

God's Covenant with Israel

Bible Background • [EXODUS 19](#), [ISAIAH 60:3](#)

Printed Text • [EXODUS 19:16-25](#)

Devotional Reading • [PSALM 135:1-9, 19-21](#)

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: EVALUATE ways the Israelites consecrated themselves to receive the Law from a holy, just, and powerful God; ASPIRE to live lives befitting God's obedient servants; and ENGAGE in worship practices reflecting our reverence for God.



McKay was filled with excitement as she circled through the revolving doors of her new graphics design job. After years of contracting, she desperately wanted to land a full-time job with benefits and paid time off. Now she finally had one! I can't believe after all these years, I've got a regular job doing something that I love! She pressed the elevator button to take her to the fifth floor and walked to the Human Resources department.

As she went in, she noticed several other people with a similar gleam on their faces. They undoubtedly must be new hires also. A petite woman with her hair pulled back emerged from one of the offices and announced, "Good morning, everyone!" Her bubbly demeanor confirmed to McKay that this was definitely the right company. "Let me take you to our orientation room. This will be your home for the next week."

McKay was puzzled. She didn't expect an orientation. She thought she'd just be told where to sit.

"We will provide our company's values along with historical information about our company. This will help you understand why this is such a great place to work," the HR associate stated. "We know that you are qualified employees. Now, we want to congratulate you in successfully joining our corporate community. You will love it!" McKay was determined to learn all that she could. She anticipated a bright future in her new job.

How do you handle being introduced to new situations? In today's lesson, we will learn how the Israelites entered their new life as a nation by consecrating themselves to God.

Keep in Mind

"And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount" ([Exodus 19:17](#)).

KJV

Exodus 19:16 And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.

17 And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount.

18 And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.

19 And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice.

20 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.

21 And the LORD said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish.

22 And let the priests also, which come near to the LORD, sanctify themselves, lest the LORD break forth upon them.

23 And Moses said unto the LORD, The people cannot come up to mount Sinai: for thou chargedst us, saying, Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it.

24 And the LORD said unto him, Away, get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou, and Aaron with thee: but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the LORD, lest he break forth upon them.

25 So Moses went down unto the people, and spake unto them.

NLT

Exodus 19:16 On the morning of the third day, thunder roared and lightning flashed, and a dense cloud came down on the mountain. There was a long, loud blast from a ram's horn, and all the people trembled.

17 Moses led them out from the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.

18 All of Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the LORD had descended on it in the form of fire. The smoke billowed into the sky like smoke from a brick kiln, and the whole mountain shook violently.

19 As the blast of the ram's horn grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God thundered his reply.

20 The LORD came down on the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses climbed the mountain.

21 Then the LORD told Moses, “Go back down and warn the people not to break through the boundaries to see the LORD, or they will die.

22 Even the priests who regularly come near to the LORD must purify themselves so that the LORD does not break out and destroy them.”

23 “But LORD,” Moses protested, “the people cannot come up to Mount Sinai. You already warned us. You told me, ‘Mark off a boundary all around the mountain to set it apart as holy.’”

24 But the LORD said, “Go down and bring Aaron back up with you. In the meantime, do not let the priests or the people break through to approach the LORD, or he will break through to approach the LORD, or he will break out and destroy them.”

25 So Moses went down to the people and told them what the Lord had said.

The People, Places, and Times

Moses. Moses, the Old Testament Hebrew prophet, delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery under Pharaoh’s rule. His name is derived from the Hebrew root meaning “to take out,” since as a baby, he was taken out of the water by Pharaoh’s daughter (Exodus 2). Moses was the primary leader and legislator during the Hebrews’ time in the wilderness. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, His covenant with Israel. Moses also acted as interpreter of the Law that established faith and civil traditions, many of which still exist today.

Mount Sinai. This is the mountain where God talked with Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments, also called the Law. This mountain is often paired with Mount Horeb. Scholars believe Horeb is the mountain range, and Mount Sinai is a mountain summit on the ridge. Scholars do not agree on the exact geographic location of Mount Sinai; Jebel Serbel in the central Sinai and Jebel Musa in southern Sinai have been the major contenders. Mount Sinai is viewed as sacred not only in the Jewish tradition, but also for Christians and Muslims as well.

Why was it necessary for God to select sacred places for His people to experience His presence?

Background

Chapter 19 is a pivotal shift in the book of Exodus. It begins with the people of Israel arriving at the wilderness of Sinai. From Mount Sinai, the Lord called Moses and asked him to relay an important message to the people of Israel. He wanted Moses to explain what He had done to the Egyptians and how He had delivered Israel out of their hands. It was for their deliverance, but it was also God’s definitive desire to bring the Israelites closer to Him. All they had to do was keep His covenant and He would make them a holy nation, a kingdom of priests.

