

## Exodus 19

This chapter begins abruptly with no meaningful transition from what has come before. This abrupt transition indicates that something new is afoot. What is afoot is that the people have reached a holy location at the foot of the mountain of God; the mountain where Moses first encountered YHWH in the burning bush. And it is at this mountain where the Israelites are going to have to make two critical choices. The first choice is whether the Israelite people will **hear** (listen to) God, even without **seeing** miracles like they witnessed in the past (meaning will they listen to the words/Law that Moses is about to receive). The second choice they will be required to make is whether they will agree to **obey** the Law and thus become a new people of a new covenant.

The two choices are delivered to Moses (vs. 4-6) who is to deliver them to the people. Moses, seemingly excited about being back at the mountain, had immediately head up the mountain even as the people unpacked. His ascent was rewarded when YHWH once again spoke to him and asked him to deliver the two choices to the people of Israel. What is interesting about these two choices is that they only have an upside for agreeing and no downside for not agreeing. The upside for agreeing is as follows: First the people will be YHWH's treasured possession out of all peoples and second, they will be a priestly kingdom and a holy people. The gist of these two rewards is that YHWH wants Israel to be an example to the world of the life-giving possibilities of community when community is organized according to God's ways and not human ways. In other words, the people are chosen (a holy people) for a purpose (to bless the world) and to bring God's ways to the world (a priestly kingdom sharing God's word/Law with all humanity). To be clear, YHWH neither commands the people to accept the new covenant nor does YHWH pledge to punish them if they do not accept. This is a free choice.

Moses summons the people, sets before them God's **words** and the people respond in the affirmative, even though they have no idea of what they are agreeing to (*sort of like we do when we agree to the terms and conditions of new software*). One midrash says that the people agree because they were afraid that if they said no, the entire mountain would fall on them. A kinder explanation is that these former slaves saw an opportunity to become something great, a people with a purpose.

In addition to agreeing to the covenant, God wanted the Israelite people needed to believe that Moses was the intercessor of God's Word and that they needed to prepare themselves for encountering God. God assists in both these areas by **speaking** with Moses in the **hearing** of the people and by giving the people a command to purify themselves and to keep an appropriate distance from the dangerous, holy mountain. Once all was ready on the third day, the real action began.

The day began with thunder, lightning, thick clouds, and a loud trumpet. The people followed Moses to the base of the mountain where they witnessed a **conversation** between God and Moses. Finally, Moses is summoned up the mountain again, only to be sent back to redeliver an earlier message that they people were to keep their distance and to bring Aaron back with him. Why go up, come back, and bring Aaron? Perhaps it was to remind the people that Moses could **speak** directly with YHWH and live and because Aaron, as the future priest of God, needed to be present at the giving of the religious rules and regulations.

**Reflection:** The children of Israel stand at a crossroads. They can choose to go their own way or they can choose to listen, learn and live in God's ways. It would be nice to assume that something has changed in the last 4,500 years but it hasn't. Every day we stand at the same crossroads having to make the same decision about whose ways we will follow, our ways or God's ways. At times, the decision is easy, but at other times it is not. Yet, the gift of God is that we are part of a covenant people, whom God loves and forgives.

### Questions:

1. What do you make of God's focus on hearing rather than seeing?
2. Why do you think that the people agreed to the covenant?
3. How has Jesus changed our concept of drawing close to God?