

A Kingdom of Priests, A Holy Nation

Man, you missed it!" Keshawn said, smiling at his coworker. "We had a great time last night. Bruce paid for everything."

Last night, Ervan did not accompany his supervisor and coworkers to the popular sports bar.

"We really had a great time," Keshawn continued. "And I think I'm in love with one of the waitresses. She gave me her cell phone number."

"And the new guy, Harold, was really talking Bruce up," Keshawn said, leaning against Ervan's file cabinet. "Bruce may consider him for the new men's basketball coach. Didn't you have your eye on that position?"

"Yes," said Ervan. "I've expressed my interest and talked to Bruce about being the men's basketball coach."

"Man, you should have come out last night," said Keshawn. "Why didn't you? I would think a single man like yourself would also like looking at good looking women."

The drinking environment and what he suspected would be the mood of the gathering were exactly why Ervan did not go. He knew himself and didn't want to put himself in that predicament. Ervan also loved God and didn't want to displease Him or reflect poorly on His name.

"Oh wait," Keshawn added. "Are you a holy roller?"

"I serve a holy God, and I love Him" said Ervan. "I try to live a holy life, because it pleases Him."

- 1. What does a holy life look like?**
- 2. Why does God want us to obey Him?**
- 3. What part do God's people play in His plan for creation?**

LESSON FOCUS: A holy God requires a holy and obedient people.

Invitation to a New Identity

Exodus 19:1–8 KJV

1 In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they into the wilderness of Sinai.

2 For they were departed from Rephidim, and were come to the desert of Sinai, and had pitched in the wilderness; and there Israel camped before the mount.

3 And Moses went up unto God, and the LORD called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel; 4 Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. 5 Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: 6 And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.

7 And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the LORD commanded him. 8 And all the

Exodus 19:1–8 NIV

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.

people answered together, and said, All that the LORD hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the LORD.

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

After centuries of bondage in Egypt, where Pharaoh treated the Hebrews with contempt, God delivered them from slavery, using miracles beyond human comprehension. The people travel through the wilderness, and God leads them to the foot of a mountain, a place connecting heaven and earth. The mountain would smoke and thunder in a fearful display. At Sinai, they meet with Yahweh—God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and creator of the universe.

God first asks Moses to remind the people of all that they had witnessed (vv. 4–5). They were rescued and protected, "carried on eagles' wings." The people were brought out of Egypt for God's sovereign purpose (v. 4). God invites the people to embrace a new identity. Instead of Pharaoh's slaves, they have become the creator's chosen ones.

Since God is giving them a holy status, they are to be a "treasured possession . . . a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (vv. 5–6). God is doing something new. Although He created the whole earth, God is using the children of Abraham to bless the world (Gen. 12:3). Their holiness is not from what they have done. In fact, they were passive characters in their own redemption story. But God is loyal. He rescued them, and now He calls them His people. God shall be devoted and faithful to them. At the same time, He requires their obedience and faithfulness to His covenant. The people respond, "We will do everything the Lord has said" (v. 8)

The rescue plan is bigger than the redemption of one nation; God intends to bless the whole world. Through the descendants of Abraham, God plans to lead all nations into His presence, to fill the world with order and justice. The rescue, redemption, and covenant of Israel become a model of salvation for God to unveil to all people through

Jesus Christ (compare 1 Peter 2:9).

4. *What is the first thing that God asks Moses to say to the Israelites?*

5. *How might this reminder prepare the people for the invitation that follows?*

6. *God invites Israel to embrace a new identity. What are the conditions of this invitation?*

Preparing to Encounter God

Exodus 19:9–14 KJV

9 And the LORD said unto Moses, Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and believe thee for ever. And Moses told the words of the people unto the LORD.

10 And the Lord said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes, 11 And be ready against the third day: for the third day the LORD will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai.

12 And thou shalt set bounds unto the people round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death: 13 There shall not an hand touch it, but he shall

Exodus 19:9–14 NIV

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;

surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live: when the trumpet soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount.

14 And Moses went down from the mount unto the people, and sanctified the people; and they washed their clothes.

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.

Moses continues his conversation with God on Mount Sinai, and all the while God appears in a "dense cloud" so that everyone might see and recognize Moses' authority (v. 9). God endorses Moses' leadership and wants the people to know that Moses is speaking on God's behalf.

God tells Moses to consecrate the people, for Yahweh plans to come down on Mount Sinai right in front of their eyes—an encounter not to be taken lightly (vv. 10–11). Moses must prepare for this meeting by instructing the people about treating the mountain as sacred. God tells Moses that no one, not even an animal, is to touch the holy mountain and desecrate the space where God reveals His presence (v. 12). Before the signal, anyone who deliberately ignores this command and approaches the mountain shall be stoned or shot with arrows (v. 13).

Moses goes back to the people to deliver these instructions. He consecrates them, and they wash their clothes as God commands (v. 14). They are making themselves ritually clean and keeping themselves from anything disordered and unclean. The stage is set for God to appear on the mountain, where He will give Israel the covenant that they shall follow to remain His holy people.

