

Prayer

We praise You, Lord God, because You do powerful and amazing things, and any miracle that happens to us is like a glorious touch of your compassion and love. You guide us through the ordinary and the extraordinary, and we praise you for both. May we honour You both for the common things of life and for what is strange or uncommon; and may we give glory to You, Lord God, for You who are our magnificent and powerful Father in heaven. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Focus your prayers upon your own needs today, and do not be afraid to ask the Lord for healing, and for guidance in what matters most to you

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian speakers.** *By this, I mean those who speak at Christian conferences and events. Pray they will listen to the Spirit.*
- *Give thanks for the many blessings God has given you recently*
- *Pray about the way that advertising affects people's lives today*

Meditation

Help me and hold me, Lord Jesus,
as I seek to walk the path of faith.

Help me think about things clearly,
and grant me the gift of wisdom.

Help me understand things correctly,
so that my mind may mature.

Help me see things with eyes of faith,
in order to perceive the Kingdom.

Help me hear others with empathy,
and respond to people with love.

Help me endure all things gladly,
knowing I am never, ever, alone.

Help me and hold me, Lord Jesus,
I am Yours, and You are mine.

Bible passage – Exodus 19:1-8

¹ On the third new moon and after the Israelites left the land of Egypt, on that same day, they came to the desert region of Sinai. ² They had moved on from Rephidim, came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain.

³ Moses then went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain. He said, 'This is what you will say to the house of Jacob, and declare to the Israelites: ⁴ You have seen for yourselves what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed listen to my voice and keep my covenant, then you will become my own special treasure out of all the nations; for the whole earth is mine. ⁶ You will be a kingdom of priests for me, and a holy nation. These are the words you will say to the Israelites.'

⁷ So Moses returned and summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all the words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸ All the people replied together: 'We will do everything that the LORD has said'. So Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD.

Bible Study

Review

Chapter 19 is an extraordinary chapter of Scripture, and it is like no other. This is because it described the first time God's people began to draw near to their God in worship. They came to the foot of Mount Sinai to prepare to meet their God so that He could give them the 'Law', and because of the great importance of the law, people tend to focus on this (Exodus 20) and not on the awesome events beforehand. In chapter 19 we read about Israel's gradual approach to Sinai (otherwise called Horeb, see Ex 3:1, Deut 1:6, etc.), and the preparations they had to make, in order to be holy before their God, and receive His Law.

As so often in Scripture, this chapter has more to offer than we would think. It begins with a description of Israel's cautious movement towards the holy mountain (19:1,2), and continues with Moses' eager approach to 'go up' and see God (19:3). Moses, of course, had been to Sinai / Horeb before, when he met God in the burning bush (Exodus 3:4f.) and commissioned Him to deliver Israel from Pharaoh. He was told, *'I will be with you; and this will be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain'* (3:12). So Moses was keen to approach the Lord and tell Him that his mission was completed (19:3)!

When Moses 'went up to God' (19:3), however, he received no personal affirmation or reward. From the middle of verse 3 to verse 6, we read a speech from the Lord God telling Moses to go back to the people with a very important message. Firstly, God wanted the people to think about why they had been saved from Egypt by His awesome power, and why He had brought them to Sinai (19:4). In this beautiful verse, God speak of Israel being '*lifted up on eagle's wings*' (19:4, see also Deuteronomy 32:11) and brought to God Himself, and this illustration has captured people's imaginations for centuries. But the beauty of the image should not divert us from the thrust of what God was saying. He told Moses to challenge the people to listen to Him and keep His Covenant, because He could only treat them as His '*special treasure*' if they were obedient to this call (19:5). God wanted to make His people into a 'kingdom of priests' and a 'holy nation' (19:6), but he could only do this if the people consented.

This message must have come as something of a shock to Moses after feeling that he had completed his commission; but he was faithful to the Lord and went back to the people as God required (19:7). This was no simple request, for Moses had to present the people with a solemn undertaking, seeking their consent to be as faithful to God as He had been to them. They were about to come before this awesome God, receive His laws and be 'ordained' into God's service for ever (Exodus 20:20). Although they responded positively to God's request (19:8) and Moses reported this to the Lord, the consequences of this promise would affect the entire history of God's people, perhaps even the world.

