

Sermon 56, You Don't Understand Holiness, Exodus 19:16-25

Proposition: The planned meeting with God on the third day was canceled because Israel did not understand holiness, did not understand the real demands of standing in God's presence — and we fail to understand those demands too.

- I. Anticipation: The Plan to Meet God on the Third Day, vv. 11, 16
- II. Realization (Almost): Going Out to Meet God, v. 17
- III. Cancellation: You're Not Fit to Meet God, vv. 19-25, 20:21
 - A. Moses Alone Ascends, Without the People, v. 20
 - B. Moses Commissioned to Tell Israel to Stay Back, v. 21
 - C. Moses Commissioned to Tell the Priests to Stay Back, v. 22
 - D. Moses Reminds Yahweh: There's No Chance the People will Trespass, v. 23
 - E. Yahweh Cancels the Meeting with the People, v. 24
 - F. Moses Brings the Bad News, v. 25
 - G. The Mediator Will Go to God for You, 20:21

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, some commentators accuse this chapter of ending on a note of anticlimax. The anticipation builds and builds, and then peters out with a whimper, a speech by Moses rather than a glorious, awe-inspiring revelation of God Almighty. Those commentators have missed the basic plot of the chapter, which is this: Israel arrives at Sinai, spends two days getting ready to meet God, literally marches out of camp to the foot of the mountain, only to have God tell Moses in no uncertain terms that the meeting is canceled.

This is paralleled by the scene with which Exodus closes: the Tabernacle gets all built, the priests are ready to move in and start worshiping in the Levitical way, and then the glory of God descends on the Tabernacle and denies them all entry.

What is the deal? Why does God seemingly jerk His people around like this? God jerks His people around like this to teach them that He is holy, and to tell them that they don't understand holiness. Let's look at the story in more detail to see how this is so.

The anticlimax is real enough. It is the stress of being canceled at the last second. This is preparation for the Ten Commandments; this is how God signals that our conceptions of holiness are way too shallow. The point is not that God doesn't keep His promises; He does keep His promises.

I. Anticipation: The Plan to Meet God on the Third Day, vv. 11, 16

This is it, people. This is the most momentous event of your lifetime — not meeting the president or some Hollywood A-lister, but meeting God Himself. As we saw last time, this plan necessitates that you clean up in preparation. You have to be physically clean: wash your clothes. You have to be sexually clean: Don't touch your wife for two days. You have to be

geographically clean: Don't go near the mountain, for its holiness will destroy you. And you have to be ritually consecrated, made holy.

Two full days of preparations! It's not quite the whole year of beauty treatments that Esther underwent before meeting with the king of Persia, but it says something about the level of anticipation and preparation that Israel felt.

This, at last, is the point of the Exodus! They had to be let go from Egypt so that they could serve Yahweh. But how were they to serve a God they did not know, a God they had never met? That problem is about to be solved. They are going to meet Him. The problem of sin and alienation from God has been solved; the gates of Eden are going to open up again on the third day, and the Israelites will be able to go through them and walk with God in the cool of the day.

II. Realization (Almost): Going Out to Meet God, v. 17

So the anticipation builds until Moses says "It's zero-hour. We move out now." And they all pour out of the camp toward the mountain, ready to ascend into the presence of God and meet the one whom they have worshiped at a distance for so long.

If you look at the chapter closely, God never actually says that the people will get to meet Him. He says that they will get to hear His voice. There is a difference. But Moses, seemingly going beyond his remit, leads the people out to meet God in v. 17. He is convinced that it's going to happen. He thinks that redemption from Egypt is some kind of signal that the distance between a holy God and His sinful people has now been eradicated.

In other words, why are the people thinking that this is the moment when they will at least meet God — if not see Him face to face, at least see Him, stand in His presence, be changed to be like Him by seeing His glory? Because that's what their leader is telling them! "Israel, we get to meet God today." Whoa! What a privilege; what a promise! Brothers and sisters, preachers like me will tell you that you get to meet God in person, but we kick it into the far-off future, into a time after death when you're disembodied in Heaven. Then you'll meet God in person. Pie in the sky by-and-by. That's how we often start to think of it. But Moses has dragged that glorious eschatological state into the present. You will meet with Yahweh *today!*

III. Cancellation: You're Not Fit to Meet God, vv. 19-25, 20:21

Except that isn't what happened. The realization that it's not going to happen dawns rather gradually. It starts innocuously enough.

