

EXODUS 19: MEETING GOD ON THE MOUNTAIN

SERMON-ALIGNMENT CURRICULUM

by Kevin McGill

There is one particular theme that many biblical scholars recognize: marriage. In the book of Exodus, marriage imagery is strong. Chapters 1–17 portray courtship, with the Hebrew slaves held by Egyptian overlords like a princess in a tower. Israel is rescued and must leave the gods behind. As their relationship with God grows, they face testing in chapters 12–17.

Then comes engagement in chapters 19–20, when Israel meets God on the mountain, like receiving a ring. The wedding and moving in together happen in chapters 25–40.

1. Leave (Chapters 1–6)

- **Main Point:** Declare “I want out!” – Leaving Egypt begins with a desire for freedom and a move toward God.
- **Key Application:** Recognize areas of bondage; declare your desire for God’s deliverance.

2. Leave the Gods Behind (Chapters 7–12)

- **Main Point:** Define what you’re leaving behind – Egypt’s gods and your comfort idols.
- **Key Application:** Identify and release the idols and securities that keep you from fully trusting God.

3. Holy Fire / Test (Chapters 12–17)

- **Main Point:** Moving toward God involves testing – trust, patience, and reliance.
- **Key Application:** Embrace God’s tests as refining your relationship with Him; you cannot do it alone.

God comes down from the mountain, sets up His tent among theirs, and lives with them in holy matrimony. Hosea 2:14–20 echoes this: “I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness... I will betroth you to me forever in righteousness and steadfast love.”

Biblical scholar Michael Fishbane says the redemption from Egypt is God’s wooing and wedding of Israel, with Sinai as the marriage contract. However, there is a challenge. From chapters 1 to 19, Israel keeps asking, “Who is this God?” God repeats, “I am Yahweh,” but never fully reveals Himself until chapter 19. Before, He spoke through Moses or appeared as fire and cloud. But now, they see lightning, thunder, and cloud covering the mountain.

Imagine leaving the comforting Egyptian gods and meeting this terrifying God. There’s anxiety when dating, especially blind dates, fearing the person may not be who they seemed. Israel feels similar anxiety approaching God at Sinai, wondering if they are compatible with Him.

So, as we enter chapter 19, we see Israel standing before a God who has wooed and rescued them, yet they ask, “What if we have nothing in common? What if this doesn’t work out?” This is the tension we navigate in Exodus 19.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. Israel felt anxious meeting God at Sinai, wondering if they were truly compatible with Him.

Have you ever felt nervous about getting closer to God, like He might see something in you that would make Him pull away? How has that affected your relationship with Him?

2. Throughout Exodus, God woos Israel like a bride, inviting them into a committed relationship.

When in your life have you felt God pursuing you relationally—like He was inviting you closer to Him personally rather than just asking for obedience or belief? What was that experience like for you?

God Woos Us

On the third new moon after leaving Egypt, Israel came to Sinai (Exodus 19:1). They encamped before the mountain while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him, saying, "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself" (Exodus 19:4). God is wooing Israel, reminding them how He rescued them like a man bringing a woman to himself.

Verse 5 continues, "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6). God promises them intimacy, identity, and mission: they will belong to Him, inherit the earth, and stand as priests between God and the world, interceding for its healing.

When Moses relayed these words, the people replied, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8). God then said, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever" (Exodus 19:9).

God woos us similarly. First, He rescues us, drawing us close through His saving acts. Second, He reveals that earthly pleasures lose their grip, inviting us into deeper relationship. Third, He uses doubt to strip away religious games and provoke real questions, leading to genuine faith (cf. Jude 1:22). Finally, God draws us through joy. As Psalm 16:11 says, "In your presence there is fullness of joy." Joy becomes transcendent, not rooted in material things but in God Himself.

This is what it looks like when God woos His people into covenant love.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. In Exodus 19:4-6, God reminds Israel of how He rescued them and calls them His "treasured possession," inviting them into intimacy and purpose.

When you think about how God has rescued or pursued you in your life, how does it change the way you see yourself as His "treasured possession"? (See Exodus 19:5-6)

2. Psalm 16:11 says, "In your presence there is fullness of joy." The text says God draws us closer by revealing that earthly pleasures lose their grip.

Have you ever experienced a time when something you once loved lost its appeal because God was drawing you to find deeper joy in Him? What was that shift like for you? (See Psalm 16:11)

Preparing to Meet God

At the end, God says, "Now I'm going to come down and meet my people" (Exodus 19:9-11). God tells Moses to consecrate the people, meaning to set them apart as holy. Like preparing for a wedding, Israel must prepare to meet God.