The people of Israel could only demonstrate the commitment required by the Lord (19:5) through sustained obedience. In reality, they were unable to do this. This is clearly recorded in the book of Exodus itself (see Ex 32-34), let alone in the remaining history of God's people in the Old Testament. They certainly tried, but although God worked amazing wonders through His people, and this has continued to inspire us and teach great spiritual lessons, the time had not yet come for God to break the root of failure and sin in the life of Israel. It would be many years before Jesus came to 'change the hearts' of people, so that true people of faith might form a 'kingdom of priests' in this world. This 'kingdom', as we now know, is the Church of God.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The geography of the region, and timing (19:1,2)
- God's purpose in bringing Israel and Moses to Sinai (19:3,6,)
- 'Eagles wings' (19:4)
- A 'kingdom of priests' and a 'holy nation' (19:6)
- The people's promise (19:7,8)

Notes on the text and translation

- V1** *'On the third new moon and after the Israelites left ...'* Most Bible versions do not have 'and' in this sentence. I have added this because it is not otherwise clear to us that the Hebrew presents us with two 'time references', not one reference after another. Consequently, we are not to count three new moons after Israel left Egypt, rather we must take the date of the third new moon of the year after Israel left (which is entirely different!). See study for the full meaning of this; it is important.
- V1** *'the desert region of Sinai'* The Hebrew word 'midbar' means 'wilderness' or 'desert', but in the context of this story it is best described as a desert region that surrounded the Sinai mountain range. Exodus has already said that the Israelites were encamped somewhere near the 'mountain of God' (18:5).
- V2** *'they had moved on from Rephidim'* The Hebrew word translated 'moved on' means 'pull up tent pegs' and indicates that the camp moved from Rephidim.
- V5** *'You will become my own special treasure'* The Hebrew word refers to a personally owned and valued possession that is kept safe for a purpose. Its general use in the Old Testament refers to something owned by a king, but it is often used to refer to God's ownership of Israel.
- V6** *'a kingdom of priests'* This is an extremely evocative phrase that seems to fit the New Testament (and the letter to the Hebrews) rather than the Old Testament, in which priesthood is reserved for the descendants of Levi (and Aaron in particular). The Hebrew says this exactly, and the translations that attempt to alter this (for example, 'priestly kingdom' – NRSV) do not help interpret this important text. Only through understanding the special nature of this passage of scripture can we understand what is meant here (see study).
- V7** *'So Moses returned ...'* Most Bible versions have 'So Moses came ...' However, the Hebrew word used is a general one for moving from one place to another, and it is clear from the context of the story that Moses went back to the camp; hence my translation.
- V8** *'So Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord'* The Hebrew says more strictly, 'So Moses returned the words of the people to the Lord.' All the translations interpret this as an act of reporting, as I have done, but the word used implies a more active form of reporting, as if Moses had to turn around and take these words back to the Lord, possibly at the mountain (see verse 3).

Going Deeper

The geography of the region, and timing (19:1,2)

There have been many attempts to work out the location of Mount Sinai. Some suggest it is in the north east of the Sinai peninsula, near the Dead Sea. Some suggest it is on the north western side, closer to the origins of Israel's route from Egypt. Yet others favour the traditional sites in the south of the peninsula. The most popular traditional view is that Mount Sinai is in fact a triple peak of 'Gebel Musa' (Mount of Moses), 'Gebel Serbal' and 'Gebel Katarina' in the south of Sinai. In addition, it is very clear from a multitude of references in the Old Testament, that Mount Sinai and Mount Horeb are virtually interchangeable terms, and it is unlikely that there is any significance in these two names; they are simply a double name for one place.

The passage we have read today speaks not just about place, but about time. In ancient times, periods of time were measured by lunar months, and the passage tells us that the meeting of Israel with their God took place exactly after six weeks of travel. They left Egypt 14 days after the first 'new moon' of the year; the second new moon would then have occurred two weeks later, and the third new moon, six weeks after that. The significance of all this is that the great meeting of God with Israel took place on the seventh week after their departure. Just as God made the world in six days and then rested, Israel had travelled from Egypt for six weeks and then stopped to encounter God!

God's purpose in bringing Israel and Moses to Sinai (19:3,6)

As we have seen, Moses was keen to go up the mountain and greet God; but God was ready to embark on a major new part of His mission to save people and redeem the world. Half way through verse 3, we hear the first of God's speeches in chapter 19, extending to verse 6. The speech is a challenge to Israel to prepare for the future. However, it is more than this. It is the first of a series of great speeches by God which can properly be called the 'Lawgiving', and it extends from this point in Exodus, through the whole of Leviticus, to Numbers 10. We should remember that the first five books of the Bible were held together from the earliest of times and revered as the 'Law of God', the great 'Torah' (Hebrew for Law) of the Old Testament. Incidentally, the rest of Numbers after chapter 10 contains stories about the journey of Israel through the wilderness and related incidents, and Deuteronomy is a speech by Moses (not God) recounting the legal principles of the whole 'Law', as interpreted by Moses (hence its name which means 'second law').

