

The holy nation

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[0:00] So you might like to have your Bibles open at 1 Peter chapter 2 and if you've got a bookmark you could stick it in Exodus 19 as well.

I'm going to look at several other passages of scripture as well as we go through but those will be the main passages. Up on the screen there I put the ESV, English Standard Version translation of this verse which is a bit more literal, accurate to the Greek.

So let me read you that in the ESV version. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession that you may proclaim the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

And that translation makes it even more obvious that Peter is quoting here of course from Exodus chapter 19 verses 5 and 6.

As I said the phrase the holy nation occurs only here in the New Testament but it brings together a lot of threads that run through the New Testament.

[1:15] The theology of 1 Peter is to some extent embedded in the theology of the Exodus. You may have noticed in verse 2 when he talks about obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood.

Talking about sprinkling by his blood is obviously a reference to the sprinkling of the blood of the Passover on the entrance I think to the... Well it's sprinkling, there are the sprinkling of blood and sacrifices and so on as well but it seems to me that probably he's mainly thinking of the Exodus there.

And yet in the context 1 Peter 2 the situation can hardly be more different than the people that Moses was addressing in Exodus 19.

Moses' hearers were all gathered together in one place at Mount Sinai. Moses' hearers were all gathered together in one place at Mount Sinai. Moses' hearers were all sons of Israel, children of Israel.

They all shared a common ancestry. Most of Peter's readers would not be Jewish. And even if they were Jewish they were part of a nation that by that time was divided by culture and sect and disputes.

[2:46] And yet Peter insists that these words of Moses actually apply to them. He insists in chapter 2 verse 10 that now they are a people.

So what are we to make of this? Peter makes the connections himself of course in the following verses as he goes on to say about how exactly you put this into practice.

But we're not actually going to treat it that way. Instead I want to look back to the threads that Peter is drawing together here. And the key phrase here is, as I said, a holy nation.

What is this nation and in what sense is it holy? And again, as we did last week, it's useful to address this issue by asking some questions. And really those are the four questions I want to look at as we go through.

First of all, is a nation the same thing as a kingdom? How can Peter describe his readers or us as the church as a chosen race?

[3:56] How and in what sense is the nation holy? And will we indeed prove that treasured possession that Peter is talking about? So let's think about some of these questions.

The first question I'd like to just think for a moment is, is a nation the same thing as a kingdom? And we might ask more specifically, is the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, which is referred to frequently in the Gospels and particularly in Matthew, what Peter is talking about here?

And I think we'd have to answer that question. Well, yes, but no. I mean, he's obviously talking about the same thing, the same people, those people who offer obedience to the king. But the meaning of the word is slightly different. The word kingdom means fairly obviously the domain of a king or the dominion of a king.

Of course, our Western democracies, even if they do retain a monarchy, do so with very restricted powers. And so we've rather devalued the word kingdom, really.

[5:12] But in New Testament times and in New Testament Greek, the kingdom, the *Basileia*, is the place where the king, the *Basileus*, reigns.

Again, as in English, the word kingdom is derived from the word for a king. It is very much the place where the king reigns or the dominion of the king. And the emphasis is very much on the rule of the king.

And so Jesus, the king himself, defines the scope and nature of the kingdom of heaven. Once having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say here it is or there it is, because the kingdom of God is within you or among you.

People argue about whether it means within you or among you, but either way, it's clearly not something that is defined by territory or that it's very easy to pin down.

Jesus is making it clear that the kingdom of heaven consists of those who acknowledge the rule and authority of the king. So in this sense, of course, this is indeed the same thing as the holy nation that Peter refers to.

[6:31] But Peter does use a different word here. In fact, he uses three different words, as we shall see as we go through. The basic Greek word for a nation, which has a kind of different vibe to that of a kingdom.

The basic word is *ethnos*, which we get our words like ethnicity and so on, of course. And what does *ethnos* mean? Well, it refers to a large number of people who live together.

And the emphasis is very much on the people, the collection of people. But they do have something in common. They have common laws and values and culture.

And that's what makes them a nation. A nation may or may not be a kingdom. Now, a united kingdom, of course, consists actually of four nations, plus a group of various islands whose constitutional status is a bit strange, but we can go into that.

