

READY TO LISTEN

SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO FREEDOM



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Exodus 19:1-25
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Paul Taylor

Exodus 19:1-25

I'll begin by asking you a simple question: are you ready to listen to God?

I love being listened to. It's such a great feeling when you are speaking and someone else is really listening. Like right now.

My wife and I have been married now for 23 years. We've found that listening to each other is really important. At times though, it can be tricky to figure out how to listen to each other well. Several years ago, our five children were all young and required a lot of attention every day, so Rachel was staying home to raise them. We had a common pattern where I would come home from work, and I'd want to talk about all the parts of my day. I'd walk in the door and be ready to be listened to.

Understandably so, Rachel was not ready to listen. She'd been managing kids all day and couldn't just transition immediately. Often we would schedule time after the kids went to bed. I'd make her a cup of decaf coffee. We'd sit down together. And then she says, "Okay, I'm ready to listen."

To be honest, this hurt my feelings at first. I wanted to be so interesting that as soon as I came home, my wife would want to do nothing other than rapturously listen to the fascinating details of my day's activities. But over time, I realized that this ritual actually meant a lot more. If it were easy to listen to me, it wouldn't actually require that much. But the fact that she was willing to be intentional, make space for it, and prepare herself to listen to me demonstrated the depth of her love for me.

Here's the moral of the story. Sometimes it's not easy to listen. But we can prepare ourselves to listen to the voices in our lives that we decide are important.

God understands this principle. He created us—he ought to understand how we work. He knows we can't just listen to something really important without being prepared to do so.

We've been working our way through the book of Exodus since last September. We've seen God's people freed from slavery in Egypt. Starting a few weeks ago, we watched as God led his people through the wilderness. He's turned bitter water sweet, rained down bread from heaven, gave them water from a rock, led them to a military victory, and has been teaching Moses to be a better leader.

All of this has been leading up to the passage we'll look at next week. God will speak to his people and give them the biggest gift of the Old Testament: the Law of God. But one more thing has to happen before he does that. He will do several different things to prepare his people to listen. God will help his people become ready to listen.

I often hear people say they don't feel like they can hear God's voice. They aren't sure what he is saying to them. But let me ask you this: when was the last time you prepared yourself to hear God's voice?

Don't get me wrong: if God wants to raise his voice and break through all your defenses, he can certainly do that. But this morning, we'll see him taking several concrete steps to prepare his people to listen to him. So it makes me wonder what we can do in order to listen to God.

Honestly, I think we need this even more than the ancient Israelites did. We live in a world of noise. A few years ago, The New Yorker ran an article suggesting that noise pollution might be the next public health crisis.¹ And yes, the article was published before COVID, so maybe they weren't quite right on that one. But the point is still valid: everything in our world is louder. Most of us have buzzes, dings, and beeps constantly assaulting us from our phones. There are endless shows to catch up on, people to FaceTime, and feeds to check. We are surrounded by noise.

If we believe that God is real and that he might actually speak to us, how do we get ourselves ready to listen? How do we clear out the noise and open our ears? Let's see what God does for the Israelites. Maybe we can learn something from them.

Are you willing?

Our passage begins with God's people making the journey up to the base of Mt. Sinai.

Exodus 19:1-2:

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. 2 They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain,

Three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites arrive at the base of Mt. Sinai. This is the same spot where God met with Moses before sending him back to Egypt. In fact, this event is the fulfillment of a promise that God made to Moses. Here is what God told him.

Exodus 3:12:

He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

After all that's happened, God has kept his promise. Here they are, at the base of Mt. Sinai. There's some debate about where Mt. Sinai actually is, but here is a picture of the leading candidate. [Shows photo]

You can see the wide open space in front of the mountain. That's where the people would have camped. And once they go up to the edge of the mountain, you can see the raised part where they would have assembled. Today it takes 2-3 hours to hike to the top. It would probably have been longer for Moses. Israel would remain here for almost an entire year. This is where the rest of the book of Exodus takes place. They don't leave until halfway through the next book, Leviticus.

Think about all that has happened to get the people to this place. God has led them out of slavery. He destroyed Egypt's armies. He's provided water and bread. He's given them military victory over the Amalekites. God has done a lot before he asks them to listen to him.

Think about your own life. What has God done to bring you here to this moment? How has he shown you that he loves you? Think about all that you've come

through. How has God been with you? How has God led you to this moment and provided for you along the way?

Having brought them to this place, God speaks to them through Moses.

Exodus 19:3-6:

...while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: 4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

God says to his people, *You have seen what I can do. I destroyed the Egyptians, and I delivered you. I have proven myself to you. I have shown you that you are my treasure. I care deeply for you. I have responded to each of your doubts, complaints, and needs. So now it's up to you: will you listen to me?*

We all look somewhere to figure out how to live our lives. Whether it's Instagram, Reddit, a mentor, fitness gurus, our parents, or the Bible, we're always looking for direction on how to live. At the base of Mt. Sinai, after everything he has done to get them there, God turns to his people and says, "Will you look to me for direction?" Are you willing to listen?

