

Prayer

We give ourselves to You and to Your service, Lord Jesus Christ, because You have given everything for our salvation. Receive our praise, and receive our confession of sin; so heal us, and set us free. Use us to do Your work in the world, to preach the Good News, to set captives free, and to tell people that God loves them! We ask this in Jesus' name: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray today for the hopes and aspirations of those who are closest and dearest to your heart. Bless them in Jesus' name.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian speakers.** *Pray for any well known speakers who are known to you personally*
- *Pray for those who design our towns and cities, and for the affect this has on people's lives*
- *Give thanks for the many blessings God has given you recently*

Meditation

I wonder how you see me, Lord?

Do You see me as the man or woman of God I reckon that I am?
Or am I merely a shadow of the person You know that I can be?

Do You find me obedient to Your every word, discerning of Your will?
Or am I really motivated by my own deep needs and interests?

Do You hear my prayers and know for sure I long for truth and justice?
Or am I forever using and testing You to get my way above all else?

Do You watch me in daily work and see Your Kingdom established?
Or am I easily distracted by the many worldly opportunities before me?

Do You speak to me or guide me, and know I will respond with care?
Or am I one who needs constant help just to keep in touch with You?

I wonder how You see me, Lord?

Despite my faults and failings, and the fruits which have yet to grow;
May I respond to the powerful love by which You minister to my soul.

Bible passage – Exodus 19:9-15

⁹ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'I am going to come to you in a thick, dense cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and so believe in you forever.'

When Moses told the LORD about the words spoken by the people, ¹⁰ the LORD said to Moses: 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow; tell them to wash their cloaks, ¹¹ and let them be ready for the third day, because on the third day I, the LORD, will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² You will set limits for the people all around, and tell them, "Be careful that you keep the restriction placed on the mountain, as far as touching the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain will die by a violent death. ¹³ No hand must touch them; they will surely be stoned or shot through; whether an animal or a person; they will not live." They may only go up the mountain at the sounding of the ram's horn trumpet.' ¹⁴ So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the

people, and they washed their cloaks. ¹⁵ He said to the people, 'Be ready for the third day, and abstain from sex.'

Bible Study

Review

Today, we might wonder what this passage is about! We can relate to the awesomeness of God, but why are boundaries and limits set between people and God? Why will the people die if they touch Mount Sinai? What we have read reflects the relationship between God and His people before Jesus broke such boundaries, so when God wanted Israel to come near to Him, it could only be on His terms. Israel had to respect these barriers, because they were a matter of life and death.

We may wish to skip past this chapter in order to read about the giving of the Law in Exodus 20, but some important things happened before this extraordinary event, and God's people had to prepare themselves to meet their God. Their attention had been drawn and they had to show that they were being obedient (see yesterday's reading, 19:1-8). Only then was God willing to set out the rules by which they could come near Him (as in today's reading). Then, after they had accepted their place and proved their obedience, God showed Himself to them firstly in awesome power (see tomorrow's reading 19:16-25), and then in the giving of the Law, including Ten Commandments (Exodus 20),

This passage reflects an extraordinary paradox, for God was different from His people. He was holy and shrouded from their sight in 'thick dense cloud (19:9), yet He was coming closer to His people and would be seen by them (19:11)! The rules kept the people apart from God's holiness, and yet their purpose was to enable God to meet His people (19:11,13)! The purpose of their meeting was to give Israel a glimpse of God's life-giving righteousness, and to receive His life-sustaining law, yet these rules threatened death if Israel contravened them (19:12)!

We are understandably horrified by the thought that God might threaten death, and yet this is Scripture. So, even if we recoil from this, we must overcome our feelings in order to find its truths. We must dig deeper, and approach the whole text with care. To begin with, we need to accept that what is said here is not so much a threat as a statement of fact. God is all righteousness and holiness, and outside of His grace, sinners will die in His presence. Without the benefits of all that Jesus won for people on the Cross, the only way for people to begin to approach God was for them to be utterly obedient to all He said.

For this reason, Israel were told to prepare to meet their God. He would come to them (19:9), but they should not approach Him (19:12). A trumpet blast would sound to signal that they could '*go up the mountain*' (19:13). In order to be ready, God required ritual preparations (19:10) lasting at least two days, with the meeting scheduled for the 'third day' (19:11). The people had to keep their distance from the mountain itself, and not touch it on pain of death, lest the awesome holiness of God consume them (19:12)! Moses also conveyed the instruction for people to abstain from sex (19:15). This seems crude to us, but the Bible speaks about such things elsewhere as appropriate for ritual holiness. Moreover, in a world where some sportsmen and women have to do the same before performing, we should not think of this as too weird!