A. Moses Alone Ascends, Without the People, v. 20

Israel is standing at the base of the mountain, waiting for God to descend. Then He does. He comes down in fire, with all the trimmings. It is the most awesomely scary sight in human history, because it is not the power of nature alone. That would be terrifying enough, but at the center of the storm is the most powerful, holy, fearsome Being imaginable. No one greater or more terrifying can be conceived.

And so God descends in fire and then He says, "Moses, come up."

Moses goes up. Alone.

The people are standing at the base of the mountain. It's not yet time for them to go up. Are they having second thoughts by this point? We don't know. But we do know that they were

shaking with fear back in the camp, and that after they hear the voice of God they tell Moses “No. We can’t do this. You speak to Him for us.” And then they have to stand there at the mountain’s base, watching Moses ascend the mountain of the Lord. The gate is shut on them. Remember, v. 12 instructed Moses to fence off the whole mountain. Now, presumably, that fence has been built. Moses seemingly reminds God of that in v. 23. And in the fence, then, there is a gate, and God is on one side of that gate and the people are on the other.

It is the exclusion from Eden all over again. Instead of an angel with a flaming sword standing there to exclude humanity, now it’s God Himself, in cloud and fire, lightning and thunder, announcing in no uncertain terms that Moses is allowed to come and therefore, by implication, that Israel is not.

B. Moses Commissioned to Tell Israel to Stay Back, v. 21

Well, the people stand there waiting awkwardly, with plenty of time to contemplate the mountain while Moses is busy ascending it. Moses finally gets up to the top — yes, he had to go all the way to the very top in order to talk with God — and there he hears, “Tell Israel to stay back.”

Do you think that Moses is feeling pretty foolish at this moment? He is a mediator, after all, and now the Almighty is telling him “You were wrong. You told the people that they were coming out to meet God. It’s not going to happen. The people are going to stay down where they are. Period.” And then God posits that the people are prone to curiosity, and that they might “break through to Yahweh to gaze.” What does He mean by that statement?

We can think of positive statements of the theme: “One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple” (Psa 27:4). David had one request, and that was “Jehovah’s beauty to admire and in His temple to inquire.” He wanted to gaze on the beauty of God. Brothers and sisters, does that desire not fire the heart of every Christian? “They shall see His face.” “We shall see Him as He is.” That is the great promise.

And yet Israel was prepared to seize it by force, to, like the Babel-builders, attempt to break through into Heaven on their own terms and see the beatific vision without permission.

My sister used to say, “My face is not public property.” Brothers and sisters, the face of God is not public property! You do not have a right to see it. The beauty of God is real. And it is on the other side of a fence you cannot penetrate, at least not on your own.

When we hear that the people were shaking with fear, literally shaking, we may wonder that the Almighty thinks that they might try to break through to gaze on Him. How little we know of our own hearts! Brothers and sisters, the attempt to break through and gaze on God takes different forms today, but it is with us still. How? Like this: We create a mental image of the Almighty, typically one shaped in our image, and then decide that this false god we’ve created is the real and true God. It is all too easy, and nearly pointless, to point to things like the heresy-filled *Jesus Calling* and *The Shack* and other runaway bestsellers that clearly depict a God who is not the Yahweh who descended in fire on Sinai. It’s easy to point to icons and religious art and architecture that claim to offer an encounter with the Lord, a Lord who, again, has more to do with the ideas of the painters and architects than with anything in the pages of Scripture.

