

AT MOUNT SINAI (6)

Exodus 19:1-24:18 (Read 19)

Key Verses: 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."

The book of Exodus is divided into three parts. This section forms the central portion or pivotal point, the hinge upon which the whole book turns. At Mount Sinai God had called Moses by showing him a great sight. At Mount Sinai God also gives his people the Law of God. It is amazing that God gives this lawless people the Law of God. Why did he do so? It is because God is a God of hope. He had hope that these lawless and broken slave people could become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. So he gave them the Law of God and renewed his covenant with them. Today we want to think about the great hope of God for his people Israel and for us.

I. A kingdom of priests and a holy nation (19:1-20:21)

First, God carried them on eagles' wings (19:1-7). Three months after the Israelites left Egypt they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and camped there in the desert in front of a mountain. The mountain was Mount Sinai. This was the mountain where God had called Moses by showing him a great sight through a burning bush. Now, at this mountain, God is preparing to give his people the Law and instructions.

When Moses went up to God, God gave Moses a message for his people. Look at verses 4-7. ""You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 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." These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.' So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak." We learn two things here. Firstly, God's one-sided grace for his people. When they were slaves in Egypt, God carried them on eagles' wings and brought them through the wilderness. They and their children were the living dead as slaves to the Egyptians. They had no hope. But God, according to his covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to bring them to the land flowing with milk and honey, remembered his covenant with his people (2:24). God, in his great mercy, brought them out of Egypt on eagles' wings. Without God's mighty hand, they were to perish in the land of Egypt as slaves.

But God brought them out of Egypt on eagles' wings. Through this event God showered his grace upon his people. Secondly, God treats them like his treasured possession. Here, "treasured possession" means that God chose them as the most precious people because he chose them as his firstborn son remembering his covenant with Abraham. To be a chosen people is not a small matter. President Clinton has been nominated for the Nobel peace prize. How happy he would be to be chosen. How happy his daughter, Chelsea, would be if her father is chosen. Sometimes it is good to be chosen by men. But it is most blessed to be chosen by God. The people of Israel endured all the hardships and suffering throughout the ages with the thought that they were God's chosen people.

But there have been many people who complained that God chose them as his servants. Even some holy saints complained. Before his sin was cleansed away, Isaiah was unhappy that he was chosen by God. Habakkuk complained to God about how long he should endure the wicked swallowing the righteous. Virtually he complained to God for choosing him to be his servant. Reptavia, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, knew the agony and blessing of being chosen by God. When his village was the target of a pogrom, he cried out, O Lord, thank you for choosing us. But sometimes couldn't you choose someone else? We did not choose God. God chose us according to his purpose. John 15:16a says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last." In our Christian life we have many things for which to thank God. Among them, we have to thank God first and last of all for choosing each of us as his servant in our generation. If we have no sense of being a chosen people, we are nothing but cultural Christians.

Second, a kingdom of priests (19:4-7). At that time, the Israelites had just been emancipated after 430 years of captivity. They were full of slave mentality and slave desires. They could not see tomorrow, only today--and potato chips in front of their eyes. But God is the God of hope. He called them "a kingdom of priests." What does "kingdom of priests" mean? There are a tremendous number of references to this in the Old Testament. But in terms of New Testament theology, we can say that it means "a shepherd nation." A priest is a mediator between God and man. Jesus is our good shepherd; he is the only mediator between God and man (1 Ti 2:5). In the Old Testament, priests were supposed to lead their people to God, and proclaim the knowledge of God to the world. When God made a covenant with Abraham, God intended to make him a blessing by making him a shepherd for his nephew, as well as all peoples of the world (Ge 12:2,3). Here we learn God's hope. God's hope is indeed great. The Israelites were ugly slave people with a beggar mentality and an easygoing attitude. They were nothing but slaves of pleasure-seeking desires. But God had hope in them to be raised as a kingdom of priests so that the knowledge of God might be proclaimed to

the whole world through them. God had hope to raise them as shepherds and scatter them throughout the whole world. God's hope is so great that we cannot fathom the width and depth of it. If we were to say that all the street bums and gangsters would become devoted Christians and prayer servants for all nations, it would sound very strange. But God's hope was exactly like that. God hoped 600,000 Israelites would be raised as good shepherds for his people as well as for all people of the world. We praise God for God's hope for his people as well as for us. Each of us is great because God has hope for each one of us. The United States is great because God has hope for this nation.

Third, "you will be for me...a holy nation" (6). At that time, the Israelites were mentally still a slave people. Their desires were for nothing but physical gratification and the satisfaction of their stomachs. They were indeed hopeless people. If they knew one thing, they knew how to complain bitterly. But God is the God of hope. He said to them, "you will be for me...a holy nation." We must know that our God is the holy God. God is love, and at the same time, God is holy (1 Jn 4:8; Lev 11:44). Many people interpret the word "holy" as "separated" or "different from others." But the Bible teaches that the holiness of God combines God's love and God's righteousness. Simply speaking, God does not like dirty things: dishonesty, immorality, and unfaithfulness. When God said, "you will be for me...a holy nation," God wanted Israel to be holy, as God is holy. Without knowing the holiness of God, we cannot see God (Mt 5:8). Without knowing the holiness of God, we cannot love God. Rather, we hate God because of our impure hearts and dirty desires. Without knowing the holiness of God, we cannot be happy because the peace of God, which comes from the holy God, cannot dwell in our hearts. Without knowing the holiness of God, our hearts become like a junkyard. Without knowing the holiness of God, we always feel unclean, like a man with leprosy. God wanted his people to be a holy nation, so they might proclaim the holiness of God to the world.

