

A Kingdom of Priests, A Holy Nation

Devotional Reading: Leviticus 19:1-10

Background Scripture: Exodus 19

Exodus 19:1-14

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.

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.”

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.

Key Text

“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.” —Exodus 19:5-6a

Costly Sacrifices

Unit 1: Tabernacle, Sacrifices, and Atonement

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize God's expectations as expressed through Moses.
2. Explain the concept of "covenant" in its original context.
3. Declare God's praises as one of his treasured people.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Mediating Peace
- B. Lesson Context

I. Coming to Sinai (Exodus 19:1-2)

- A. The Wilderness (v. 1)
- B. The Mountain (v. 2)

II. God's Chosen People (Exodus 19:3-6)

- A. Rescued (vv. 3-4)
Carried Along for the Journey

- B. Treasured (v. 5)

- C. Holy (v. 6)

Building a Foundation

III. God Shall Come (Exodus 19:7-14)

- A. The People Agree (vv. 7-8)
- B. Divine Presence Anticipated (v. 9)
- C. Moses Gives Instructions (vv. 10-14)

Conclusion

- A. Holy God, Holy People
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Mediating Peace

When I look at the news and see turmoil in the Middle East, I remember the wars I witnessed as a child. The nation of Israel had defeated its neighbors in the Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973). Hostilities still persisted between the two sides. But something remarkable happened in 1978: two staunch enemies, Israel and Egypt, signed a peace treaty known as the Camp David Accords. Those talks didn't resolve every issue or change the fact that the nations had fought bitterly. But Egypt formally recognized Israel's right to exist, and in exchange, Israel returned all captured territory in the Sinai Peninsula.

Like all peace treaties between nations, it took both sides—represented by Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menachem Begin of Israel—to find common ground and shared goals. The peace talks also required a patient mediator—the United States and President Jimmy Carter—to bring them together.

The key role of a mediator is related to today's lesson in three ways. First, Moses played the role of communicator and mediator at Mount Sinai. Second, God communicated a plan through his mediator to form Israel to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). Third, those functions took on new meaning at the coming of the ultimate mediator, Christ, who brings lasting peace to all who turn to him with faith (Romans 5:1).

B. Lesson Context

Four hundred thirty years from the time of Joseph, God delivered Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 12:40; 18:10). Through miraculous plagues, which showed Egypt's deities to be powerless (7:8–11:10; 12:29–42), God brought the people out into the wilderness, where he continued to protect and provide for them (Exodus 13–18). In spite of dangers and trials, the people arrived at their destination: Sinai, the mountain where God had first revealed himself to Moses (Exodus 3). Exodus 19 begins the climactic meeting of God with his redeemed people.

I. Coming to Sinai

(Exodus 19:1-2)

A. The Wilderness (v. 1)

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.

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* (compare Exodus 12:2; 13:4). The Hebrew word translated “month” can also mean “new moon” (examples: 1 Samuel 20:5, 18, 24). 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.

What Do You Think?

What insights can you share about experiencing God’s provision during a relocation?

Digging Deeper

How might those insights differ between voluntary and involuntary relocations?

B. The Mountain (v. 2)

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.

Rephidim is where Moses struck a rock to produce water for the children of Israel, who doubted God’s provision (Exodus 17:1-7). 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 (17:8-16).

Now at their interim destination, the people camped before Mount *Sinai*, also called Mount

Horeb (Exodus 3:1). It is where Moses saw the burning bush and removed his sandals before holy ground (3:5). But the geographical location of Sinai is much-debated by archaeologists and researchers. One possible location, Jabal Musa, is at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. Some object that the Hebrews could not have reached this location so soon after leaving Egypt, and they propose other sites. Since Scripture does not give a precise location, the issue remains contentious.

The Hebrews would spend just under a year camped before this mountain (compare Exodus 19:1 with Numbers 10:11-12).

II. God’s Chosen People

(Exodus 19:3-6)

A. Rescued (vv. 3-4)

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:

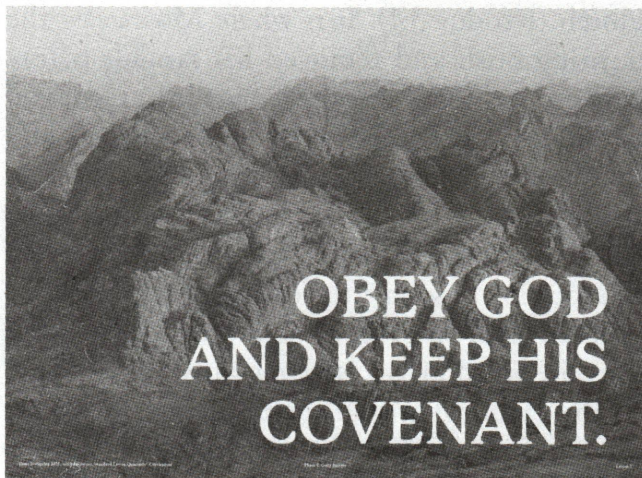
In the ancient Near Eastern world, high elevations were considered holy sites. These were places closer to Heaven and the gods who were thought to live there. The “high places” in the land of Israel were even used to worship God before the construction of a temple (1 Kings 3:2). Some five centuries later, Solomon’s temple was constructed at a high elevation and as the proper place of worship.

