

## ASCENDING THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD

**Exodus 19:16-18** <sup>16</sup> On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup> Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. <sup>18</sup> Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently . . . .” **20:18-21** <sup>18</sup> When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” <sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” <sup>21</sup> Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

On April 3, 1968, in one of the most powerful speeches delivered during the struggle for civil rights, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood in front of hundreds of eager listeners and delivered a speech that has since been entitled, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop.” By this time in our nation’s history, Rev. King’s dream had been cast on the steps of the Lincoln memorial, he had made his historic march from Selma to Montgomery, he had proclaimed, throughout the nation and around the world, the message of God’s deliverance and equality for all people. And just one day before his assassination, less than 24 hours before that dreadful moment at the Lorraine Motel, King had delivered these powerful words. King had directed our minds to the Christian image of a mountaintop. In the last paragraph of this unforgettable speech, King prophetically proclaimed, “Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land.”

With these words, the audience stood up immediately with loud shouts and applause. “I have been to the Mountaintop.” They are words that lifted the spirits of the downtrodden. They

are words that gave hope to the hopeless. “I have been to the Mountaintop,” he proclaimed. Six words that offered promise and a future, words that spoke of change and words that reminded the people of the end of their journey, the goal of their longsuffering. They were words that spoke deep into the heart of a people who had been on a long and arduous journey. They spoke to a people who had traveled down that dusty road. They had been through the swamps and the lowlands. They had traveled through the muck and the mire. They had been in the valley, and now right behind Rev. King they stood at a Mountain.

While King’s powerful biblical reference may have went unnoticed by many in the crowd that day, certainly some of the church folk in the crowd would have known the Old Testament story that lay behind these powerful words. As King delivered such powerful words, surely he was thinking about the journey of the children of Israel. Surely, he was traveling along with Moses, Miriam, and Aaron. Surely, he was leading his own people on a journey towards God and towards the Promised Land.

It’s a fine and commendable thing to be on the mountaintop. It’s an honorable and good thing to long for that summit experience, to crave an intimate encounter with God, to look over and see into the Promised Land, but there is no Mountaintop experience in Scripture that doesn’t come with its own journey. There is no moment of heavenly bliss, that doesn’t come with earthly travail. There is no moment with God, that doesn’t require a journey through the wilderness of life.

Just like Moses and the children of Israel, we as the children of God are on a journey, and in this journey God desires for us to ascend the mountain and to dwell with him. God is calling us to move beyond the initial location of our deliverance. It’s just fine to revel in our salvation and to find joy in the day of our redemption, but we must press on. For, salvation is not merely

about the moment, it is not about hour, or the initial spiritual high, salvation is about the journey. Our meeting with God doesn't come through the initial invitation alone. Our meeting with God is established in the journey to the top of the Mountain. And so we press on to the mountaintop.

In our passage, Moses and the children of Israel are deep in the midst of this journey. They have traveled deep into the heart of the wilderness to meet with God. They have walked down that long and dusty path that few choose to travel. And along this path they have encountered several trying moments, only to end up at the foot of the mountain, where they would face their most challenging moment yet. So for just a moment, let us walk along side of the God's children, for their journey and their path to the mountain of God is wrought with the same troubles that we, as Christians, will all face. Our journey, like their journey, up this mountain is physically draining, treacherous, and at times it is still and lonely.

There are three types of struggles that we will face in our journey toward the top of the mountain. We will face our own inner struggles (our struggle with the old sin nature, with what Paul calls "the flesh"), our inclement surroundings (about the outside forces that seek to destroy us), and finally we will experience God's incomprehensible silence, which is seen in the dark cloud that rests at the top of the mountain in Exodus 19. So, let us begin by looking first at our internal struggles.

### 1. Internal Struggles

As any hiker will tell you, the greatest enemy that you will ever encounter in your attempts to climb a mountain is yourself. Sir Edmund Hillary was the first man to ever step foot on the summit of the world's highest point. And in 1953, shortly after his amazing ascent up Mt. Everest, Hillary was quoted as saying, "It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves." The inner struggle of the Christian life is sometimes the hardest things that we fight against. Like the

children of Israel, we have been rescued from the cruelty of this world. We have been set free from the bondage of sin and decay. The stain of sin is washed away, but there is a part of us that wants to return. As we look up from the far bank of the Red Sea, the first struggle that we encounter is this desire to give up, to turn back, to lay aside the future that has been promised to us and return to the life that we once knew and were comfortable with. Faced with the wilderness, the scarcity of food, the lack of clean water, the children of God despised the desert. Their flesh was weak and vulnerable. They, like Oscar Wilde, would have agreed that, “The best way to deal with temptation is to yield to it!” Temptations of the flesh are overwhelming. Anger, greed, jealousy, lust, pride, licentiousness and all matter of evil are at work within us, keeping us from pressing onward to the goal which is in Christ Jesus.