This passage challenges us to understand that any contact between people and God is a matter of life and death. Many people might scoff at this, but to ignore it is folly. God has given all people life, but their sin separates them from God and leads them to death. All suffer this fate outside of God's redemption, which is found today in Jesus Christ. The Israelites lived before the coming of Christ, but they were an essential part of His 'salvation plan'. It is therefore only to be expected that what happened to them was often a matter of spiritual life and death. They may not have understood this, but God was protecting them so that He would be able to bring salvation through their nation.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The holiness of God (19:9-15)
- Consecration (19:10,11,14)
- Life, death and limits (19:12,13)
- Permission to '*go up the mountain*' (19:13)
- Abstinence from sex (19:15)

Notes on the text and translation

- V9** *'in a thick, dense cloud'* This Hebrew expression combines two words for thick cloud (Hebrew 'av' and 'onon'), and both of these are used in the Old Testament to refer to the visible presence of God in clouds of incense, for example, or in the cloud that led the people of Israel through the desert. The use of both these words together is rare and emphasises the gravity of the occasion.
- V10** *'go to the people and consecrate them ...'* The Hebrew word for 'consecrate' comes from a form of the verb 'to be holy', which means 'cause them to be holy'. This is what we mean by 'consecration'.
- V10** *'tell them to wash their cloaks.'* Most translations have 'let them wash their clothes'. However, this is not a polite suggestion, but a rigorous requirement, as is clear from the grammar of the sentence, so I have expressed this accordingly as a command. In addition, this is not a general requirement for all clothes; those mentioned are the outer cloak or mantles worn in those days. In other words, the people should present themselves before God wrapped in clean garments.
- V11** *'I, the Lord, will come down'* Strictly, the text says 'the Lord will come down' however, the Lord is speaking at this point, and there is hardly any difference between this and the Hebrew which adds the first person, as I have done here. It helps the sentence make sense.
- V12** *'Be careful that you keep the restriction placed on the mountain'* The verse is rather difficult to translate, and you will find that most Bible versions have 'be careful that you do not set foot on the mountain' (or something similar). In fact, the sentence has no 'negative'; it merely urges the enforcement of the limits placed on the mountain, up to the very edge of it.
- V12** *'will die by a violent death'* The Hebrew words are a double use of the verb 'to die', placed together in a construction usually used in Hebrew to indicate certainty, or in the case of death, the punishment of death.
- V15** *'abstain from sex'* The Hebrew expression is literally, 'do not go near a woman', however, the words used are frequently used in the Old Testament to indicate abstinence from sex with a spouse, so I have translated the phrase in this way simply to make clear what is meant.

Going Deeper

The holiness of God (19:9-15)

The ancient concept of holiness is not part of most of our cultures today. This is largely because people regard the idea of God as itself debatable, and put their energies into deciding whether He exists God rather than what His properties are! By contrast, ancient people spent much time thinking about God, and they believed that the world was indeed made by a God, but He was essentially different from people. God was 'holy' and people were different, they were 'profane', or 'worldly'. Holiness was associated with the notions of Godly perfection, 'otherness', or mystery, and Israelites went further to add ultimate goodness, truth and beauty. The idea of a God of 'love' arises in the Old Testament together with the notion of 'Covenant', and it comes to fruition in the work of Christ.

So within the idea of holiness there is a basic separation between God and humanity, which is obvious within this text. God is holy, and if the people are to approach Him they must do what God says, and take suitable precautions. Most of today's text explains the precautions relevant for God's coming to deliver His commands to Israel, and these were necessary to prevent them being consumed by His awesome power.

We might wonder whether this text describes Sinai itself is somehow 'holy'. This mountain is generally thought to be the one called 'Gebel Musa' in the Sinai range of the southern Sinai peninsula, and people climb this mountain today and return saying that they find it to be very 'holy'. We should be careful about using the word 'holy' in this way, however, because it is far removed from how the word is used in the Bible. Like this, the word merely describes feelings of closeness to God or not, but the notion of holiness is not rooted in human emotions or in the physical activity of climbing a famous mountain. In truth, holiness is an awesome property of God. Holiness is something that comes on Sinai for a singular and specific purpose, so that God could speak to Moses and convey His law.

