

Keith Miller
Northwest Church
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Israel: The People of God? Exodus 19; 32; 34

INTRODUCTION

“Why God?” is a question that we often ask, is it not? Why did I lose my job, why did my fiancé end our relationship, why did my spouse leave, why the cancer, why did he/she have to die, why are things not going the way I planned, why God?

But God’s ways are seldom our ways. God does not think and operate the way we do, does he? In fact, our great God even says, “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Israel was under the oppressive heel of Egypt’s pharaoh. God, I am sure seemed distant and impersonal, but just at this point the dawn of God’s redemptive mercy and grace breaks through the dark clouds of Egyptian bondage: God calls Moses to lead Israel into the land He had promised to Abraham!

We learned three things from Moses’ call in Exodus 3 ...

- He was called by a holy God (vv. 1-6)
- He was called by a covenant keeping God (vv. 7-12)
- He was called by the only true God (vv. 13-22)

This is important for us to understand, for our understanding and Israel’s understanding of God shapes the way we live our lives and it would shape the way Israel would respond to God.

Moses, called by God to lead Israel out of Egypt, delivers Israel from the clutches of an evil empire through the power of God. How does He do it? Through ten plagues! The ten plagues were designed to prove the impotent nature of Egypt’s idols.

You need to understand that Egypt had individual gods who had dominion over just about everything.

- The Nile: Khnum (creator of water and life), Hapi (Nile god)
- Frogs: Heket (goddess of childbirth whose symbol was the frog)
- Gnats
- Flies
- Livestock: Hathor (mother and sky goddess whose symbol was the cow), Abis (bull god)

- Boils
- Hail: Seth (god of wind and storm)
- Locusts: Isis (goddess of life), Min (goddess of fertility and vegetation, protector of crops)
- Darkness: Sun gods (Amon-Re, Atum, Horus)

Before the final plague, God instituted the Passover meal where they were to take a lamb that was without defect and slaughter it, eat all of it, and take its blood and touch the lintel and two door posts. (Read Exodus 12:21ff.)

- Death of firstborn: Osiris (judge of the dead and patron deity of the pharaoh)

We could spend lots of time on the plagues, but I am really concerned about Israel's call as the people of God and what that means for us today.

God has proven to Israel that He indeed is sovereign, merciful, gracious, and omnipotent. God proved this through the ten plagues, He proved it by feeding Israel bread from heaven, He proved it by turning salt water into fresh water for all of Israel to drink, He proved it by so many miraculous wonders; now God will call Israel to something that He had not called any people group to before this time:

[There is something new going on here in redemptive history]

Israel was called to be a people of God (Exodus 19)

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.

Here is Israel gathered at Mount Sinai and God is about to establish a covenant conditioned on Israel's obedience and faithfulness to God. He tells Moses to tell the people that there are three things that are conditioned on their obedience, "...if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples... you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

So Israel's becoming God's treasured possession, God's kingdom of priests, and God's holy nation is conditioned on their obedience to God and the keeping of His covenant.

Why did God choose Israel to be His treasured possession? Because the whole earth was His possession that's why. All nations belonged to God because He alone is their creator and preserver. Why does he pick Israel of all people groups? Turn in your Bible's to Deuteronomy 7:6-11...

⁶ For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸ but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹ Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, ¹⁰ and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face. ¹¹ You shall therefore be careful to do the commandment and the statutes and the rules that I command you today.

In other words, the reason God chose Israel is not because they had anything that would motivate God to chose them, God chose them to be His treasured possession because He loves them and because He is faithful to the oath he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is it, no other commentary is offered for the reason God chose Israel; He chose Israel because He chose Israel!

What I love about this passage is that God does not simply say you will be my people, He specifically says that Israel will be His **TREASURED POSSESSION**; conditioned of course on their obedience and faithfulness to God and His covenant.

But a treasured possession is not all that they will be, for they will also be a **KINGDOM OF PRIESTS**. Israel would be to God a nation of priests before every other nation as His representatives. God would be their King and they would be His Ambassador and not just His ambassador to the other nations, but His mediator as well. Israel would become, “the vehicle of the knowledge and salvation of God to the nations.”

The third identity Israel would take on based on their obedience to God and His covenant would be that they would be to Him a **HOLY NATION**. Israel would be a holy nation in two ways: 1) she would be set apart from the other nations, and 2) she would share God’s character in moral likeness. Israel would be holy.

I want to be very clear here, we must understand that God did not make a unilateral covenant with Israel like He did with Abraham when He promised that Abraham’s seed would be a blessing to all nations. The covenant God was making was entirely dependant on Israel’s obedience. So in other words, Israel would no longer be God’s treasured possession, kingdom of priests, or a holy nation if they did not keep covenant with God.

What was the covenant that Israel was to keep? Look at Exodus 20:1-20

Shortly after Israel agreed to enter into covenant with God, they failed miserably which leads me to our second point...

Israel failed to be the people of God (Exodus 32:1-10, 14)

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."² So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."³ So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.⁴ And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."⁶ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

Here we go again. I hope that one of the things you are seeing throughout this series is that the human heart is bent on evil continually. Jeremiah 17:9 seems to be the recurring theme, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"*

Just when things were looking really good for Israel, shortly after they told God that they agreed to enter into covenant relationship with Him, they commit spiritual adultery.

