

Who are we, and what are we here for?

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[0 : 00] All right, good. Well, I wonder, would you turn back to that passage, the first of the two passages that was read to us, Exodus chapter 19. That's where we're going to be looking at this morning.

And as you're finding it again, I think they said it was page 90 in the Pew Bible, if that's what you're looking at, or perhaps on a... Sorry, page 60, I'm sorry. Or perhaps you have it on your phone, or perhaps like Moses on tablets.

You know, he was quite advanced, was Moses. Well, he took tablets and went up the mountain. So, Exodus 19, and while you're getting it, let me pray.

Father, we thank you for the great gift of your Word. It is second only to the gift of the living Word, your Son, Jesus Christ. And we ask that through your Holy Spirit, now you will speak to us from your Word and make our hearts open and attentive, but also make our wills willing to be obedient to what you have to say to us as you spoke to Israel all those hundreds of years ago.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, you may have seen the title on the service sheet that I asked to be printed there for this sermon.

[1 : 15] Who are we and what are we here for? And you might say, well, we're Christians and we're here because of Sunday in church. But a little bit more profoundly than that, what does it mean to be the people of God?

Who are we as the church and as Christian believers? And what is our purpose of existence on this planet? What are we here on earth for? Well, if you ask that question at a personal level, of course, the answer really depends on what story you think you're living in.

We all have a personal life story, of course, but we also have this sense that we're living as part of a wider narrative that makes sense of the world we live in.

That narrative in the Western world, at least for the last couple of hundred years, has been that myth of human progress, that somehow everything is going to get better. We will make progress in all sorts of areas.

And we really think we believe that. That's the story of the world. We don't know quite where it's going, but it's getting better. If not for us, then for our children and our children's children and so on. All that kind of political jargon that quickly comes in.

[2 : 22] Somehow, if we do our bit, we hope, somehow it will get better. That story, actually, that sort of very modern myth of progress is getting rather thin these days, one has to say.

People find it hard to believe anymore when they see the way the world is going. And even as a story, those who don't have a transcendent perspective of a belief in God, some kind of faith, it's getting very thin indeed.

For atheists, for example, if you believe that the universe came from nowhere and is going nowhere, just from big bang to big crunch, what sort of a story is that? We're pretty meaningless within that framework.

Which may be why, I don't know if you heard this, but a few years ago, you may have seen it on the news, in London, where I come from, the secular societies, the humanists, people like Richard Dawkins, paid for an advert to go on the side of the big red London buses.

You know, the sort of famous red London buses. So for a few months, for about 800 of those buses, had this message on the side of them. It said, there probably is no God, so relax, no, actually, stop worrying and enjoy life.

[3 : 29] Very thin and negative. Actually, there was a very enterprising church in London. I love this, and it's a true story. Their church building was actually on a street beside a bus stop.

And they put a big placard outside their church saying, there probably is no bus, so step inside and enjoy God. That was a clever way to put it in a bind.

And even God has a sense of humor. But when I first saw that advert on those buses, I must say my reaction was to say, well, what sort of a story is that? There's no story in it at all, in fact.

It's just totally negative. It gives no reason to live, nothing really to die for, just relax, enjoy life. I mean, we have a story. It says, God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

That's a story. It's got a beginning. It's got a problem. It's got a solution. It's got an ending. That is the biblical story. So that's the kind of story I'm thinking of when I say we need to say what story we're living in.

[4 : 36] And if you come to this passage in Exodus 19, we would ask that same question about these people. Who were they and what were they there for in that story?

And the answer, of course, comes to us not just from the little snippet of the biblical story that we have here in the book of Exodus. They've come out of Egypt and they've come to Mount Sinai. But that in itself is part of this much bigger story, God's big story, the great drama of the whole Bible that shapes the Scripture from creation through to new creation, that spans the whole of the universe, that explains and fills the whole of the past, the present, and the future.

God's story, the big story. Which, of course, is where not only did Israel get its meaning, but so did Jesus of Nazareth draw his significance from that narrative. He interpreted himself in the light of that story.

