

## **The Mountain Of Freedom** by Jeff Strite

Exodus 19:1-20:6

OPEN: In about 4 weeks our nation is going to have a special celebration. Does anybody know what that special holiday is? ("Independence Day") We are a free people, and we celebrate that freedom on July 4th.

One of our nation's founding documents is called the Declaration of (Independence). And in that Declaration of Independence are these words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights –that among these are Life, LIBERTY and the pursuit of Happiness."

We are a nation of Free people.

And what's interesting is that our Nation's Founders realized the importance of basing that freedom upon the upon the same set of Laws that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

It's true.

Look just about any place you like in Washington D.C. and you will find Scripture written on about every famous building in sight... including the Capitol Building where the Supreme Court meets.

As you walk up the steps to the Capitol Building you can see near the top of the building a row of statues that represent the world's great law givers. And each of those statues is facing one statue in the middle that ONE statue is facing forward with a full frontal view. Any idea who that middle statue is?

That's right - it's Moses...holding the Ten Commandments!

As you enter the Supreme Court itself, there are 2 huge oak doors, and engraved on the lower portion of each door, guess what you'll see?

The tablets of Stone representing the 10 Commandments.

And if you were to sit inside that courtroom, you could see on the wall right above where the Supreme Court judges sit... again - a display of the Ten Commandments!

Now, why would they design the Supreme Court in this way?

Because as a nation of Free People our leaders intended to build our freedom upon God's Laws given Moses at Mt. Sinai.

In our story this morning we find the people of Israel have come to the Mountain of God. This is where they're to received the 10 Commandments and all the rest of God's commandments. And the very first words of those Commandments are these: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Deuteronomy 5:6

They've been brought out of the HOUSE of SLAVERY.

Once they were slaves – now they were a Free People.

God made them Free.

Now they were on their way to the Promised Land. A land that would be for them a Land of Freedom.

But on their way to that land of freedom God had them stopping here at this mountain. They were here to receive God's law. And this Law is going to be the foundation of their blessings and freedom as a people of God.

In Deuteronomy God tells them that – if they obey His Laws:

“You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.

Your descendants will be blessed, and your soil's produce, and the offspring of your livestock, including the young of your herds and the newborn of your flocks.

Your basket and kneading bowl will be blessed.

You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

“The LORD will cause the enemies who rise up against you to be defeated before you. They will march out against you from one direction but flee from you in seven directions.

The LORD will grant you a blessing on your storehouses and on everything you do; He will bless you in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

The LORD will establish you as His holy people, as He swore to you, if you obey the commands of the LORD your God and walk in His ways.”

Deuteronomy 28:2-9 (HCSB version)

God was promising Israel that His Law would be THE FOUNDATION of their Freedom and their Blessings as a people of God.

In my library I have a book called “None Of These Diseases” and the author focuses on God's promise to Israel - that if they obeyed Him they wouldn't experience the diseases that had plagued Egypt. The author goes to great lengths to point out the diseases Israel would be spared if they obeyed the Law God gave them.

- For example, in our present culture, the idea of sexual purity is laughed. And yet sexual purity was something the law focused heavily on for Israel. What has been the result of our nation ignoring and mocking God's laws on this? Since the 60's the number sexually transmitted diseases have skyrocketed and have become a leading health concern for our nation.
- Then there were God's laws concerning cleanliness and sanitation would spare Israel plagues and mass infections. We take much of what the Bible for granted because our culture has understood the importance of such things. But that has not always been the case.

ILLUS: Back in 1840, THE medical center of Europe was in Vienna, Austria. If had a disease or illness, this was the place to go for the most cutting edge in medical care. In that day, there was a young doctor stationed there named Ignaz Semmelweis. His area of oversight was the maternity ward of the hospital. But there was a problem there that deeply concerned him – the percentage of death in his ward was extremely high. One out of every six women died of what was called “Childbed Fever”... and no satisfactory explanation seemed to be found.

So Semmelweis decided to watch the doctors who treated the women and observe what they did. He discovered that the physicians first stop of the morning was at the morgue. They would examine dead bodies. Of course, there were no rubber gloves in that day... and the doctors never washed their hands. There was no seeming need to do so. Once they'd finished examining the corpses, they would make their way up to the maternity ward to examine the women there.

You and I can understand why there'd been such a high death rate of expectant mothers, but Semmelweis was the first doctor to realize the connection and he began to institute a strict regimen of hand washing before Doctors examined any of their live patients.

The death rate plunged to a mere 1% of their patients.

