

Who Are We and What are We Here For?

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Introduction by Dr. James Hernando

Dr. Christopher Wright has a long and illustrious education and missionary training. Listening to Dr. Wright this week reminds me of a comment made by a New Testament scholar, Larry Hurtado. He was referring to the teaching, wisdom, and parabolic sayings of Jesus, and he said, “You know if you search the entire corpus of Jewish writings by pre-Christian Jewish rabbis, you will find that almost everything Jesus taught has some parallel by some rabbi somewhere, who wrote something that sounded like what Jesus said and taught. But no rabbi said it all with such poignancy or with such profundity and in such a concise manner as Jesus.” That is a little bit like what I felt as I listened to Dr. Wright! I know I have heard a lot of what he said—somewhere—but never on one occasion and in such a concise, cogent, and convincing fashion. Dr. Wright, I want to tell you that we have enjoyed your lectures tremendously. I will be chewing on these lectures for some time to come.

Who Are We? What are We Here For?

Thank you so much! No pressure you know! Just Jesus, huh? Oh well! Or a rabbi, which I am certainly not either!

Good! Well, thank you for that welcome again and since this is the last of the official

appearances here, apart from the Q&A at the end, let me say a big thank you to you, Dr. Klaus, for inviting me all those years ago to share here in the work and ministry of AGTS. It is a great joy. Some of you have said that you found it refreshing, but I have also found it refreshing to be in your midst, to interact with you and to face some of the questions that have been thrown at me over the last few days and try to tackle them in some sort of manner. It certainly challenged me in my thinking!

Review of the First Two Lectures

Now in the case of the three lectures, as distinct from the classes, there was a certain order in what I have tried to do. In our first lecture, we asked the question, “Can we read the whole Bible for mission, and what happens when we do?” What are the kind of ways in which the Bible can be presented as a fundamentally missional document, especially presented in that way through the Lord Jesus Christ himself and His teaching on Resurrection Day on the Old Testament Scriptures?

Then the second lecture was a slightly more general topic. We were looking at the love of God and how that led Christ to the cross, but I also wanted to show us that the love of God is not just a John 3:16 expression but has deep roots in the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus and Paul used so well.

It is the love of God which drives the mission of God, which leads to the cross and how the cross must be central to all that we seek to do as we seek to participate in God's mission in the world—whatever God calls us to. Of evangelistic nature, social nature, compassionate nature, or whatever it is, we need the cross at the center.

Introduction

I come this afternoon to think more about the question, “Who are we, and what are we here for?” What is our sense of identity as God's people? That is an issue I have been wrestling with for some time. In fact, in trying to write a book that is something of a sequel to *The Mission of God*, which was a kind of missional hermeneutic of the Bible, to ask the “So what?” question. Then, if that is the mission of God, what is the mission of God's people? That, in fact, is the title of my soon-to-be-released book in which I have tried to trace going back to Abraham and then on through in a biblical-theological way moving backwards and forwards between the Testaments as to what is the mission of God's people and our calling to be a blessing to the nations, to be a priesthood among the nations, to be a people who attract other nations to God as Solomon speaks about or to be God's servant in the world, as Isaiah does. To be a witnessing people, to be a gospel people—all of this is very Old Testament language, by the way. Witnessing and good news. Then also to be a people who are both sending and being sent. Again, language which you find in both Old and New Testament. And a people of praise and prayer, and also a people who live in the public arena and have work to do there in God's world. So, I try to pick up a number of these things in that book. What I am offering to you now is a selection of one part of that: “Who are we, and what are we here for?” Particularly drawn from Exodus 19:4-6.

So, if you have your Bible, as the evangelists sometimes like to say, you might like to open it now. It is a very familiar passage.

In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 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.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites (Exod. 19:1-6).

So, who are we, then? What are we here for? The way that you answer that question really depends to a large extent on what story you think you are in. There is a moment in *The Lord of the Rings* where Frodo asks that question. What story have we fallen into? Of course, it is a fictional fantasy narrative, but it makes the point that we all live in a story of some kind, even if it is a story or narrative that we have to make up for ourselves to try to make sense of our own lives. We talk about our life story; we talk about a way in which we are trying to live our lives or the journey of our lives. Even atheists have to do that—although I don't think they always make a very good job of it.

