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## Exodus 19

### God's Exodus People: Dirty People Meet a Holy God

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If you've ever been in a relationship, chances are you and your significant other at one point had to DTR—define the relationship. That's the moment when you've been seeing each other for a while, maybe you're friends and things seem to be getting serious, so you label it. Aka. "We're a couple." DTRs can go really well if you each like each other, or they can go really poorly if one person feels differently.

In the case of Monica and me, we DTRd literally thirty second after I officially asked her out. This is because six weeks before this I asked Monica out, then un-asked her out. Monica wanted to get it in writing the exact nature of our relationship. And by that I mean, make it Facebook official. In order to make our relationship a success, we defined our relationship at the beginning to help us understand how to treat each other.

We're coming to a place in the book of Exodus, when God is going to define the relationship with his people. God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, he saved them, but that's their relationship so far. This generation of Israelites probably doesn't know God very well. Their ancestors have been in captivity in Egypt for 400 years, where they've probably picked up the religious attitude of the locals, worshipping idols and false gods. So God needs to introduce himself and teach these people how to be in relationship with him.

### **Situation: The Israelites have come to Mount Sinai to meet God. (Ex 19:1-8)**

Let's review the journey so far. After Egypt, the Israelites crossed the Red Sea at the gulf of Suez (14:29). Then they entered the Desert of Shur (15:22) and arrived at Marah where the water was bitter (Ex 15:23). After Marah, they came to an oasis (15:27) and then the Desert of Sin between Elim and Sinai (16:1), where they received manna, before coming to the desert of Rephidim (17:1). Finally they've come to Mount Horeb in the Desert of Sinai (19:1). *This isn't the first time we've encountered this mountain in Exodus.*

Back when Moses was a shepherd for his father-in-law Jethro in the land of Midian, he brought his sheep to this same mountain, Mount Horeb (Ex 3:1). When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, he promised Moses he would bring the people back to this mountain.

**Exodus 3:11–12** But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.” (NIV®)

Right here, in v. 1-2, God has fulfilled his promise to bring the Israelites back to the mountain. It's at this mountain that God is going to formally enter into a **covenant relationship** with his people. A **covenant** is defined as "A promise where God is involved." God already made an **unconditional covenant** with their forefather **Abraham** that he will use Abraham's descendants to bless all peoples on earth (Gen 12:2-3). Now God is going to extend this relationship to the Israelites, but through a **conditional covenant** with terms.

**Exodus 19:5-6a** Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation... (NIV®)

In this moment, God sounds a little demanding, doesn't he? He sounds like a boyfriend or girlfriend that says, "You have to act a certain way for me to date you." Well, **A)** this is a more formal relationship, like a marriage, where you make promises to act a certain way. And **B)** Israel is not God's peer. They are not on equal footing. He is holy and they are unholy. And **C)** before God ever offers this relationship to the Israelites, he shows them abundant grace and kindness. Right before these verses God says this.

**Exodus 19:4** 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. (NIV®)

An eagle is a **bird of prey** that kills small rodents and animals to feed its young. There's a scene at the end of the *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* movie when the good armies of Gondor are making one final stand against the evil armies of Mordor. They are overwhelmed by the hordes of orcs and Ringwraiths riding their huge black fell beasts. Just as they come swooping in, the hobbit Pippin looks up into the sky, smiles, and shouts, "The eagles are coming! The eagles are coming!" They attack the Ringwraiths and chase them away. That's kind of like God. He swoops in to rescue his people, the Israelites, not just from Egypt, but from the false gods of Egypt and from the broken lives they left behind in Egypt. Yes. God's covenant relationship is conditional, but it's because he doesn't want the Israelites to return to their comfortable sin.

God wants to transform these broken people into his "**treasured possession**" (v. 5). A treasured possession is a king's personal stash, his treasure box. God wants to transform his people from broken dirty vessels to "**a kingdom of priests and a holy nation**." Priests **pray** to God on behalf of people and **teach** them about God. God wants Israel to pray to God about the foreign nations and be God's witness to them. *God's relationship with the Israelites is going to be conduit for all people to be in relationship with God.*

If you're here today, and wondering why (just like Israel at Sinai), there are several possibilities:

- I. **God wants to meet you.** He brought you here today on the arms of a friend or spouse so that you can encounter the living-breathing holy God.
- II. **God wants to be in relationship with you.** You don't know where you and God are at. Maybe it's time to define the relationship (DTR) with God. Maybe it's time to trust him with your life.
- III. **God wants to change you.** God didn't save the Israelites from Egypt so they can act like slaves in the desert. Has God saved you, but you're still living in sin? God wants to change that.
- IV. **God wants to use you.** God changes us so we can share the message of transformation with others. If you're a Christian, you're a priest who get's to pray for neighbor and share God with them.

The Israelites have come to Sinai to not just meet God, but enter into relationship with him.

