

# Becoming God's People

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Exodus chapter 19. If you're looking at one of the Pew Bibles, that is page 60. We've been going through the book of Exodus this year, and so far we've seen that the God of the Bible is a God who saves. The first part of Exodus narrates the story of God delivering, saving the people out of slavery in Egypt, and then we've seen that the God who saves us also sustains us. We've seen God sustaining His people in their journey through the wilderness, providing bread for their hunger and water for their thirst and help along the way.

And now the people of Israel come to Mount Sinai, the place, sort of the destination that the book has been leading up to all along. So let's read Exodus 19, the whole chapter.

On the third new moon, after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel, You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 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. 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. So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, All that the Lord has spoken, we will do. And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses,

Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe you forever. When Moses told the words of the people to the Lord, the Lord said to Moses, Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot. Whether beast or man, he shall not live. When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain. So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments. And he said to them, and he said to the people, Be ready for the third day. Do not go near a woman. On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet

God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. And the Lord said to Moses, Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look, and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them. And Moses said to the Lord, The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it. And the Lord said to him, Go down and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them. So Moses went down to the people and told them.

[ 4 : 14 ] Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word, and we pray that you would open our hearts and minds to receive from you this morning, and to see your character more clearly, and respond to you rightly.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. What does it mean to have a genuine relationship with God? Or in other words, what does it mean to be God's very own people? That's what this passage is talking about this morning. Several weeks ago, my family and I took a day trip down to New Jersey, and we were in Jersey City, and my kids and I took the boat to see the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. From 1892 to 1954, more than 12 million immigrants entered the United States through that one pivotal checkpoint.

It is estimated that over 100 million Americans today, about a third of the population of the United States, can trace their ancestry back to someone who arrived at America at Ellis Island.

That was the place where they declared their loyalty to the United States and became American citizens. Now, this morning's passage in Exodus looks back to a similarly pivotal checkpoint in the history of Israel, where they, in one sense, this is where they were constituted together as a nation, where they became citizens, and God officially recognized them as His kingdom of priests, His holy nation in the world. The whole story of Exodus, as I said earlier, has been leading up to this point back in chapter 3. Back in chapter 3, God had appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and this is the same place where that happened, because back in chapter 3, God said to Moses, when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve or worship God on this mountain, and now here they are. It's sort of like the day where they officially pass through the checkpoint and become citizens. It's even, you could say, like their wedding day, a day they'll look back on for the rest of their lives. God says in verse 5, the Israelites are now His treasured possession, His holy nation. Now, as we look at the Israelites' experience at Mount Sinai, what we're going to see this morning is three things about what it means to be God's holy people, to have a genuine and real relationship with God. The first thing that we see is found in verses 1 to 8, is that being God's people means relating to God on His terms and not on ours. And if you look at verse 4 to 6 especially, these are key verses in the book of Exodus, because in these verses, God sets out the terms of His relationship with His people. And broadly speaking, we see two things in these verses. First, in verse 4, we see that we're saved only by God's grace. Verse 4 begins, you yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. God begins by reminding the people not of what they have done, but of what He has done for them. And that's where the story always begins for every one of God's people. It doesn't begin with us listing our accomplishments, listing how good we've been, listing how worthy we've been. It begins with [ 7 : 44 ] God intervening in His mercy and grace to rescue us and bring us to Himself. Jesus said to His disciples, you did not choose me, but I chose you. Or 1 John says, we love Him because He first loved us.

In other words, we're not the heroes in this story. If you have a relationship with God, if you're one of God's people, it's not something you can boast about on your resume. That's one of your accomplishments, along with all your other accomplishments. No, it's something we can be thankful for, that God in His mercy and grace has brought us to Himself.