This challenges our assumptions that God accepts us without any change. Here, He tells Israel to prepare by washing their garments, setting boundaries around the mountain, and abstaining from sex (Exodus 19:10-15). Washing garments was symbolic cleansing. Boundaries protected them from His consuming holiness (Hebrews 12:29). Abstaining from sex kept their intimacy undivided, as this meeting with God was to be the highest intimacy (1 Corinthians 7:5).

God had always shrouded His fullness, but here He would reveal Himself in fire, thunder, and lightning. This was a vulnerable moment where God showed His true holiness (Exodus 19:16-19). In Philippians 2:6-8, Jesus also set aside His divine glory to come as a servant. Often God meets us with gentleness, but here He meets Israel in power.

This preparation parallels human relationships. Just as brides and grooms prepare for their wedding day, Israel must prepare to meet God. If a groom showed up in board shorts instead of a tux saying "Take me as I am," it would dishonor the significance of the moment.

God's commands here do not reveal a joyless God, but one seeking undivided devotion. Sex is a symbol of intimacy between husband and wife (Genesis 2:24). Likewise, God wants Israel's full attention for this sacred meeting.

Though this may feel like the judgmental God we fear, it reveals His holiness. His invitation to prepare is an invitation into deeper intimacy with Him, recognizing that "Our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29).

Holy Love

As we move closer to God, His holiness shines on our sin. His holiness is His character—love, selflessness, care, and compassion. When this love encounters greed, anger, or selfishness, it overtakes and destroys it.

Like Aesop's fable, where the wind bets the sun it can force a man to remove his coat. The wind blows hard, but the man clutches his coat tighter. Then the sun shines warmly, and the man naturally takes off his coat. God's holiness is like the sun. It is not harsh force but radiant warmth and love. When we draw near, we see our sin and want to remove it.

We might wonder if feeling this conviction is self-deprecation, but it is preparation. God's holiness invites us to cast off what doesn't belong. As Israel prepared to meet God at Sinai (Exodus 19), so too we remove anything unworthy, drawn by His love into deeper relationship with Him.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. In Exodus 19:10-11, God asks Israel to consecrate themselves before meeting Him, like preparing for a wedding.

What would it look like in your life right now to intentionally “prepare to meet God”? How does this idea challenge or encourage you? (See Exodus 19:10-11)

2. Hebrews 12:29 says, “Our God is a consuming fire,” reminding us of His holiness and power.

When you think about God’s holiness and His desire for undivided devotion, does it make you feel fearful, loved, or something else? Why do you think you respond that way? (See Hebrews 12:29)

When have you experienced God’s love in a way that felt like the sun in Aesop’s fable—so warm and kind that it made you want to let go of something in your life that didn’t belong? (See Exodus 19)

Meeting God on The Second Mountain

On the third day, Mount Sinai shook with thunder, lightning, smoke, and trumpet blasts as God descended in fire (Exodus 19:16-19). The people trembled. They expected a gentle God but met terrifying holiness, like approaching Mount Doom rather than a peaceful shepherd. Israel, former slaves with no pedigree, faced the perfect, powerful God. How could this relationship ever work?

Tim Keller says meeting a famous person makes us nervous—how much more meeting the infinite God? It seemed impossible. Sinai revealed a God so holy that even touching the mountain meant death. But Hebrews 12 tells us of a second mountain: Mount Zion.

At Zion, God again descends. But instead of thunder and smoke, He comes as Jesus, humble and gentle. At Sinai, coming close meant death. At Zion, Jesus climbed the mountain and died for us. At Sinai, God said, “Stay back or die.” At Zion, Jesus says, “Come to me and live.”

Sinai showed us we could never reach God through our efforts or holiness. Zion shows us that God came down to reach us. At Sinai, the mountain was untouchable. At Zion, God Himself became touchable. He took our sin and shame on the cross so that what should have been a life-ending encounter becomes life-giving.

The terrifying God of Sinai is the loving God of Zion. The One who descended in fire also descended in flesh, died, and rose again to bring us to Himself. The chasm Sinai revealed, Zion bridged forever.

We often feel barriers—our sin, guilt, unworthiness. But at the second mountain, those barriers are removed. Because of Jesus, there is now no fear in drawing close. Deep down, what we desire most is God Himself. Through Zion, you can meet Him face to face without fear—because He made a way.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. At Sinai, God's holiness felt terrifying, but at Zion, Jesus invites us to come close without fear.

When you think about approaching God, do you feel more like the Israelites at Sinai or like someone welcomed by Jesus at Zion? Why do you think you feel that way? (See Exodus 19:16-19; Hebrews 12)

2. At Zion, Jesus removed every barrier so we could meet God face to face.

What barriers—like guilt, shame, or unworthiness—still make it hard for you to draw close to God? How might remembering what Jesus did on the second mountain help you approach Him today? (See Hebrews 12; Matthew 11:28)