

# NOTES ON THE BOOK OF EXODUS

by

Charles H. MacIntosh

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F. H. Revell

## Exodus 19

We have now arrived at a most momentous point in Israel's history. We are called to behold them standing at the foot of **“the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire.”** The fair millennial scene which opened before us in the preceding chapter has passed away. It was but a brief moment of sunshine in which a very vivid picture of the kingdom was afforded; but the sunshine was speedily followed by the heavy clouds which gathered around that palpable mount, where Israel, in a spirit of dark and senseless legality, abandoned the Lord's covenant of pure grace for man's covenant of works. Disastrous movement! A movement fraught with the most dismal results. Hitherto, as we have seen, no enemy could stand before Israel - no obstacle was suffered to interrupt their onward and victorious march. Pharaoh's hosts were overthrown - Amalek and his people were discomfited with the edge of the sword - all was victory, because God was acting on behalf of His people, in pursuance of His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the opening verses of the chapter now before us, the Lord recapitulates His actings toward Israel in the following touching and beautiful language:

**“Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and an holy nation”** (Ver. 3-6).

Observe, it is **“my voice”** and **“my covenant.”** What was the utterance of that “voice?” and what did that “covenant” involve? Had the Lord's voice made itself heard for the purpose of laying down the rules and regulations of a severe and unbending law-giver? By no means. It had spoken to demand freedom for the captivity provide a refuge from the sword of the destroyer - to make a way for the ransomed to pass over - to bring down bread from Heaven, to draw forth water out of the flinty rock. Such had been the gracious and intelligible utterances of the Lord's “voice,” up to the moment at which **“Israel camped before the mount.”**

And as to His “covenant,” it was one of unmingled grace. It proposed no condition - it made no demands - it put no yoke on the neck - no burden on the shoulder.

When “**the God of glory appeared unto Abraham,**” in Ur of the Chaldees, He certainly did not address him in such words as, “thou shalt do this,” and “thou shalt not do that.” Ah! no; such language was not according to the heart of God. It suits Him far better to place “**a fair mitre**” upon a sinner’s head, than to “**put a yoke upon his neck.**”

His word to Abraham was, “**I WILL GIVE.**”

*The land of Canaan was not to be purchased by man’s doings, but to be given by God’s grace.*

Thus it stood; and, in the opening of the book of Exodus, we see God coming down in grace to make good His promise to Abraham’s seed. The condition in which He found that seed made no difference, inasmuch as the blood of the lamb furnished Him with a perfectly righteous ground on which to make good His promise. He evidently had not promised the land of Canaan to Abraham’s seed on the ground of ought that He foresaw in them, for this would have totally destroyed the real nature of a promise. It would have made it a compact and not a promise; “**but God gave it to Abraham by promise,**” and not by compact. (Read Galatians 3).

Hence, in the opening of this 19th chapter, the people are reminded of the grace in which the Lord had hitherto dealt with them; and they are also assured of what they should yet be, provided they continued to hearken to mercy’s heavenly “voice,” and to abide in the “covenant” of free and absolute grace.

“**Ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people.**”

How could they be this? Was it by stumbling up the ladder of self-righteousness and legalism? Would they be “**a peculiar treasure**” when blasted by the curses of a broken law - a law which they had broken before ever they received it? Surely not. How then were they to be this “**peculiar treasure?**” By standing in that position in which the Lord surveyed them when He compelled the covetous prophet to exclaim, “**How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel! As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river’s side, as the trees of lign aloes which the Lord hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters. He shall pour the water out of his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn**” (Numbers 24:5-8).

However, Israel was not disposed to occupy this blessed position. Instead of rejoicing in God’s “**holy promise,**” they undertook to make the most presumptuous vow that mortal lips could utter. “**All the people answered together, and said, ‘All that the Lord hath, spoken we will do’**” (Exodus 19:8). This was bold language. They did not even say, “we hope to do” or “we will endeavour to do.” This would have expressed a measure of self-distrust. But no; they took the most absolute ground. “**We will do.**” Nor was this the language of a few vain, self-confident spirits who presumed to single themselves out from the whole congregation. No; “**all the people answered together.**” They were unanimous in the abandonment of the holy promise - the “**holy covenant.**”

And now, observe the result.