And it's where we live. We live in that story, the story of the Bible from creation to new creation. So what happens here in Exodus 19 is that God, as it were, has got these people to himself at last.

I mean, it's been a pretty busy time for the last few months, what with Moses going down to Egypt and all the story of the plagues flying around and then getting across the sea and into the wilderness and manna and water and all those problems.

[5 : 56] But now, at last, as it were, God has got the people at the foot of Mount Sinai. And he's going to explain to them the meaning of what's happened and who they are and what the purpose that he has for them.

In this very significant few verses in Exodus 19, verses 4 to 6, which recur quite a lot of times in the rest of the Old Testament and, as we'll see, are echoed in the New as well.

I'd like us to see that what God does in these verses, Exodus 19, 4 to 6, is basically three things. First, he explains the past. He looks back. Then, secondly, he points to the future and the vision that he has for this people.

But then also he calls for a response from them in the present. So each of those three we'll look at briefly. First of all, what I would like to call the past grace of God's salvation.

Now, you won't see the word grace in this passage, but it is basically filled with the grace of God. And the first is this historical past grace. Because look what God says in verse 4.

[6 : 58] God says, You have seen what I did, what I have done, pointing to the past. And, of course, they had. Because what God is talking about here is what had happened only three months ago.

It's pretty fresh in their minds. Three months before this, they'd been being whipped and beaten as slaves in Egypt, as an ethnic minority immigrant people who had taken, as it were, economic migrancy and refuge in Egypt and then generations later being exploited and subject effectively to state-sponsored genocide in Exodus chapter 1.

And now God says, I brought you out of that. I've liberated you. I've freed you. And God also, as we know from Exodus 1 and 2, had done that because of His grace.

Because He said, I've remembered my covenant. I've seen their suffering. I've heard their cry. And so God engages with these people out of love and compassion, grace and action, liberating, saving grace, is the story of the first chapters of Exodus.

So you see, whatever is going to happen next in this story, which we know because we've read the book, but they hadn't. For them it was still in the future.

[8 : 12] But we know that what's going to happen next will be the giving of the Ten Commandments in chapter 10, the making of the covenant, the giving of the law. All of that is based upon this grace of God that had saved them already.

And I'm stressing that because there still is this rather unfortunate idea around in some people's minds that the basic difference between Old Testament and New Testament is simply that in the Old Testament they got saved by keeping God's law, whereas in the New Testament, of course, thank God, we don't have to keep God's law.

We get saved by grace. Now that's true, of course, in the second part, but it's very untrue of the first. Salvation was always a matter of God's grace, God's promise, and responding to that by faith and obedience.

I mean, look at the book of Exodus. You've got 18 chapters of grace, of salvation, gospel, good news of God bringing the Israelites out of Egypt before you get a single chapter of law.

Grace comes first. You have seen what I have done. Now then, obedience coming second if you will obey me. Even the Ten Commandments, very next chapter, start the same way. Not with the first commandment, but with a statement.

[9 : 22] I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt. Same is true for us as Christian believers because there are commandments to obey. We're not under the law, as Paul says, but we still live, in a sense, under the authority of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ who said, this is my commandment that you love one another.

It's not an option. It's a commandment. But Jesus says, love one another as I have loved you. And John puts it, doesn't he, he says, we love because he first loved us.

Grace first, then response. So, that's really the first point. If we're going to live as we think Christians ought to live, it must always be because we are coming back daily to the grace of God. We know the historical grace of God. It's almost as if, if we were to take this verse into a New Testament context, it's almost as if God would have pointed a cross of Christ and say, you have seen what I have done.

Now then, how are you going to live in response to that, in our mission and in our obedience to him? That's the first point, the past grace of God's salvation. They knew it, we know it, let's remember it.

[10 : 31] The second point, though, is that God points to the future grace of God's mission. Now again, you won't see the word mission in this text, but I think it's what's happening in verse 5 when God begins to tell these people what's his perspective on the world.

