

No Longer Slaves: prepare to meet God

Just around the corner in Exodus 20: the Ten Commandments! The world is about to change, as Israel's God – to this point mostly a God of action – gives verbal shape to the life of Israel. But first: YHWH has to get Israel ready to listen. That's Exodus 19, and our text for today.

1. Can you identify a time in your life when God was “getting you ready” for something? What was that like?

Read Exodus 19 all the way through, out loud.

2. What stands out to you in particular, and why?

A lot of careful positioning and framing goes on in these verses, and it's easy to figure the need. Israel has seen YHWH in awesome action repeatedly, but they have never *met* him; nor have they heard him speak. They know he speaks to Moses; but this is “next level”.

3. If you knew that tomorrow you would be meeting God, perhaps on a local mountain, how would you prepare?
4. What does your answer tell you about your view of God and of your relationship with him?

Israel's preparation is full-orbed: body, mind and heart (emotion) must all be readied. YHWH starts with the mind and will of Israel, introducing them to the basic terms of covenant on offer. Read 19:3-8. There we find a high promise for obedience, greater by far than what might usually be given. Covenant obedience – expected of all subjects to their sovereign – would normally guarantee protection and provision. But Israel's obedience will make them a “treasured possession”, and give them great authority as a “kingdom of priests”! No wonder they said “yes!” (v.8).

Jesus famously renews God's covenant in the gift of his own blood, which we celebrate every time we share communion (Luke 22:20).

5. What does it mean to you to be – with other believers – in a covenant relationship with God?

Read 1 Peter 2:9-10, which takes up the same theme and applies it to us as believers in Jesus.

6. What would it be like for you to think of the God's people as a “kingdom of priests”?
7. What would it mean for you to be a “priest” in the world, bearing the kingly authority of the Lord?

Israel is equally offered the role of “holy nation”. Tokens of this are in the way YHWH prepares the bodies of the Israelites, and their hearts, throughout the verses that follow in Exodus 19. Read verses 10-11 and 14-15. In the washing of clothes and abstention from sex, the Israelites eliminate the risk of ritual defilement. (Be assured that the Bible is sex-positive; potential contact with menstrual blood is the issue here; cf. Leviticus 18:19.)

Such provisions seem very strange to us, in an age where bodies are either worshipped or ignored as irrelevant to our moral situation before God. But this is not a biblical view; see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. So consider:

8. In what ways does your treatment of your own body matter to God?

YHWH also prepares Israel emotionally, by instilling awe and a holy fear in their hearts. Read verses 12-13 and 16-19. Take a moment to imagine the experience of smoke and fire, blasts on an invisible shofar, lightning and thunder and a mountain that shakes under the presence of God. No wonder “all in the camp trembled” (verse 16).

9. What would be the overall effect on Israelites in their heart attitude toward God?

10. What kinds of experience awaken “awe” in you?

11. What is the place of awe and holy fear in your attitude toward the Lord?

Israel needs to be prepared in this way. Otherwise, when the Torah is laid down, beginning with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), there is high risk that Israel will not pay attention. They might take the Ten Commandments as the Ten Suggestions. They might find ways around the commands of God, or simply imagine that God doesn't really care about disobedience. Sad to say, many modern Christians live just this way.

In our egalitarian society, and with our understandable delight in the lovingkindness of Jesus, it is hard for us to imagine God as far above us in nature and authority, as One whom we might properly fear, and whose every command is to be taken with utmost seriousness. Yet this is the God of Israel, the God of our forefathers (1 Corinthians 10:1), and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclude by renewing covenant with God, pledging your obedience and thanking the Lord for the promise of his protection and provision, and for the high calling on your life. (If you are with others, do these things together, knowing that God calls us as a holy nation!) Ask God to grant you awe and holy fear, and to fill you with the promised Holy Spirit, who enables us to live faithfully into our calling.