I don't know if you are aware that last year there was a campaign by the British secular society or humanist society and people like Richard Dorkins and a few others paid for an advertisement on the side of the London buses. So, for a few months, about 800 of the London buses were going around London with this message on the side: "There probably is no God. Stop worrying and enjoy life." That was the message. In fact, the campaign funds were contributed to by the Bible Society in Britain because they said, "That is great! I would love to get people talking about God. We don't agree with what you are saying, but anything that puts God on the side of a London bus is good for evangelism!" Which wasn't quite what Dorkins had in mind. But when I saw that advert, I had several reactions, of which one was, "It is curious to say that there probably is no God, so stop worrying and enjoy life as if somehow, those who believe in God, the Christian people, are those who worry most and don't enjoy life. Whereas the statistics prove that, on the whole, religious people in the UK are those who have less stress in life and actually enjoy a greater sense of life fulfillment than the average Joe in the population. So, it was a bit of an odd message, but what struck me is that that is not much of a story. That is not much of a story to give any meaning to life or death or the future. I mean, here is a story—"God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Now *that's* a story! It has a problem; it has a solution. It's got a middle and an ending—that is the biblical story in a nutshell. That is worth living for! That is worth dying for!

So, here in this Old Testament passage, there is a sense in which we could ask that very same question about the Old Testament Israelites. Who were they, and what were they there for? The answer, both for them

and for us, of course, depends on the story they were in. The story they were in was the one that the chapter begins with—the Exodus story. They had just been brought out of Egypt, but that, too, we have to say is set within a very big story—the big narrative of God's picture—the great drama that shapes the whole of the Bible and spans the whole of space and time, the universe. It includes the whole of the past, the present, and the all of the future. That is the story that these Israelites, in this generation, who had just come out of Egypt were in. It was a story that told them who they were and what they were there for. It is a small part of the story that tells us the same thing because it is, of course, the story which gives us Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is the story that told Him, Jesus, who He was and what He was there for! Because there is no doubt that Jesus drew His own sense of identity and mission from the Scriptures which He had known from His mother's milk and which shaped His subconsciousness and His driving sense of identity and purpose.

So, that is all a kind of preface to this passage to say that God is wanting to say to the Israelites something about who they were and what they were to be. However, it comes in the context of a story they had just experienced—which was part of a much bigger story and which still goes on and which we are in today.

The story itself in its immediate context is easy to tell, and I am quite sure that you all know it well. The Hebrews had been oppressed in Egypt. God had responded to that—both out of compassion for their suffering and out of faithfulness to His promise. He called Moses, back in the early chapters of Exodus at this very same point, by the way, at Mt. Sinai, which was where the burning bush was. He sent him down to

Egypt to say to Pharaoh, “Let my people go!”

The pharaoh says, “No way!”

God says, “Well, that is tough, but you will in the end.”

Pharaoh says, “I don’t even know who this god is. I don’t know Yahweh the Lord God.”

You can almost hear the sharp intake of breath among the angels in heaven saying, “You don’t want to say that! You will know who this God is before this story is over!”

And he did. So, there are the plagues, and there’s the crossing of the sea, and the great escape, and the song of Moses in Exodus 15, and then there is water from the rock in chapter 17, and manna, and food, and quails, and then the destruction of the Amalakites. Then, Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, comes along and gives him a bit of a lesson in crowd management and so on. The story is proceeding through this narrative of salvation, protection, and provision until at last, here in chapter 19, you almost get the feeling that God, with a sense of relief has got the Israelites to himself at long last. No more plagues flying around the place or Amalakites on the edges and so on. At last, here they are. I’ve got you where I want you. Now it is time to explain and make sense of the story—to tell you what’s happened and why and what I want you to be for Me. So this is actually a very hinge moment, as it were—quite a fulcrum in the book of Exodus. The way God speaks in verses 4-6 gives us a sense of fulcrum because He points to the past, as it were the far end of the see-saw, the first part of the book of what He has already done and then He points, as it were, to the other end, to the future—to His greater vision. Then, He points to the present and to what He actually

wants from these people, who they were and what they were to be there for in the world at that time. So, let’s begin then, in verse 4 with what I have called here: “Past Grace—The grace of God’s salvation.” You have probably sensed that what I am sharing with you as a lecture has also other various incarnations of being a sermon. It is kind of a mixture of both at the moment, and I hope that you don’t object to that. I find that I teach as I preach, and preach as I teach, and it is very difficult to separate the two.