St. Peter once bragged about his loyalty to Jesus by saying, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (Mt 26:33). But at the moment of Jesus' crucifixion Peter denied Jesus, not one time, but three times (Mt 26:70). After denying Jesus three times, he surveyed the cross of Jesus. He saw Jesus' blood dripping down. He saw the holiness of God in Jesus. When he saw the holiness of Jesus, he was changed. There is a story about a conversation between Peter the fisherman and a Roman tribune. The Roman tribune was guilty of crucifying Jesus. Because of his guilty conscience he was at the peak of madness. Peter met the tribune and said, "Brother, you may have something to say. But I want to tell you first, I betrayed Jesus, not one time, but three times." Then the tribune confessed that he killed Jesus. The tribune asked Peter, "Can you forgive me?" Peter the fisherman said, "Jesus forgave your sin. How can I do less?" The holy

blood of Jesus cleansed the poison of sin of the Roman tribune. Through this short testimony hour, the Roman tribune could see the kingdom of heaven, the holy God on his throne.

God is the God of great hope for his people Israel. They were indeed dirty slaves. Their mentality, their desires and their way of thinking were stained by the poison of sins. But God wanted them to be a holy nation. We praise God for God's hope for his people. We praise God for God's hope for us, as well as all the peoples of all nations.

Let's see how the people responded to God's word (19:8). Look at 19:8a. "The people all responded together, 'We will do everything the LORD has said.'" They were indeed helpless people. But when they came to know God's hope for them through his glorious words, they were happy to obey his word. Here we learn that we must teach the Bible to our sheep with the hope of God. Then they will surely respond.

God appeared to his people to give them the Ten Commandments. Our God is the holy God. God's holiness is like a consuming fire to his filthy people. So God did not meet them face to face. God came to them in a dense cloud and spoke to them with his voice. Since our God is the holy God, we must consecrate ourselves. We must wash our clothes when we come to God. We should not wear dirty shirts or stretched stockings. Moses knew our God is holy and that he is like a consuming fire to his dirty people. So he consecrated them by baptizing and circumcising them and giving them haircuts, and he washed their clothes diligently so that they might consecrate themselves and be ready to appear before God.

After consecrating his people, Moses led his people out of the camp to meet with God. They stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him (16-19).

At the top of Mount Sinai, the LORD called Moses and said, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish" (21). Moses said, "I already warned them." But God said, "Go down and put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy and bring Aaron up with you" (23-24).

Fourth, the Ten Commandments (20:1-23:33). Before giving the Ten Commandments God consecrated his people. Actually, it was not necessary to give the Law of God to these lawless slave people. But in the hope of raising them as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, God gave them the Law of God and his commands. There are Ten Commandments of God. Commandments 1-4 are given to teach his people to love God only.

The next commandments, 5-10, regard their neighbor. God commands them to love their neighbor. These Ten Commandments are the foundation of all laws of all nations at the present. But when we analyze them we can summarize them in a sentence: Love God and love your neighbor (Mt 22:37-39). We already thought about the Ten Commandments at the beginning of our Exodus study. Chapters 21-23 are the practical application of the commandments that deal with man to man relationships. These laws show us a picture of how the slave people had lived. They had been violent, immoral, dishonest and irresponsible. But God had hope for them. God gave them these laws to help them overcome their bad habits as slaves. God gave them these laws in the hope of raising them as a holy nation.

II. God's covenant confirmed (24:1-18)

The scene at Mount Sinai teaches us what our attitude should be when we come to God to receive his word. At this moment God was about to give them the Law of God and the Ten Commandments. God wanted his people to stand around the mountain without touching it. The seventy elders stood in front of the people. Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu could go near to God. This does not show social ranking, but the measure of faith they possessed. God wanted his people to obey his command absolutely. They responded with glad emotion. Look at verse 3. They said, "Everything the LORD has said we will do." Moses read the covenant book to the people and they responded saying, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey" (7). Then God gave the law and commands to Moses (12-18). When God gave Moses the law, he gave the tablets of stone on which were written the Ten Commandments (12). When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud. He went up on the mountain and stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. The author pictures how the word of God was given. When the word of God is given to us we must receive it with an attitude of holy reverence.

In this passage we learned that God has a great hope for his people Israel. His people were selfish. Probably they had to be selfish in order to survive. But our God is the God of hope. Nevertheless, God wanted them to be a kingdom of priests, that is, a shepherd nation or a shepherd-like people. God also wanted them to be a holy nation, even though they were nothing but a people of smelly and dirty desires. God's hope for them was comparable to the hard, sinful world being changed into the glorious kingdom of God. We praise God for his holiness and we praise God his hope for his people.