And that's what God reminds them of here. He says, I saved you from an enemy that you could not defeat on your own, and I have carried you with the strength and tenderness of an eagle. Several times the Bible points to the eagle. Often it's as an image of strength. Eagles can soar to great heights. They can swoop down with terrifying speed. They can fly long distances without growing weary. But the Bible also points to eagles as an image of tender care. Deuteronomy 32, verses 10 to 12, in the Song of Moses, he says this. He says, the Lord found Israel in a desert land, in the howling waste of the wilderness. He encircled him. He cared for him. He kept him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions. The Lord alone guided him. That's the Lord who saves. He's the God of great power, but He's a God of tenderness, like the mother eagle teaching her chicks to fly, her eaglets to fly, and catching them when they fall, and bearing them up. So that's the first thing we see, is that we're saved only by God's grace and mercy. But the second thing we see in verses 4 to 6, is that God calls us into a life of obedience. Verse 5 goes on, If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession. Now that word covenant is an important word.

Maybe if you have come to church for a little while, and you hear people talking about God's covenant, covenant and His covenant people, you sort of think that sounds like one of those old-fashioned religious words. But in the ancient world, it was a very common word, and it simply meant a binding agreement, often a treaty. So a covenant was often a treaty between two nations, often a stronger nation who promised to bring a weaker nation under its protection, and the weaker nation in turn promised exclusive loyalty to the stronger nation. And Exodus, and the Old Testament in general, uses that well-known ancient framework of a covenant, or a treaty, or a binding oath to explain what it means for us to have a relationship with God. We're that weaker party who comes under the strength of the Lord, and He promises to protect us, and look after us, and sustain us, and keep us, and we promise in turn to be loyal to Him alone, and not make any other alliances that would compromise our loyalty to Him.

[ 11 : 21 ] Now Exodus 20 through 23 begins to spell out the terms of the covenant, right? In any treaty, it's... there's details. And so we'll get into the details over the next few weeks, starting with the Ten Commandments. But that's the big picture. Israel is called into a relationship of exclusive loyalty and obedience to the Lord. Now some people... this is a bit of an aside, but I want to point this out in the broader framework of the Bible. Some people have pointed out a potential distinction between this covenant that God makes with His people at Sinai and the covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants back in Genesis. So if you notice, verse 5 uses the word if. If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

In other words, this arrangement, at least in part, is conditional on Israel's obedience. If they obey, they'll be His treasured possession. If they don't, they will lose that privilege of representing Him to the world. But if you look back to Genesis when God makes His covenant with Abraham, He doesn't say if.

He just says, I will. I will make you a great nation. I will bless you. You will be a blessing. I will carry out my promise through you. So some people have said that the covenant with Abraham is unconditional while the covenant at Sinai is conditional. And I think there is an important distinction here because the Apostle Paul in the New Testament distinguishes between the enduring certainty of God's promise to Abraham and the temporary and provisional nature of the law in books like Galatians. Now other people argue that the distinction that I'm making here is not quite so clear-cut. Even Abraham is warned that if his descendants aren't circumcised, and circumcision is sort of symbolic oath to keep all of God's commands, that they will be cut off from the covenant. So some people say, well, in every covenant there's a tension between God's unconditional promise and that it's conditioned on obedience. And that tension isn't resolved until the New Testament when Jesus Christ finally fulfills all the conditions, when He perfectly obeys the law of God, so that we can be confident that God's promise is given to us in Him. And we can depend on His obedience and His righteousness.

Now that's just a bit of a window into the relationship between the various covenants in the Bible, and I won't go any further into the nuances this morning. But there's an obvious point that shouldn't be overlooked however you work out the finer distinctions. And that's this. In every place in the Bible, with Abraham, at Sinai, with David, and in Jesus in the New Covenant, whenever God enters into a relationship with His people, it always begins with His grace. It's always founded on His grace, but it always includes a calling to loyal obedience. And God's grace doesn't cancel out the demand for obedience. In fact, it makes it even deeper. It heightens it. Because you see the mercy that God has displayed to bring you into this relationship with Him. And so, the meaning of obedience becomes even more profound. As we consider verses 5 and 6 in particular, the New Testament describes the calling of the Christian church in these very words. For example, Revelation 1-6,

[ 15 : 07 ] Jesus has freed us from our sins by His blood. In other words, we have a better Passover and a better exodus, freedom from our sins by His blood, and He has made us a kingdom priest to His God and Father.