And you would think that this great achievement would have been met with praise and adulation from fellow Doctors and nurses. But no. The medical establishment was enraged by the extra burden of having to wash their hands all the time and eventually he was let go from that hospital.

Eventually, he was hired at another hospital in another country. Again he saw the horrific death rates he'd seen before and again instituted the regimen of hand washing. And again, the medical staff became angry and ultimately fired him.

It wasn't until Pasteur confirmed the "germ theory" years later that Semmelweis' ideas began to be endorsed by Doctors.

But centuries before, God had declared that anyone who touched a dead body was unclean for 7 days. (Numbers 19:11ff). And touching a dead carcass required washing of one's clothes. (Numbers 11:25).

The people of Israel observed these laws without understanding anything about germs, bacteria or viruses. But in obeying these simple rules they avoided many of the plagues and diseases that troubled other nations.

(Pause)

So God brought them to the Mountain to receive His Law - the Law that would be the basis of their Freedom as His people. If they obeyed His Law... they would remain a FREE people.

But then, just before He gave Israel His law, God did oddest thing. God tells Moses: "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments 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. 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. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.'

When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain." Exodus 19:10-15

Boundaries.

Anyone who touched the mountain was to die!

Hmmm.

Israel had come to the Mountain where their freedom would be based on God's Laws. And freedom should be celebrated by fireworks.

Isn't that what we do? Of course it is.

And so God sets off His own kind of Fireworks... and we're told:

".. when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Exodus 20:18-19

God sets off fireworks... but these are so scary the people tremble and fear for their lives.

This is a place of the foundation of Israel's Freedom?

Where's the celebration?

Where's the excitement?

Where's the festivities?

Where's the BBQ and Brats?

Why on earth would God create such an ominous and scary atmosphere for the giving of His Law? A Law intended to give freedom and blessing to Israel?

Well, I can think of at least two reasons why God would do it this way?\

1st God knew their hearts.

At one point while Israel was still in the desert, Moses told them

"... never forget how you provoked the LORD your God to anger in the desert. From the day you left Egypt until you arrived here, you have been rebellious against the LORD."

Deuteronomy 9:7

God knew their hearts.

He knew they'd be hard hearted and rebellious. He knew that they'd provoke Him by their behavior.

And so, when He brought them to the base of the Mt. to receive commandments, He puts on a really scary light and sound show.

He was basically telling them:

"I'm God. You're not... get used to it"

He was telling them that these commandments He was about to give them were commandments – not suggestions. They didn't get to vote on them and they wouldn't get to pick and choose what they wanted and leave the rest go.

These were God's commandments

It was all or nothing.

If they wanted God's Freedom... they had to take God's Laws.

ALL of them.

But why say that to them in this way?

Well, because people tend to bend the rules for their own advantage.

ILLUS: A couple months ago Reader's Digest had an article about cheating. The article discussed what prompted people to cheat... and how they'd justify it. According to the Josephson Institute:

- Those with power, or better office space felt they had a right to steal and cheat.
- Those who hung around with others who cheated or stole... were more likely to do so.
- Those who felt that another person had cheated often felt that it was only fair that they "level the field" by cheating or stealing from the "wrong doer".
- And those who had gotten used to minor infractions grew into larger ones. Rule breaking worsens over time. "Kids who cheat on high school exams are 3 times as likely in adulthood to lie a customer or inflate an insurance claim compared with non-cheaters.

What I found interesting in the article was an admission by a behavioral economist named Dan Ariely at Duke University who involved in the study that was buried toward the back of the article. Ariely noted that "if test subjects were made to recall the 10 Commandments before a test, they were less likely to cheat. And researchers found that this worked even among the nonreligious."

(<http://www.rd.com/culture/why-people-lie/>)

In other words, the when people simply were made to "think about" God's laws they would be less likely to justify and embrace sinful tendencies like cheating and stealing. That was the power of the living words of God to alter the minds of men.

God knew the hearts of the Israelites.

And He knows our hearts as well, and that's one of the reasons He made such an imposing and frightening display at the Mountain.

The 2nd reason He may of don't this was: He knew Israel's freedom under the Law was not ...TOTAL freedom.

I've preached on this text several times before, and this was the first time something caught my attention. Did you notice... the Israelites were not allowed to touch the Mountain?

I'd seen that before, but at this was the first time it caught my attention and made me realize a couple of things.

They're not allowed to touch the mountain.

Question: WHO is on that mountain?