But those are not the problems of the people in here. We break through the gaze on the Lord by thinking that if we have the Westminster Shorter Catechism memorized then we have God all sewed up and can't possibly sin in a really serious way. We break through to gaze on the Lord by thinking that our theological smarts are what really counts, even though the Bible never says anything of the kind. Ultimately, brothers and sisters, breaking through to gaze on the Lord refers to any attempt to see or experience or profit from God on our own terms rather than His, and in particular to any and every attempt to come through that locked gate into His presence by any means other than the mediation of Jesus Christ. If we think that our own smarts, our own righteousness, our own theological purity, our own excellent devotional habits, or the fatness of our wallets and the conveniences they buy are what gets us through the gate and into the throne room, then we are like Israel of old. And of course, it's only too often that, though the \$100 bill says "In God we trust," we trust more in the bill than in God.

So the people have this desire in their hearts to overcome their fear and gaze on the beatific vision without the Mediator. They want to get into the presence of God without going through the proper channels. It's not going to work, any more than Babel worked. But we still want to do it. We still have this idea that we can find salvation by being good enough to not need Jesus and His forgiveness. And guess what? If you carry that idea right to your death and to the final judgment, you will perish. The idea that you are good enough to come into the presence of God, that you qualify for heaven without the mediator's work, is what spiritually kills many.

So Moses will have to tell the people to stay back and not try to get into God's presence.

C. Moses Commissioned to Tell the Priests to Stay Back, v. 22

It's not just the people, though. It's the priests too. The priests have to be consecrated.

Now, Moses is probably thinking, "Uh, Lord, I hate to break it to you but the priests just spent the last two days consecrating themselves." But Moses has learned a little bit since the burning bush incident, and he doesn't feel the need to openly correct God. Yet.

What exactly does God mean? Well, He's working around to His main point, which is this: You don't understand holiness. You have no concept of what you're dealing with here. You think that holiness is just a quantitative difference, that if two days of purification didn't do the trick, then three or four will probably work. Yeah, the priests have spent two days getting consecrated. But what's needed is not more of the same. Holiness means that God is so pure that He's dangerous. If impure priests come up the mountain, their status as clergy won't do doodly squat for them. God will rush out upon them and strike them down for their transgression.

D. Moses Reminds Yahweh: There's No Chance the People will Trespass, v. 23

Now, before we talk more about what holiness is, I want us to look at Moses' response to these warnings from God, because I think we pretty much feel the same way he did. Moses says, "God, I don't really know why you are so sure that the people have this penchant for unauthorized access. We literally fenced off the mountain so that there would not be any unfortunate accidents."

We feel the same way: “God, it’s not even possible to come into your presence without authorization. We literally can’t transgress your holiness. You are too exalted and remote for that. No one can break into Heaven even if they want to.”

In other words, God says “You people need to be on red alert.”

We yawn and say “God, there is nothing to worry about.”

Who’s right? Obviously, God is right. The reason we don’t worry about transgressing on His holiness is that we don’t understand holiness. We don’t get how stringent His requirements are. We tend to think of the kingdom of heaven as being like a moderately selective state university. Basically, if you’re half decent and/or like you’re good for a full semester of tuition money, you’re in. Similarly, if you’re good for a lifetime of tithe money, you’re in.

That’s not correct at all. The kingdom actually demands perfect righteousness. God demands perfect holiness. You have to exist entirely for God and walk out that purpose by obeying Him 100% of the time. Ritual purity is not good enough; only real purity will do. God hates sin and will react against it; He can’t and won’t tolerate it in His presence — hence the statement that people who touch the mountain are to be shot and killed. Even animals are not up to His exacting standards of holiness. The message of Sinai, even before God speaks the Ten Commandments, is simple: You aren’t holy enough! God exists for Himself. Anyone who exists or lives for something lesser, who stops loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength for even a single instant, is not holy enough to be in His presence. You are not holy enough to come into God’s presence. That goes for laity and for clergy too.

E. Yahweh Cancels the Meeting with the People, v. 24

And so, to underline His point, Yahweh point-blank cancels the meeting with the people and the priests. Moses has to pick his way back down the mountain to announce that no, there will be no meeting with Yahweh, not now — perhaps not ever. His standards are too high.