**Relationship: The people meet God by hearing his words and trusting him.**  
**(Ex 19:9)**

God is going to come down and speak the Ten Commandments directly to the Israelites so they can learn to trust Moses and by extension God.

**Exodus 19:9** The Lord said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.” Then Moses told the Lord what the people had said. (NIV®)

What’s the most important piece of a good relationship? Communication. God doesn’t say, “You need to see me to believe.” Instead God says, “You need to hear me to believe.”

Today, we don’t get to see God, but we can read his words in the Bible. We learn to trust God as we read and hear his words and discover that he is good. If you want to grow as a believer, position yourself to hear God’s word regularly through personal Bible study, prayer, and church attendance; and then put what you learn into action in your own life so you can see that God is trustworthy.

Israel is called into a wonderful relationship with God. He wants to transform and use them to reach the whole world. He wants to communicate with them and love them. But there’s one big problem.

### **Problem: Dirty people can’t approach a holy God. (Ex 19:10-20)**

Imagine for a moment that your child is **playing outside in the mud**. They’ve built mud-castles, baked mud-pies, and taken mud-showers. They are covered in mud. All you can see is the whites of their eyes as they stare up at you from the front door. They’ve already gotten mud all over the steps and you just caught them before they came running into the house. What do you do? Do you hose them off? Do you make them change in the garage? Do you banish them to the outdoors forever? The Israelites have a similar problem.

**Exodus 9:10** And the Lord said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes (NIV®)

They’ve been walking the wilderness and desert for weeks. They’re covered in dirt and filth, but that’s not the real issue. *The desert dirt symbolizes their heart dirt.* They’re covered in **sin**, like a mud you can’t wash away. God is the most holy and pure of all beings. They’re not fit to come into his presence and meet him. So God says, “I’m going to come down, but they need clean up first. They need wash their garments which symbolizes washing their sins. And even once they’ve cleaned up, they need to approach me carefully or they will die. Put up signs to keep them back from the mountain (v. 12). Only when they’re washed and the shofar trumpet sounds, can they climb the mountain (v. 13, cf. MSG).”

Exodus 1-15 tells the story of Israel’s physical salvation from Egypt. This symbolizes their need for spiritual salvation, which they can only have through a real relationship with God. But there’s the **catch 22**. *In order to be in relationship with a holy God, they have to be saved by God, which requires a relationship with the holy God they need to know but can’t.* God needs to wash away their sins and a bath won’t cut it.

When God comes down, he gives the people permission to come up on the mountain. But Moses knows that although they may appear outwardly clean, inwardly they’re dirty.

**Exodus 19:23** Moses said to the Lord, “The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, ‘Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.’” (NIV®)

When God comes down, there’s thunder and lightning and a loud trumpet blast. God hides himself in a thick cloud. We call this a **theophany**. A theophany is “When God appears visibly to a human (or humans).”<sup>1</sup> In the OT, this usually happened through a cloud or fire, such as the smoking-fire pot in Genesis 15 or when

<sup>1</sup> *Exodus for You* by Tim Chester. The Good Book Company (TGB). 2016. Page 271.

God lead the Israelites as a pillar of smoke by day and of fire by night in Exodus (13:21). God doesn't lower his holiness standards to be around us. Instead, he covers himself so as not to kill us.

If someone could take a camera and look into your heart, what would they see? As a goodbye gift, Anthony gave me the privilege of watching a video feed inspection of his home's sewage runoff system. It was a surreal four minute long video of dirty pipes running with dark water, ending in a cavernous space full of sewage. As people, everything might look fine above ground. Your life looks like a nice green lawn or a bed of roses. But God sees the heart, he sees below the surface. To be a Christian we recognize we're not good on the inside—that's why we need a savior.

Some people say God's primary attribute is love ("...God is love" 1 John 4:8); while others argue God's primary attribute is holiness ("You shall be holy, for I am holy." 1 Peter 5:16). The temptation is to emphasize the attribute we naturally prefer. But what we see in the Bible is both. God demands perfection, but he provides a perfect way for us. *The bad news is that dirty people can't approach a good God, but the good news is a good God can approach dirty people.*

## **Solution: We need a mediator to bridge the gap between God and us. (Ex 19:21-26)**

Because of sin, the Israelites can't be in relationship with God. If they approach God themselves, God will destroy them. So they need a mediator. They need someone who can go to God on their behalf. A **mediator** is defined as "Someone who brings two enemies together and makes it possible for them to be friends again."<sup>2</sup> That's what Moses tries to do.

### **Moses tries and fails.**

We can tell that Moses can't adequately mediate because no matter how hard he tries, he just can't do the job. We see how hard he tries by how many times he goes up and down the mountain. Tim Chester writes:<sup>3</sup>

1. **Verse 3.** Moses goes up the mountain ("Moses went up to God.")
2. **Verse 7.** Moses goes down the mountain ("Moses came and called the Elders")
3. **Verse 8.** Moses goes up the mountain. ("Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.")
4. **Verse 14.** Moses goes down the mountain. ("Moses went down from the mountain")
5. **Verse 20.** Moses goes up the mountain. ("Moses went up.")
6. **Verse 21.** Moses goes down the mountain. ("Go down and warn the people")

Moses goes up three times and down three times, and he's 80 years old. He's not what the people need. Even if Moses could go up and down enough, the people still aren't going to keep the **conditional covenant**. The people promise to obey in verse 8 but less than 40 days later they worship the golden calf (Exod 32).