7. *How does God appear to Moses, and why?*

8. *What instructions does God give to Moses?*

9. *What can we learn about God from His instructions?*

What Is Holiness For?

As both the Exodus story and the apostle Peter make clear, salvation comes before the call to holiness. God does not save Israel because they are holy—Israel is declared holy after they are saved and rescued (Ex. 19:4–6). Peter reminds the church that holiness is a proper response to their salvation (1 Peter 1:9, 16). But what is holiness for?

Some people may think the purpose of holiness is to earn salvation. Others could say achieving holiness is its own reward. Both ideas, however, miss the point: Israel's holiness is intended for worship and mission.

In Exodus 19, God explains two purposes for making them a holy nation: to “bring you to myself” as “my treasured possession” (vv. 4–5), and to be “a kingdom of priests” among the nations (v. 6). Holiness makes Israel fit for a relationship with God—to worship Him—and with the nations—in mission for them. To see holiness only in relationship to salvation or purity misses that they are expected to do something with the holy status they have been given.

In 1 Peter 2:9, this same holy calling is extended to the church: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” God declares and calls the church to be holy so that they will proclaim His glory. This proclamation is an act of worship and mission. We can feel empowered by God's call: be holy! It is what He created us to do, to love our creator through acts of worship and to love our neighbors by serving them.

10. *Is holiness a moral calling for us to reach, or a spiritual status given by God. Or could it be both? Why?*

11. *How can we understand God's purpose for making us holy, in light of His purpose for making Israel holy?*

12. *Does the invitation to “be holy” feel like a burden or a relief? Why?*

Holiness on Mission

God saves His people—Israel then, the church today—to make them holy, setting them apart to make them fit to worship Him and for mission to the world.

► *Think about the spiritual disciplines that draw you nearer to God (Bible reading, prayer, worship, fasting, etc.). Reflect upon which one of your spiritual disciplines could be purposed for mission. Create a goal for your practice of this discipline in the week ahead, so that you can orient it toward mission.*

God might invite me to use _____ for this purpose:

KEY VERSES

All the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. —Ex. 19:5b–6a KJV

Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. —Ex. 19:5b–6a NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of March 3 through March 9

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Ezekiel 14:1–11—They Will Be My People.

Tues. Psalm 26—Desire for God's Presence.

Wed. Ezekiel 43:1–12—God's Glory Fills the Temple.

Thurs. Ezekiel 44:15–27—Who May Draw Near?

Fri. John 2:12–22—The Temple of Christ's Body.

Sat. John 4:13–26—Worship God in Spirit and Truth.

Sun. Exodus 25:1–9; 26:1, 31–37—Prepare a Sacred Space.

A SACRIFICE THAT SAVES

Have you ever stopped to ponder the sacrifices of ancient Israel? In those days, many people sacrificed animals to their gods. But Israel's God was supposed to be different.

Other nations offered sacrifices to get something in return—an abundant harvest, children to carry on their name, success in battle—but that didn't apply to Israel's sacrificial system at all. Instead of twisting God's arm, sacrifices in the Bible allowed people to live in close relationship with the holy God—a God radically unlike the disordered and sinful people He had chosen. In other words, sacrifice is about a relationship.

Humans disobeyed their creator and wandered from the order of His design, but God longed to be near them, just as He had once walked beside humans in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8). God chose a group of people—not perfect by any stretch—but ordinary people who became special because God chose them. They would be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). They would bring blessing to the whole earth, just as God had promised their ancestor Abraham (Gen. 12:3).

But to be with His people, God would need to set boundaries and ground rules. If God's very presence was going to dwell in their midst, they would have to keep the standards of a covenant agreement. Most of all, they would carefully separate God's holy presence from the sin and disorder of their own lives. God asked them to construct a tabernacle, a place for the divine presence to “dwell among them” (Ex. 25:8).

To tend to the tabernacle, Israel would need representatives called priests (see Ex. 29:1–9). Not just anyone could enter the presence of a holy God, but Aaron's sons would have this important task. They would offer burnt offerings, “an aroma pleasing to the LORD” (Lev. 1:9) And once each year, the high priest would offer a separate kind of sacrifice, a goat whose blood would be required to “cleanse . . . from the uncleanness of the Israelites” (Lev. 16:19).

But over time and through the centuries, the corruption of human priests became harder to ignore. Even Aaron's sons could not be trusted to be faithful and to observe all that God had asked (see Num. 3:2–4). How could any high priest represent the nation before God? How could priests offer proper sacrifices and ask God to forgive, especially when priests were flawed and culpable? Could the sacrifices performed in an earthly temple ever be enough to reach the heights of heaven, and could those sacrifices actually rid people from the entanglements of sin?

But the mystery of God's plan had yet to be unveiled; God's designs cannot be derailed. God would establish a relationship like never before. God would transform the hearts of His people, dwelling with them—first in the ministry of Jesus and later in the Holy Spirit. Hebrews 9:26 says, “He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Not only was Jesus a fitting sacrifice to take away sin, but He was also a superior priest—one who had no sin and who can stand blameless, appearing before God in heaven (Heb. 9:24).