I mean, just imagine for a moment, what do you think the view was like from the top of Mount Sinai? Because that's where God was, at least in the sort of pictorial way the story is told. God is up the mountain and the Israelites are at the bottom of the mountain.

Now, at the foot of a mountain, you can't see very much. And the people of Israel might have been tempted to think, well, we're very special. We're the only people who are here. We must be the people on earth that God cares about, that God has chosen, that God has saved.

Bully for us. And God, as it were, says, yes, yes, you are special. You are a treasured possession. I have a particular love and concern and purpose for you people, but don't think that you're the only people on earth because from up here, so to speak, on the mountain, I can see the whole earth and it's all mine and all the nations of whom you are part and I have a plan for them too.

Do you see both of those words in verse 5? All peoples, all the earth, or in the end, I think all nations, whole earth. They go together. That's God's vision.

[11 : 56] In fact, it's beautiful, I think, in these verses the way God brings together the particular Israel and the universal, the whole world.

Particularity and universality in the same verses because, you see, here is the God who had just rescued one nation out of bondage and slavery. But God's ultimate purpose is to bring salvation and liberation to all nations, people from all countries.

God says of Israel, you are my treasured possession yes, but God says the whole earth is mine. God had just demonstrated his power in one land, the land of Egypt.

But while he was doing that back in Exodus 9, he had said to Pharaoh, look, I've raised you up so that the whole earth will know that I'm the God of all the earth, not just of one country. So you see, this sense of all nations, whole earth, is here in this text even though it's very specific in particular with Israel there at Mount Sinai.

Now, if we'd been reading this right through from the beginning from Genesis, we ought to be saying at this point in the story, well, of course this is what God is concerned about because who is this God?

[13:09] This God who is speaking at Mount Sinai. This is the God who at the same place, Mount Sinai, at the burning bush with Moses some months earlier, when Moses asked him, what is your name?

Who shall I say sent me? And God answers, I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Throwing us right back to that wonderful promise of God in Genesis chapter 12 where God had said to Abraham that through you and your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed. See, that's God's agenda. God's business with Israel in this part of the story is really simply God's unfinished business with all the nations of the world that go right back to Genesis 10 and 11. The problem of the story of the Tower of Babel, the scattering and judgment of the nations. God is going to solve that problem as well as the problem of the sinful human heart. That's God's story. That's God's big vision and that's what God is pointing to for these people. So you see, whenever we look at the story of Israel in the Old Testament, we need to remember that it's part of a bigger story of God and the world and God and the nations.

[14:24] That's what can be called, if you like this kind of language, a missional hermeneutic of the Scriptures. It's looking at the story of what God is doing in that story but interpreting in the light of the long-term goal of God bringing blessing to all the nations.

Which, of course, is where the Bible goes and where the Bible ends. Because after Jesus' death and resurrection, what does He do? He says to His disciples, okay now, it's for the nations. Go, make disciples of all the nations. It's not an afterthought. It's not as if Jesus woke up and suddenly thought after His resurrection, hey, I'm off back to heaven. What are these guys going to do with the rest of their life?

Tell you what, why didn't you go and be missionaries? No, no, no. Jesus is in the story. He's telling His disciples this is where it always was meant to go. This is what is written, He says, in Luke's Gospel, Luke 24, that the Messiah would come and suffer and die and rise again and that forgiveness and repentance would be preached to all the nations beginning in Jerusalem.

So go for it. So mission is in the story. Ultimately, of course, it comes to the book of Revelation where John, in his great vision, he tells us, saw people of every tribe and nation and language gathered before the throne of God to praise the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb on the throne.

[15:40] And can you imagine God turning to Abraham, poking in the ribs, saying, there you are, I kept my promise. I said, all nations will be blessed. All nations it is through the Lord Jesus Christ.

So that's a biblical, as it were, input into a text like this which just speaks of God talking about all the nations and the whole earth because God has never forgotten that even when He's dealing with Israel.