Past Grace—God’s Salvation

But, here we have past grace—God’s Salvation. The very first thing that God says to the Israelites is, “You have seen what I have done.” He doesn’t ask anything of them, He doesn’t teach them anything; He doesn’t demand anything. He just says, “Remember what I have done. You have seen what I have done.” Of course, they had seen, because as the first verse tells us, it was only three months before this event that they had been slaves in Egypt—a captive people, an immigrant minority exploited by the majority host population. They weren’t exactly illegal immigrants; they had been welcomed for economic asylum during the famine a few generations ago, but now they had become a nuisance so they are being exploited for the Egyptian construction and agricultural projects. They were doing all the jobs the Egyptians didn’t want to do and then getting whipped and beaten. They were suffering from a subversive intentional genocide with the murder of their baby boys, and so on. That has all been going on just up to three months ago. Now, they are free! They must have been foot-sore and weary and tired of the manna already, but they are free. God says, “I did that!” God says, “That was an act of My compassion, love, and faithfulness to My promise. So God points to His grace in action—redeeming grace. The exodus is actually the first event in the

Bible described as redemption. If you want to get a biblical theology of redeeming and redemption, we need to go to the exodus because that is where it starts. So, it is an act of God's grace in saving, liberating, and delivering redemption. God says, "I did it! I've done it!" It is a fact now! We are starting with fact.

So, you see, whatever is going to come next in this narrative, this story—which is going to be the Ten Commandments in chapter 20 and then the making of the Covenant in chapter 24, and then the building of the Tabernacle and the worship of God after that—whatever is going to come next must be founded upon grace—on the having happenedness of the exodus. It is an accomplished fact of salvation already for these people. Past grace—God's salvation.

I am emphasizing this for an important theological reason and that is to counteract what I still find in different parts of the world to be quite a common misperception about the Bible as people try to explain the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. I hope it is not a misperception existing in *this* room, but just on the off chance that it might, it is the view that says that in the Old Testament, of course, people got saved or thought they could get saved by keeping God's Law whereas now in the New Testament we know that we don't get saved by the Law, thank God, but we get saved by grace. That is all very nice and good because Paul told us that we get saved by grace and not by the works of the Law.

Now, of course, what that is, is a fundamental distortion of the Old Testament faith. The Apostle Paul was combating the view which had emerged to a degree within the Judaism of his day and turned the faith of Israel, as it were, into a faith in which

somehow obedience to the Law was a means of proving and demonstrating that you belong to God's people and that, therefore, you are safe and you were going to be OK on the last day. But that, first of all, was never the way it was in the Old Testament. Salvation was never by obedience to the Law; it was because of God's promise and because of God's grace in the Old Testament just as much as in the New Testament.

It is very clear in this story. God saved Israel and then said, "Now, let's talk about your obedience." You have eighteen chapters of salvation in the book of Exodus before you get a single chapter of Law. That is, I think, theologically significant. Grace and salvation come first. You have seen what I have done. Now then, if you will obey me, let's talk about the Law and the Covenant. The same thing, of course, is true for us as we think of ourselves and our identity under the gospel as those who claim to be God's people in continuity with the people of God in the Old Testament. It is exactly the same truth. We, also, have commands in the New Testament that we're called upon to obey. Jesus said, "A new command I give you. Love one another." So, loving one another is a commandment. But remember what Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." His love comes first. In fact, John makes that very clear. He says, "We love because He first loved us." Paul says, "Forgive one another." Again, it is a commandment in the New Testament, but it is a commandment based on "Forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven you." It is God's grace that comes first and our response afterwards.

