

God Draws Near to an Undeserving People

Following the Red Sea crossing, Israel praised God as they celebrated their freedom from Egyptian servitude. But, as children quickly forget yesterday's joys, Israel forgot their blessings with each new challenge they encountered. After three days journey into the wilderness, there was no water except that which was not fit to drink. Rather than asking God in a faithful expectation based upon His recent and marvelous works, they complained to Moses. In response to Moses's pleas, God cleansed the water, teaching Israel, "If you diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight ...and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you (Ex. 15:26)."

With their water replenished they came to the Wilderness of Sin where they complained of inadequate food. Rather than beseech the Lord who had just promised to take care of them, they cried out, "Oh, that we had died by the hand of the Lord in... Egypt when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full!... you have brought us out... to kill this whole assembly with hunger (Exodus 16:3)." To supply their needs God gave them manna, a bread-like substance. Their only regulation was to gather enough for each day, except on the sixth, when enough for two days should be gathered, for the seventh day was to them a Sabbath rest and a Holy day (16:23). Of course, there were those who disobeyed and gathered more than directed. The excess spoiled.

At Horeb Israel was again in need of water and, again, complained to Moses, "Why is it you have brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst (Ex. 17:3)?" God provided water from a rock, overlooking once again their complaints, as well as their taunt, "Is the Lord among us or not (Ex. 17:7)?" It is apparent that these Hebrews, whom God chose to make into His own people, were not an admirable group in their own right. God brought a band of incorrigibles out of Egypt because they were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to whom He had promised to build into a great nation. It was with this "stiff-necked" people God would make His covenant. As with all of God's work with His creation, this was not about the people involved, but was a foreshadow of a future covenant between Himself and the world in which the whole stiff-necked, corrupted, and incorrigible race of men would be given an opportunity to reconcile with its Creator and receive an eternal blessing.

God, who "bore [Israel] on eagles' wings and brought [them] to [Himself] (Ex. 19:4)," proceeded undeterred in His plan to establish His covenant. At Sinai God declared that if Israel would "obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people (Ex. 19:5)." In spite of their past unfaithfulness and before they learned the details of the covenant, by the voice of their elders the people agreed that they would do what the Lord had spoken. God then orders Israel to "wash their clothes (19:10)" in preparation for His approach. Calling for them to be ready "on the third day," He warns the people that they should "not go up to the mountain or touch its base (19:12)" under penalty of death.

When God drew near on the morning of the third day "there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud (19:16)." The Lord descended upon Mt. Sinai in fire, causing a great smoke like that from a furnace, and the mountain "quaked greatly (19:18)." As the "blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder (19:19)," God descended on the mountain, calling Moses to the top. He immediately sent Moses down the mountain with a second warning that the people should not attempt to come to the mountain "to gaze at the Lord (19:21)." The text records that after Moses returned, God spoke in the hearing of all Israel the words we refer to as the Ten Commandments. The Covenant is established.

With all the drama unfolding before them, Israel, "trembled and stood afar off (Ex. 20: 18)." They besought Moses to carry God's communication to them, fearing death with their own hearing. But, Moses said to them, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin (Exodus 20: 20)." As we prepare to consider the constitutional framework of the Mosaic Covenant, let us retain this picture of Israel before God. As we approach God some thirty-five hundred years later, we should not become presumptuous, made careless by a casual grace.

[Read Exodus 20]