4. “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.

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

How to Say It

Amalekites	<i>Am-uh-leh-kites</i> or <i>Uh-mal-ih-kites.</i>
Rephidim	<i>Ref-ih-dim.</i>
Sinai	<i>Sigh-nye</i> or <i>Sigh-nay-eye.</i>
theophany	<i>the-ah-fuh-nee.</i>



Visual for Lesson 1. Have this visual on display as you discuss the lesson commentary associated with Exodus 19:5.

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.

God had sent plagues on the Egyptians and shown their magicians and deities to be toothless (see Exodus 7:8–11:10; 12:29–42; compare Psalm 106). The reference to *eagles' wings* might stand for species of great birds, some thought to “[hover] over [their] young, that spreads [their] wings to catch them and carries them aloft” (Deuteronomy 32:11). This is an image of great care (compare Isaiah 40:31). God had fulfilled his plan by bringing the formerly enslaved people to this mountain to serve him (Exodus 3:12). And the Hebrew people didn’t just barely escape from *Egypt*; they were led out by the glorious power of God—“flown away” so to speak, as if carried by a majestic bird.

The image might seem ironic to a people tired of walking. But their deliverance from Egypt was unprecedented and a clear indication of the benevolent power of their rescuer-God.

Carried Along for the Journey

Mine is a family of cyclists—at least in theory. My wife and I enjoyed a good ride for many years before our kids came along. There are few memories of parenthood I treasure more than the ecstatic smile that came across my daughter’s face when she rode a bike without assistance for the first time.

But when our second child was born, we had to make a new plan. So, instead, we turned to the next best family activity: walking. I found that I could get my heart pumping by strapping a growing child to a carrier on my back while I circuited the neighborhood. And he didn’t seem to mind one bit. In fact, that became the routine for his nap. Somehow, nothing would put him to sleep like the steady trotting of his father or mother and the security he felt on a new adventure.

God invites the Israelites to picture a similar image in Exodus 19:4, “I carried you on eagles’ wings.” I can relate to the tender confidence in that statement, the way God reminded the Israelites of all the dangers passed and trials overcome. Has God done something similar in your life, perhaps carrying you to the place you need to be? Or, perhaps, are you on a journey with your Heavenly Father right now?
—J. H.

B. Treasured (v. 5)

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,**

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 (Genesis 12:1–3; 15; 17). 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.

God’s claim of ownership of *the whole earth* justifies his particular election of Jacob’s children. If God lacked rights to the whole, he would not have the ability to choose. But the creator God breathed into humans the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). He is the redeeming God whose covenant people shall be a blessing to all the earth, in continuation of his promise to Abraham (12:3).

C. Holy (v. 6)

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.”

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.

The description “a royal priesthood, a holy nation” is valid for God’s people of the new covenant (1 Peter 2:9). Unlike the Sinai covenant, which would be repeatedly broken, the redemptive work of Jesus offers Christ’s followers a “new covenant” (see Jeremiah 31:31-32).

What Do You Think?

How would you explain to someone what being part of the new covenant priesthood means?

Digging Deeper

How would your explanation to a person agnostic to faith differ from your explanation to a new Christian?

Building a Foundation

I have done quite a few DIY projects as the owner of an old house, and I’ve learned a thing or two about proper preparation. When I first tiled a bathroom floor, I thought I knew what I was doing. I selected the right materials: tile, grout, and underlayment. The last thing I wanted was for my project to end in failure.

I had neglected to consider what lay beneath the surface. After demolishing an existing floor, I was left staring at severe water damage to the subfloor. Suddenly, I had to learn something else. I had my work cut out to replace the damage. Otherwise, I would have been covering up a more significant problem and asking for things to fall apart later.

Sometimes, we try to prepare for something new, but we might imagine a narrow set of concerns. Often, we need to spend the most work building solid foundations to ensure everything else isn’t in vain. I imagine that’s what God was doing for the Israelites in Exodus 19. Instead of leading them directly to their promised land—giving them instant consolation—God took his time. The Lord did everything possible to lay a solid foundation in their covenant relationship, for God wanted them to remember their mission and their redemptive history. Can you think of any way that God has been preparing you? Has there been an area of your life that requires starting from scratch? —J. H.

III. God Shall Come

(Exodus 19:7-14)

A. The People Agree (vv. 7-8)

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.

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.

Moses gave them to a chosen group of *elders*, which was much more practical than trying to communicate with thousands of people all at once. The representatives were expected to relay the information to everyone else.

What Do You Think?

What is one thing you can improve on to ensure that your actions match the Word that God has called you to proclaim?

Digging Deeper

What are some indicators that a situation calls for silence rather than speaking?

