moon is the month of spring, Nisan; the Passover meal was eaten on the fourteenth day of Nisan. The journey into the desert beyond the oasis of Elim occurred during the second month [16:1]. At the beginning of the third month, that is, just over six weeks, *after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai.* The Jewish Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*) is observed on the fiftieth day after Passover and commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. In later times, the Feast of Weeks was called by a Greek name, *Pentecost*, meaning fiftieth [Tobit 2:1; 2 Maccabees 12:32; Acts 2:1; I Corinthians 16:8].

Still in the desert, Israel has now *entered the wilderness of Sinai*, the region near the base of the mountain also called Sinai. As explained in Lesson 13, the exact location of Mount Sinai is disputed. It is generally identified with Horeb, the *mountain of God* in the land of Midian [3:1], but this gives no further certainty as to its location. The traditional "Mount Sinai," also known by its Arabic name *Jebel Musa* or "Mountain of Moses," is about 7,500 feet high and is located in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula. This "Mount Sinai" was first identified in the 4th century A.D. and is the site of the Orthodox Monastery of St. Catherine.

How could the location of such a holy site have been forgotten by Israel? The Jewish biblical scholar W. Gunther Plaut writes:

... it is possible that the failure of Jewish tradition to preserve the knowledge of the locale had its deeper reason. The Torah states expressly (Deut. 34:6) that the place of Moses' grave remains unknown, presumably in order that it

would not become a place of pilgrimage and the person of the lawgiver the object of adulation or even adoration. Similarly, had the locale of the holy mountain been firmly known in later centuries, Jerusalem and its temple could never have become the center of Jewish life, for they would have been inferior in holiness to the sacred mountain. Sinai thus became, either by design or happenstance, a concept rather than a place, its universal importance heightened by the vagueness of its site, its timelessness unfettered by an identifiable place.¹

There was little need to recall the mountain in the desert once the Temple Mount in Jerusalem had been established as the favored dwelling-place of God [Psalms 48 and 87].

Our story continues as the people gather about the mountain and Moses alone is summoned to go up to meet God: *Israel camped there in front of the mountain ... Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain.* These words remind us that an encounter with the Holy One is always by the summons of God, not the convenience of humans.

When Moses approaches his God, the message is a reminder that the promise of 3:12 has now been fulfilled: the people have indeed been brought out of Egypt and they will worship YHWH *on this mountain.* The LORD says: *You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.* The eagle was respected for its swiftness and surety in flight as well as its ability to soar to great heights. In the same way, YHWH has brought his people to his mountain home quickly and safely, to the amazement of other nations.

Exodus 19:5-8

God has taken the initiative and has set his beloved people free. What will they do with their freedom? The LORD places a challenge before them once again: will they fail as before, or choose aright? The LORD's choice of the Israelite people is irrevocable, but it remains for them to accept God's choice. So *if they obey God's voice and keep his covenant* they will grow and mature in their dignity as the chosen people. God invites them to be a *treasured possession out of all the peoples, ... a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.* They will begin to grasp what it means to live in God's grace and favor; they will serve as an example to all other nations. Their uniqueness will be comparable to the consecrated status of the priesthood, totally dedicated and set apart for the service of God.

These words may be compared to the Christian doctrines of grace and merit. We do not earn God's love by being obedient to the commandments. God's love for us is an eternal,

¹ Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, p. 520.

irrevocable fact. In response to human sin, God sent his Son to reconcile us; his death and resurrection accomplished once and for all our re-union with God, our *redemption*. But, as creatures with free will, we can choose to believe or not believe, to accept or reject this grace, this gift of God. If we believe, if we choose God, Christ's act of redemption becomes real in our lives. That is what the apostle Paul means when he speaks of our being *justified by faith* [Galatians 2:16]. Our acceptance is manifested in our behavior, our living according to the covenant. As the apostle James says, our faith is shown in our good works [James 2:17-18]. The more we choose to live in God's love, the more loving we will be; we become more and more like God. We then become partners with God as we grow toward *salvation*, or as the Eastern Church calls it, *deification*, sharing fully God's life. God honors our efforts to live a grace-filled life and responds to our human love with divine love, experienced by us as reward. It is actually our spiritual growth and progress toward salvation through the grace of God in us. This is what is meant by merit.

Like the Israelites, we are the chosen people; *if we keep the covenant, we will be a priestly kingdom, a holy nation.*

Moses serves as the intermediary of the covenant. He sets *before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him* and reports *the words of the people to the LORD*. Notice the enthusiastic response of Israel to the offer an all-embracing, permanent covenant: *Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do*. These words will be spoken again as the covenant is ratified in chapter 24. The rest of Israel's history will witness their alternating forgetfulness and remembrance of their solemn assent to God.

Exodus 19:9-12

Two key words will guide our study for the next few days: *theophany* and *holiness*. A theophany is a manifestation of the Deity. Since God is a pure spirit, invisible, inaudible, unable to be grasped by any sense, a revelation of God to humans takes place through some physical medium, such as the luminous cloud of 13:21-22.

Holiness, in the Old Testament, is a very difficult concept for modern people. The Hebrew for "holy," *kadosh*, basically means "separate." God is not to be confused with his creation. God is not like anything that human beings can imagine. God is different, totally other. God is "holy."

Human beings have often been aware of the presence of the Holy One among them. Their reaction to this extraordinary presence may be fear, awe, unworthiness or intense fascination. As we saw in chapter 3, our longing to see God must not become mere curiosity. God's appearance among us may be likened to a high-voltage wire fallen in our back yard. Those who attempt to grasp such power will not survive.

Humans know that those who are “touched by God” are changed. They become different, unusual. Whatever belongs to God, whether a sacred place, a sacrificed offering or a chosen person, shares something of the “other-worldliness” of God. These sanctified creatures are to be respected and may not be treated as common.