Clearly, God brought Israel to Mount Sinai not just to worship Him, and not just to receive the Ten Commandments (and many other laws). It was a moment of decision (as we have already noted), but not just for Israel. God had decided to reveal Himself to people in remarkable ways, and convey to written words the moral codes of the world He had made. It was necessary for all the reasons we read about yesterday. The new nation of Israel had just about survived under the leadership of Moses, but however great a man was Moses, the real leader was God. After the impressive events which settled Moses as the leader of all Israel (Exodus 16,17), it was necessary for the Lord God to imprint His authority on both Moses and the people. He was not going to just stand and deliver the Law; he challenged the people to believe in Him, state their trust in Him and be obedient in worship (as we will find out in the rest of chapter 19). After this, He would reveal the Law.

'Eagles wings' (19:4)

In verse 4, the Lord God offered two images of His salvation of Israel. Firstly, He asked Israel to recall 'what I did to the Egyptians'. There is no doubt about what is meant here. God's military might was demonstrated (Exodus 14) over Pharaoh in no uncertain terms as his entire army was decimated in the Red Sea as it recklessly pursued Israel. No battle was fought, but God's power alone saved the Israelites from Egypt.

This image of God's power and protection, however, is in stark contrast to what comes next, which is the wonderful word picture; '*how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself*'. Many a sermon has been preached on this picture, though largely from the same picture as found in Deuteronomy 32:11, illustrating God's care and protection of His people in the midst of adversity. It is frequently observed that the previous military image is rather 'male', and the caring image of the eagle (as indicated by the grammar of the Hebrew) is female. Here and in Deuteronomy, nurturing language in Hebrew is used to indicate God's care and protection; in this case, Israel was brought from the Red Sea through the desert by means of the Lord's provision of food and water. Recent events within Exodus amply illustrate this, and Israel was indeed 'carried' through the desert by their God. In addition, we have already noted that Israel had arrived at Sinai to meet their God, and this helps us understand the meaning of the final part of this word picture; '*... and brought you to Myself*'.

God's care and provision is no vacation, healing experience, or image of discipleship. It is a picture of God's act of salvation, and time is not relevant. We should, however, observe the conditional nature of this provision. In the following verse (19:5), the Lord explains the reason for His demonstration of love (irrespective of its illustrative 'male' or 'female' characteristics, which are balanced with each other in this text). The Lord has a Covenant with His people, and those who respond to Him and accept His love and protection are called to be obedient; to 'listen' and to 'keep my covenant'. The flight with the eagle is no free ride; it is given to inspire people to respond by taking God seriously, and so that they might accept His call totally and unconditionally. This is a reasonable requirement, because God has given Himself to His people with eternal covenant faithfulness.

A 'kingdom of priests' and a 'holy nation' (19:6)

In the translational notes I have indicated the importance of the phrase 'a kingdom of priests'. There is no doubt that this means God intends all Israel to be 'priests' in respect of their witness to the whole world. It is unique in the Old Testament, except perhaps for Isaiah 61:6, which says, 'but you will be called "priests of the Lord" and you will be named "ministers of our God"'. Isaiah conveys the same sentiment, but does not refer to a 'kingdom'. The notion of a kingdom, of course, implies the presence of a 'King'; and although a King was not established in Israel until the time of King Saul (1 Samuel 9f.). Even in the time of the Judges, it was accepted that the only King of Israel was God Himself (e.g. Gideon's comment in refusing to accept the title of king himself, in Judges 8:23).

The idea of a kingdom is that of a people who are distinct, and if their distinctiveness comes from God, then they must, by definition, be a 'holy' people, and this is exactly what is said by God in this verse. The notion of a 'kingdom of priests' is the same as that of a 'holy nation'. It is true that later on in Exodus, the tribe of Levi was set aside as a priestly class of people within Israel. However, this does not discount in any way the clear intention of God stated here in Exodus 19, that Israel had a unique task to do God's work in the world as His priests. They are to represent God in the world, and bring to Him the concerns of the world, acting as any priest does. It may rightly be said that Israel's chief failure (as Isaiah clearly observed in the latter chapters of his prophecy) that Israel became interested in itself, and lost sight of this fundamental call of God.