So whether we are thinking about ethical obedience or if we are thinking about the obligations of Christian mission, you can't do it. You can't either obey God or live as a

Christian should live or get engaged in mission as you think Christians are called to *unless* you have *first* experienced and come to know the historical saving grace of God as it was with the Israelites in the exodus. For us, of course, it is supremely at the cross of Christ. Indeed, if we are going to take this text, Exodus 19:4, and transpose it into a New Testament gospel framework, it is almost as if God were to say to us and point to the cross of Christ and say, “You have seen what I have done on that cross—out of my faithfulness, in my love, through my Son, Jesus Christ.” Now then, what does that mean in terms of your faith, your obedience, your mission, and your sense of identity? So, like the Israelites, then, we need to remind ourselves here from this passage that if we are asking the question about who we are and what we are here for, that we remind ourselves of God’s past grace of salvation. That is where it starts in both Testaments—Old and New. We have to begin there.

Future Grace of God’s Mission

But we move on to what I would call in verse 5 the future grace of God’s mission. This is where we get back to the main theme. You may be looking at the text and thinking, “Where on earth is mission in Exodus 19:5?” Well, hang on a moment, and we will get there!

One way that I like to introduce this thought is to ask the question or, as it were, appeal to your imagination and to say, “I wonder what the view was like from the top of Mt. Sinai?” God tells us it was actually pretty wide—you saw the whole earth, metaphorically. This is sort of a picture language of the story. God is at the top of the mountain, and Israel is down at the foot of the mountain. When you are at the foot of a mountain—I don’t know if you have much experience of this in Missouri—but at the foot of a mountain, you can’t see very much.

There isn’t very much of a view, not like as it were in the prairies. So, the Israelites might well have thought, “We are the only people here. We are the only people in the world in connection with God here. Nobody else is stupid enough to be around this wilderness. We are the only people God is interested in, the only people God cares about, etc.”

It is almost as if to precisely correct that sort of misunderstanding that God speaks what He says in verse 5. He says, “Yes, of course, you are right.” There is a special relationship between God and Israel. You are my treasured possession; my family treasure. It is a word that actually comes from the ancient Near East; it was used of Mesopotamian kings. It distinguishes between the fact that, on the one hand, the king owns the whole country. The king owns all the land, but every king will also own his own private, personal treasury—you know, the royal jewels or the crown jewels, as we call it in Britain, of the royal collections of art. The king or queen has his or her own personal possessions, their own family treasure. That is the word that God uses for Israel. He says, “Yes, you have that unique relationship with Me, but don’t think that you are the only people on earth that I care about or am interested in. You may think that you are the only people down there at the foot of the mountain, but from up here where I am, as it were, I can see the whole earth, and it all belongs to the Lord. All the nations of the world are Mine.” There is this affirmation of the universality of God’s perspective, of God’s interest, and of God’s agenda implicit in Exodus 19:5 even though there is, as it were, almost extreme particularity of a phrase like “special possession” and Israel at Mount Sinai, their special place of revelation. There is, along with that particularity, a universality of the God who is speaking and

the vision from Sinai. So, although, yes, we have to affirm that God had just rescued one nation, one single nation, out of bondage—the Hebrews out of Egypt—the fact is He had done that because His goal was to offer deliverance from bondage—salvation to all the nations of the earth. That is still in the story, yet to come.

Yes, of course, it was true that Yahweh, the God of Israel, had just demonstrated His power in one land—the land of Egypt, but while He was doing it, according to Exodus 9, He explicitly said to the King of Egypt that He was doing it so that he and the whole earth would know that Yahweh is God—in *all* the earth, not just in Egypt, still less just in Goshen, the land where the Hebrews were living. So that, you see, is the scope of God's interest and God's vision. These two phrases, "All nations" and "the whole earth" coming in verse 9 are highly significant. This is the extent of God's interest and God's mission even while He is engaging with the Israelites while at Mt. Sinai.