That's one way of actually describing the calling of a Christian in the world is to be a ruler and a priest. We don't always think of it in these terms. But ever since the beginning, from Genesis 1 to here in Exodus 19 to the New Testament, God calls His people to be rulers over creation. In other words, reflecting His wise and holy character into the rest of the world, as well as priests of creation. Okay? A priest is someone who stands within a people or within the created order and represents it

to God. Right? We reflect the praises and the groans of all creation in our prayers to the Lord. So, in some ways, you could say that's our calling to be rulers and priests to live lives of holiness, reflecting God's character, and lives of prayer, praying, bringing the concerns of the world before the Lord and praising Him for His good creation. 1 Peter 2 uses these same words.

We're a royal priesthood, a holy nation. And again, Peter emphasizes, once you had not received mercy, but now you've received mercy. We've been brought into this relationship with God by grace.

And then the next verse, he says, abstain from the passions of the flesh. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable so they may see your good deeds and glorify God. So, that's what it means to relate to God on His terms and not on ours. It's to rest in our salvation by grace and to embrace His calling to a life of loyal obedience. And initially, verse 8, the people are ready to sign on.

All that the Lord has spoken, we will do. They're ready to say yes to everything that God is asking of them. But that's not all. That's the first part of what it means to have a relationship with God and be His people. But the second aspect of being God's people that we see in this passage means is recognizing God's all-consuming holiness. Verse 9 to 15, God tells the people, get ready for the third day when the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

[ 17 : 53 ] And in order to prepare, they're told to do two things. First, to consecrate themselves, or that means to be set apart from everything that is unclean or ordinary, to be devoted and dedicated to God and His purposes.

Now, often in the Old Testament, the process of consecration involves some kind of washing or bathing or fasting or sometimes offering a sacrifice. Here, they had to wash their clothes, which was no small task in the middle of the desert.

God provided water from a rock, but again, that would have taken some intentionality. Laundry wasn't a daily chore back then. And verse 15 says they had to abstain from sexual relations. That's what that verse means.

It comes across a bit strong to us. But verse 15 is not saying that sexual intimacy is wrong or dirty. Eating food is not wrong or dirty, and yet on occasion, God commands His people to fast and pray as a way of preparing themselves or focusing specially on God Himself. And so here, in order to prepare for the Lord's coming, the people have to temporarily separate themselves from what is normally permitted sex within marriage. It's sort of like preparing your house for a special guest, except the guest is the King of glory Himself. So first, they have to prepare themselves. Second, they have to stay within boundaries. Verse 12 and 13. Verse 12 and 13, you shall set limits for the people all around. And this was very serious. It says, whoever touches the mountain will be put to death. And they were required to sort of police themselves in that way.

Now, what we'll see later on in the chapter is that God will come down on the top of the mountain, but only Moses could go all the way up into the very presence of God. The elders or the priests could go partway up the mountain, but not all the way.

[ 20 : 05 ] The rest of the people had to remain at the bottom. And they were not even allowed to go beyond the edge of the mountain. And Mount Sinai is actually very... in that way, Mount Sinai is very much like the tabernacle that God is going to instruct Moses about how to build, because there are three main sections to the tabernacle. There's the Holy of Holies, the top of the mountain, the presence of God Himself, and only the high priest can go in there only once a year. And then there's the holy place where the priest can go but nobody else. And everybody else has to worship in the outer court.

You see, even if they obeyed all of Moses' instructions and prepared themselves through washing and fasting and consecration, the people as a whole were not free to draw near to the presence of God.

And then in verse 16 through 20, we see the Lord actually descending on Mount Sinai. And He comes down in a storm with thunder and lightning and a thick cloud. He comes down in fire with smoke that spirals up from the mountain. He comes down in an earthquake. The whole mountain trembles. And with a trumpet blast that grows louder and louder, it's as if the entire created order goes into upheaval and trembles before its creator. Have you ever been outdoors in the middle of an open field in a thunderstorm and there's nowhere you can run and nowhere you can hide? Or near a fault line and the earth begins to rumble and threatens to cave in? Or have you ever been near enough to a fire, a forest fire, some other kind of fire that you can feel the searing heat?

