

3/1/26

The Mountain of Promise *Exodus 19:16-20; 24:12-18*
Pastor Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

“On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now 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. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up” (*Exodus 19:16-20*).

Moses was the first, and preeminent, leader of the Israelites. He led the people out of enslavement in Egypt to the threshold of the promised land. He’s also the lawgiver and the archetypical prophet. He’s the dominant individual character in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The text speaks of him in glowing terms: “***And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face***” (*Deuteronomy 34:10*). For all his greatness, however, Moses never loses his humanness – displaying anger, frustration, and a lack of self-confidence, in addition to his leadership abilities, humility, and perseverance.

Because of the towering significance of Moses as the mediator of God’s law to the chosen people, it’s not surprising that, in the New Testament, Moses is mentioned principally in connection with the law. That’s true both in the Gospels (*Matthew 19:7; Mark 7:10; Luke 16:31; John 1:17*) and in the Letters of Paul (*Romans 9:15; Romans 10:19; 1 Corinthians 9:9; 2 Corinthians 3:13*). He’s also cited as exemplary for his faith in God (*Hebrews 3:2; 11:24*) and is regarded as having announced beforehand the coming of Jesus as Messiah (*Acts 3:22; 26:22*). The traditions contained in the New Testament are unanimous in citing Moses as one specially chosen by God to free God’s people and give them God’s law.

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘**Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there;** and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.’ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and **Moses went up into the mountain of God.** To the elders he had said, ‘Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.’ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. **Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights**” (*Exodus 24:12-18*).

The Israelites had witnessed God’s power in Egypt — the plagues, the Passover, the deliverance at the sea. They had tasted daily provision – in manna from heaven and water from the rock. But at Mount Sinai, in the two passages from *Exodus 19* and *24*, they encountered not only God’s power, but God’s holiness.

The scene is overwhelming. Thunder roared and lightning flashed. A thick cloud descended upon the mountain. The sound of a trumpet blast grew louder, until the people trembled. Smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace because the Lord descended in fire. The entire mountain shook violently. This wasn’t a private, mystical experience. This was revelation in public view.

The people stood at the foot of the mountain. Moses, alone, was summoned upward. The separation is striking. The people must not cross the boundary. Holiness requires preparation. They washed themselves. They consecrated their lives. They waited. The distance between God and the people revealed both divine greatness and human limitation. God is not common. God is not casual. God is holy. Yet, the story doesn’t end with fear.

In *Exodus 24*, the Lord calls Moses: “*Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there.*” Moses ascends with Joshua partway, and instructs the elders to remain below with Aaron and Hur. Leadership is structured. Community is ordered. And then, the cloud covers the mountain for six days. On the seventh day, the Lord calls to Moses from within the cloud. Moses enters the cloud and remains for forty days and forty nights. **The God who inspires awe is also the God who invites.**

The Mountain of Promise teaches us enduring truths:

- **God is Holy and worthy of awe.**
- **God is Just, the giver of righteous standards.**
- **God is Relational inviting us into covenant love.**

God Is Holy

The fire, smoke, trumpet, trembling earth — all proclaim God’s otherness. Holiness means separation, purity, majesty. The people couldn’t rush into God’s presence unprepared. Like the fence around a playground that’s next to a busy street, the boundaries were not cruelty; they were protection.

Holiness confronts modern assumptions. Worship is not entertainment. Prayer is not trivial conversation. Approaching God is not casual familiarity. The event at Mount Sinai teaches us that reverence isn’t optional, it’s appropriate.

Yet, holiness is not harshness. The fire that burns is also the fire that purifies. The cloud that conceals is also the cloud that shelters. God’s holiness reveals both danger and beauty. As Gregory of Nyssa reflected, Moses’ ascent symbolizes **the soul’s continual journey into the mystery of God**. The higher one goes, the more one realizes that God’s fullness exceeds comprehension. Holiness draws us upward. The God who is holy calls us to live holy lives, as well.

God Is Just

At Sinai, God gives the Law — not as a burden, but as a gift. The commandments define what justice and covenant love look like in practice:

- Love for God — exclusive devotion, reverence, worship.
- Love for neighbor — honor, protection of life, faithfulness, truthfulness.
- Justice within community — fairness, accountability, mercy.

These are the qualities God seeks from each of us, as individuals, and commands for a just society. Not only Israel under Moses, but any nation can measure itself against God’s standards. Israel had been freed from slavery, but freedom without formation leads to chaos. The Mountain of Promise teaches that true freedom requires direction. God’s justice flows from God’s character. The Law reflects divine righteousness, order, and faithfulness, and calls us to righteousness and faithfulness in our daily living.

The giving of the Law demonstrates that redemption is not merely rescue *from* something, but rescue *for* something. God saves Israel to shape them into a holy nation. Deliverance precedes obedience; grace precedes law. The Law is given within covenant relationship, not as a condition for earning it. The Mountain of Promise at Sinai reveals that obedience is not oppression. It's participation in God's good order.