Note that God reserved a special place for Moses. In verse 9, he said that He would come to Moses in a thick visible cloud, so that the people could hear what He had to say, and also believe in Moses, forever (19:9). This is a prediction of what would shortly take place, when Moses went up the mountain of God (Sinai) to receive the Law and bring it to the people (Ex 20). We must be careful, however, for we will find that Moses may not have been 'up' the mountain on this first dramatic giving of the 'Law'!

Consecration (19:10,11,14,15)

Consecration comes from being obedient to God's demands about how to approach Him. The rules about this appear strange to us, for example, why did God require cloaks be washed (19:10)? Firstly, it may be

that God's instruction (19:10) may well have included other things that are not recorded here because people generally understood what they needed to do to come before their God. Later laws about cleanliness and holiness within in the Bible contain far more detail (e.g. the priestly instructions about approaching God in the Tabernacle, 25-40).

What we fail to appreciate today is that holiness, alongside its opposite human quality of 'profanity', were regarded as contagious. One example of this is the idea that touching the mountain will bring a person in contact with the holiness of God, and therefore kill them (19:12). In this light, we can see that the instruction to wash the cloak (the outer garment) meant that if people touched each other, then they would not be affected by any uncleanness of the individual wearing the cloak. To us this seems rather fastidious, but preparation for holiness before God required utter dedication to the smallest detail. Any uncleanness in the presence of God was unacceptable.

There is some speculation about the meaning of the 'third day' mentioned in this passage. Of course, Jesus was raised 'on the third day' and some think there may have been a connection Jesus' resurrection and the divine presence of God on Mount Sinai. This may be worth exploring, but there is no evidence in the New Testament or elsewhere that Christians of the early church noticed this connection, so it may be unwise to place too much stress on it. Essentially, a period of three days was considered an appropriate period of time for ritual purification, and there are numerous different Old Testament references to 'three days', each with its own significance and meaning (see Joshua 1:11, 3:2, 1 Sam 9:20, Ezra 8:15 etc.).

Life, death and limits (19:12,13)

Verses 12 and 13 are a difficult part of the text for us today. They describe the limits set around the mountain because of its holiness when touched by the presence of God (19:9). We may understand the difference between God's holiness and people's sinfulness, and we may appreciate that the whole of the mountain will become holy and should not be trespassed upon; but why should those who touch the mountain die (19:12)? Further, the next verse explains that God does not enact the death sentence Himself, but other people must do this by stoning or shooting (with arrows)! Again, we may even understand that the reason for stoning is to prevent touching the one who has sinned and being infected with profanity, but for us, this is quite dreadful. Why should this happen?

There are two possible ways to answer to this question. In the first one we must place ourselves in the position of an Israelite and appreciate the importance of being obedient to God at that time. God had set out the conditions under which He would meet the people, and the actions of one individual could undermine the acceptability of everyone to God. The crossing of God's boundaries was a heinous crime for those days, even if, because of the mercy of Christ, it is not today!

The second possible answer is this. As we saw in the beginning of the Bible study, holiness was a matter of life and death, and contrary to people today who regard such a notion as fanciful, ancient people would have taken the matter as a deadly to the community. In the same way that that we read a sign that says 'High voltage electricity – do not enter' and keep a healthy distance, the words in verses 11 and 12 would have had a similar impact upon the people of Israel. The fact was that the people did not go near the mountain or touch it (as we will see in tomorrow's passage), becomes a matter of contention.

Permission to 'go up the mountain' (19:13)

At the end of verse 13, the instruction is given that the people may only go up the mountain when a 'ram's horn trumpet' is sounded. It is a simple instruction, though we will find out tomorrow that it is the subject of a little confusion.

The word for 'ram's horn trumpet' is 'yobel' from which we get the word 'jubilee' in English. The jubilee was a special fiftieth year celebration in Israel at which debts were cancelled and land was returned to its original family and clan allotments. To indicate the year of Jubilee, these trumpets were sounded, and in due course, the trumpets were sounded to indicate the beginning of festive celebration and the worship of God. The sounding of trumpets, however was associated more with the presence of God than the festival itself, and the story of the battle of Jericho reminds us that the sounding of trumpets could mean the coming of God to destroy as well as to save (Josh 6:8)!

There are many references to the sounding of trumpets in scripture, and these signify the presence of God in some way; for example, at King Solomon's anointing in 1 Kings 1:34, in worship as recorded in Psalm 47:5, or the 'word of the Lord' prophesied by Isaiah in Is.18:3. However, there is little use of the imagery of the trumpet in the New Testament, except to indicate second coming of Christ in glory, and the defeat of all evil. The book of the Revelation of John records the sounding of seven trumpets, six of which bring doom, but the seventh brings the victory of God and the 'kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah' (Rev 11:15 – see also 8:7f.). The sounding of a trumpet indicates the imminent presence of God.

