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Moving Mountains: Challenging our Cherished Heresies—Sinai Exodus 20:1-22

[Scene from A Few Good Men]

That's one of my favorite movie scenes of all time. Tom Cruise is a young lawyer with little experience in the courtroom taking on a well-respected Marine Colonel as he tries to get to the truth of what happened in the death of a young marine. It's a spirited and emotional debate about the truth. We wouldn't expect anything less right? People have argued about what is true for a long time. Whether it's my children arguing about who really forgot to flush the toilet or people of faith arguing about which religion is really true or Israelis and Palestinians arguing over the land, truth has been an emotional and important subject for as long as we can remember. In the history of humanity the argument about truth has caused many tears to be shed, many relationships to be destroyed, and much blood to be spilled.

Today, as we continue in our series about how the biblical mountain experiences challenge our cherished heresies, I want to talk about truth. Do you think truth is an important topic in our culture? Some of the most cherished heresies in our culture have to do with truth. And the biblical mountain that we're going to climb today, Mt. Sinai, confronts those heresies dead on. Does anyone remember what happened on Mt. Sinai? God gives the Law to His people. Turn to Exodus 20 and let's see what God's Word reveals to us about truth.

Exodus 20:1-6, 18-22

¹ And God spoke all these words:

² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

³ "You shall have no other gods before^[a] me.

⁴ "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me,⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

...
¹⁸ When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance¹⁹ and

said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

20 *Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."*

21 *The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.*

22 *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites this: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven:*

Okay, confession time. How many of you thought of Charlton Heston during this scripture reading? And how many of you thought of the great DreamWorks flick, *The Prince of Egypt*?

This is one of the most important mountains in all of scripture, and these few chapters of Exodus are hugely important in understanding the grand story of scripture. That God is the Creator, but after humanity screwed things up God began to implement an incredible plan of redemption. At Mt Ararat God revealed His promise to never again destroy all life with a flood, at Mt Moriah God assured Abraham that God would use his descendants to bless the whole earth, and now at Mount Sinai, after God has saved Israel He reveals to them their call to live God's way and shows them what it means to be the people of God.

And it was no small affair, listen to the magnificence described in **Exodus 19:16ff**:

16 ... *there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.* **17** *Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.* **18** *Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently,* **19** *and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.*

20 *The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up ...*

Wow! This was a holy moment. The Most High God was on display. Then there's Moses: he's not trembling; he walks right into fray. He goes up the mountain and receives the 10 Commandments from God, right? I don't think so. Look at verse 25 of Chapter 19, "**So, Moses went down to the people and told them.**" Moses went up Mt. Sinai and then came back down to pass a message on to the people and that's when God spoke the commandments. He spoke them for the whole community of Israel to hear. They all heard God's voice. They all heard God's commands. This wasn't Moses' little brilliant idea to keep peace among the Israelites ... "I'll just go up the mountain on this stormy night and tell everyone that God spoke to me these important laws." No! God speaks to the whole community: *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* God starts by revealing Himself to them – I am the One who heard your cries for freedom; I am the One who saved you from slavery; I am the One who put the

pillar of fire behind you as you left; I am the One who split the waters for you to walk on dry ground; I am the One who has called you to be a priesthood to the world for my sake; I am the One who is causing this mountain to shake; I am the LORD and now that I have saved you, this is how I want you to live.

Why did God give the 10 Commandments? Was God trying to be a killjoy; was He trying to keep God's people from having any fun? That's how a lot of us think of the boundaries that God has designed for us. But this law isn't meant to take away life, it's meant to give life! God, the Creator, shows up in the midst of the thunder and the smoke and the quaking mountain and reveals to all of Israel how to live God's way (the best way) so that they can reveal the truth of God to the world.

It's a pretty amazing story isn't it? You've got the drama, the elements, the transcendent; you even have some conflict. It would make a great movie, don't you think? **But is it really true?** Are these commandments really from God? How can the Israelites be sure? How can we be sure? Can we prove it? Or maybe we don't need to worry about it because we can just accept that it was true for them, or it's true for us because we believe in the Bible, but it's not really true for everyone. What's true for you isn't necessarily true for your neighbor, right? What is truth, anyway? How do we know something is true? Is truth only that which we can prove? Is truth relative? Mt Sinai has something to say about it; are you ready to go there? Alright, well put on your thinking caps, fasten your seat belt and let's go.

I spent some time this week listening to Christian apologist Stuart McAllister from RZIM, good friends with Michael Ramsden and John Lennox, and someone we hope to have visit us in the future. I'm grateful for the help he gave me as I grappled with how to frame this for us this morning.

First of all, what is truth? Listen to this quote from Os Guinness, "**Truth is that which is ultimately, finally, and absolutely real, or the 'way it is', and therefore is utterly trustworthy and dependable.**" Does that sound right? Yes; truth is reality. When we talk about truth, we're talking about reality or the way things really are. The question is how do we know what's real?

The answer to that question depends on your epistemology. Does anyone know what epistemology means? **Epistemology is the study of knowledge;** the primary question of epistemology is, "**How do we know what we know?**" Does that make sense? So, let me ask you, how do you know what you know is true?