The moment Israel uttered their singular vow, the moment they undertook to “do,” there was a total alteration in the aspect of things.

**“And the Lord said unto Moses, Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud . . . And thou shalt set bounds unto the people, round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount, shall be surely put to death.”**

This was a very marked change; the One who had just said, **“I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself,”** now envelopes Himself **“in a thick cloud,”** and says, **“set bounds unto the people round about.”**

The sweet accents of grace and mercy are exchanged for the **“thunderings and lightnings”** of the fiery mount. Man had presumed to talk of his miserable doings in the presence of God’s magnificent grace. Israel had said, **“We will do,”** and they must be put at a distance in order that it may be fully seen what they are able to do. God takes the place of moral distance; and the people are but too well disposed to have it so, for they are filled with fear and trembling; and no marvel, for the sight was **“terrible,” - “so terrible that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake.”**

Who could endure the sight of that **“devouring fire,”** which was the apt expression of divine holiness?

**“The Lord came from Sinai, and rose up from Seir unto them; he shined forth from Paran, and he came with ten thousands of saints; from his right hand went a fiery law for them”** (Deuteronomy 33:2).

The term “fiery,” as applied to the law, is expressive of its holiness: **“Our God is a consuming fire,”** - perfectly intolerant of evil, in thought, word, and deed.

Thus, then, Israel made a fatal mistake in saying, **“we will do.”** It was taking upon themselves a vow which they were not able, even were they willing, to pay; and we know who has said, **“better that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.”**

It is of the very essence of a vow that it assumes the competency to fulfil; and where is man’s competency? As well might a bankrupt draw a check on the bank, as a helpless sinner make a vow. A man who makes a vow, denies the truth, as to his nature and condition. He is ruined, what can he do? He is utterly without strength, and can neither will nor do anything good.

Did Israel keep their vow Did they do **“all that the Lord commanded?”**

Witness the golden calf, the broken tables, the desecrated Sabbath, the despised and neglected ordinances, the stoned messengers, the rejected and crucified Christ, the resisted Spirit. Such are the overwhelming evidences of mans dishonored vows. Thus must it ever be when fallen humanity undertakes to vow.

Christian reader, do you not rejoice in the fact that your eternal salvation rests not on your poor shadowy vows and resolutions, but on **“the one offering of Jesus Christ once?”** Oh, yes, this is our joy, which never can fail. Christ has taken all our vows upon Himself, and gloriously discharged them for ever. His resurrection-life flows through His members and produces in them results which legal vows and legal claims never could effect. He is our life, and He is our righteousness. May his name be precious to our hearts. May His cause ever command our energies. May it be our meat and our drink to spend and be spent in His dear service.

I cannot close this chapter without noticing, in connection, a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy, which may present a difficulty to some minds. It has direct reference to the subject on which we have been dwelling.

**“And the Lord heard the voice of your words, when ye spake unto me; and the Lord said unto me, I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee: they have well said all that they have spoken”** (Deuteronomy 5:28).

From this passage it might seem as though the Lord approved of their making a vow; but if my reader will take the trouble of reading the entire context, from ver. 24-27, he will see at once that it has nothing whatever to say to the vow, but that it contains the expression of their terror at the consequences of their vow. They were not able to endure that which was commanded. **“If,”** said they, **“we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived! Go thou near, and hear all that the Lord our God shall say; and speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it and do it.”**

It was the confession of their own inability to encounter the Lord in that awful aspect which their proud legality had led Him to assume. It is impossible that the Lord could ever commend an abandonment of free and changeless grace for a sandy foundation of **“works of law.”**

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