(God is)

ILLUS: In other cultures and nations, people would honor their pagan gods by building altars on High Places. Why would they do that? Well, the higher they went... the closer they could get to their god! Makes sense, doesn't it.

But God didn't want Israel to build altars on the high places. (Deut. 12:2-4)

Why not?

Because Israel didn't belong where He was.

He was totally holy and pure... and they weren't.  
Even after they received the Law, their sin made them unable to get REAL CLOSE to God.  
The Law couldn't make them acceptable to God.

Paul wrote: "...it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." Galatians 3:11

In other words, the Law could help you be a better person, but it couldn't get you close to God. As one person observed:

"The Ten Commandments will keep you out of jail. But they won't keep you out of Hell."

But why wouldn't keeping the 10 Commandments make you acceptable to God?  
Simply because - we've ALL sinned and fall short of the glory of God.  
Keeping rules and depending on our own self-righteousness would NOT give us the right to come into God's presence, because clean living doesn't make us clean enough for God.

ILLUS: I got to thinking of a way to illustrate this, and my mind turned to a piece of clothing that I always wear: t-shirts.

Did you know that t-shirts were made popular by Clarke Gable? (I posed for the audience giving them the impression that I thought I might look like Clarke Gable).

When I've worn my t-shirts for the day, I wash them. Sometimes I'll spray them with spot remover if they've gotten extra dirty.

But you know, eventually I need to buy a new package of undershirts. I'll take them out of their package and place them in the drawer. And you know what? I can usually tell the difference between the new t-shirts and the old ones.

You know how I can tell?

Because no matter HOW CLEAN I get those old t-shirts they're never as white as the new ones. They'll always look a tinge of greyish compared to ones I've bought.

In order to get REALLY white t-shirts... I need to get NEW ones.

Think about that for a moment as I share a couple of passages out of Hebrews.

Hebrews 11 is called the "Faith Chapter" because it tells us of all the great men and women of faith in the Old Testament. But at the end of that great chapter we're told this:

"God had planned something better for us (Christians) so that only together with us would they (the Old Testament saints) be made perfect." Hebrews 11:40

The Old Testament saints were great people... but they lacked ONE thing that we have.

What do we have that they didn't?

(Jesus)

But that's not all. There's something we have as Christians because of Jesus. Earlier in Hebrews we're told of one of the important advantages of having Christ in our lives:

Hebrews 10:16-22 "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."

Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."

And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us DRAW NEAR to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."

Did you catch that?

We get to "Draw Near" to God!

Because of Jesus we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place and boldly approach the throne of God!

The Israelites at the Mt. Sinai were not allowed to even TOUCH that mountain.

They weren't holy enough to come into God's presence.

But now, because of the blood of Jesus you and I can do what they could not.

We get to get up close and personal with God.

But, not because we've kept a bunch of rules and lived a clean life!

We can come into God's presence ONLY because God has done something NEW in our lives.

Remember where I told you – if I wanted something truly white I needed to get something NEW?

Romans 6:4 says that when we were buried in the waters of baptism

"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a NEW life."

And 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us that when that happens:

"... if anyone is in Christ, he is a NEW CREATION; the old has gone, the NEW has come!"

CLOSE: But how is it that God could take someone who has really messed up their lives and make them NEW again? It's only through the transforming power of the Blood of Jesus.

I can't quite explain the process completely but I know it works because I've seen the results.

I want to close with this illustration from the days of Queen Victoria of England.

Victoria would visit businesses and homes of her subjects and often did so in a way that they would have no idea who she was. On one such occasion, she paid a visit to a paper mill.

The foreman knew she was a distinguished visitor, but he didn't know WHO she was. He showed her and her attendant thru the plant and ultimately they came to a room filled with trash. Refuse gathered from the city's garbage.

As the Queen watched she saw men picking out the rags from the piles of trash. She asked why they were doing that and the foreman explained that once the rags were sorted out, those rags would make the finest white paper.

After her departure, the foreman found out who she was, and sometime later, the Queen

received a package of the most delicate white stationery embossed with a watermark - the Queen's likeness.

A letter explained that the stationery had been made from the dirty rags she'd seen at the plant. But the process they'd used turned old worthless pieces of rag into stationery worthy of a Queen.

And that illustrates Christ's work in us. He takes us, filthy as we are, and makes us into new creatures. New creatures worthy of a King.

Baptized into Christ - we put on Christ. And when that happens we are as different from what we were before... as that pure white paper was from the filthy rags from which it was made.

But you can only have that in your lives when you turn your lives over to Jesus Christ.