Subsequently, Moses came down and summoned all of the elders and told the people what the Lord had commanded him. The Israelites agreed to obey all that God commanded. Moses relayed the Israelites’ agreement to the Lord. Then, Moses received more instructions. He was to

tell the people of Israel that the Lord would come down in the form of a dense cloud so that the people could fully trust the word of Moses.

Before God spoke to them, everyone would need to consecrate themselves—wash their clothes, and stay away from the mountain for three days. Anyone who touched any aspect of the mountain would be stoned to death or shot with arrows. Moses relayed all of the Lord's commands and added that they should abstain from having intimate relations.

What does it mean for us “to consecrate” our-selves before God?

In Depth

1. God's Wondrous Presence (Exodus 19:16–19)

Imagine the grandest special effects in a movie involving a volcano, thunder, and lightning. This would still pale in comparison with the wondrous display God provided at Mount Sinai for the Israelites. On the morning of the third day, following their time of consecration, God displayed Himself through thunder, lightning, a dense cloud, and the sound of a loud trumpet. Mount Sinai was completely enveloped in smoke. The smoke went out as though from a furnace, and the mountain shook. Thunder, lightning, and smoke have often been associated with God's presence throughout the Old and New Testaments.

For the believer, God's presence signals His power and sovereignty. God is not just at a special designated holy place. He lives within us. This means that our entire lives are consecrated to Him on a daily basis. With this knowledge, we walk in the fear of the Lord. Although we do not witness the same visual spectacle as the Israelites did at the foot of Mount Sinai, still we are in awe of God's presence just the same. And, we fear God, which means that we respect and reverence Him!

How has God demonstrated His power and presence in your life?

2. Need for a Mediator (vv. 17, 19–25)

In these verses, Moses' position as the leader of this movement is reemphasized. It was initially showcased in Egypt with his interactions with Pharaoh. Here he remains as God's choice to be the mediator between Him and the people. In verse 17, Moses leads the people to meet God. In verse 19, Moses converses with God. These actions alone indicate God's favor toward Moses.

In verse 20, God only calls Moses up to the mountain and not the priests. A constant going to and fro from the mountain shows God and Moses exchanging dialogue and continuing their relationship. Yet, if any of the Israelites were to go to the mountain, they would die. Later, God calls Aaron, Moses' brother, to join in the dialogue. God appoints Aaron as Moses' mouthpiece to speak on Moses' behalf.

This should confirm that Moses was the intermediary. He was readying the people for their introduction to God. Moses' encounters with God foreshadow man's need for a mediator, Jesus. God wanted to reinforce the ongoing message that the only way to come into His presence without judgment is through an intermediary assigned by Him. As the Israelites had Moses, we have Jesus—our divine intermediary who goes to the Father on our behalf.

Why are intermediaries important in assessing circumstances in our daily lives?

Search the Scriptures

1. Why do you think God chose to display Himself in multiple forms ([Exodus 19:16](#))? Would you be terrified to “see” God in such a display?
2. Why did God allow Aaron to come up to Mount Sinai but not the rest of the priests or the people (v. 24)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why do you think God was seeking to deepen His relationship with the Israelites at Mount Sinai?
2. How does God meet with and talk to His people today?

Lesson in Our Society

As Christians, although we are not of the world, we still can be influenced by it. One of the ways is through a sense of entitlement. This “I am able to do it on my own” mentality can be dangerous. This inward focus on “what I deserve,” or “my rights,” and “my priority” allows many to believe they don’t need anyone else. Self-sufficiency is one of the world’s most dangerous fallacies.

The Israelites needed Moses to be the mediator for them because they weren’t worthy to be in God’s presence, even after consecrating themselves. We need Jesus as our Mediator, because our best righteousness is like filthy rags ([Isaiah 64:6](#)). We are never too important to need others, especially God.

Oftentimes, the church can become just a show, but this is not what God intended. We are there to worship the God who has invited us to experience His presence through the New Covenant. Some of us in the Black community face new challenges. We may have new jobs or new families. Some of us face the challenge of being the only Black person in a certain neighborhood or business.

The good news is that God is there with you. Jesus has already brought you into the presence of the same God who brought Israel into the Promised Land. Don’t be afraid of the new situation. Orient yourself around the presence of the Almighty God and He will show you the way forward.

How can we remind ourselves and others that God is present with us in the midst of new challenges?

Make It Happen

As followers of Christ, we are grateful that we have a mediator in Jesus Christ in order to have a relationship with a holy God.

- Spend some time worshiping God and contemplating how holy He is in relation to our sinfulness.
- Write “God” down on a piece of paper and draw a large circle around it. Inside the circle, list what God is responsible for in your life. Then write “Me” on a piece of paper and circle it. In the circle, write what you are responsible for in your life.
- Ask a friend or relative who doesn’t know Jesus what comes to mind when they think of being in God’s presence.