Abstinence from sex (19:15)

One other small issue about consecration is worth mentioning. We may be puzzled about why Moses required the people to refrain from sex in preparation for meeting with God, something not mentioned earlier in the text. However, it may have been regarded as a normal feature of preparation to meet God, and Moses felt it necessary to emphasise this because he feared some might forget it.

What, however did it mean for people to refrain from sex, and why was it a part of consecration? If you turn to Leviticus 15:18, it reads '*If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening.*' This reflects the view that the release of bodily fluids made those involved 'unclean'. We may regard such stipulations as somewhat primitive, but we should be wary about our own attitudes towards what 'uncleanness' meant. Firstly, we should remember that the rules of 'uncleanness' generally helped ancient peoples with issues of hygiene in an age when little was known about the true nature of disease. Secondly, Paul told the Corinthians that it was appropriate that married couples refrain from sex as a form of abstinence in order to spend more time in devotion and prayer (1 Cor 7:5f.). Abstinence from sex is therefore a forgotten act of devotional discipline.

Application

Today, we experience holiness through the life-giving and redeeming work of Jesus Christ, and it is hard for us to read about the holiness of God in an Old Testament passage such as this. We feel that the holiness of God we have seen in Jesus is something precious and beautiful, something to be treasured and sought after, and a privilege of our faith. All this is true, and yet the Old Testament reminds us powerfully of the 'other side of the coin'. For although we have glorious access to God the Father through Jesus Christ, we presume upon this privilege at our peril. Ultimately, all life is still dependent upon the mercy of God, and although we know that we can claim this through Jesus, there are too many people in the world, and some who go to church, who fail to understand that the alternative to life with Christ is death with self. Just like any Israelite who might rebel against God at the foot of the mountain by choosing to touch it, thereby reaping the penalty of making contact with the searing righteousness and holiness of God that cannot abide sin; something similar may happen to us. Certainly, if we presume that God is generous to all people whatever they do, and there is no penalty for rebelling against the Maker of all things, then we come close to claiming that God will save anyone just because they exist.

Unfortunately, too many people believe something like this about God today, and the result is that they live as if what they do does not matter either to others or to God. The prophetic word God calls His people to preach today is that He is present in the world and He is watching. He does not want people to rebel against Him but they do, and thereby choose to ignore His Gospel and the path of life He has given us through Christ. When people choose to believe in a god for whom moral choice does not matter, they choose a god of their own making, not the God who made this world. Ultimately, they choose death rather than life, because the only life beyond this one is with the God who made it!

I put this as starkly as this because unless we see our faith as a matter of life and death, we miss the truth about God as revealed through Jesus. It is certainly hard to read that people in Old Testament times faced life and death choices about what they did and whether they were obedient to God. Ultimately, we face the same choices ourselves today.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. If you knew that God had called you to meet Him, what would you do to prepare for this meeting?
2. What use is the idea of 'consecration' for us in the church today? What does it mean to 'consecrate' our church leaders?
3. For what good reason might we refrain from activities such as sex, for the sake of dedicating ourselves to God? What other forms of abstinence may be appropriate today?

Topics covered by this text

- *The notion of holiness*
- *Preparations to meet God*
- *The consequences of meeting God, life and death*

Personal comments by author

The subject of life and death is hard to face, but after I have read a passage of scripture such as this, I find myself strangely relieved. The truth is that I know I have found my path to life through Jesus, and I feel immensely privileged to have been born at such a time and place as I can make a choice to follow Christ, and trust that He has dealt with the penalty of death for my sin. This makes me feel I must pray for those who do not have this choice put to them, for whatever reason, and I pray that God will be merciful to them, for their eternal future is His to decide.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *What do you know that God requires you must do to follow Him, and also, what do you know that God requires you must not do? Are these a matter of eternal life and death, and how do you know this?*
- *Pray for those who do not know the Gospel and may not ever be given the chance to know it, possibly because they feel content in some other faith or social setting. Pray for good missionary work that breaks down barriers to the true Gospel, which speaks sensitively and correctly to people of all situations.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, wash away the sins from which we suffer; make us holy, clean, and worthy to be counted as Yours, we pray. Fill us with Your joy and happiness so that no temptation or evil can drag us away from You; make our lives complete in You. Thank You Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord! AMEN