So the past grace of God's salvation and the future grace of God's mission. But of course, we have to move on, thirdly, to the present grace of God's people living in God's world according to God's ways.

So God says to His people, all right then, that's what I've done for you. I own the whole earth, but you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in the midst of the nations.

And we need to ask ourselves what those words mean. Priestly, and holy are the two emphatic words in the statement. So to understand what it meant for God to call the Israelites His priesthood, we need to understand something about what the priests were in Israel to see the context and understand it their way.

[16:55] The priests in Old Testament Israel were basically middlemen. The priests were mediators between God on the one hand and all the rest of the people on the other.

And in that middle position, they operated in both directions. On the one hand, it was the job of the priests to be teachers, to teach God's law to the people. So God told Aaron and his sons in Leviticus 10, He said, you must teach the Israelites all the decrees that the Lord has given. It's repeated in Deuteronomy and in Hosea and Malachi and elsewhere that that role, that function of the priests was that they were to be the ones who would make God known to the people, teaching His word, His ways, His character, His law.

Through the priests, the people would come to know God. That was the theory. The other direction was also there that the priests were those who would bring the sacrifices of the people to God. So if you had sinned in some way as an Israelite or some ritual uncleanness which meant that you were unable to come into the presence of God in worship along with the rest of the people, what did you do?

[18:04] You brought your animal according to the prescription. You laid your hand on the animal's head confessing your sins which were in a sense symbolically transferred to the animal which was then slaughtered.

The blood of that sacrifice was thrown against the altar representing God and the priest would declare that your sins are atoned for. That's the language of Leviticus.

And so through the death of the animal sacrifice you could come back into the presence of God and your sin was dealt with and you could then celebrate with your family that renewal of fellowship with God.

It's a picture of course of the ultimate sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ but in the Old Testament that's the way it worked. So the job of the priests in Israel then simply was to bring God to the people through their teaching and to bring the people to God through their sacrifice.

Now isn't it amazing that God says to the Israelites as a whole as a community as a people of God He said your role will be you will be for me He says to all the rest of the nations what your priests are to you.

[19:16] You will be the people through whom I will make myself known to the world which of course He's done because how do we know who God is? We know the living God through the scriptures that substantially are the scriptures of Israel the Old Testament of course interpreted in the light of Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah and all the truth that we then build on that in what we call the New Testament but basically God has made Himself known through these people and secondly of course God has brought the world to Himself through the Messiah of Israel the Lord Jesus Christ who said I if I be lifted up will draw all people to me so we know that through Christ ultimately God has revealed Himself to the world and brought the world to Himself and made the way open through the death and resurrection of Jesus this ultimate sacrifice but we can't confine the meaning of this text to Christ alone because this role of being God's representatives in the world of nations that mission that God gives to Israel is also exactly what the New Testament says is true of us as Christians in fact Paul says it first of all about himself in Romans chapter 15 verse 16 you know that Paul had been a church planter a missionary and so on and he says that his ministry was

I'm now quoting Romans 15 he said I was a minister of Christ Jesus through the grace of God the minister of the Messiah to the nations God gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God so that the Gentiles the nations might become an offering acceptable to God sanctified by the Holy Spirit what's Paul saying he's saying I've had a priestly job now Paul could never have been a priest in the Old Testament sense in Jerusalem in the temple he was the wrong tribe he was a Benjamin but Paul says but I was a priest but my priestly job was bringing the gospel of God to the world and bringing the world to God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in other words his evangelistic task was his priestly task and you might say well that's all very well he was Paul he was an apostle he was a missionary I'm just an ordinary Christian whatever that's supposed to mean but we don't get off with that sort of excuse because Peter applies precisely this text to all of us Peter in 1 Peter chapter 2 that second reading that we had he says you you plural he says you Jews and Gentiles who have come to faith in Christ because he's speaking to a mixed audience almost certainly there in western Turkey he says you are that people and he quotes doesn't he from Exodus 19 you are the people whom God has called into existence to be his priesthood and his holy nation in the midst of the nations so he goes on live such good lives in the midst of the nations that people will see and come to glorify God you are to be the representatives of God in the world says Peter to us to all of us so you see if somebody in London those years ago sees on the side of a London bus there probably is no God they ought to be puzzled by that they ought to be saying to themselves well that can't be true because