Or surrounded by deafening sirens which only get louder and louder? And these are only the physical manifestations of the presence of God. The spiritual reality of God's presence is far more awe-inducing and terror-inspiring. And then in verse 21 to 25, God repeats the warnings. Don't break through the boundary or the Lord will break out suddenly and destructively against you. If you look at chapter 20, verse 18, we see the people's reaction. It says, when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off. See, what do we see here? We see that the God of the Bible is a holy God.

[ 23 : 05 ] He cannot be approached carelessly or lightly. God is not a game that we can cleverly manipulate in order to serve our own ends. His words are not a buffet from which you can pick and choose what you want and leave the rest. He's not a box to check off on Sunday mornings so that you can go live the other six and a half days of the week without thinking of His will. God is not a therapeutic technique to add to our toolbox along with yoga and meditation and exercise and whatever else you do that makes you feel good. The Bible says God is a consuming fire.

He demands and deserves our full and complete allegiance. He is worthy of our reverence and awe. And this is not just an Old Testament teaching. We read earlier Hebrews 12, which says that the same God who has spoken to us in Jesus Christ is also the God who revealed Himself on Mount Sinai. And it says, let us worship Him with reverence and awe for He is a consuming fire. Let me ask you this question. Is this God, the holy God who is a consuming fire, is that the God that you worship?

If not, you're worshiping an idol of your own or someone else's making. There's only one true and living God, and He is holy. So, being God's people means relating to Him on His terms and not ours. It means recognizing His all-consuming holiness. But third, it means responding to Him through His appointed mediator.

Do you notice that throughout this entire chapter, God and the people never speak directly to each other? God speaks to Moses. Moses speaks to the people. Sometimes He only speaks to their elders, their representatives, and they speak to the people. The people speak to Moses. Moses brings their message back to God. Three times, Moses goes up the mountain to God and back down to the people. Verse 3, Moses goes up to God, and there God speaks to him. Verse 7, He goes down to the people and sets before the elders all the Lord's words. Verse 8, the people answer Moses. Moses goes up and reports their words to the Lord. Verse 14, He goes down to instruct the people. Verse 20, God calls him to the top. Verse 25, Moses goes down to the people. Back and forth, back and forth, up and down.

[ 26 : 06 ] Now, what's the point? The point is, Moses is God's appointed mediator. He's the one who stands between the people and God. He brings God's words to the people, and he brings the people's response back to God. And Moses was a faithful mediator. We see that here. He was faithful in conveying God's words to the people, and he was faithful. He was faithful in conveying the people's responses to God. He stood between God and the people and went back and forth and back and forth. But you know what? He could never bridge that gap. In fact, the gap actually only grows wider throughout this chapter. Notice how in the beginning, in verse 8, chapter 19, verse 8, the people are eager and united, and they say, all that the Lord has said we will do. But then look at chapter 20, verse 18, or 19, the people stood far off and said to Moses, you speak to us and we will listen. But don't let God speak to us lest we die. Verse 21 says, the people stood far off while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God. You see, God revealing himself and his law at Mount Sinai, even with the faithful mediation of Moses, does not ultimately bring us near to God. In the end, it only exposes how wide the gap is.

It shows us the all-consuming holiness of God, but it doesn't make a way for us to enter that holy presence with freedom and confidence and joy. In the end, we remain like the Israelites, far off. That's where many people live their whole lives. Is that you? Perhaps you know that God is real. You have some sense of his great power or his burning holiness, and you draw back in fear. You stay at a distance. Maybe you listen in to someone else's report. Maybe you look for someone else like Moses to bring a message to God, to pray for you, and then to maybe convey some message from God to you. But you are far off.

If that's you, the good news is that the story of the Bible does not end here. It doesn't end with a bare recognition of God's all-consuming holiness. The Bible goes on to tell of a better mediator than Moses and a better covenant than the one at Sinai, and ultimately a better way through which we

can draw near to God.

Hebrews 12 says, You have not come to a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a storm, but you have come to the city of the living God and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and to his sprinkled blood. You see, Moses was a faithful mediator, but Jesus is a much better, better mediator. Because unlike Moses, Jesus could and did actually bridge the gap between God, the holy, consuming fire, and his sinful people. You see, Jesus doesn't just walk back and forth.