But basically, we have four nations, although we are a united kingdom. Now, I'm sure in this case, of course, the kingdom and the nation are coterminous, as we might say.

[7:38] They are the same people that he's talking about. But the word nation does have a different emphasis. It puts the emphasis on the people. And while a kingdom can only have one king, a nation is quite a diverse thing.

It will have rich and poor, town and country, educated and uneducated people. In those days, of course, it would have had slaves and free.

Often, perhaps, very different people. And yet, people which are united by one thing, by the laws and the heritage and the values and the culture of the nation.

So, the holy nation that Peter refers to is, of course, a kingdom. And indeed, its key value is submission to the rule of King Jesus. But actually, that's not what Peter goes on to focus on in this passage.

It's the living out of those values among the pagans, as he tells us in 1 Peter 2, verse 12. And we'll come back to that later. That's what Peter has in mind. Before we go to that, let's just mention, there are actually two other Greek words which contain the basic idea of a nation.

[9:00] And Peter uses both of them here. In fact, all three of them are used in this one verse, all three words. Unfortunately, the NIV translation rather hides it.

There are three different concepts here. Although the ESV sounds a bit clunky, the thing I read at the beginning, it is actually more precise. It says, you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.

But as I've said, here's the thing. Those whom Peter is addressing are not a nation, are they? They don't share a common ancestry.

They have a variety of languages and cultures. They're not even living together. Indeed, Peter says they're scattered. So what is it exactly that Peter is getting at here?

So let's break it down a bit and look at these three different words for a nation. And the first one he talks about, he says, you are a chosen race.

[10:17] And the Greek word there is actually *genos*, in which we get all our words like genealogy and so on. And what it literally means is those who share a common ancestor. It means a kindred.

And as I said, Moses' words are actually addressed to the children of Israel, which the authorised version makes clear. It sounds a bit quaint in the modern languages, so the modern translations translate it people of Israel or just Israelites.

But the actual phrase is *ben Yisrael*, the sons or the children of Israel. Moses is emphasising the fact that they have a common ancestry.

They are a race, a nation in that sense. But Peter's readers didn't share a common ancestry. And if we look at our church today, the church today, it's even more diverse of every tribe and language, as Hebrews tells us.

Chris sort of went through some this morning, didn't he? If you were here this morning. People from various languages and races and nations gathered this morning and gathered here.

[11:28] I don't think we quite made the record. There was one Sunday back decades ago now when somebody counted people from 29 different countries. I think you had to keep, you know, you had to think of the nations of the United Kingdom as separate countries to make it come to 29.

But even so, we often are, we're a very cosmopolitan congregation here actually. And we have been over many decades. So how can you talk about us being a chosen race?

We don't have a common ancestor, do we? And of course the Jews were very proud of their ancestry. And yet Jesus makes it clear that they had completely misunderstood the concept of the fatherhood of God.

If you look at John chapter 8, and again if you want to look these up, I will read them out, but I put the page numbers up there if you want to look them up.

John chapter 8, verses 39 to 44, we read, Abraham is our father, the Jews answered Jesus. If you were Abraham's children, said Jesus, then you would do the things Abraham did.

[12:45] As it is, you were determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does.

We are not illegitimate children, they protested. The only father we have is God himself. Jesus said to them, if God were your father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here.

I have not come on my own, but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? It is because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire.

He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Jesus is asking the Pharisees who their father really is. And to put it the other way around, of course, he's saying that Abraham's two true children are those who share Abraham's obedience.

[13:51] obedience. And just to make it clear, Matthew 3 verse 9, Jesus says this, do not think that you can say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father.

I can tell you that out of these stones, God can raise up children for Abraham. Abraham. And of course, another thing about having a father, you can only have a father if you've been born.

And there's these, of course, well-known verses in John chapter 3. I won't read the whole passage, but let me just read John chapter 3 verses 3 to 7. Jesus is replying to a question from Nicodemus here.

I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. How can a man be born when he is old?

Nicodemus asked. Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born. Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

[14:58] Flesh gives you birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again. So what's Jesus saying here?

He's saying we may not be natural children of Abraham, but if we share the faith of Abraham, if we are born into the kingdom by the Spirit, then we are Abraham's adopted children.