The first thing that God does in preparing his people to listen to him is to ask them whether they even want to. He simply asks, are you willing to listen to me? Do you want to hear my voice and keep my ways?

This question is a critical thing for each of us to decide. Many of us might say that we're willing to listen, but if you look at our lives, it's hard to tell. We want to hear from God, but are we willing to do the things that make it easier to hear God? Or do we think that God needs to speak up if we're going to hear him?

In response to God's question, the people respond enthusiastically.

Exodus 19:8:

All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD.

All the people. They answered together. “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” This response is a strong yes. They are willing to listen. They have said yes to the initial question. This response will be repeated in Exodus 24 after they receive the Law. God’s people indicate their willingness to listen to God.

You might be skeptical of this answer if you know how the rest of the story turns out. We’ll see God’s people over the next few weeks do a little less than “all that the LORD has spoken.” We certainly see that over the rest of the Old Testament. But it is not for nothing that they agree here. Willingness doesn’t guarantee follow-through, but it is an important first step.

Dallas Willard points out that spiritual transformation involves the intention to be transformed. That intention doesn’t guarantee that you will be transformed. But not having the intention guarantees that you won’t be. He summarizes, “People who do not intend to be inwardly transformed ... will not be. God is not going to pick us up by the seat of our pants and throw us into transformed kingdom living.”²

Listening to God begins with a willingness. Are you willing?

Are you prepared?

After making sure the people are willing, God gives Moses instructions about preparing them for what is about to come.

Exodus 19:10-12:

The Lord said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments 11 and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. 12 And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.’”

God tells Moses how to make the people ready. They are supposed to spend two days being consecrated. That word is the very form of the word that means “holy” in Hebrew. We might say they are being “holy-fied.” They also have to wash their clothes, which would have been a rare occurrence living in the desert. And Moses is supposed to set limits around the mountain, so they don’t come too close. Several verses later, they are also told to abstain from sex.

All of these activities are meant to help God’s people prepare for the incredible experience of hearing from God. It’s a way to signify that something important is about to happen. This significance is why we dress up when we go to weddings. That event is a different kind of event than what happens in the rest of our lives. Something serious is going on. We give honor to the drama of the event by wearing clothes that we don’t wear to other kinds of events.

We don’t need to be consecrated. We don’t need to wash our clothes. For us, the most practical way to prepare ourselves is simply to make space. Create a hole in your life that God’s presence can fill. Turn off all the other voices. Clear out your normal activities and priorities, and responsibilities. Open a door and wait. See if God walks through it.

For the most part, God won’t interrupt your life. Sometimes he does, but often he’ll simply wait for you to make space. Listening to God doesn’t usually happen without some effort on our part.

Please understand that I’m not talking about salvation. I’m not talking about whether God accepts you, loves you, or forgives you. He absolutely does. God loves you more than you can ever realize. But it’s going to be really hard for you to experience that love of Christ if you don’t make room to listen.

How can you prepare yourself to listen to God? How can you be prepared?

Being prepared is going to look different for each of us. Listening to God works in a similar way to other relationships. Some people like talking in a car, so they go for a drive—others like to converse over a meal, a quiet walk, or a shared activity.

I have a prayer routine that I use many mornings. It’s a process that helps me make space to listen to God. I find it hard to sit down and shift immediately into listening to God, so this routine helps me clear away the noise

and quiet myself. It's not magic, and I don't always hear anything specific from God, but just creating the space changes how I approach the day.

There are plenty of ways to do it, but I encourage you to find a way to prepare yourself to listen to God regularly.

For God's people at Mt. Sinai, once they've done that, the real drama begins.

Does God have your attention?

Let's look at our picture of Mt. Sinai again, where God's people find themselves.

They're gathered at the base of that mountain, and then God makes himself present in a dramatic way. Listen to Exodus 19:16-19 and have that picture of the mountain in mind.

Exodus 19:16-19:

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. 17 Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. 19 And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

Have you ever been outside in the midst of a storm? Several years ago, I was at my parents' house in Houston when lightning struck our neighbor's tree. It was probably the loudest sound I'd ever heard in my life. The whole neighborhood shook. Can you imagine being at the base of Mt. Sinai as thunder and lightning, and smoke shook it?

Then there were the trumpet blasts. We hear about trumpets throughout the Bible, which always signify the arrival of something important. At Sinai, the trumpet sounds and then gets louder and louder and louder. Finally, God himself speaks in thunder.

Why all this commotion?