Now if we had attentively been reading the story all the way from the beginning in Genesis, we would be exclaiming at this point, "Well, yes, of course, it is! Of course this is the interest and extent of God's concern because, after all, who is this God who is speaking here?" This is the God who appeared the first time to Moses at this spot. Remember the burning bush where Moses first encountered God was at Mt. Sinai or Mt. Horeb. It is the same mountain—two different names for the same mountain. When God had appeared to Moses at Mt. Sinai, how did He introduce himself when Moses asked His name? What name was He to give to the Israelites? God said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That's who I am."

We know, now, don't we very clearly, that Abraham was the one to whom God had made that promise that we saw yesterday, "Through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). So important is that promise in Genesis 12:3 that it is repeated four more times in the book of Genesis alone. And five times in the book of Genesis God says that His intention is to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth through the descendents of Abraham. So, you see, what this is saying is that God's business with Israel here at Mt. Sinai and all the way through the Old Testament is really nothing other than His unfinished business with all the nations on earth. That is an expression I borrowed from a Dutch missiologist, Blauw. I think that is exactly how he put it. "God's business with Israel is nothing more than His unfinished business with all the nations." It is a lovely way of expressing the connection between the particularity of God's involvement with Israel and God's intention for the world. It brings together the particular and the universal.

One way that I like to illustrate this is in relation to my own children. All my kids are now grown up and adults. I had two boys, but when they were little, of course they played a lot of football, soccer, as you call it here, for their school and for their boys' brigade club and so on. As a dutiful father, I longed to watch them play football. I took my camera along with me, as you do. This was in the days before digital cameras, but I was rather proud of my practice; I had a long telephoto lens (200mm), and behind that I put a doubler, which gave me 400 reach. It was quite powerful in terms of a telephoto lens. I developed the technique of keeping both eyes open while I had the camera up. So, with one eye I was looking through the camera lens, and I could fill the whole frame with my son, Tim, wherever he

was on the field. I could see him in good outline real close up. With my other eye, I just watched the match—the game, to see what was going on and where the players were and where the ball was. It was probably nowhere near Tim, but it gave me a sense of what was happening in the game. So, one eye was telephoto, and the other eye, as it were, was wide angle. You see, I was there with my camera because my son is there. Tim is my first born son; so, we have a rather special relation going back a long way. I am there because he is there. So, I could affirm him close up in that relationship in the pictures that I would take, but he, my firstborn son, is only there because there is a match going on with all the other players involved. He is part of a game which has another or a bigger story than what would simply go into my photograph album. You see the point I am trying to make?

When you read the Old Testament and a passage like this, we have to develop that kind of double vision. We need to recognize that, of course, the main frame, the big picture, of the Old Testament so often is filled with the children of Israel, the people of Israel, the kings of Israel, etc., but they are only there as God said to Pharaoh, “Israel is my firstborn son because they are the first born son—because there are other players, there are other sons, there are other nations, there is a big story going on that God is involved with.” God is as much involved in the histories of the other nations as He is in the history of Israel.

Deuteronomy says that quite explicitly in Deuteronomy 2-3, especially chapter 2, where it affirms that God had driven these people out of there and brought those people into here and that even the Zamzummites used to live there, but then some other people came in. It is all under the authority of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

So, what God was doing in Israel was only part of the wider providential sovereignty of God for all the nations of the world. That, you see, is God’s big picture; that is the ultimate goal—God’s mission of bringing blessings to the nations. That is what makes sense in this context of what God had done for Israel and what He expected from them, and that is the future grace, as it were, of God’s mission, God’s long-term project, alongside the past grace of God’s historical act of salvation when you put verse 5 and verse 4 alongside each other.

You could say that the whole of the story of the Old Testament is slung between those two poles, as indeed, is the whole story of the Christian Church and the whole story of your life and my life, because all of our identity and mission is simultaneously a response to what God has done in the *past* and an engagement with what God is doing and will do in the *future*. We live, as it were, between the past and the future; between grace and glory; between the act of salvation and the completion of God’s mission—between where we have come from and where we are going to—between what God has done and what God will do. That, to me, is THE story that enables me to have any sense of significance in the universe.

