

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 11 November 2007

No. T0495

Speaker: Mr. Peter Ollerhead

Lessons from the mountains of Israel: Mount Sinai

Good morning, and welcome to this talk about the scriptural importance of Mount Sinai. It is the first of four in a series regarding various mountains in the Bible. I suppose that mountains have a lasting fascination for many of us, especially when we are able to enjoy the rigour of walking and climbing, an activity that loses its appeal as we get older! One famous mountaineer, when asked why he wanted to climb Everest, gave the answer, "Because it's there." As Christians there are many spiritual mountains that we meet during our lives, yet none of them are negotiated "because they are there". They are not by-paths traversed at a whim, rather are they essential features of the journey of faith as the Lord leads us on. Every true Christian will, sooner or later, meet the experience typified by the mountains that we will discuss in the next four weeks. We believe that Mount Sinai speaks of something important in our everyday lives, as believers in the Lord. We do not have to go out to find the mountain because we will find it confronting us in the life of faith. Before we continue with this talk, however, I would emphasise that not every mountain in Scripture is a symbol of some spiritual truth; neither do they all suggest certain types of experience, or lessons, in the life of the believer.

The first mention, in the Bible, of a mountain, is in Genesis 7:20, which I shall read from the King James Version: "Fifteen cubits upwards did the waters prevail; and the mountains were covered." One would be justified to ask how that has an implication for us today. I would remind you that the context is the story of Noah who was safe in the Ark, whilst the rain and floods were devastating the whole country. To me, this verse is simply stating that when God's judgement finally comes no individual will escape. Just as the flood of God's wrath covered the whole human race, in the time of Noah, so will it be in a coming day. We might ignore, or mock, as Noah's contemporaries did, yet the fact that God will require an answer from us all is something that we can't escape from.

Can I emphasise here that I do not believe that the recent summer floods, in various parts of our land, were God's judgement. They devastated homes that were built in places that were in reach of over-flowing rivers. Taking the message of the text we have just read when God's judgement comes it will reach us all. Some of us, through God's grace, will have a shelter in that time because of the work of the Lord Jesus upon the Cross. We have been saved from the wrath to come because God has touched our hearts to bring us to faith in the Lord Jesus. If you are a believer in Him give thanks to God now for bringing you into that knowledge.

We must now return to Mount Sinai which, as I said earlier, is our theme this morning. We first meet this mountain in Exodus which, as I am sure you are aware, is the second book in the Bible. It is concerned with the experiences of the Israelites as they left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea. Exodus 20:19 illustrates a very important point about the mountains of Scripture: "And the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the LORD called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up." There are two points that I wish to make about this particular verse that affect us as individuals. First, there is the thought of mountain top experiences. Many hymns hold out for us the experience of such an encounter with God. I am convinced that, as believers, we can have special times when we can feel the nearness of God in a profound way. These are just 'special times', not necessarily every day happenings. They could be during a crisis in our lives, or at other times. William Clowes, one of the founders of Primitive Methodism, recalled such an occasion in his journal. Though he had been a Christian for some time he was enduring a period of distress. I now quote directly from his writings: "The next day, hearing that there was to be a love-feast held at Harriseahead, three miles from Tunstall, I mustered the strength to go thither; and blessed be the name of the Lord God! In that meeting the clouds of darkness and temptation which had settled on my soul were dispersed, and the flame of God's love expanded throughout all my powers: both body and soul rose in strength and majesty ... the place was filled with the glory of God." He went on to devote his life to the Lord's work, preaching and evangelising all over England, until his death, in Hull, in 1851.

The second point, regarding our verses from Exodus, is that the time Moses spent on the mountain top came about through the action of a sovereign God. According to our quoted verse, it was God who came down to the mount and God who called Moses to share His presence. We cannot engineer occasions that some have called 'soul revival'. We are called to walk a pathway of faithfulness and obedience, as Moses was doing. God will lead us as He wills.

We must move on now to consider the importance that Mount Sinai has for the people of God. I would guess that most of you listening this morning are aware of the events that occurred on Sinai that are recorded in Exodus. Here

the whole law was given, providing a pattern for the life and conduct of the redeemed people. That latter point is important because, by the time the Israelites reached Sinai, the secret name of the living God had been disclosed to them, as we can read in Exodus 6:2-3: "And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the LORD: and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known unto them." This revelation was central to the life and experience of the people Moses was to lead to the Promised Land. Motye, in his book, "*Revelation of the Divine Name*", suggests that from now on He will be the God who makes Himself known by His active presence among His people.