Whose your mediator? We all have one. When you've sinned, or done something wrong, who makes you feel better? For me, it's myself. I go before God and say, "Yes. Lord I sinned when I got angry like that, but today I'm going to be better. Today, I'll pray more. Today, I'll read my Bible for longer. God, see how I'm good." Or, if I'm feeling really bad, I'll tell my friends my sins and nudge them to say things like, "We've all been

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<sup>2</sup> *Galatians For You* by Timothy Keller. The Good Book Company (TGB). 2013. Page 190.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from *Exodus for You* by Tim Chester. Published 2016. The Good Book Company. Page 153.

there. That's not so bad." These tactics never work, do they? No matter how much we bargain. We need a better mediator. Moses tried and fails, and so do we. But God has provided a better mediator...

## **Jesus tries and succeeds.**

Last week we learned that Jesus is the second Moses. Jesus actually climbed a mountain to talk to God much like Moses did. In Matthew 17, we read about the transfiguration.

**Matthew 17:1-3** After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. (NIV®)

When Jesus' face shines like the sun and his clothes become white as light, he is showing us he is the God who came down at Sinai in thunder, lightning, fire, and a thick cloud of smoke (cf. Dan 7:9). And just to make it abundantly clear who Jesus is, Moses also shows up to demonstrate Jesus is a mediator like him.

**Matthew 17:4-5** Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (NIV®)

What's happening? God wraps Jesus in a cloud just like he wrapped himself in one at Sinai. God is using an OT **theophany** to demonstrate that Jesus is Son of God, God in the flesh. Back in Exodus 19:9, what else did God say? He wanted the people to hear his words, to listen. Now what is God saying? "Listen to Jesus! Jesus speaks for me just like I spoke to the Israelites." God isn't just telling Peter to shut-it, he's making the connection for us between this day and Sinai. Jesus is the perfect mediator who can represent God fairly, he's fully God, but can also represent us fairly, since he's fully human, but without sin.

How do the disciples respond? Just like the Israelites, they shake in their sandals. They fall down terrified. But Jesus says something different than Sinai, "Don't be afraid." (v. 6-7). Through Jesus, we can approach God unafraid. As a **church**, we're not Israel. We don't operate under the **old conditional covenant**. At the last supper, Jesus gave us a **new covenant** (Luke 22:20). This one doesn't say we have to be good to enter into God's presence, but that we're saved by grace. Hebrews compares the Mount Sinai, and what happened there, with Mount Zion, the place where Jesus reigns in heaven that will one day come to earth (Rev 21:1-4).

**Hebrews 12:18-21** You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." (NIV®)

You and I don't approach God like the Israelites at Sinai because we approach God through Jesus Christ.

**Hebrews 12:22-24** But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Through Jesus, and his blood shed on the cross, we can come into God's presence unafraid. *We can approach God in his holiness because Jesus approached us in our dirt.* We don't have to take a bath to access God's presence. In Christ, we're white as snow (Psa 51:7). Just like Moses took his brother Aaron to the top of the mountain, Jesus lifts us up into God's presence in heaven (Eph 2:6-7).

Is that how you approach God, as if you're as holy as Jesus? If Jesus had a job today, I think he would be a sewage lineman. That's what he does with our hearts. He's not afraid to look down deep to where there's nothing but filth. It doesn't scare Jesus to see who you are. He knows how to deal with your clogs and leaks perfectly. In fact, when you come to Christ, he digs up your whole system and gives you a brand new spotless tank you can never dirty or crack. In Jesus, the garden on the outside is also on the inside.

***We can approach God in his holiness because Jesus approached us in our dirt.***

When you're overwhelmed by your sin and dirt, I want you to remember God carried the Israelites out of Egypt on eagles wings before he ever asked them to obey him. God has carried you far away from your sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He's cleaned us up on the inside; but is still teaching us to not play in the mud. When we sin, the temptation is to run away from Jesus. Come to him. He'll carry you.

One day Jesus is going to come back. On that day, just like at Sinai, a trumpet will blast to announce his return (Matt 24:31). There will be thunder and lightning and the whole world will shake (Rev 16:18). On that day, we will look up into the sky, smile, and shout, "The eagle is coming! The eagle is coming!" *We can approach God in his holiness because Jesus approached us in our dirt.*<sup>4</sup>

*Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).*

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<sup>4</sup> Some ideas/concepts adapted from *Exodus for You* by Tim Chester and *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* by Tony Merida. I recommend both books highly for opening and understanding the book of Exodus.