Otherwise, we might as well believe what Richard Dorkins put on the side of a London bus. If there is no God, there is no story except the one you make up for yourself. So, make one up, enjoy it, and get on with it until you die, and then that is it. What significance does that give to this six-foot chunk of intelligent DNA that happens to be standing in front of you now? If that is all I am, there’s not much meaning, but when I take this little slice of humanity that I am and the tiny little space that I will occupy in the grand sweep of universe time, from whenever you think the big bang happened

to whenever the Lord returns, somewhere in there is me. Just this tiny fragment of human history, but it's got meaning, it's got significance, it's got purpose because it is built into a story which is this big—of all the earth and of all the nations under the sovereign authority and mission of God. That is something that does lift up our eyes, in that sense, of answering the question: “Who are we and what are we here for?” We are in THIS story for this purpose with an ending that looks towards what we eventually discovered, of course, in the rest of the Bible right up to Revelation.

Present Grace—God's People in God's World

So that's the past grace of God's salvation, but in between that and the future grace of God's mission is, of course, the present. So we have to ask the question: “So what, then, did God want from these people?” That is what leads us in the third place, to what we could call present grace, or God's people in God's world. Verse 6, where God now says to them: “So then, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” That's who you are. That's what you are there for—to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. We have to ask again, “Well, what on earth does that mean? (Because they are not words that we perhaps like terribly well). We have had the Protestant Reformation—we don't want priests any more, thank you very much. Well, we do believe in holiness of a certain sort, but priestliness and holiness—what would Israel in the Old Testament have understood by these phrases? So, let's take each of them.

Priesthood

To understand that, you need to understand the role of priests in Israel's society. Very simply, they were there to bless the people, according to Numbers 6, but to bless the

people by standing in the middle between God, on the one hand, and all the rest of the people, on the other. The priests were middle men, quite literally. In that mediatorial middle position, they functioned in two directions—both directions of their position. The first was that it was the job of the priests to be teaching God's Law to the people. Now, we are not so familiar with that because we don't read Leviticus as much as we should, even if we read Hebrews. So, we have gotten on to this fact that when God called the Levites to be priests He said to them, now say this is to the sons of Aaron, “You must teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses” (Lev. 10:11). They had a teaching function, and that is similarly repeated in the blessing of Moses on the tribes of Israel in Deuteronomy 33:10. This is what is said about the tribe of Levi: “He teaches your precepts to Jacob and your Law to Israel and he offers incense before you and sacrifices at your altar.” The job of teaching comes first. Through the priests, God should become known to the people. It was the job of the priest to bring the Word of God, the Law of God, the teaching of God, to the rest of the ordinary people who would not have written copies of the Law as we do of our Scriptures and so on. That's why when the people went astray, the prophets blamed the priests. Do you remember Hosea? He says, “There is no knowledge of God in the Land. There is only idolatry, adultery, and murder, and violence, and bloodshed and who is to blame? He says, “You—you priests because you are not teaching God's people” (Hosea 4).

But the second direction of their work was to bring the sacrifices of the people to God. We are more familiar with that. We know about the job of the priest at the altar. So, if you were an Israelite, and you had

committed some sin, and you were unable to come into the worshipping community of God's people, what would you do? You brought whatever the prescribed sacrifice was—the animal, lamb, or whatever it may have been in the prescription. You brought it to the Tabernacle or to the Temple. You find some priest standing around with nothing to do. You say, "Come over here. This is my animal." You lay your hands on the animal, you confess your sins, you kill the animal, and the priest takes the blood of the sacrifice and throws it against the altar, which represents God. And then the priest says to you, "Your sins are atoned for." Through the priest you were then able to come back into the presence of God and the worshipping covenant community.

