

Exegetical Notes, Exodus 19:7-19
“Set Them Apart”

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Exodus 19:7-19

Verse 7

So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words YHWH had commanded him to speak.

- In Exodus 19:1-6, Moses was told to consecrate the people of Israel, to set them apart for God’s use. He was given a three-step process for accomplishing this task.
- The first step was to tell the people what God had said. Here, Moses accomplishes that step in part. He calls together the elders, the leaders of the people, and tells them what God had said in its entirety.

Verse 8

The people all responded together, “We will do everything YHWH has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to YHWH.

- God told Moses that if the people would listen to what he said and do it, he would bless them. When the people heard God’s offer of blessing they agreed to do what he said. Their decision was without deceit and freely made.
- Having heard the agreement of the people, Moses returned to tell God what had been decided.

Verse 9a

YHWH 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.”

- God intends to appear to Moses in a special and dramatic way. He will descend on the mountain in a thick cloud or fog. The cloud will hide Moses and God from the sight of the people, but the people will hear God speaking to Moses from inside the cloud.

- The purpose of this drama is to reinforce Moses' special role and to encourage the people to trust him.

Verse 9b-11

Then Moses told YHWH what the people had said. And YHWH said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day YHWH will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people."

- Moses told God that the people had agreed to listen to what God said and then to do what God said. They would keep all the words of the Lord.
- In response to the decision of the people to listen to his words and to do them, God prepared to bless Israel. He told Moses to go and prepare the people for his coming. Moses was to consecrate them. He was to set them apart for God. Israel was to take two full days to prepare for God's coming.
- The first step in their preparation was to wash their clothing.

Verse 12-13

"Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. He shall surely be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on him. Whether man or animal, he shall not be permitted to live.' Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they go up to the mountain."

- Here is the first test on the peoples' resolve to obey everything that God says. The mountain is to be roped off on the third day and no person or animal, other than Moses, is to be permitted to go up on the mountain or even come close to it. If this rule is broken, the person or animal that violated it is to be executed.
- This is an apparently senseless rule. The people and animals of Israel have been permitted upon the mountain before. But on this day the regular practice is changed. They will be permitted access to the mountain again after the shofar sounds. But on this day, they must not go up on the mountain. God has spoken. Will Israel obey?

Verse 14- 15

After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. Then he said to the people, “Prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations.”

- In verse 9b through 13 God tells Moses how to prepare the people for his visit. Two specific commands are given. They are to wash their clothing and stay off the mountain. In verse 15 Moses adds an additional rule. He says that they are to refrain from sexual relations until after the third day. The dilemma is where this rule came from. Clearly God did not utter it. The question is, if it came from Moses, is it binding on the people.
- Most often, this dilemma is resolved by relating this rule to the laws of consecration found later in the book of Exodus. The ceremonial law made such an obligation on priests, etc. 1 Samuel 21:4-6 indicates that even non-priests were considered ceremonially unclean if they had had sexual relations too close to a ceremonial event. However, these laws and customs do not appear before the issuing of the law to Moses, an event which has not yet happened in relation to this text.
- It appears that Moses introduced this rule in order to prepare the people. Apparently he knew that they needed to keep their mind and their bodies right before the Lord to prepare properly for the Lord’s coming on the third day. This is part of what he hears in God’s command to the people to “be ready” (verse 11). Moses takes the liberty of interpreting what God’s command includes for the people of Israel.

Verse 16

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.

- At the appointed time, God came with signs to announce his arrival that frightened Israel even though they were expecting him.

Verse 17

Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because YHWH descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and

the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

- The symbols that announce God's arrival on the mountain are consistent with his self revelation throughout the book of Exodus. He comes in fire as he first appeared on the mountain to Moses in the burning bush. He comes as smoke as he revealed himself to Israel throughout the journey from Egypt. He appeared as a cloud or as smoke by day. He reveals himself in mighty signs to provoke notice of his presence. The mentioned of the furnace is to remind Israel of her years baking bricks in the kilns of Egypt.
- When Moses speaks, God answers. The time has come for the blessing of the Lord.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Set Them Apart*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)