Something dramatic changed through the ministry of Jesus. Instead of seeking the atonement of sin through repeated sacrifices—a constant reminder of human powerlessness to overcome sin—God's people could rely on their “advocate” before God the Father (1 John 2:1). The new way to find relationship with God is through the Son of God, the “Righteous One” sent to earth (1 John 2:1). Obedience to His word and message shows the love of God and redemptive power of His sacrifice (1 John 2:5–6). Sacrifice was always about relationship, but the Spirit of God dwells within all those who follow the way of Jesus and receive forgiveness for sin. The love displayed by Jesus and through His followers is the ultimate sign of redemption for the world.



Albrecht Dürer, a sixteenth-century master artist of the German renaissance, created this woodcut depicting the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus' offered Himself as a sacrifice, cleansing for sin with His own blood (Heb. 9:25–26).

Albrecht Dürer/National Gallery of Art



This modern altar is created to be like the altar in Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. The priests maintained a regular burnt offering, creating “an aroma pleasing to the LORD” (Lev. 1:9). Through the sacrifices from one day to the next, God was invited to dwell with His people and to meet with them.

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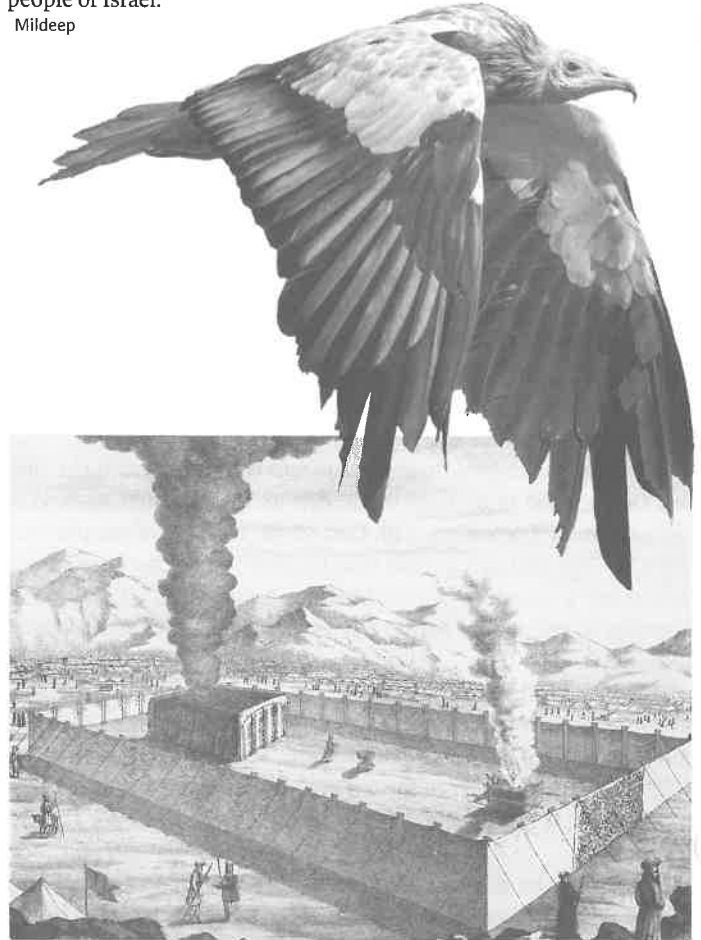


The *Christo Redentor* statue (Portuguese for “Christ the Redeemer”), with its outstretched arms of invitation, has become an international symbol of Christianity where it stands in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In the words of 1 John 4:16, “God is love.”

© Peter Adams/Getty Images

God delivered the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt and brought them out “on eagle’s wings,” (Ex. 19:4). This miraculous deliverance set the stage for a covenant relationship that God would give to the people of Israel.

Mildeep



God provided all of the raw materials that the Hebrews would need to construct a mobile sanctuary in their midst. This nineteenth-century illustration places the tabernacle in the middle of the tribes of Israel. It was a visible manifestation of God’s presence with them.

Internet Archive Book Images



This cathedral’s window depicts Aaron’s job of choosing a goat to offer once a year on the Day of Atonement. This once-a-year offering was necessary “because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins [had] been” (Lev. 16:16).

Jules & Jenny, UK



This mosaic which was created by the contemporary Jewish artist, Yael Portugheis, has twelve sections of stones to represent Israel’s twelve tribes. This reminds us of a special garment, called the ephod, which was worn by the high priest Aaron and the high priests (Ex. 29:5). It had twelve stones to represent each tribe of Israel, since the priest was representing the whole nation before God.

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Covenants in Scripture

One consistent way that God interacts with people in Scripture is by making covenant agreements. In the ancient world, most covenants had expectations from both sides. You might want to work with a group to investigate some of the following texts. See if you can find what each side is supposed to do.

Covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:4–11)

God promises:

God expects:

Covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:18; 17:9–14)

God promises:

God expects:

Covenant with David (2 Sam. 17:8–17, 28)

God promises:

God expects:

Hint: Does God ask anything of David?

A “New Covenant” (Jer. 31:31–34)

God promises:

God expects:

How does the covenant at Mount Sinai compare to these other examples?