Yet in the midst of this battle there is good news. For in the eight chapter of Paul’s epistle to the Romans, Paul says:

“<sup>7</sup> For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law-- indeed it cannot,<sup>8</sup> and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. <sup>9</sup> But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. <sup>10</sup> But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.”

Your efforts, your struggles will always fall short of mark. In your own power and strength, you will never make it to the top, but be encouraged this morning. For, you are **not** making this journey alone. Beside every step of the way is a friend who sticks closer than a brother, beside you is the rose of Sharon, the bright and morning star, the Lamb of God and the Savior of the world. Through him you shall receive your strength to press on. Through him, you will find fresh manna from heaven, you will be given the water that your body desires. For as John reminds us out of “His belly will flow rivers of living water.”

## 2. Inclement Surroundings

And so the first leg of the journey is complete. With a full stomach and a clean mind the children of Israel press on. And in Exodus 17, we discover that the journey is not only inwardly dangerous; outwardly, there are enemies at every turn in our journey. Verse 8 of chapter 17 says, “and then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.” Things of the flesh had been laid aside. The children of God were being nourished and hydrated by the sweetness of God’s provision in the desert. They had learned how to live life in a different way. They no longer ate the same things that they did back in Egypt and they no longer went to the same place that they did back in Egypt land. God had provided a new way, but while the internal battle may have settled, as the journey continued there was a new battle that arose and this time God’s people came face to face with the enemies who sought to destroy them. They found themselves in the midst of a situation that was unprovoked, undesired, and unforeseen.

And how often is this true in our lives? How often are we forced to encounter storms on the seas of our life? They could be completely unexpected. They seem to blindside us. One day its business as usual, the next day it seems that all of hell has fallen in our laps. The security that we held so firmly to is stripped away, and as we progress on this journey, we realize that there are forces at work in the world that are completely out of our control. We can plan and organize. We can say all the right things. We can do all the right things. We may have our priorities in order and we can have our all of our 401-Ks in place. Spiritually, we might do our devotions just right, we might pray more than anyone in our family. We might fast and sing the songs of Zion. We can make all the right moves, and still there are spiritual forces that stand in opposition to us. Our surroundings are completely out of our control, they are beyond our grasp, and are completely untamable.

Nevertheless, the one who tamed the storm on the Sea of Galilee is the one who stands by you on this journey. The One who calmed the wind and the rain, will calm the storm of your life. He is the God who goes before His people in battle. He is the rider who is called Faithful and True. He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. He is the God of Jeremiah 29.11, “For surely I know the plans I have for you . . . plans for you welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” He is the God of Romans 8.31, the God who is for His People, and “If God is for us, who is against us.” He is the one who stood at the frontline of this cosmic battle on the cross. As He hung there, between heaven and hell, he hung as Victor. And though surrounded by death, hell, and the grave, for three days, Early on the third day He came bursting forth from the grave forever liberating the captives, forever loosing the chains of the imprisoned, forever reigning as conqueror over death, hell, and the grave. Jesus is our Victor. Jesus is our Victor.

### 3. Incomprehensible Silence

So we have made it to the mountain of God. The children of Israel have followed Moses through famine and war. They have stood by his side through the battle with the Amalakites, and finally they are asked to meet with God at the top of the mountain. They stand at its base, peering up at its insurmountable walls, staring at its majestic beauty, fearful of its colossal cliffs, and they hear the call to rise up. They hear the call to press on and while the journey has been trying, we have not walked this far to turn back now. They have not pressed through the temptations of the flesh to tuck tale and run. They have not stood face to face with the Evil One to be conquered by this precipice. The mountaintop is waiting. God is waiting. God is asking His people to come. He is asking us to communion with him.

This is where God has taken His people. This is where their journey has led them, and this is the final test. This is the test of Incomprehensible Silence. If God has been deliverer,

provider, and victor in the past, for the first time in Israel's journey waiting at the top of this mountain is a vision of God as darkness. It is a strange and foreign image. For many of us it is an uncomfortable image. He is the God of light. He is the God of the burning bush. He is the God that lives in the pillar of fire. But now he is the God exists in the thick darkness. When Moses found himself at the top of the mountain, he did not find clear blue skies. On the contrary, Moses' mountaintop encounter with God was an encounter that occurred in the midst of darkness. He was stripped of all vision. Moses was left in the midst of this dark silence, but as the Scripture says, "Moses drew near to the thick darkness," because the thick darkness was where Moses could find God. In our spiritual journey, there are many times of spiritual darkness. There are many occasions when the enemy would have us believe that God has abandoned us. Darkness surrounds us on all sides, and though God stands still, be assured this morning that God is there. The vision that God had placed in your hearts has been clouded and blurred. The direction that was once so clear is now shrouded with shadows. The hope that held you seems to have slipped away. But just as it was for Moses so it is with you. In the midst of a darkness that is unsurpassable, in the deepest, darkest hour of your life, God is still there. You may not feel Him. You may not understand him. You may not want to understand him, but He is there. He has been with you every step of the journey. When you are weak and powerless, He has been your guide. When you have fallen away; He has brought you back. And now when you exist in the midst of this dark hour, even when you feel separated from all hope and grace; God is there.