The people's promise (19:7,8)

It is possible to argue that the events recorded in Exodus 19 and 20 are rather like Israel's 'ordination' into this priesthood, and into the task of representing God within the world. Nevertheless, it was a task that had to be accepted and agreed. Moses was given the task of returning to the camp of the Israelites with what the

Lord proposed, and obtaining the answer of the people. Of course, now they had a structure of leadership (as we saw yesterday), it was possible for the mind of the people to be assessed!

Verse 8 is a fascinating verse because as soon as we read it, the problems begin to appear, for the people 'replied together "We will do everything that the Lord has said."' How often do we hear a very large group of people say something in unity? We may say that this is the Old Testament and the will of God that Israel should say this, but it seems far-fetched. The Bible mostly reflects reality, not fiction, and the unified response should indicate to us what was perhaps a general consensus, or perhaps the wise counsel of leaders. I suggest that my doubt about the integrity of the response is justified by the quick manner in which the people of Israel changed their tune within 40 days of this great event, and worshipped a golden calf (Ex 32:4)!

Nevertheless, God was prepared to work with the response He gained. He was capable of working with a faulty and dishonest people, so that in the end, His own righteousness could be shown, and He would be revealed as just, righteous and true. Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord, and He proceeded to call the people to worship Him, but as we will find out tomorrow, the manner in which they were to do this would test the people's aptitude, manner and resolve.

Application

From the first time Moses appealed to Pharaoh to 'let the people go', Moses said that he intended to lead the people into the desert so that they could worship their God (Ex. 8:1, 9:1, 10:3 etc). So they had come to worship at Sinai, but it was worship with a difference! Of course, we have not yet come to the real 'worship' where the people came close to God, and Moses has to deliver messages about how far they could come (19:9f.); but already, their worship indicates much more. The people were to be ordained into a task for God, as 'priests' to the world. They were called to be obedient to a Covenant that God had already set out through their forefathers; in other words, theirs was not a religion they could shape and evolve at their own discretion. Their worship had also to be balanced, and reflect experiences of God that ranged from His military authority and might to His maternal care and protection 'as an eagle'!

I have purposefully presented these ideas in an evocative manner because we must not avoid the challenges they represent. Too much worship of God today is inconsequential and personalised ritual, and the Lord longs for us to be caught up in worship that changes lives and responds to the call of God to be different people in the world, for Him and for His purposes. People obviously warm to the idea of being carried aloft 'on eagles' wings', but they need to accept that it is necessary to worship God in other circumstances; in battle against God's enemies in the world, in witness to the eternal Covenant of God, and in testifying to the saving power of God, in all circumstances.

God brought the people of Israel to worship Him on the seventh week of a journey; it was like a 'Sabbath' week, dedicated to God for His purposes. As we continue to read in Exodus, the focus of the story turns steadily away from the people and onto the Lord God. He is the One who is Master and Lord, and it was His plan to do something very important. He required His people's full attention.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Does it matter whether we can locate Mount Sinai accurately? How would it help us if we could?
2. What did God really want of the 'house of Jacob', the 'Israelites' (19:3f.)? How could they be a 'kingdom of priests'?
3. How do we know whether people are sincere in responding to God, and what does history show us about whether people are generally faithful to Him?

Topics covered by this text

- *Commitment between God and His people*
- *The worship of God*
- *The witness of God's people to the world as a 'holy nation'*

Personal comments by author

I have great sympathy for Moses in this passage. He went to the mountain to present the people to God and say 'Look! We have done it!' Instead, the Lord swiftly moved the situation on to His next move, and instructed Moses to go further. It is true of the Lord that when we have completed one task, He is likely to move us on to another! This is not because He wants to burden us, but because the Lord's tasks are urgent, and He needs us to get on with them!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Imagine yourself as Moses, as a leader of Israel, and as one of the people of Israel in this story. What different emotions do you experience as these events unfold? Read through the story and imagine how it all feels. Let the Lord guide your thoughts and feelings through this exercise, and He will guide you into what He wants of you.*
 - *Pray for people who long to serve the Lord but find it hard to know what to do. Pray that the church of God will help them fulfil their vocation.*
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Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You love and love again with unending faithfulness. We praise You for the love You have shown us and rejoice that you have led us to accept it. We pray for all those who You love, but who have not yet responded; and we grieve with you for those who have rejected Your love. Save us, Lord Jesus, save us. AMEN