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

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.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to prevent corporate confessions from becoming mere rituals?

Digging Deeper

What examples from Scripture point to this happening?

B. Divine Presence Anticipated (v. 9)

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.

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 (Exodus 13:21). In the New Testament, the Father speaks from a cloud at Jesus’ transfiguration (Matthew 17:5-6; Mark 9:7-8; Luke 9:34-35). Later, Jesus ascends from a mountaintop and is taken up in a cloud, which shows God’s heavenly presence (Acts 1:9). 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.

C. Moses Gives Instructions (vv. 10-14)

10-11. And the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes 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.

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 (see below). 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.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways you can better reflect your consecrated status to the world?

Digging Deeper

What guardrails are available to keep that reflecting from becoming legalistic or “holier than thou”?

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.

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 penalty is less as a punishment than a means to protect the community from a defiler's misdeed.

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."

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.

A *ram's horn* sound was to be the signal to approach. God does not specify who was to be the one to blow it, to see that it *sounds a long blast*. At the signal a few verses later, the blower of this horn is once more unidentified (Exodus 19:19). One possibility is that God's angel is responsible, since the signal comes from the mountain where humans have not been allowed to tread, except for Moses.

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

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 (example: Leviticus 15:5-12). 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 (example: Exodus 40:12-16).

Conclusion

A. Holy God, Holy People

In its context, Exodus 19 shows the responsibilities that fall upon people whom God chooses and redeems. They are required to prepare themselves for God's presence. In the new covenant context, it is not church buildings that house God's presence; rather, it is the bodies of Christians themselves, those who become a "temples of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19). Followers of Jesus also serve as mediators who introduce others to the ultimate mediator, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:15).

By making Israel his "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), God was laying the groundwork to bless the world through the children of Jacob. Israel would break the Sinai covenant and fall victim to sin, but God had a plan to make a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-32; compare Matthew 26:28). For Christians, the promise that "all peoples on earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3) has come true, in and through Jesus. He is the seed of Abraham, the inheritor of God's promise (Galatians 3:16). Christ alone, because he is God's Son, is fit to be *king* of God's kingdom; the permanent *high priest* to a group of priests, he is the perfect *mediator* between God and humans.

B. Prayer

Lord, we sometimes feel inadequate as representatives of your holiness. May we be found to be your faithful servants and a royal priesthood despite our shortcomings. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The holy God is the redeeming God.

Visuals FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: page 237) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Spring Quarter. Order No. 9780784740132 from your supplier.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Have this brainstorming question posted for all to see as class members arrive:

What methods does God use to get our attention?

Expect a wide variety of responses, including *sickness, tragedy, and godly counsel from others.*

Lead into Bible study by saying, “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

Arrange for a class member to give a brief presentation on the historical context of today’s text. The presentation should summarize Exodus 1–18 in no more than eight minutes. *Alternative.* Show the six-and-a-half minute video on Exodus 1–18 from the Bible Project, found online. Caution: the video streaming site that hosts the video may interrupt it with commercials unless you have their “premium” subscription.

Next, have the text read dramatically by two participants, one being the voice of the narrator, the other being the voice of God. Have them read their respective parts of the text. The class as a whole should respond with the words of Exodus 19:8b when the narration reaches that point. (*Option.* To make this go more smoothly, print and distribute the text in advance with the three speaking parts highlighted in different colors.)

Then, form participants into study pairs or triads. Distribute handouts (you create) on which are printed the following three tasks:

- 1–Summarize God’s expectations as expressed through Moses.
- 2–Explain the concept of “covenant” in its original context.
- 3–List questions about the text that come to mind.

After several minutes, reconvene for a whole-class discussion.

Alternative. Depending on the nature of your class, you may find better instructional value in posing only the first question for the pairs or triads to consider, followed by a whole-class discussion of only the responses to it. Then, repeat the cycle for the second and third tasks individually.

After discussing the three tasks, display three posters, widely separated. Have the following topics on the posters, one each:

GOD’S FAITHFULNESS
THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL
ACCEPTABLE WORSHIP

Invite class members to indicate by show of hands which of the three topics interests them most. Form study groups based on those preferences, with at least two participants per group. Distribute handouts (you create) with the following questions:

- 1–What does today’s Scripture say about this topic?
- 2–What does this account suggest for our behavior today?

Use the responses to the second question as a transition to the Into Life segment.

Into Life

God’s Faithfulness. Extend this discussion by asking how we have even more proof of God’s faithfulness than the Israelites had. Invite responses in whole-class discussion.

The Priesthood of All. Ask participants to name ways that Christians can be mediators of God’s grace today. *Option.* Distribute copies of the “A Holy Priesthood and a Priesthood Wholly” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Assign the five texts to five pairs or triads to complete as indicated.

Acceptable Worship. Brainstorm valid ways to declare God’s praises today.

As learners depart, distribute copies of the “Who, Where, Etc.” puzzle from the activity page.