[ 29 : 54 ] He doesn't just go from heaven to earth and back up to heaven and heaven to earth and back up to heaven. No, he came down from heaven and he became one of us. He took on flesh and blood. He became a real human being. He became our brother so that we might know God as our Father. And Jesus didn't just appear on top of a mountain so that we can gaze from afar. He came all the way down to meet us in the valley of the shadow of death, in the darkest place of our sin and shame. He came down and he entered into the depth of the chasm, that unbridgeable gap between God and humanity. That's why he died on the cross.

That's why there was darkness and an earthquake when he died. Because he was carrying our sins into the all-consuming fire of God so that they might be extinguished once and for all. And he, the only righteous one, came out the other side on the third day, risen from the dead so that we might approach the throne of God's grace with freedom and joy and confidence through him. You can draw near to God today through Jesus.

Jesus, will you do that? Will you trust and rely on him? He's the only one you need. And he's the only one who can make a way for you into the presence of the one true and living God.

And you don't have to go through an elaborate preparation. You don't have to wash your clothes.

You don't have to fast. You don't have to clean yourself up and put your best stuff on and appear as good as you can be and then be told only to the edge of the mountain and no further.

You see, Jesus accomplished in three days what we never could. In three days, he was crucified for our sins. He was buried in the grave and he rose up from the dead.

[ 32 : 05 ] And now as our risen and ascended Savior, he has poured out his Holy Spirit that we might draw near to him in faith and that he might make his dwelling place not far off, but even within us.

You might say, where does God show himself in the New Testament like he did at Sinai? The surprising answer is on the day of Pentecost.

According to verse 1, the Israelites came to Mount Sinai on a third new moon, the third lunar month after they had gone out of Egypt. They had left Egypt on the 14th day of the first month.

If you work out the chronology, it works out to approximately 50 days after the Passover and the Exodus is when they come to Sinai. And 50 days after Passover was the Jewish feast of Pentecost. And every spring on Pentecost, the Jewish people remember the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. And after Jesus' resurrection, Jesus' followers were gathered together on that day, 50 days after his resurrection, and God gave his people an even greater gift, not the law at Sinai, but his very own spirit.

[ 33 : 29 ] Acts 2 says that on the day of Pentecost, the disciples of Jesus were all together in one place, and God showed up in power, like at Sinai, in a storm with a mighty rushing wind and in fire.

But the amazing thing is that the all-consuming fire of God did not just appear from a distance and make the people draw back.

The tongues of fire divided and came to rest on each one of them, on each one of the followers of Jesus. And the disciples of Jesus were filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit, and they began praising God and declaring his mighty works to the ends of the earth in all kinds of different languages.

And they were filled with awe, but they were also filled with joy. Because the all-consuming fire that had once descended on Mount Sinai had now come to rest in the hearts of God's people under the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus' blood covers us, we won't be burned up. We will only be refined and empowered by his Holy Spirit.

[ 34 : 43 ] The Apostle Peter said, Repent, that means turn to Jesus and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Every time someone repents and turns to Jesus and is baptized and officially welcomed into the church, the gift of the Holy Spirit is passed on.

You come to join in to God's kingdom of priests, his holy representatives to the world. Pentecost is sometimes called the birthday of the church.

Just like the people of Israel could look back on Mount Sinai, we can look back on the day of Pentecost. Like the people of Israel could look back at the Passover and the Exodus and see God saved us.

We look back on the death and resurrection of Jesus and see God saved us. And then at Mount Sinai, as the people of Israel would look back and say, He made us His own. We look back on the day of Pentecost, and we can see God has made us His own.

[ 35 : 51 ] He has called us His own people, and He has given us His very own Spirit within us. This is good news. And our calling is to live this out as rulers and priests in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for revealing yourself at Mount Sinai. We praise you for showing yourself to us as the holy and all-consuming fire.

And we praise you for Jesus, whose blood speaks a better word to us, who is the mediator of a new covenant, and who has made a way for us to come freely and joyfully and confidently before you.

We pray that your Holy Spirit would do His good work, cleansing and purifying us, empowering us, and enabling us to be your witnesses, your kingdom of priests to the ends of the earth.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.