We think Harvard is ridiculous with an admission rate of 3.43%. But God’s admission rate is a big fat 0. The people and the priests alike are excluded from the presence of God, and if they come into His presence He will kill them. One thinks of Ahasuerus, who would kill anyone who entered his presence unbidden. With the Persian king, that was just a fancy to emphasize his royal greatness. We have the same thing with our president today. Anyone who enters the presence of the president without an invitation and a security screening is, at the very least, going to be arrested, searched, and questioned rather vigorously, if not shot on the spot. We do this in the name of preserving the president’s life. With God, that is not part of the equation. His royal personage is not and cannot be under threat. Rather, His holiness is an active force, a purity and purpose that actively repels and destroys everything contrary to it. God’s holiness is the matter that obliterates the antimatter of defilement and impurity. God’s holiness is the consuming fire that will burn to ashes anything that is not totally and completely set apart from common use for His special, royal use.

And that’s why God told Israel “You don’t understand holiness. If you think you’re good enough for My presence, you don’t have a clue what My presence is like.” One can imagine warning people against paying a visit to the surface of the Sun. Is the Sun concerned with

security? Is it just trying to act remote? No. That's not the point. The Sun is so full of rushing, boundless energy (in this case, heat energy in particular) that to come within 10 million miles of it is to be consumed. Allow me to just say that God is more powerful and energetic than the Sun — by far, by an infinite amount. To come into His presence is as possible for you and me as it is for us to walk upon the surface of the Sun, asbestos suit or no asbestos suit.

Holiness means purpose — existing for God. But all of God's attributes are His essence. In His case, holiness cannot be limited or separated from His other attributes and from Himself. He is holy! So the angels cry. And that means that His holiness is His love, His energy, His consuming fire, and His inexorable justice. Indeed, I have set up this sermon around the theme of holiness, but if you'll notice, the text of Exodus 19 never applies the category of "holiness" to God. It speaks of the people and priests being consecrated, set apart for Him — but it never says that it is specifically His holiness that keeps the people away from Him. That's because everything about God keeps the people away from Him. Yes, the fence around the mountain and the gate through which Moses presumably goes to ascend the mountain are pictures of holiness. They show that God is set apart from earthly use and earthly people. And the reason He is set apart is not just His holiness, but His whole self, which is His holiness and every other attribute.

F. Moses Brings the Bad News, v. 25

So Moses goes back down and tells the people "No meeting with God today. I overpromised and now I'm underdelivering." The bad news is that getting back to Eden is not that simple.

Imagine, if you would, that the people could have simply gone up the mountain and met with God here in Exodus 19. We literally would have no need for the rest of the book, for any of Leviticus, or for a lot of Numbers. In fact, the Exodus would have been over, with a happy ending: They came to the mountain of God, ascended and saw His face, and were happy ever after. How could you not be? To see the face of God in light and glory is the *summum bonum*, the greatest of all goods and the one that contains in itself every good you could possibly want or need. And it was not to be. God had a whole lot of plan left for these people. He had a plan for them to build a holiness containment structure, a Tabernacle in which He could live among them. He had a plan to make them holy enough to meet Him through the Levitical system.

G. The Mediator Will Go to God for You, 20:21

Ultimately, He had a plan to send His Son to make us fit to see His face — someday, in Heaven. He was not going to scrap that entire plan and let the people come up into His presence three days after their arrival at Sinai. Anyway, He couldn't have. The people would have simply been burned up by His holiness, and that would have been the end of the story. The book of Exodus would have been a story of how Yahweh brought 2 million slaves out of Egypt, only to consume them with His holiness. The end.

Thank God, brothers and sisters, that this is not the end! We will see His face — just not yet. God has made a way, and that way does not involve climbing up the mountain and getting cooked by His holiness. The upshot of this canceled meeting at Sinai was that the Mediator would go to God so the people didn't have to. That's what the people asked for after hearing the Ten Commandments, and what God asked for even before delivering the Ten Commandments.

The Mediator is the one who makes it possible. The Mediator is the one who sees the face of God and tells you what it is like and how to live in such a way as to attain to the beatific vision. So listen to Him. Listen to Moses, and listen to Jesus, the Mediator of a better covenant. Don't try to climb the mountain on your own; don't trust your righteousness to get you into His presence. Follow His prescribed way, and I'll see you before the throne of God, where we will gaze on His face together, world without end. Amen.