More Light on the Text

Exodus 19:16–25

16 And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.

Having prepared themselves by staying pure, washing their clothes, and standing at the foot of the mountain, the people experience God’s presence as promised in the form of thunder, lightning, a thick cloud, and a very loud trumpet. This causes everyone to tremble. The Hebrew word for “tremble” (chared, khah-RED) usually has a sense of fear associated with it, so it is more than just a physical shaking from the sights and sounds (see [Isaiah 41:5](#)); God’s presence evokes fear and trembling. God is at once very noticeable in the forms of loud sounds and lightning, but also enigmatic as a thick cloud covers the mountain.

17 And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. 18 And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.

Moses was told that when the horn sounded, the people could go to the mountain (v. 13), and they respond accordingly. Now, the whole mountain is covered in smoke because the Lord has come down to the top of the mountain. God and the people cannot be in too close proximity to one another. The people may not go up the mountain or even touch its border, and God does not descend any farther than the peak. God’s presence is once again that of fire and smoke, causing the whole mountain to “quake.” This is the same verb that was used in verse 16 concerning the people’s response to the thunder, lightning, and cloud. God’s presence causes both the people and the mountain itself to tremble.

19 And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice.

Sounds keep increasing—the sound of the trumpet, the sound of God’s voice. Both “voice” and “thunder” are the same word in Hebrew, which is a general word for a sound (Heb. qol, KOLE). God shows Himself to the people and commands them through various sounds, including the trumpet, thunder, and His voice. The New Living Translation captures the connection by saying that “God thundered his reply.” The trumpet keeps getting louder in order to reveal how powerful God’s voice is— louder than even the loudest horn, akin to the sound of thunder.

20 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. 21 And the LORD said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. 22 And let the priests also, which come near to the LORD, sanctify themselves, lest the LORD break forth upon them.

The text reminds us that the Lord came down to the top of the mountain and called only Moses to come up. Now God has a command for the people from the top of the mountain. The command is a reiteration of the command God gave Moses to tell the people on the first day—they are not to come close enough to see the Lord. If they do, they will die. The word “breakthrough” (Heb. haras, hah-RAHS) has the sense of tearing down a structure, in this case, the boundary God has created between the people and His presence (v. 12). Likewise, any priests who approach the Lord must sanctify themselves or the Lord will explode with anger against them. The Hebrew word for “break forth” (parats, pah-RAHTS) carries a physical image of destruction. The Lord will break out in anger and severely punish (by death) those priests who are not properly set apart for Him.

23 And Moses said unto the LORD, The people cannot come up to mount Sinai: for thou chargedst us, saying, Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it. 24 And the LORD said unto him, Away, get thee down, and thou shalt come up, thou, and Aaron with thee: but let not the priests and the people break through to come up unto the LORD, lest he break forth upon them.

Moses’ response to God’s warning of punishment is that the people cannot do what God is warning them against because He has commanded them not to do it. They have already been told to establish a boundary around the mountain and sanctify it (v. 12). “To sanctify” in Hebrew (qadash, kah-DASH) is always associated with boundaries. To sanctify or consecrate is to set somebody or something apart for a special purpose, whether as a priest or prophet of God or as a burnt offering to Him. The mountain has been set apart in both a physical and a spiritual sense. God’s response is to tell Moses to go back down the mountain and come up with Aaron. None of the priests or the people may cross the boundary, though—only Moses and Aaron or God will explode with anger. Previously the priests were told they must sanctify themselves if they approach God (v. 22), but now they are prohibited from ascending the mountain. Some scholars have proposed that this potential conflict represents different traditions in antiquity, some of which allowed any priest to approach God if properly sanctified, some of which only allowed the high priest to do so. The reason for this seeming conflict in commands regarding the priests is unclear. The most likely answer is that now that Moses is about to ascend the mountain to

receive the Ten Commandments, the centerpiece of God's covenant with the Israelites, only Aaron and Moses may ascend the mountain, whereas at other times the priests could approach God (see Exodus 24).

25 So Moses went down unto the people, and spake unto them.

Verse 25 reminds us that throughout the chapter, Moses has been a messenger between God and the people. God does not speak directly to the people not even to the priests, and only at the end of the chapter when God calls Moses back up for the Ten Commandments can Aaron accompany him up the mountain. God's holiness demands fear and honor, and for His people these entail being aware of God's presence and listening to His commands, as well as acknowledging His distinction as the Almighty through a physical distance from God's holy mountain.

Say It Correctly

Sinai. SIGH-nigh.

Sanctify. SANK-ti-feye.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

You are God's Choice

([Deuteronomy 10:12–22](#))

TUESDAY

Prepare to Meet Your God

([Exodus 19:9b–15](#))

WEDNESDAY

The Triumphant Glory of God

([Isaiah 60:1–7](#))

THURSDAY

House of Israel, Praise the Lord
([Psalm 135:1-9, 19-21](#))

FRIDAY

Revealed in a New Way
([Luke 9:28-36](#))

SATURDAY

A Chosen Race, a Holy People
([1 Peter 2:1-10](#))

SUNDAY

Worship God through Obedience
([Exodus 19:16-25](#))