Yet another crucial event had occurred, before they reached Sinai, and that was the redemption from the slavery of Egypt. This was always considered, by succeeding generations, to be a critical point in the spiritual and religious history of the nation. By God's sovereign will and action they had been released from the iron grip of Pharaoh. The counterpoint to this in our experience is obvious. Redemption is an absolute necessity to us. We can have no relationship with a Holy God unless there is faith in the redeeming blood of Christ. Many Israelites could have said that the blood of a lamb upon their door posts was foolish in the extreme. The fact was that only those who obeyed the injunction were redeemed from the awful judgement that covered the whole land of Egypt.

I have considered the revelation of the divine Name and the redemption of the people at some length because they place the events at Sinai in perspective. The law was given to regulate the behaviour and worship of God's people not to make them God's people. A mistake that is often made, even today, by some caring and good living people, is that we can become Christians by our manner of life. This can result in some preachers condemning a good life as if it is inherently bad. I have no doubt, whatsoever, that it is foolish and dangerous for anyone to rely upon their own efforts for salvation, yet far too many of our fellow citizens, in England today, have no care, or concern, how they live. We need more people in our land with values and standards that make us good citizens, parents or neighbours. However, if any listening this morning are among those who imagine that a good and concerned life can make us a child of God then the whole weight of Scripture is against you. God Himself has provided for our reconciliation in the Person of His Son. We have to rely upon the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus at Calvary for our salvation.

This awareness, that only God's grace can bring us into a relationship with Him, can lead to a faulty understanding of the law that was given to Moses at Sinai. I have heard some remarks that can leave one with an impression that it was wrong for the Israelites to try to live by the law, as outlined in Exodus. What such teachers miss is that there is an aspect of the Sinai experience that is all of God's grace. God chose this small nation to know the secret of His being. They did not choose Him. He gave them a means whereby they could remain in relationship with Him, despite the innate sinfulness of man. Some of them took such pride in the law that they made it a burden, and irksome for many of their fellowmen. Psalm 119, however, is an example of a man who found delight in the possibility of knowing God under the circumstances that the law established.

I know that John, in verse 17 of chapter 1 of his Gospel, states the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. Ultimately, the law represented God's standard of righteousness; grace demonstrated His attitude towards those who could not keep the law. The regularity of the sin offerings that were demanded by the law demonstrated that:

*"Not all the blood of beasts,
On Jewish altars slain,
Could give the guilty conscience peace
Or wash away its stain."*

Paul sums up one aspect of the law, in Galatians 3:24, when he writes: "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith." My point is that the law was declared by God at Sinai; it was not designed by Moses. God provided a means whereby the Israelites could be in a covenant relationship with Him.

Gentiles had very little prospect of enjoying that relationship with the LORD God, as it would have been necessary for them to become a member of the Jewish race. Christianity opens the door to all who believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that He has been raised from among the dead. His death upon the cross is the offering for our sins. A perfect sacrifice, never to be repeated; a propitiation provided by God Himself.

However, once we have a living relationship with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ then we have the responsibility to live like His children. Sinai teaches us that. Even then we must not make the mistake that we become a Christian through grace and then law keeping takes over. We are saved by grace and we live by grace, yet we have to live as followers of the Lord Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel chapter 11 and verses 28 and 29, the Lord's words are recorded for us: "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls." 'Learn of Me' can be translated 'learn from Me'. It is the Holy Spirit who provides the power to learn from the Lord and to live like Christians.

The next question is: 'How do we know how we should live?' We find such teaching outlined in Scripture. We neither provide the power or the instruction. True Christianity is all of grace.

