

*Series: Exodus – The God Who Guides and Provides*

*“Freed to Serve”*

Introduction: A Swedish nanny was working hard on her English language skills. She was doing ok in general conversation, but had not quite mastered all of the difficult English idioms. Once when she came into the room where the children she was caring for had gotten a little out of control she meant to say: “What on earth are you doing?” But instead, what came out was, “What are you doing on earth?!”

Though it was the wrong question for that particular situation, it’s still a good question for us to ponder. It is one of several questions we should ask from time to time about our place in the world, questions such as: “Where did I come from?” “Where am I going?” “What am I doing on earth?”

Last week, after being rescued by God from oppression in Egypt and delivered through the Red Sea, we heard the Israelites ask (in their grumbling way!), “What on earth are we doing in the desert?!” And we heard God answer that he was teaching them and training them what it would mean to be a people who trusted in him. He did so as he brought them through a water, and then a food, crisis.

We pick up the action couple of months later when the Israelites have arrived at Mt. Sinai and God now gives them a broader and deeper answer to the question, “What are we doing here?” He reveals to them that he has freed them from slavery to be his treasured possession, and to serve him as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

These re not just ancient directions. As we will hear Peter describe it, this is what we are to be doing on earth as well. We, the church, have been given the mission to which the people of God have long been called. We are linked to God’s call to Abraham, and then Israel, to bring blessing to the nations. What is that to look like? Let’s begin with God’s ancient people and then work our way forward. [READ]

I. What are we doing on earth?

A. Arriving at Mt. Sinai, things had come full circle for Moses. This was the place God had made himself known to Moses in the form of a burning bush, and where God had then called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. Moses, as you’ll recall, wasn’t too thrilled with this role and came up with all sorts of excuses. But God promised to be with him and said that a sign of this promise would be that when Moses had completed this call, God would meet him again at this mountain. It must have been an incredibly affirming moment for Moses as he returned to that space and reflected on all that had gone on in the last few months. He didn’t have too much time to contemplate as he learned that he wasn’t really done! Now that he had led God’s people out of Egypt, God would call him to lead his people on. Just what that entailed would become clear when Moses makes the first of several hikes up to the summit of this mountain. There, he didn’t just commune with God but received directions to pass along.

B. The directions were essentially the job description God had in mind for the Israelites. It turns out that he had freed them not to live however they pleased but to serve him and the world in unique ways as those specially chosen by him, his “treasured possession,” to be a “kingdom of priests,” and a “holy nation.” As “priests,” they stood in the middle, serving in a mediating role, bringing the nations to God and revealing God to the nations. They were to do this by being “holy,” or distinct, both ritually and

ethically, from those who lived around them. God's laws and decrees were what was to help them remain distinct. Leviticus 18:3-4 records it well:

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees.

Practically, this would mean not offering a sacrifice at the local altar for a good harvest and sealing that sacrifice by interacting with a shrine prostitute. It would mean not offering your child as a sacrifice to the gods in order to be assured of their favor. It would mean not consulting the sun, moon, and stars for direction in life. It would mean not pursuing the idols of prosperity and power. This was so important for them to learn that they remained camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai for almost a year, and for the next 59 chapters! (They wouldn't depart until Num. 10:11). During that time, they learned what being a holy nation was to be about. They learned what it looked like to live distinctively.

C. Significantly, such a job description came AFTER a reminder of what God had done for the Israelites, as he reminds them using the image of the wings of a mother eagle. Israel's deliverance was like an eagle swooping down to hover over its young, fighting off the bird of prey that was Egypt, and carrying the Israelites to safety (cf. Dt. 32:9-11). In the next chapter, we see the same truth declared in propositional form in the introduction to the 10 Commandments: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (20:2). Everything else that followed, all that God would be calling his people to do, begins here. It begins with what God had first done for them. It begins with his grace. So the life God calls the Israelites to live is not about Israel earning her salvation; it is about living it out, it is about being the kind of people God has called them to be, not just for their sakes but for the sake of others, and ultimately, for the glory of God.

D. Israel was chosen for this missional purpose like we in the church have been chosen, not by anything marvelous we have done but solely by God's grace. Peter makes this clear in a rather remarkable passage in his first letter. The church, he writes, using Exodus 19 language, is a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, based purely on the mercy of God. The church also, don't miss, has an incredible history, one that begins far before Paul Revere even thought of making church bells!

Illustration: During my days of study at Fuller Seminary in California, pastors I met there used to be amazed that our church was over 300 years old. For them, 30 years is an old church! Of course, go east instead of west and in the countries of Europe you will find churches with 1300 years of history. But even that is not very old when you really think about what Peter is saying. The words he uses to describe the mission of the church go back to around 1500 B.C. which means for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> c. that we have joined something that has been going on for over 3,500 years! Our roots are deep. We are part of an ancient and grand story. We are to be a part of the people who are called to show the world what God is like. How are we to do this?

## II. How are we to do it?

A. In Lausanne, Switzerland, in July 1974, a group of over 2,700 Christian leaders from over 150 countries gathered to think about "the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world." This Lausanne Movement, as it became called, is still very much alive. In a devotional I received from them a week ago, *Calling the Church back to Humility, Integrity, and Simplicity*, was the following introduction:

*When there is no distinction in conduct between Christians and non-Christians, then the world is right to wonder if our Christianity makes any difference at all. As believers we are a part of God's new humanity, and as a result we are called to walk in distinctiveness...*

B. Such distinctiveness is what being a holy nation, writes Peter, is all about. It is about living lives that are distinct from the world around us so that the world takes notice of the God whom we serve. While many of the laws designed to keep Israel distinct no longer apply with the arrival of Jesus, there are still plenty of imperatives in the NT which are designed to keep us distinct and which we are to follow. Paul sums it up in his description of a life lived in the flesh vs. that of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-24):

<sup>16</sup> So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . <sup>19</sup> The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; <sup>20</sup> idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions <sup>21</sup> and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. [nor will they reveal the character of God!]

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. [and these will reveal the character of God!]

C. Living as a holy nation under God is not based upon the passport you carry in your purse or the flag you have affixed to your truck. It is not about which soccer team you root for or style of government you prefer. It is not about what color you are or what language you speak. Being a holy nation is a people who live, no matter where they live, as "aliens and strangers" in this world, under the government of King Jesus and the power of his Spirit. It is a people who seek to put off sinful desires and who seek to put on deeds of love and mercy. In so doing, they become a holy nation which reveals the nature of the living God.

D. The challenge of this is captured by a document put out in 2010 by the Lausanne Movement, the *Cape Town Commitment*. It describes our call to live distinctively like this:

The people of God either walk in the way of the Lord or walk in the ways of other gods. The Bible shows that God's greatest problem is not just with the nations of the world, but with the people he has created and called to be the means of blessing the nations. . . When there is no distinction in conduct between Christians and non-Christians—for example the practice of corruption and greed, or sexual promiscuity, or attitudes toward people of other races, or consumerist lifestyles, or social prejudice—then our message carries no authenticity to a watching world.

We challenge one another, as God's people in every culture, to face up to the extent to which, consciously or unconsciously, we are caught up in the idolatries of our surrounding culture. We pray for prophetic discernment to identify and expose such false gods and their presence within the church itself, and for the courage to repent and renounce them in the name and authority of Jesus as Lord . . . we urgently recommit ourselves, and challenge all who profess the name of Christ, to live in radical distinctiveness from the ways of the world.

By the grace of God we have been freed from the slavery of sin. May we use that freedom to live lives of radical distinctiveness, not only for our sakes, but for the sake of others, and ultimately for God's glory.