**A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation**

June 6, 2021

Exodus 19:1-24:18

Key Verse 19:5-6a “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

In this passage, God reveals his purpose of why he saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. It was to make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God had vision that through his people all peoples on earth would come to God. God wants all peoples on earth to be blessed through Israel. The Israelites at that time were full of slave mentality. They were lawless and had all kinds of bad habits, especially complaining spirits. God had hope for these kinds of people. God is God of hope. In this passage, the holy God, Creator of heaven and earth, meets his redeemed people and makes a covenant of blood with them. May God bless us to learn of his great hope and purpose for us to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation!

Now it is the first day of the third month. It has been 47 days since the Israelites came out of Egypt, and they came to Mount Sinai. The Lord called Moses up to the mountain to teach him what to say to the Israelites. Look at verse 19:4. “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” The Israelites were eyewitnesses to the events of the past year. They had seen God’s mighty hand striking the Egyptians again and again, bringing that huge empire and proud Pharaoh down to their knees. They had seen how they were able to cross the Red Sea on dry ground, and how the Egyptians who tried to follow were drowned. And step by step, God had led them through the desert, guiding their shepherd Moses and providing them with water, meat and daily bread. The Lord described it as “carrying the people on eagles’ wings.” The eagle is the most powerful bird, huge and majestic. To be carried by one would be an exhilarating and frightening experience. It was like the Israelites were plucked out of their slave existence in Egypt and miraculously transported to the mountain of God. The Israelites had met their limitations and complained to Moses and to God so many times. But the Lord had not faltered in his plan to bring the Israelites to himself. Now, they needed to look back and let what the Lord had done for them sink in. They needed to give thanks and praise God from their hearts. They needed to trust God who was going to lead them to the Promised Land. Then God told Moses to teach the Israelites his plan. Look at verses 19:5-6a. “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

**First**, treasured possession. Here, “treasured possession” means that God chose them as the most precious people. They are chosen people in the sight of God. It is not because they were better and righteous than other people. But God chose them because of his covenant with Abraham. When we read Exodus, we see how terrible the Israelites were. They were rebellious, stubborn, and full of slave mentality. We feel like shouting to them, “Come on men, can’t you be a little more patient?” We wonder how God would call them “treasured possession.” But Deuteronomy 7:7-8 says, “The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than others peoples…But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.” Christians are also said to be chosen people. 1 Peter 2:9 says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” From time to time, we feel inadequate to serve God. We still struggle with our sinful desires. We are still stubborn and rebellious. Many of us experienced failure in raising disciples. There are so many smart people that we wonder why me. But we are the most valuable, precious thing God has. Nothing is dearer to him than we are. We need to look no further than the cross of Christ to understand our value to God. God sacrificed his one and only Son for us. When he looks down at us from heaven, he sees sparkling jewels shining in his radiant glory. And he says, “Wow, look at that one! And look at that one over there! And this one right here!” We are delightful to his eyes. We are God’s special treasure. That is our identity. That is who we are. What a wonderful privilege it is to be chosen by God in this generation! We must have pride of being a chosen people.

**Second**, a kingdom of priests. At that time, the Israelites had just been emancipated after 430 years of slavery. They were full of slave mentality and slave desires. They could not see tomorrow, only today—and only potato chips in front of their eyes. But God is the God of hope. He called them “a kingdom of priests.” What does “kingdom of priests” mean? A priest is a mediator between God and man. Priests lead people to God, and proclaim the knowledge of God to the people. When God made a covenant with Abraham, God promised, “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Ge 12:2,3) Here we learn God’s hope. God’s hope is indeed great. The Israelites were ugly slave people with a beggar mentality and an easygoing attitude. They were nothing but slaves of pleasure-seeking desires. But God had hope in them to be raised as a kingdom of priests so that the knowledge of God might be proclaimed to the whole world through them. God wanted to use Israel to let the world know who God is, and his love and his redemption. Isaiah saw God’s vision that the Israelites would become the source of blessing to the whole world. Isaiah 2:3 says, “Many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” We praise God for his hope for his people as well as for us. God has hope for each one of us to be royal priests so that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

**Third**, a holy nation. At that time, the Israelites were mentally still a slave people. Their desires were for nothing but physical gratification and the satisfaction of their stomachs. They were indeed hopeless people. If they knew one thing, they knew how to complain bitterly. But God is the God of hope. When God said, “you will be for me...a holy nation,” God wanted Israel to be holy, as God is holy. The word “holy” means “separated” or “different from others.” God’s people must live holy lives different from worldly people who live unholy lives such as dishonesty, immorality, and unfaithfulness. Without knowing the holiness of God, we cannot see God (Mt 5:8). Without knowing the holiness of God, we cannot love God. Rather, we hate God because of our impure hearts and dirty desires. Without knowing the holiness of God, we cannot be happy because the peace of God, which comes from the holy God, cannot dwell in our hearts. Without knowing the holiness of God, we always feel unclean, like a man with leprosy. God wanted his people to be a holy nation, so they might proclaim the holiness of God to the world.