I know Sarah and John and they're Christians and God is obviously real and living in their lives so how can we say there's no God when I know people who demonstrate God you see that's the dynamic of this text we are called to be the living proof of the living God that's some mission and that demands not just what we say also demands how we live what we do and that's where we come of course to the other part of our text because how on earth can we possibly be that kind of priesthood to the nations that God calls Israel well he says if you will obey me and be my holy people and holiness of course is another one of those words that gets much misunderstood we sort of think that God is talking about religion well it isn't really religious at all it's just talking about being different you shall be holy because I the Lord your God am holy means you've got to be a different kind of people because I the Lord am a different sort of God from all the gods of the nations it

means distinctiveness it means being a contrast community and I'm delighted to see that you use that language here in St. John's that that's what we're called to be
God had said to the Israelites in Leviticus 18 he says you must not do as they do in Egypt where I brought you out with all the idolatry of the military and power and empire and you must not do as they do in Canaan where I'm bringing you where they worship the gods of sex and money and health and wealth and all the fertility cults of Baal God says don't be like that be my people be a different people or as Jesus put it you've got to be salt and light in the world and those are things which are very contrasting salt stands against corruption light dispels the darkness and Jesus says that's what I want you to be and the only way to be that says God in this text is if you will obey me and keep my covenant in other words if you will live the way I'm going to tell you and in case we imagine oh yeah here's some kind of works righteousness again you know God is saying if you will obey me then you'll get saved and be blessed and all of that no no no that's not what the text says God had not sent the ten commandments down to Egypt to tell the people if you will obey these commandments then I might save you no he had already saved them so their obedience to God's laws we said right back at the beginning is not a condition of their salvation he'd already saved them but it was a condition of their mission if you will obey me then you will be for me in the world what I want you to be so it's our obedience to God it's the way we live it's how our lives conform to the story we're in that we belong to that will or will not be serving God in the mission of being his priesthood that's what's at stake in our obedience and in our mission in other words for Israel this obedience was a matter of grace it was the grace of obedience responding to the grace of salvation for the sake of the grace of God's mission all centered on the grace of God including everything that we do for God's sake in God's world well let me summarize and conclude what have we been seeing well we asked that question at the very beginning who are we and what are we here for and I would want to say from our text that like Israel in the Old Testament we are people who have experienced the past grace of God's saving work for them the exodus for us the cross but in either case

[26 : 22] God says you have seen what I have done and secondly that like Old Testament Israel we are people whom God wants to use for his mission of future grace of bringing people from all nations in the whole earth to know and worship him that's God's mission and God calls us to participate in it and to be the vehicles of it and thirdly like Israel of the Old Testament we are then called to live in response to that grace to live as the people of God to represent the truth the integrity the justice the compassion the love the care of God in the community in which we are to be the different kind of people who show to people that there is a different God that there is a different throne there is a different way of living because we are the people of God who demonstrate that ourselves in other words we are exactly what Peter says in 1 Peter 2 he says you are those who are called out of darkness into his marvelous light now that's exodus language

Peter says you've had your exodus experience you didn't used to be the people of God now you are the people of God you once had not received mercy now you have received mercy so in response to that grace of God live out this identity live within this story be who you are for the sake of God's kingdom and may God's grace enable us to do that let's pray together father we thank you that the challenge of your words speaks to us right across the centuries in fact the millennia from these words first spoken by God through Moses to the people of Israel and we echo what Peter says that we are that people this is our story we belong here and so we pray that through the Lord Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit you will enable us to live within the story you've put us in the story which ultimately is the story of this whole world and the whole universe and all creation for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ but also for the sake of the people among whom we live that they too may come to know this God and share in this story we ask it in Jesus name
Amen