So, you see this double picture at work. The job of the priest as the representative middle person was to bring God to the people and to bring the people to God. How significant it is then, that God says to Israel as a whole community, "You will be for me to all the rest of the world what your priests are to you." You will be the people through whom I will make Myself known to the world, and you will be the people through whom I will draw the whole world to myself." Now that, it seems to me, is a missionary position. That priestly role is to be the representative of God to the world and to be the attraction of the nations to God. In fact, in the Old Testament, you find both those dynamics at work because you do read about how through the people of God that the Law of God, the knowledge of God, and the salvation of God were to go out to the ends of the earth. This is centrifugal motion. Also, the people of God will be those who would draw the nations to themselves—whether individuals, like Rahab, Ruth, or Naaman, or like one of the foreigners for whom Solomon prays in 1 Kings 8 who would come and pray in the Temple. He

asked God to answer their prayers. There would be an attraction to God through God's people.

But when you come to the New Testament, of course, and ask the same question about us, this is exactly what the New Testament says is supposed to be true of us as Christians. We are to be the people who bring God to the world and bring the world to God. Now that is certainly how the Apostle Paul saw his ministry. If you were here yesterday, I did mention this text before, but here it comes again. In Romans 15, Paul speaks about his evangelistic ministry, and he says, "It is the grace that God gave me to be a minister of the Messiah, Jesus, to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." Paul says, "That was my job—to bring the gospel of God to the nations and to bring the nations to God." That is priestly work. Paul says, "That's what I was doing." So, you might say, "That is fine. Paul was an apostle. He was a missionary. I am not!" Oh well. That doesn't let us off.

Peter applies this same text to all Christian believers in 1 Peter 2, the most familiar place, perhaps, where Exodus 19:6 is used. It is actually used quite a lot in different places in the Bible, but here is where Peter, addressing a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ says, "You are that chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." Peter says, "You are that people! You are God's priesthood." That, I think, is what I prefer to mean by the priesthood of all believers. I do believe the Reformation doctrine which declares that all believers have, in a sense, that right of access into the presence of God through the

sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. But there is another sense in which we can speak about the priesthood of all believers—the whole Christian community is meant to be God’s representative people to the world. So, you see, if someone reads on the side of a London bus, “There probably is no God,” they should be saying to themselves, “You know, that can’t be true because I know Sally or James and they are Christians and God is manifestly real in their lives.

To be priesthood means that we are to be the living proof of the living God—to be the demonstration, the proof that this nonsense that there probably is no God, is exactly that—nonsense. You can’t believe it once you have encountered Christians. That’s the way it should be. Our task is to bring God to people and to bring people to God. But how? That, of course, leads to the other half of the saying that we are not only called to be priestly but to be holy.

Holiness

Holiness is a rather misunderstood word. It doesn’t mean that we are to be extra special religious. God was certainly not saying to the Israelites, “I want you to be a religious people because all these foreigners are atheists.” Of course, everyone in the ancient world was religious. That wasn’t the problem. In any case, God’s got enough in religion, as it were, to last Him all eternity. He doesn’t need more religion. That is not what He wants. To be holy is not to be religious but to be different, distinctive—that is what the word means, separate.

You might have a whole bunch of cups in your cupboard, but if you take some vessels and you actually set them aside to be used for the worship of God in the temple, they become holy—not because they are magical but because they are different. They are set aside. They are distinct from all the ordinary

cups you use every day. It’s the same with the priests; they are set aside for God. So to be holy is to be different, and this is the difference that God explicitly puts on the Israelites in Leviticus where the word is used regularly. Leviticus 18:

Speak to the Israelites and say to them, “I am the Lord your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt where you used to live. You must not do as they do in the land of Caanan where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey My laws and be care to follow My ways,” say the Lord. So you know what the Egyptians are like? They worship the idolatry of power and empire and military. They are a great imperial force. Don’t go that way—don’t go that direction. That is not an idolatry you need to have. You know what the Caananites are like? They are into the worship of Baal who is the god of sex, money, business, prosperity, and everything else, including the fertility of your wife and your animals and your health. So, you worship Baal in order to have health, wealth, success, and prosperity. Don’t go that way! Don’t be like the Egyptians or the Caananites. Follow My ways. Be different; be holy. That is who we are; that’s what we are where for.”