Your epistemology depends mostly on your worldview; your worldview is not what you see, it's what you see with. And most of the time it is unconscious. The most dominate worldview in our culture for the last few hundred years has been **Modernism.** Modernism came from the Enlightenment which taught us that the key to knowing things (epistemology) is human reason. I'm going to steal from Pastor Jim some images that might help us to wrap our heads around this (to flip

chart ... draw ‘modernity circle’). The modern worldview sees the cosmos as a closed system. In this closed circle is all that we know; whatever is within the circle is real. So, if in the modern worldview only what is rational, observable, and meets the standards of the scientific method is really true, then where is God? Either God is a projection of the perceived needs of our brains, or God has to be out of the circle with a question mark. There are some helpful things in this worldview, but ultimately it is limited because reality is defined by our own empirical method.

So, did God really show up and give the 10 Commandments to the Israelites? Did a transcendent being, from outside the closed system of the cosmos really break in and speak from heaven? Well, according to the purely modern view, you can’t really know because only the stuff within the closed system is real. So, is this (pointing to the flip chart) the biblical worldview? No.

Well, then maybe the biblical worldview is more like a new philosophical movement that responds to modernism called **postmodernism**. Postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment thinking; it devalues the rational way of knowing. It argues that we really can’t even know real, objective truth. It says that all truth is relative. Perhaps this picture will help (go to flip chart & draw lots of circles); each of these circles are communities of one or many who have developed a system of what is true, but it’s only true for them. There is no way to test between competing claims for truth—nothing that is bigger, more encompassing, more certain, real, first and true than us or me. In this worldview, no system or method can be purely objective, therefore no one can really know what is really, absolutely true. So, if *that’s* what’s really true, then what’s the most admirable human virtue? Tolerance... tolerance of everyone else’s view of reality, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, life-giving and life stealing. Is that the biblical worldview? Is God only true for the people who believe in God? Not if God is really the God as described and revealed in the Bible. See there’s one vital flaw shared in each of these worldviews; **in both modernism and post-modernism truth is decided by humanity.**

Truth is reality, it’s not relative. Truth is reality even when we can’t understand it. Truth isn’t based on what you or I believe; it is simply descriptive of what is happening. If my neighbor believes I’m crazy and my wife believes I’m not, which one is true? Even if they believe it with all their heart, and even if they provide observable and logical evidence to support their belief, truth is reality, so one of them is wrong.

Who decides what is real, who decides what is true on Mount Sinai? Who is the cause of all that is occurring there? Who is the One who determines reality? It is the Lord. God says, “*I am the LORD.*” In other words, I am the one who is at the center of everything. All of reality derives from God. **The events on Mt. Sinai when the LORD revealed Himself and His way, is not just true for the Israelites and it is not just true for the people who believe in Jesus as their Messiah. God’s way, revealed to us in Scripture is absolutely true because it is reality.**

So what is the biblical worldview? God is (write GOD real big on flip chart). God is the Creator; God is not created. **All of reality derives from God** – heaven and hell, our universe, culture, language, science, math, every law of nature, and you and me. The scripture teaches that all of the cosmos is created by and created for and held together in Christ who said of Himself, "**I am the way and the truth and the life.**" We don't determine what reality is; God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the ultimate reality.

But did you notice how the Israelites responded in Exodus 20? After the LORD spoke the 10 Commandments the Israelites trembled in fear; they kept themselves at a healthy distance so they didn't really have to deal with the reality of God. They whined (verse 19), "**Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.**" They were glad that God had saved them from Egypt, but they didn't really want to see God – they couldn't handle the truth of God. Some of us might be like that too. Maybe it's just too hard to fully open yourself up to God; maybe it's easier to just believe that truth is relative than to really care for your neighbor's salvation; maybe it's too scary to give up control of your family or your finances or your image; maybe you'd just rather let the professionals deal with God on your behalf or keep it all at arm's length to see if something that fits you better comes along. Are you avoiding God about something? Are you guarding yourself from Him? I know that's my tendency, but that's not how I want to be. I want to be like Moses; did you see what he did? Look at verse 21, "**The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.**" Moses walked right into the presence of God; he approached where God was. If you want to know the truth then approach where God is; don't stay at a distance, move towards Him.

Because no matter who you are, no matter what you believe, no matter what you've done, no matter how far away you are, no matter what religion you are, no matter what country you're from, no matter what worldview you have, here's the truth: **God the Creator loves you and—even though you turned your back on Him and tried to be the god of your own little world—God sent the one and only Son Jesus to live and die and rise again, so that you could be reconciled to God and participate in God's work in the world.** That's the ultimate reality. That's what is absolutely true.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**
- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.
- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **Dig deeper**
 1. Read both Exodus 19 and 20 (it shouldn't take too long).
 2. Why do you think God makes such a big deal of the mountain in Exodus 19? What's important about that?
 3. What does God say right before He starts the 10 Commandments? Why do you think that is important?
 4. Do you tend to see the world through modern or post-modern eyes (do some research if necessary)? What is the Christian worldview?
 5. Read John 14:6. Why does Jesus call himself the Truth? What does it mean for you, and us?