Holiness is sometimes spoken of as a kind of contagion; often the Bible uses the term “unclean” to indicate, not filth or sinfulness, but the presence of a divine force that may not be tampered with [Leviticus 15:16-20, for example]. Humans may use whatever is “clean” but the “unclean” is entirely God’s property, to be left alone.

YHWH announces that there will be a theophany, one that can be both seen and heard: *I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.* The people will, of course, not see God, but the divine manifestation will increase their faith in the word that Moses proclaims to them as God’s message.

Moses informs the LORD of people’s readiness to accept the covenant [19:8] and the LORD gives them their instructions: *consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day.* The term *consecrate them* is also translated *have them sanctify themselves* or *have them purify themselves*. This means abstinence from all sexual activity as will be explained later.

In addition, the area around the mountain is to be cordoned off: *on the third day the LORD will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death.’* The sanctity of this earthly throne of God is so great that trespassing on it is a capital offense.

Exodus 19:13-15

As we read yesterday, the “holiness” of YHWH’s appearing excludes all human contact. Even the trespassers on the sacred mountain must be avoided, for they will have “caught” some of the divine energy. So Moses is instructed: *no hand shall touch them, but they shall be stoned or shot with arrows; whether animal or human being, they shall not live.* The theophany will be temporary and so will be the sanctity of the mountain. When the apparition ceases the mountain will become itself again: *when the trumpet sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain.* We recall that it is God alone who is the Holy One, not the place itself.

Moses descends *from the mountain to the people* to relay their instructions. *And he said to the people, “Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman.”* Sexual intimacy unleashes its own energy, its own kind of “holiness” in people’s lives. It is both an

experience of ecstasy, literally, “going out from oneself” and the power of giving new life. Together these powers of sex make humans godlike [Genesis 1:27]. The ancients believed that juxtaposing the release of sexual energy and the approach to some manifestation of God was dangerous. This is not to be understood as the condemnation of sexuality as evil or sinful.

More likely, it is the awareness that people can only take so much. The sacredness of marital relations and the sacredness of offering of sacrifice require their own space and time. To be totally “for God” excludes any other intimacy. Hence, the Israelite priests were forbidden to have sex when they were about to offer sacrifice; even an involuntary nocturnal emission disqualified a man from Temple service.

In the later Essene monastic movement in Judaism, and the monastics of Christianity, celibacy was taken as a permanent way of life, so as to live always in a state of sacrificial purity before God. This celibate consecration was then extended to include all priests of the Roman Catholic Church; in the Eastern Orthodox Church, bishops are chosen exclusively from celibate monastics.

Exodus 19:16-19

On the morning of the third day after Moses' meeting with God and the announcement of the preparation of the people, the theophany begins. In addition to the thick cloud there was thunder and lightning and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled ... Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. These descriptions have led some to suppose that Mount Sinai is a volcanic mountain. The *trumpet blast* is not from a human source, but a metaphor for the sound accompanying the eruption of the mountain, possibly from the escape of the pressurized vapors and gases of the volcano. *Fire*, extremely hot *smoke* (like that *of a kiln*) and earthquake are all phenomena which accompany an eruption.

This natural explanation should not obscure the real significance of our story: *Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God.* YHWH, previously revealed in power over the sea and land, has chosen to make his magnificence known again, upon a mountain, where the ancients supposed that gods lived.

Central to the faith of Israel is that YHWH is never seen, but heard [Genesis 3:8; Deuteronomy 4:33; Isaiah 6:8; Ezekiel 2:2]. In the great revelation at Sinai, the LORD enters into conversation with Moses: *as the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder* [Job 37:4; Psalm 29:3; John 12:29].

Exodus 20:18-21

The words of God to Moses are the “Ten Words,” in Greek, the *Decalogue*. The Decalogue is contained in chapter 20, verses 1-17. These will be studied in the next lesson. Today we will continue with the story of the theophany.

The sights and sounds of the presence of God are enough to inspire reverence and awe. The *thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking* cause the Israelites to be *afraid* and keep their *distance*. They promise *Moses* their obedience, for fear of being overwhelmed by the holiness of God: *do not let God speak to us, or we will die*.

The covenant, however, is not between the people and their prophet. YHWH reveals one aspect of his glory lest the people fail to take the covenant seriously. The people need to know that their God is not a pet, not a household item to be used and set aside. Their God is the source of the existence of the entire universe and the wellspring of every power. YHWH is Being itself, the sole Author of life and death.

At the same time, the holy covenant is not be a relationship of fear, in the sense of fright or panic. This kind of fear would only end in dejection or rebellion. The Israelite people are not to be slaves anymore. As they mature in the exercise of their freedom, they will discover the awesome consequences of being free. Life and death, blessing and curse are set before them. They are never to be afraid to choose, for not to choose is a choice. Instead, they will become even more free as they learn to reject what is evil and choose what is good [Genesis 3:5; Deuteronomy 30:19; Isaiah 7:15; Romans 12:9-11].

Moses says: *Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin*. The heart of the covenant is a conversion to the ways of God. At first, sin must be immediately punished and virtue rewarded so that people will learn to hate sin and love goodness, in the same way that children are disciplined to encourage virtuous behavior. Similarly, the immature people of God avoid sin because of fear. The mature adult needs no external discipline because he or she has internalized standards of right behavior and loves goodness because it is good. Likewise, Israel will discover that the true nature of YHWH is love. Their fear of punishment must mature into a holy “fear of the LORD,” the fear that one has not loved well in response to love. This holy fear, or reverence, will lead the people to wisdom [Psalm 111:10]; wisdom in turn will lead to life with God.