

A Kingdom of Priests, A Holy Nation

Devotional Reading: Leviticus 19:1-10

Background Scripture: Exodus 19

Today's Scripture: Exodus 19:1-14

I. Coming to Sinai

Exodus 19:1-2

¹ On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. ² After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

1. The first two verses of Exodus 19 bookend the narrative that began at Exodus 7:16: Moses had been sent to bring the Hebrew people out of Egypt “so that they may worship [God] in the wilderness.” The verse before us gives an indication of how long they had been traveling: this is *the third month* since leaving Egypt. The Hebrew word translated “month” can also mean “new moon.” A new moon is how ancient people would mark this passage of time. The *Desert of Sinai* was adjacent to the wilderness of Sin, where the people had been traveling (Exodus 16:1; 17:1). They had been without natural access to water or food, and they remained dependent upon God’s provision of each.

2. *Rephidim* is where Moses struck a rock to produce water for the children of Israel, who doubted God’s provision. It is also where the Israelites fought the Amalekites, a group who came out to wage

war on God’s people in their vulnerable state. In response, God provided supernatural protection by allowing Moses to raise his hands to assure victory.

II. God’s Chosen People

Exodus 19:3-6

³ Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

3. In the ancient Near Eastern world, high elevations were considered holy sites. These were places closer to heaven and the gods who were thought to live there. The “high places” in the land of Israel were even used to worship God before the construction of a temple. Some five centuries later, Solomon’s temple was constructed at a high elevation.

4. This is the first message carried by Moses—a direct speech of God. The exchange is analogous to “declarations” in a traditional wedding ceremony, which are spoken before a bride and groom take their vows. God is declaring what he has done by choosing the descendants of Jacob and rescuing them from slavery. The words supply a rationale for making an agreement with the Lord: he is the God who delivers.

5. The speech continues with a conditional statement, a way of explaining the logic of *covenant*. God is the initiator of a covenant, just as he made a covenant with Abraham. Covenant is part of his plan to bring blessing to the world. Typically, covenants were agreements between two parties (usually humans or nations). The promise is that, *if* the people hold up the requirements of the covenant, *then out of all nations you will be [God’s] treasured possession*. Israel’s obedience would set them apart from all the world.

6. The *holy* status that the Israelites received was not intended just for their personal benefit but ultimately for the benefit of the world as *a kingdom of priests*. This rationale is also discussed in the first century when Jesus told the Samaritan woman, “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). Likewise, the apostle Paul acknowledges the privileged position of Jewish people: “[They] have been entrusted with the very words of God” (Romans 3:2). Moses had been modeling a mediating role for God’s people as he accurately reported *the words* spoken by God all along.

III. God Shall Come Exodus 19:7-14

⁷ So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. ⁸ The people all

responded together, “We will do everything the LORD has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.

⁹ The LORD said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.” Then Moses told the LORD what the people had said.

¹⁰ And the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes ¹¹ and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, ‘Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death. ¹³ They are to be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on them. No person or animal shall be permitted to live.’ Only when the ram’s horn sounds a long blast may they approach the mountain.”

¹⁴ After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes.

7. Moses was a faithful servant because he relayed all that God had told him. The text does not say whether Moses used a form of writing when he *set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak*. But in Exodus 20:1-17, Moses will relay ten “words,” also called the Ten Commandments. The verse before us anticipates what Moses shall do by bringing down commands of God, commands that corporate Israel were expected to obey.

8. The words of this verse—the collective agreement of all *the people*—are repeated in Exodus 24:3, 7. But here in

Exodus 19, how can they agree to stipulations they have yet to hear? This is a common question, one even raised by ancient Jewish rabbinical interpreters. One possibility is that the people agreed to and accepted God's offer of covenant even before they were told its requirements. Exodus 19–20 gives a clearer description of the covenant. Under that reading, the people's response did not conclude or seal the agreement. Instead, it shows Israel's eagerness to follow whatever God would have them do. The fact that *Moses brought their answer back to the Lord* means that he ascended the mountain to speak with God again.

9. Once Moses had returned to speak with God, he was informed about a pending divine appearance. The technical name for this is *theophany*, which means an appearance or visible manifestation of God. Earlier in Exodus, God had used a cloud to reveal his presence and to give a sign of his protection. In the New Testament, the Father speaks from a cloud at Jesus' transfiguration. Later, Jesus ascends from a mountaintop and is taken up in a cloud, which shows God's heavenly presence. Here, the function of God's appearance in *a dense cloud* shows Moses' authority as God's messenger. Now and into the future, God wants the people to *trust* Moses. This idea is repeated in John 5:46, where Jesus says that those who disbelieve his testimony are also disbelieving Moses, who "wrote" about Jesus.

10–11. This verse begins direct speech from God that Moses was to convey to the Israelites. They must be correctly prepared to receive God's presence. The command to *have them wash their clothes* forms an *inclusio* with Exodus 19:14. Two days will be the length of this preparation, and the command to *consecrate* is of the same root as "holy" in 19:6. The

verb means "to transform someone into the state of holiness" or "to dedicate." Moses will direct the people to avoid ceremonially unclean things, while at the same time they will wash and prepare themselves in body and spirit. Washing of clothing is associated with holiness in dozens of places in the Old Testament.

12. Moses was already on the mountain when he heard this, so the prohibition didn't apply to him. A constructed perimeter would reinforce that Moses—no one else—was to be the one to whom all the people must listen. God's holiness was not something to haphazardly approach. Merely touching the area's border would bring death. This was to protect the community from a defiler's misdeed.

13. Here, the warning is heightened: even a single *hand*—perhaps laid upon the mountain in curiosity—or the mindless trampling of an animal would be enough to warrant death through stoning or arrows. Both forms of execution would allow others to remain at a distance from the one who had violated God's space. The people were not to permit anything defiling to remain in their midst as they prepared to meet God.

14. The text does not say how Moses *consecrated* the people. But washing of *clothes* is a form of ceremonial cleansing and is specified dozens of times in Leviticus and Numbers. Usually, it is prescribed when an individual or priest is being cleansed from something unclean. Two days would probably not be required to complete the washing. But a time of spiritual preparation is also appropriate when entering God's presence. By implication, the Israelites were being treated as the "kingdom of priests" that God had named them in Exodus 19:6, since proper clothing and preparation would come to be required of priests.

Involvement Learning

A Kingdom of Priests, A Holy Nation

Into the Lesson

What methods does God use to get our attention?

Today, we will look at an incident from ancient Israel's history that featured an attention-getting method of an exceptional nature.

Into the Word

Read today's text. Summarize God's expectations as expressed through Moses.

Explain the concept of "covenant" in its original context.

List questions about the text that come to mind.

For each of the following phrases, answer the questions below:

1. *God's Faithfulness*
2. *The Priesthood of All*
3. *Acceptable Worship*

What does today's Scripture say about this topic?

1.

2.

3.

What does this account suggest for our behavior today?

1.

2.

3.

Key Verse

If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.
—Exodus 19:5b-6a

Into Life

List ways that Christians can be mediators of God's grace today.

List ways to declare God's praises today.

Thought to Remember

The holy God is the redeeming God.