Because being ready to listen to God isn't just intellectual. It's also emotional. It is something you feel in your heart, your body, and in your bones, not just your head. When you stand in front of a mountain that's covered in smoke and see the lightning and feel the thunder in your gut, you are being prepared emotionally to listen to God.

We can be a pretty intellectual crowd. There's a great strength to that, but it's also important to remember that we need to prepare our hearts, not just our heads. We need to be ready not just to listen to God but to give him our attention. Does God have your attention?

This is one thing we do when we worship through music. Songs have a unique ability to unlock something within us. It's why we love the Psalms. Our music doesn't play with our emotions, but it does open doors for us to experience the emotions that fit with encountering God.

One of my favorite dynamics in music is when the music builds, and more instruments are added, the volume increases, and the intensity rises more and more. Then everything drops out, and you are left with the simple quiet of God's voice. That's what our passage describes.

Are you sure?

The story ends confusingly. There's been all this build-up. The people say they'll listen to God. They get consecrated. The mountain is covered in smoke. The trumpet sounds. God has come down. Moses has gone up. Everything is ready. But God sends Moses down to the people one more time with the same instructions he's already given him.

Exodus 19:20-21:

The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish."

Why does God tell Moses to do the same thing he's already done?

How many of you have been walking out the door when your mother yells, "Be careful"? Maybe I'm a little too analytical here, but I've often wondered about the

purpose of that suggestion. Will it change my behavior? Am I going to be more careful in life than I would have been otherwise if I hadn't heard those words? I don't really think so.

I've concluded that there is no practical reason for those words. It's how my mother expresses her concern for me, lets me know that I matter to her, and connects with me one last time before I walk out of the door.

I think that's what is going on here. God is checking one more time. So, Moses does it.

Exodus 19:25:

So Moses went down to the people and told them.

In the next verse, the majestic Ten Commandments are revealed. The whole chapter has been preparation for that moment. It's the wedding procession just before the bride is revealed; the trailers before the movie when the lights go dark. It's going to bed the night before Christmas. All of this has been leading up to God telling his people how to live their lives.

If God sends Moses down one more time, it's worth us asking one more time. Are you sure?

Are you sure that you've done whatever it is God has asked you to do in order to hear from him? Let me assure you: nothing you do will be more important than the steps you take so that you can hear from the God of the universe. I'll say that again: nothing that you do this week will be more important than the steps you take so that you can hear from the God of the universe.

Are you willing? Are you prepared? Are you engaged? Are you ready to listen?

Conclusion

We spent most of the morning hearing about how God prepared the Israelites in the desert to listen to him. But we don't stand at the foot of a mountain blazing with fire. We aren't waiting to receive the Law. We have something better.

We come to Jesus. We receive the offer of forgiveness based on his death on the cross. We are caught up in the story of redemption that He is working in the world. We are filled with his grace and his overflowing love.

The lessons about listening still hold true. Midway through his ministry on earth, Jesus recreated the scene of God's presence on Mt. Sinai.

Luke 9:28 and 34-35:

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray.

As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"

Jesus went up to the top of a mountain, and when he got there, Moses and Elijah met him. Then God spoke to all of them, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"

What more do we need? God has invited us to listen to Jesus. Don't say, "why do I never hear from God" when you never prepare yourself to listen to him. It takes space and silence, and patience to hear God speak. Even then, it can sometimes be really difficult.

Nothing important is easy. Listening to Jesus is worth all the effort you put into it. One final exhortation: listen to Jesus.

As we wrap up this morning, I want to give us an opportunity to respond. We talked about how all of this starts with a willingness to listen. God began his preparations by giving his people a chance to express their willingness. He told them if they listened to him, they would be blessed. They responded with the powerful words, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do."

I want to end by offering you the chance to do the same. I'm going to read the passage about Jesus on the mountain one more time. We're going to hear God's exhortation that we listen to him. You will have the chance to respond. For those who want to respond, you can say, "By the power of the Spirit, we will listen." You don't have to respond. Only say the words if you mean them. Feel free not to say anything. I'm inviting you, not commanding you to do something. The choice is yours.

Notice that I've added the power of the Spirit. This isn't something we do on our own. God helps us. But it is something we decide to do. If you say these words, I'd like for you to pick something concrete that you will

do this week to live them out. This is not an abstract, generalized decision. Pick something concrete. Maybe it's going for a 15-minute walk without music to create space for God. Maybe it's waking up early one morning and seeing if God speaks to you through the Bible. Maybe it's getting on your knees for a few minutes before bed to open yourself up to God's voice.

It can be anything. But pick something concrete: some way to prepare yourself to listen to God. See what he does.

As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!"

Response: By the power of the Spirit, we will listen.

Endnotes

1. David Owen, "Is Noise Pollution The Next Big Public-Health Crisis?," *The New Yorker*, May 6, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/05/13/is-noise-pollution-the-next-big-public-health-crisis>
2. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002, 91.