God Is Relational

A surprising truth of Sinai is that **the holy God initiates covenant**. The thunder doesn't signal rejection. The fire doesn't signify permanent distance. The Lord says, "*Come up to me.*" God desires relationship.

Moses is invited into the cloud. The same cloud that terrifies the people becomes the place of communion for their mediator. The covenant, established at Sinai, binds God and Israel together in promise and responsibility. "***I will be your God, and you shall be my people***" becomes the defining reality of their identity.

Even the structure of leadership — Moses, Joshua, Aaron, Hur — reflects divine care for the community. God doesn't form isolated individuals, but a covenant people. Relationship with God shapes relationships with others. Mount Sinai, then, is not simply about rules etched in stone. It's about a relationship engraved on the heart of a nation.

Sinai establishes a covenant — a commitment with expectations. Love and obedience are woven together. **God's promises call for a response from us**. Covenant is not a contract between equals; it's divine grace inviting faithful participation.

Preparation for Fulfillment

The Law reveals God's perfect standard — and humanity's frailty. Even while Moses communes with God on the mountain, the people below falter and fail. The story in Exodus exposes the tension between God's holiness and human weakness. For Christ followers, Sinai prepares the way for fulfillment in Jesus. Where Sinai had thunder and boundaries, Christ opens access. Where Moses entered the cloud alone, Christ invites all who trust in him to draw near. The holiness revealed at Sinai isn't diminished in Christ — it's embodied. **Grace doesn't abolish holiness; it makes communion possible**. The mountain of fire and promise points forward to a cross where holiness and mercy meet.

Encountering holiness changes people. Israel couldn't witness the trembling mountain and remain indifferent. Authentic encounter with God reshapes character, priorities, and

community life. It should change us. To meet the holy God is to be called into distinctiveness — into justice, integrity, faithfulness, and love. **Holiness is not withdrawal from the world, but faithful presence within it.** The covenant people are called to reflect the character of the God they worship.

Moses' forty days in the cloud symbolizes formation. Time in God's presence produces clarity, wisdom, and transformation. We learn from Moses that spiritual maturity requires waiting, as well as ascending. Anyone who has ever hiked up a hill or a mountain knows that it takes energy and effort to ascend higher. The same can be true in our relationship with God and our spiritual life. We'll see, in two weeks, that Jesus, like Moses, spends forty days alone in the wilderness before he begins his ministry. Some of us had a shorter period provided by the nor'easter and loss of power this week. The experience at Mount Sinai reminds us that faith is not merely emotional experience; it's covenantal commitment.

The Mountain of Promise teaches us God is holy and worthy of awe. God is just and the giver of righteous standards. God is relational, inviting us into covenant love. Mount Sinai trembled, but it also promised. The fire that frightened also purified. The cloud that concealed also invited. The trumpet that thundered also summoned. The mountain stands as both warning and welcome. God's presence is not to be taken lightly — but neither is it withheld. When we respond with reverence and faith, we find, not destruction, but covenant love. The holy God who descended in fire still calls, ***“Come up to me.”*** How will you respond to the invitation?

An old carpenter told his boss that he planned to retire. The boss was sad to lose the carpenter, but understood. He asked if he'd stick around for one last job — to build one final house. The carpenter reluctantly agreed, figuring he could get it done quickly. He cut corners, used cheap materials, and rushed through the work. When the house was done, his boss arrived for the final inspection. But instead of walking the house, he reached into his pocket and handed the carpenter the keys.

“This is your house,” his boss smiled. *“My retirement gift to you.”*

The carpenter was stunned. If he'd known he was building his own house, he would have done it differently. Now, he'd have to live in a house he hadn't built well. *The lesson: You're always building your own house.*

Every single day, the way you choose to show up in the world determines the quality of that house. If you choose to cut corners, use cheap materials, and rush the work, you're the

one who must live in it. If you choose to nail the details, invest in quality materials, and take pride in the work, you're the one who gets to live in it. The choice is yours. Choose wisely. At Mount Sinai, God was giving the people a choice. God was telling them – here is how to build well, follow these commandments and you will build a good life and a strong community. The choice is up to you, and it's up to us. I pray we'll be faithful, as Jesus was faithful.

In *Hebrews 3:1-6*, a connection is drawn between Moses and Jesus, and with this, I close. “Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also ‘was faithful in all God’s house.’ Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God’s house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. When you picture Israel at Mount Sinai, what stands out about God’s holiness — and how should that shape the way we approach God in worship, today?
2. What does it look like to prepare our hearts to meet with God, rather than approaching God casually?
3. God gave the Law after delivering Israel from slavery. Why does obedience follow redemption, and how does God’s guidance lead to true freedom?
4. Why are boundaries important in our relationship with God, and how do we balance reverence with confidence in approaching Him?
5. What does it mean to live in covenant with God today — embracing both His promises and our responsibility — and how do love and obedience work together?
6. If God is holy and just, how should that shape the way we live in our homes, workplaces, and communities? Where is He calling you to reflect His character more clearly?