Then take up Leviticus 19, in which God actually says, “You shall be holy as I your God am holy.” Go through that chapter, and tell me how many laws you can find in this chapter that are “religious.” There are only about two or three—one or two laws about sacrifice, how you spend the Sabbath, and so on. So, I say there is almost nothing religious in this chapter, so what is holiness about then? You read the chapter, and you find it is all about how you do your business, your farming, how you treat your

neighbor, how you handle the disabled, about your sexual morality, about the way you treat the elderly, about the way you treat foreigners and aliens, by the way, whom you are supposed to love as you love yourself. The whole chapter is about down to earth practical, everyday social ethics. God says, “That’s what I mean by holiness.” Be different.

Jesus put it differently. He said, “You are salt and light. Salt of the earth and light of the world. Salt and light are distinctive, penetrating, transforming, and confrontational. Salt confronts corruptions. Light confronts darkness. Jesus says, “You’ve got to be different!” So, you’ve got to be priestly to represent God; you’ve got to be holy in order to be priestly. How then can you be both?

That is where God puts in the condition in verse 5a: “If you will obey Me and keep My covenant, *then* you can be this kind of people.” Obedience is what is required. Of course, in the Old Testament context, this would have meant obedience to the Law of God that was immediately following: The Ten Commandments and the Law of the Covenant. Obedience to God’s Law. Ahh ... there you are. See, I knew it would get there eventually—works righteousness, justification by works, and all that. No, no, no! Hang on a minute. Remember the double context of grace. Past grace of God’s salvation and the future grace of God’s mission and within that comes obedience. You see, the important thing to see in this text is that *obedience was not a condition of salvation*. God did not say to Moses at the burning bush at Mt. Sinai, “Here are the Ten Commandments. So take them down to Egypt and tell the Hebrew slaves, ‘If you can obey these commandments and keep My Law, then I might save you out of slavery and you can be my people.’” No, no! He had

already saved them; they already were His people. They were redeemed; and now God says, “Now that I have done that for you, here is the obedience I expect in return. This is, in other words, the grace of obedience—responding to the grace of salvation, living in the grace of mission for God’s sake. “That’s who you are; that’s what you are there for,” says God to the Israelites.

Conclusion

Well, let me summarize, conclude, and open up for some comments or questions. We began by asking the question, “Who are we, and what are we here for in terms of our identity and our mission? What I am suggesting from this text is that, like the Israelites of the Old Testament, we are a people who, through Jesus Christ, have experienced the past grace of God’s saving work—through the exodus in the Old Testament and the cross of Christ and His resurrection in the New Testament. We are people whom God chooses to use for the mission of His grace to bring people of all nations and the whole earth to know Him as we do. We are called, then, to live lives in response to that grace—lives that represent God, and His beauty, holiness, and character as the priest of the Old Testament was supposed to do rather than living according to the degraded standards of the gods and idols around us. That is what will fulfill our mission. That’s what will draw people to Christ.

Just yesterday I had lunch with Mark Hausfeld, and he was telling me about an article in *Christianity Today* a few years ago where Dudley Woodberry had done a very broad survey of more than 700 former Muslim believers who had become believers and followers of Jesus to ask, “Why? What was it that had made that change in their lives which had made them convert to becoming Christians—and in most places at

great personal cost?” Of all the ten reasons that emerged in this survey, the number one reason was: “Observing the life of a Christian.” That was *the* most persuasive thing—they saw people who represented the Living God in lives that were lived as God’s priesthood in holiness and obedience. That was universal across the bands of Muslims they surveyed.

Therefore, we are exactly what Peter says we are—both in identity and in mission. Peter says it, doesn’t he? You are that people. You are God’s priesthood, God’s holy people. “Therefore, live such good lives among the pagans that though they may accuse you of doing wrong, they may

see your good deeds and glorify your Father.” Your ethical quality of life is the attractive force along with your declaring of God’s praise. You are the people, says Peter, whom God has called out of darkness. You’ve had your exodus experience. You’ve tasted God’s mercy. You are His treasured possession. You are the people of God. Now, then, live by that story. Live out that identity. Be that people; live that story. Then, people around you just won’t be able to believe the nonsense about there being no God, but they will come to glorify Him as we do. I trust that God will take that sense of identity and mission and enable us by His grace to fulfill it for His name sake.