So Peter has no problem in calling the church of Jesus Christ a chosen race. And he goes on to say, as we saw, once we were not a people, once you were not a people, but now you are a people. And so if we're members of God's church, if we share the faith of Abraham, we can say, once we were not a people, but now we are a people.

And of course you may be familiar with Paul's comment, who sums this up in just a few words. In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

[16:08] That's Romans 9, 8. He's talking, of course, about how some of the children of Abraham are children of promise and some were not. But the point he's making, of course, it is the people who share the faith of Abraham that should really be regarded as the true descendants of Abraham.

And as Jesus said, God is able to create sons for Abraham and that's what he does when we're born again by his spirit. So that's the first word that Peter uses for a nation, the genos, the kindred, the people who share a common ancestry.

And then, he talks about the nation being holy and again, here he uses the general word, as I've said, for a nation, ethnos. But, how does it make sense to talk about the nation being holy?

And, of course, Peter is directly quoting from Exodus 19, verse 6, which says, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the children of Israel, the Israelites.

The other parts of 1 Peter 2, 8 and 9 actually summarize the context in Exodus. You may not quite have made the connection because it's not quite a direct quote, but the context in Exodus is there as well in 1 Peter 2, verses 8 and 9.

[17:41] I'm sorry, 1 Peter 2, verse 9, Exodus 19, 5 and 6. Sorry, that's what I meant to say. So Exodus 19, verse 5, Moses said, if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

We'll come back to that in a minute. And what follows in Exodus are the laws and values that the people are supposed to live by. The Israelites were a people chosen by and belonging to God. and we can easily skip over the Exodus verse without paying close attention to what it says because actually what Moses says in Exodus 19 is quite strange.

He describes the Israelites as a kingdom of priests or royal priests. What did he mean by that? the people weren't even a kingdom at that time.

It would be 400 odd years before they became a kingdom. And they certainly weren't all priests. In fact, Moses is quite clear in his law that only the Levites can be priests.

[18:59] So how can he describe the whole nation as a kingdom of priests? But he says that out of verse 5 out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

It was not that God had no interest in the other nations. In fact, the Israelites were supposed to serve as a witness to the other nations. And in that sense, they would be kings and priests.

They would demonstrate the rule of God and the grace of God to those nations. And of course, this idea wasn't made up even by Moses. It goes right back to Abraham to whom God said, I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you.

I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse and all people on earth will be blessed through you.

That's Genesis 12 verses 2 and 3. And a passage we read from Deuteronomy which I say is a generation after that those words at Mount Sinai and the giving of the law as the people are about to enter the promised land and make war against some of those nations.

[20:15] What did Moses say? He said, See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me so that you may follow them in the

land you're entering to take possession of it.

Observe them carefully for this will show your wisdom and understanding show it to whom? Who's going to be interested to observe this? He says, This will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations who will hear about all these decrees and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.

What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them? The way that the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him. What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

The laws that define the nation in other words. The other nations are to look at this and say, Gosh, this is a wisdom and understanding nation. We thought our laws were okay, but look, these laws are much better.

That's what they were supposed to say. But then Moses of course says, Only be careful and watch yourselves closely. The nations are going to be watching you, but you need to watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen.

[21:45] Remember what you've seen. Don't let them slip from your heart as long as you live. So keep them in the centre of your own life.

And of course, then he says, Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Don't let them slip from the centre of the nation's life.

These laws, wise laws that Moses had given them, were supposed to show the glory of God to the nations around. These were the values that would unite the nation and should be passed on to later generations.

They mustn't let them slip. But you notice, perhaps, the promise of Exodus 19, verse 5 was conditional. It said, If you obey me and keep my covenant, you will be a royal priest at a holy nation, and so on.

So what's Peter saying here? He's making a radical claim. What he's saying, in fact, is that the literal descendants of Israel had violated the terms of the covenant.

[22:52] Just the same criticism that Jesus himself had made of them, of course. They had violated the terms of the covenant, so the promise no longer applied to them.

They hadn't been the holy people they should have been. And instead they'd become an object of scorn of the nations around. But God still wanted a special people, so he's transferred these blessings to a new people, a new laos is the actual word that's used there, which is the other word for people.