Can you imagine what it would be like if three months after you were married, your spouse committed adultery. That is exactly what Israel did to God, and God was going to divorce them, look in your Bibles at Exodus 32:7-10,

⁷ And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸ They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹ And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you."

Not only was God going to divorce them, but He threatened to wipe them out forever. Now this is a very hard passage in the Bible to wrestle with. Was God really willing to break his promise? I don't think so. If God destroyed all of Israel except Moses, He would have wiped out the tribe of Judah. You remember the promise God made through Jacob to his son Judah, don't you?

"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples"
(Genesis 49:10)

Messiah was to come from the tribe of Judah. If God wiped out all of Israel, that would make God to be unfaithful to His own covenant! That is why when we read further down the chapter, we see Moses beg God not to do it,

“O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

So what does God do? He relents. Permit me to share with you what I think is going on here. I am not so sure that Israel is at the heart of the issue here. Yes, they sinned, and yes, there’s going to be severe consequences, but I think God tells Moses that He was about to wipe out Israel to put the fate of the people whom Moses mediated for in his hand to test him. Please understand, I do not believe God tempts anyone to sin, He does however test our fidelity to Him. God was simply testing Moses’ fidelity to the call of mediator for Israel.

Moses loved Israel more than he loved the idea of becoming a prince of a nation. This says something about Moses as a shepherd doesn’t it? Moses had a deep care for the people he led above the comforts of his own life. Notice that not only does Moses remind God of His covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but after witnessing the evil Israel got themselves into, he returned to God and said, *“So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people have sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. ³² But now, if you will forgive their sin- but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.”*

[Moses had a deep care and love for God’s reputation and a deep love for Israel]

Now that is love for a people, and it is here that Moses passes the test of his fidelity to God and Israel; Moses was a true shepherd, but there is One who went one step further. Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd (Hebrews 13:20) went to the cross; Jesus took on the curse of sin to save His sheep (John 10; Ephesians 5:21). God didn’t take Moses up on his offer, but He did accept His only begotten Son’s offering up of Himself on that Roman cross, for Jesus said Himself,

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. (John 10:14-18)

Listen to Galatians 3:10-14...

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, *“Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”*

¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for *“The righteous shall live by faith.”* ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather *“The one who does them shall*

live by them.”¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us- for it is written, “*Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree*”¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

God did not take Moses up on his offer because God would one day offer up His own son on a Roman cross to satisfy His justice in dealing with sin and forgiving sinners. But did God forget His covenant with Israel? No, God did exercise His mercy and grace which leads me to our third and final point.

God restores Israel to be the people of God (Exodus 34)

*Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone.*⁵ *The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD.*⁶ *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,”*⁷ *keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.”*⁸ *And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.*⁹ *And he said, “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.”*

God had every right to forsake Israel because of their idolatry, but the thing is He does not. In fact, God takes back Israel as His covenanted people and renews the covenant He made with them in Exodus 19. How does He do it? Turn in your Bibles to Exodus 33:1-23 and let's see.

The one thing that is important to consider is that before God makes His goodness pass before Him, God warns Moses that He will also proclaim His Name, “*Yahweh*” which was a reminder to Moses of who God is. Then God proceeds to tell Moses, “*I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.*”

I think the point God is making here is that He alone is the sovereign One and it is He alone who chose the objects of His graciousness and Mercy, not Moses, nor anyone else. It is God's prerogative to forgive whom He will forgive and judge whom He will judge, but what is neat is that God does not stop there, for in chapter 34 we learn more specifically what God is about.

First Moses is told by God, “*Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.*” It is interesting that God reminds Moses that he broke the tablets, but what is more important is that God has the tablets remade and rewrite the commandments again.

But before God rewrites the commandments on the tablets of stone, He descended in the form of a cloud and stood before Moses and proclaimed, “*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and*

gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

What God does is exercise exactly what He claims to be: merciful (refraining from giving what one deserves), gracious (giving what you do not deserve), slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, faithful, forgiving. By renewing the covenant relationship He established with Israel in Exodus 19, he demonstrates that He is just what He said He was.

What is Moses' response? He pleads to God, *"If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."*

This is exactly what God does, but notice that it is still a covenant conditioned on their obedience and faithfulness to God. What are they to do as God's kingdom of priests? Remember the Passover. Why? Because it not only reminded them of how God delivered them from Egypt, but it was to serve as a picture of God's Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ. Remember how Israel was commanded to apply the blood of the lamb? Apply the blood to the lintel and two door posts (the form of the cross).

APPLICATION

Israel's story is a sad one, for time and time again we discover that Israel failed to remain pure, failed to remain faithful to the covenant she entered into in Exodus 19. They just could not keep God's commandments because of the condition of their heart (not all of them), this is why God promised that one day He would institute the new covenant by a circumcision of the heart, *"And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."*

One day the prophet like Moses would come and die for both Jews and Gentiles and through the Spirit of God, circumcise the hearts of the true people of God, Jesus did just that, and He instituted the new covenant through the cross. Read Isaiah 53

Do you want to see something really neat as we draw this message to a close? Turn in your Bibles to 1 Peter 2:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious,⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.⁶ For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."⁷ So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,"⁸ and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.⁹ 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.¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

These verses in 1 Peter 2 describe the Church! Peter makes the connection with Exodus 19 and the church and draws the conclusion that we are the kingdom of priests, we are the ones who have received the mercy God was talking about in Exodus 34. We are the people of God, for our hearts have been circumcised to love Him and live for Him!