Moses laid out God’s vision to the Israelites, and they were happy to hear it. They promised they would obey. The Lord knew very well that they had no power to obey. So he told Moses to prepare a covenant ceremony to seal the covenant. The Israelites were to wash their clothes, abstain from sexual relations and be restricted from touching even the foot of the mountain of God. Once they had given their verbal agreement, Moses wrote down everything the Lord had told him in the Book of the Covenant. And he arranged for a ceremonial reading of the Book, and marking the Israelites’ agreement to obey. So the young Israelite men slaughtered many bulls and rams and goats and collected their blood. Half the blood was poured to cleanse the altar. Moses read the Book to the people once more, and the people again promised “we will obey.” Then the other half of the blood was sprinkled on the people by Moses. Look at verses 24:7-8. “Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.’ Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” In this way the covenant was confirmed. In other words, God and his people entered into covenant relationship, just as a man and a woman enters into husband and wife relationship, saying, “I do,” at a wedding ceremony. We call this the old covenant, Old Testament.

However, we see later in the Bible that the Israelites were not faithful to their vows. They were not faithful to the covenant. They violated their covenant. It is not because the law was imperfect. There is nothing wrong with the law. The problem is our sinful nature. We are not able to keep the law. So Jeremiah looked forward to the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus Christ, God would forgive our sins, and send the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts and change us from inside out. He will empower us to keep the law. Jeremiah 31:31-34 says, “The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel…It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them…I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” This prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus established the new covenant, New Testament, through shedding his precious blood on the cross. God promised that anyone who believes in Jesus’ blood would be saved and enter into a new covenant with God.

We will study the Ten commandments in detail next week. In these commandments, the Lord taught his people how to worship and honor him and how to treat one another as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Jesus summarized these commands by saying, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Mt. 22:37b-39). Notice that God gave Ten commandments after they were saved. God did not say, “Keep my commandments and get saved.” It has always been, “Grace first, gratitude second. Love first and law second. Salvation first, and service second.” It is a common misunderstanding of the law that you have to keep the law in order to be saved. But the law was never intended as a way of salvation. The law was not given to save anyone. The law was given to the redeemed people of God as a way of holy living so that they can be set apart from the worldly people.

Chapters 21-23 contain the set of laws that would govern the daily lives of the Israelites as the covenant people of God. These laws derive from the Ten Commandments. But they are more specific and focus on the consequences when the laws are not obeyed. Many of these laws seem outdated and of no interest to our modern society. But the principle is: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Let’s look at just three examples.

First, note that the laws regarding servants are the first laws in the Book of the Covenant (21:1). It sets the principle of the purpose of the law. The law is given to protect those who have no power to protect themselves. The weakest and most vulnerable people in Moses’ time were the servants. They had no property. They had no defender. Through the Law, God declared that he is the defender of the weak, the poor, the widows and the orphans. It means that God’s hope of making his people a kingdom of priests and a holy nation extended to the very least in Israel. The law regarding servants focuses on the obligations of the owners, and the rights of the servants. Hebrew servants were obligated to serve their masters only 6 years. After that time, they were to be set free.

Second, laws regarding personal injuries. Verses 21:23-24 says, “But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” The principle, “an eye for an eye”, can seem to modern people as overly vengeful and brutal. However, its intention was to limit the brutality of vengeance. Sinful man tends to escalate the violence of their vengeance, so that the death of one man may well be the cause of death for hundreds or thousands. The law puts limits on man’s vengeance. The punishment for causing injury should be no greater than the injury caused. In this way, the law was intended to stop the escalation of violence, while making sure that the crime was fairly punished. Later Jesus made it more strict, saying, “Love your enemies.”

Third, laws regarding justice. Verses 23:2-3 says, “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd, and do not show favoritism to a poor person in a lawsuit.” Do not give into peer pressure. It is easy to feel sympathy for the poor and show favoritism to the poor against the rich. For example, one poor woman bought a hot coffee at McDonald and spilled it by accident on her lap. The jury awarded her $2.86 million out of sympathy. This should not be the case.

In this passage we learned that God has a great hope for his people Israel. Our God is the God of hope. God wanted them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, even though they were nothing but a people with slave mentality. We praise God for his hope for his people. Let us believe that God has great hope for each one of us. We are his treasured possession and God wants to raise us as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Big Idea: God’s hope for us to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.