And the dividing line is Jesus. Those who acknowledge the law of King Jesus, as he's told us earlier in this chapter, are those who are the true nation of Israel, the true inheritors of the promises, the ones that can be truly described as the holy nation.

As for the Jews, they'd stumbled. They'd not offered acceptable sacrifices. You see, in verses 5 to 7, Peter tells us that we do offer sacrifices acceptable to God.

1 Peter 2 verses 5 to 7. But the implication there, of course, is that the Jews had not offered sacrifices acceptable to God.

[24:21] And again, this was far from an idea that Peter had made up. It was exactly the refrain of the prophets all throughout the later part of the Old Testament. They went on and on.

They were always banging on about it, weren't they? The people were not offering sacrifices acceptable to God. So, for example, Hosea 6 says, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, an acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings.

Like Adam, they had broken the covenant. They were unfaithful to me there. And I said, if I read all the bits of the prophets that are on the same line saying how they choose to be up to two o'clock in the morning, I think.

They were so often on about it. So, in short, the Jews may have been a nation, but they ceased to be a holy nation. Though they claimed to live by the laws of Moses, in actual fact, they didn't.

That was the criticism of Jesus, and that was the criticism of Peter here. And Jesus himself repeatedly laid this charge against him as Isaiah had before that.

[25:47] So, just for example, in Matthew 7, 6-8, again, Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees and he says, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about

you hypocrites.

As it is written, these people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain. Their teachings are but rules taught by men.

You have let go the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. And then later in that passage he goes on to give an example of how they'd not even kept the commandment to honour your father and mother.

So the Jews had excluded themselves. They no longer could call themselves the holy nation. But the Lord would call a new nation out of slavery.

And that's what he was doing and that's who Peter was saying, you guys, you are listening to this. You are the nation called out of slavery to be that holy nation.

[26:54] And what about this treasure thing? will we prove a treasured people? And the word translated people in the ESV and the second people in the NIV which is slightly confusing.

But the word translated people, the special people, is laos. And that means those who share a common stock and language.

So to some extent they share a common ancestry but it tends to mean more that they share a common language. And here we have an aes laos which the literal meaning of the Greek is a special people but since Peter is quoting from Exodus we probably should go with the ESV translation which says you are a treasured people a people who are God's special possession. and we notice that Peter's changed the order here Moses had put that before the holy nation part but Peter puts it after. I think he wants to remind his readers that they are especially privileged. Now what is it if you own some beautiful treasure perhaps a picture or a piece of jewellery or some beautiful sculpture or anything like that?

[28:18] You'll want to do two things won't you? You'll want to protect it but you'll also want to show it off. It's no good just you know if you own something beautiful it would be very selfish wouldn't it just to go and lock it in a bank vault somewhere.

If you have something beautiful you want to show it off as well as to protect it. And that's what God wants to do of course with his people. That's what Moses had intended for the Israelites.

They would be a people that God would protect but also show off to the nations around. They would be the treasure that God says look at this beautiful thing that I have.

How were they going to do that? They should be doing it by displaying the presence of the Lord and by living by the wise laws and values which he had given them to live by. But the Israelites hadn't done that and instead of making themselves beautiful by thinking about the word of God they twisted it and made themselves ugly.

So we might say that Peter is saying to us as the church of God well you're Israel 2.0 you are the new holy nation. But you make sure that you live beautifully verse 12 live such good lives among the pagans though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

[29:49] That's very much the same thing as Moses had said isn't it to the Israelites. The pagans the people around will be looking on and at first they're scornful and they say yeah we know how to live we don't live by your stupid rules all these stupid laws and things but then when they see how it works out in practice that is what this is what God intends and they're gobsmacked and they say oh dear well perhaps we have got it wrong.

they will see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. This is what Peter is telling his readers is telling us to do to live as a beautiful treasure something that God really can show off and say look this is how my people what this is what my people look like it's a beautiful thing a nation and you just can't argue with the fact that it is ruled by wise and understanding wisdom and understanding by laws that are truly pointing to God so that they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Now as I said in much of the rest of this letter Peter goes on to explain how to do this in practice but of course we haven't got time to follow that up now you'll have to read the rest of the letter for yourselves I'm afraid but we will pick up on this idea of living beautifully because next week we're

going to look at the bride the bride of Christ so that will be our topic for next week is just find find it