Another aspect of Sinai that we have not touched upon yet, is brought before us in Psalm 68:7-8: "O God, when thou wentest forth before thy people, when thou didst march through the wilderness; Selah: the earth shook, the heavens also dropped at the presence of God; even Sinai itself was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel." To emphasise my point, I shall also read verses Judges 5:4-5: "LORD, when thou wentest out of Seir, when thou marchest out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water. The mountains melted from before the LORD, even that Sinai from before the LORD God of Israel." From both of these passages we can get a sense of the awesome nature of the Sinai experience. The Israelites always looked back to this Sinai experience with a mixture of awe and reverence. All the various laws and offerings, given at that time, served to consolidate this awesome respect for the presence of God. He promised to dwell among His people in the Tabernacle as it was carried through the wilderness, though even then regular sacrifices were needed. Only once a year could the High Priest enter the Holy of Holies, a place that signified the utter holiness of the presence of God. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews speaks of this Hebrews 9:7: "But into the [Holiest of all] went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of his people." I state again that the whole system of law and offerings, given at Sinai, reinforced the sense of the holiness of God.

When we come to the New Testament we find that the law, as a way into the presence of God, has been superseded. Sinai, as the place where the law was given, is only mentioned in Galatians 4, where it stands for the whole sacrificial and legal system that was practised at Jerusalem. In a rather difficult passage in verses 22 to 26 Paul compares the law and the offerings, given at Sinai, to the son of Hagar in Genesis 16. He summarises his main point in Galatians 4:24, 25 and 26: "Which things are an allegory; for these are the two covenants: the one from the Mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, who is Hagar. For this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all." The conclusion to his argument is stated in verses 30 and 31: "Nevertheless, what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son; for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free." The point I am making, in quoting these passages, is that the law and the offerings, as an approach to God, that were given at Sinai, have been superseded by the way opened up by the Lord Jesus.

I quote again the passage from Galatians 3:24-25, where Paul writes: "Wherefore, the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster." Christ's death upon the cross brings, to the believer, the justification and redemption which the law and the offerings were pointing to. When the Son of God came into this world to demonstrate, once and for all, the love of God that brings total and complete forgiveness, the time of seeking atonement through the Temple sacrifices was finished.

So important is this that I shall quote another passage from Galatians, this time 4:4-5: "But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." Christianity enriches us with a new relationship. We are now adopted into the family of God. None of this has been earned by obeying Sinai's law and presenting animal sacrifices. We, through grace, are free from the law. Galatians 4:7 tells us: "Wherefore, thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ." How thankful we ought to be when we realise the immensity of the blessings that the Lord Jesus has secured for us, when we believe in Him. I want to finish, this morning, by turning to a Scripture that refers to Sinai, though not by name. It reinforces the point that I have just made that we, in the church, have finished with systems of approaching God through any other way than that opened by the Lord Jesus. Please turn to the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12 and verses 18 to 21: "For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words, which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (for they could not endure that which was commanded, and if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: and so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake)". Though Mount Sinai is not mentioned by name in this passage, each of the incidents listed are all associated with that place. The writer is contrasting the terrors and fear present, when the Law was given, with the joys and spiritual freedom of Christianity, as we can read when we continue with Hebrews 12:22-24: "But ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, who are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel."

We have no time to examine all of these blessings that, through grace, belong to the Christian. I must, however, bring before us the two concluding thoughts of that passage, where it is stated that we have been brought to the Lord Jesus and to the "blood of sprinkling". We have the Person of the Lord before us in all His glory and dignity as the Son of

God, the revealer of the immortal God hidden from material world, as we can read in the opening verses of Hebrews. We are also brought to consider the effects of His death upon the cross when the writer mentions the “blood of sprinkling”. Through grace we have forgiveness from the penalty of sin; we are welcomed into all the fullness of blessings that God’s love would shower upon us. We do not maintain God’s favour towards us through the operation of the law given at Sinai, for its demands were met by the Lord Jesus, as the old hymn states:

*“Free from the Law, oh, happy condition!
Jesus has bled, and there is remission!
Cursed by the Law, and bruised by the fall,
Christ hath redeemed us, once for all.”*

The question remains, for each one of us this morning, as to whether we believe in the Lord Jesus and the significance of His death, or are we still hoping that our own efforts will be good enough for God.

To all listening to this broadcast, who truly believe in Him, I have one concluding plea. Do not fall into the trap that because grace has covered our sins it does not matter how we live. The New Testament consistently emphasises the necessity for living a life that befits a Christian. Paul, and the other apostles, teach us to live, in the power of the Holy Spirit, a life that reflects the pathway and example of the Lord Jesus. May we all take His yoke upon us and learn from Him.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.