Conclusion:

And so the question that I must end with is "are you willing to go to the mountain top to be with God?" Are you willing to completely let yourself and your own agendas lay by the

wayside? Are you willing to step into the unknown and be embraced by God? **Will you be** like the children of Israel who said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die,” or will we be like so many others who found the strength to embrace God even in the darkest moments of their life.

One such story takes place shortly after WWII. And as the allies were searching back over the prison camps in Germany, a few of the soldiers came across some of the most profound confessions of faith ever uttered, scratched into the wall of one of the abandoned prison cells. The prisoner who wrote these words was surely in a dark place. Surely the storms of life had beaten them down. Surely, they felt surrounded by a great cloud of darkness, yet in the midst of this, they were able to say, “I believe in the sun even when it does not shine. I believe in love even when it is not expressed. And I believe in God even when He is silent.” The silence of God may be the most frightening experience that we as Christians are ever forced to deal. But fear not, for that setting that is so dreadful for us to face was shared even by the son of God himself. The fear of being abandoned by God was embraced by Christ in his dying moments on the cross. As Christ found his way to the top of Golgotha, as he lay dying on the top of his mountain, He cried out in a loud voice, “My God, My God why have you forsaken me?”

In our journey with God, surely we will rise many times to the crest of the mountain, but in that quest let us never forget the journey. For while the journey to the mountain is a journey taken by many in the pages of Scriptures, the summit experience was not separated from the journey it took to get there. When Abraham took Isaac to Mt. Moriah, it wasn't just about the summit experience. It wasn't just about the summit experience for Moses when he saw God in the burning bush, or when he tries to find God in the midst of the dark cloud. It wasn't about the summit experience when Elijah he escaped to the mountain. It wasn't about the mountaintop for

David when he hid from Saul. It certainly wasn't about the mountaintop when our Lord ascended the Mt. Golgotha and lay dying upon that tree. In each of these situations, the summit experience comes, and there is victory in that experience. But we must never forget that these experiences do not come without a struggle. They do not come apart from the journey.

Even now, some of us need to return again to the mountaintop. Even in this hour, some of us have forgotten why God delivered us and are in need of a mountaintop experience. We may be at varying points in this journey. Some of us may be dealing with internal struggles, and are in need of a Provider. Some may be fighting a battle. We may be surrounded on all sides, and in desperate need of God who can fight our battles. And others this morning may be sitting in the midst of the darkness where God is. In any of these positions, let us find strength as we recall the day of God's deliverance. Let us find hope in a God who has seen fit to bring us out of the Egypt. Let us remember, like the children of Israel the day of God's deliverance. Let us remember the moment when he parted the great Red Sea and released us from the cruelty of Egyptian bondage. Deliverance had come for God's people back at the Red Sea. As they crossed through waters, as they made their way through the torrents and floods, as they stepped foot on to the far bank of that distant shore, the children of God had found their deliverance. They found their freedom. They had received their baptism. They had undergone the washing of regeneration. They had been delivered from the oppressive war-lord of Egypt. The chains of slavery and captivity had fallen to the ground. After 300 years of servitude, God's people were free. They were slaves to sin no longer. They were given new life and new hope. They were granted a new identity.

So it is with the washing of regeneration that we so freely receive through the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We remember when He died upon that cross,

as he was nailed, hand and feet to that rugged cross-beam. We remember when He was scourged and beaten for transgressions, and when as he was bruised and battered for our iniquities. We remember that on that cross, our Lord paid for our deliverance, He purchased our redemption. He stood before the throne of Pharaoh and demanded that God's children be set free. He took us through the waters of regeneration and set us firmly on the far side of the red sea, forever removing us from the oppression and slavery that held us all so tightly. As far as the east is from the west, so far did he remove us from the guilt and stain of our life of sin. He purchased our freedom and placed us on a road to the promise land. Each of us has been bought with a price. Each of us has been given a new name and new identity. Each of us has been given the opportunity to start afresh. It doesn't matter what we did or didn't do back in Egypt. It doesn't matter where we were when he found us. For as surely as the walls of the Red Sea came crashing down onto the Egyptian pursuers that day, on the day that Christ stepped into our lives the stain of sin that continued to pursue us was forever washed away and in Christ we were given a new identity, and we set out on a new journey. A journey that is wrought with inner struggle, inclement surroundings and incomprehensible silence, but a journey in which we will forever dwell with God. A journey in which God will be our God and we will be His people, and a journey that will find its end in the Promised Land.

As I close let us be reminded of the words which the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“<sup>6</sup>On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. <sup>7</sup> And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; <sup>8</sup> he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. <sup>9</sup> It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. <sup>10</sup> For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain.” (25:6-10a)