

The Story: Set Apart For God
By Jason Huff
Psalm 4, 1 Peter 2:9-12, Exodus 19:1-8

Our third Scripture reading this morning is from Exodus 19:1-8. Listen now to God's Word. "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." So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD."

This past Thursday was Veterans Day, and it started me thinking about our nation and how unique it is. We are a nation of immigrants. Virtually all of our ancestors came here from somewhere else...some pursuing a better life, some escaping persecution. But potential citizens have a lot of work to do. They study our history and culture and language. They take tests. They pledge allegiance to our country and renounce citizenship elsewhere. Those of us born here can easily forget what it means to be a citizen. But as Veterans' Day reminds us, freedom is never free. The rights we hold cannot be taken lightly. Being a citizen carries responsibilities.

This week in *The Story*, we see God making Abraham's descendents into a true nation. God sets out the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen of God's Kingdom. The Israelites may share an ethnic background, but the nation of Israel is established and ordered by God Himself. That's what sets Israel apart. Other countries have their laws and rituals and gods; those don't make Israel special. What makes Israel special is that God is at its very core.

Israelite religion and law is based in one thought: God wants to be with them. He wants them to be His holy nation, and He plans to stay with them in a very literal way. In Exodus and Numbers, God says five times, "I will dwell among the Israelites." His presence goes before them and guides them. God didn't bring them out of Egypt to let them fend for themselves. God proposes a return to Genesis 2 and 3, where God walked in Eden with Adam and Eve.

The difference is, sin has gotten in the way between the garden and now, and the people cannot experience God the same way Adam and Eve did. God has to create a way for His people to get around the problem of disobedience. In this chapter of *The Story*, we see God give the Israelites a three-fold plan so that He may dwell with them in peace. God stipulates His requirements – obedience, a place to dwell, and atonement for sin. Let's take a quick look at each of these.

First is obedience to God's commands. God gives the entire law to Moses, but the part we know best is the Ten Commandments. There are two ways we can look at them, I think. The first way is the typical way – “the list.” Do this, don't do that. My way or the highway. Rules, rules, rules. When we look at God's law that way, we see God as someone who's heavy-handed, the cosmic killjoy who wants to take the fun out of life. But if we remember that God wants to be with His people, we look at the law and the commandments a different way.

We see that the Ten Commandments are all about building relationships...what some people have called “vertical” and “horizontal” relationships. The first four commandments are all about our vertical relationship with God. “Don't have any gods besides YHWH, the one true God. Don't make any idols of any kind to worship. Don't use God's name in vain. Honor the Sabbath day and keep it sacred to God.” The last six commands are about our horizontal relationships with one another. “Honor your father and mother. Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, and don't covet what someone else has. And be honest – don't give false testimony about your neighbor.” The rest of the law explains the situational ethics created by these ten commandments, showing the community how to practice these commands in real life.

Now we don't read much of the law in *The Story* – I think it's to keep us from getting bogged down in the details. But I want to explain a few things about the law God gave the Israelites. Sometimes we'll hear about strange laws in the Old Testament that don't make sense to us, such as the prohibition of eating pork or shellfish, or eating milk and meat at the same meal. The Israelites were commanded to wear certain kinds of clothing and weren't allowed to blend fabrics together – a polyester/cotton shirt, for example, would break the Jewish law. Why are there some commands in the Law that don't seem to be concerned with morality or ethics?

As God built His relationship with the Israelites, He wanted to set His people apart from the peoples around them. These laws did that. God eventually abolishes the dietary laws and the ritual laws in the New Testament as the promise of eternal life reaches past Israel's borders. But these laws show the extent and difficulty of the first commandment. Will you only eat and drink what God allows, or are you going to make your stomach your god? Will you wear what God says to wear, or will your clothing be your god? Will you obey God even when you can't find a secondary reason to do so, when the only reason you have is God saying “yes” or “no”? It's a problem we have today with the ethical laws of God that have never been repealed. The law points to an even greater problem – we cannot truly love God and completely obey His commands, at least not in our hearts. We'll talk about that problem in a minute. For now, it's enough to say that the law was made to establish a relationship between God and the Israelites. The law was not just moral and ethical – it was about obedience to whatever God said.

The second thing that God requires is a place to dwell among the Israelites. God commands a tabernacle be built for His presence. The tabernacle was a portable tent that the Israelites took with them any place they traveled. The pillar of wind and fire that led them out of Egypt rested on the tabernacle, and the Israelites didn't break camp until the pillar departed the tabernacle. The tabernacle was built to God's specifications, and it included items such as the Ark of the Covenant, where the written Ten Commandments were kept. The best craftsmen throughout the nation built it down to the last detail.

The tabernacle served two very different but important purposes for the Israelite community. First, it reminded them that God desired to be their God and intended to be in relationship with them. They could look off in the distance and see a visual reminder of God's presence all the time. God was never limited to that one place, but in the middle of their travels and their concerns about the future, the Israelites could see that God had not abandoned them.

At the same time, the tabernacle served to remind the Israelites that God is holy. He is so unique and special that He is not to be regarded lightly or approached without the greatest caution. God's dwelling within the tabernacle was called the Most Holy Place. Only once a year could the high priest enter into that area and make a sacrifice for the people. When the glory of the LORD was in the tabernacle, not even Moses could enter it. The tabernacle showed that God dwells with His people, but he is still God. He is holy and cannot be approached by the unholy.

This leads us to God's final requirement – atonement. God wants to reside with His chosen people, but He cannot be in the presence of sin. It's the great dilemma...how does a perfect God overcome the problem of relating to people who are not only imperfect but disloyal and disobedient? It's through sacrifice.

God establishes a formal system of sacrifices. Burnt offerings, grain offerings, fellowship offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings, drink offerings...all of them worked to do one of two things. They either made a form of restitution before God for sins that had been committed, or they showed the desire of a person or family to be close to God and to be in relationship with Him. The sacrificial system had detailed instructions so the priests would honor God in their work. Not everyone could make a sacrifice; only the priests, who were the physical descendants of Jacob's son Levi, could do the task. These sacrifices had to be offered continually, since the people of God always had sins for which they needed to atone.

Atonement showed God's grace to the Israelites. God didn't have to forgive them, but through this system, He did. Atonement showed that sin had a price. A person did not receive atonement without sacrifice. And yet the sacrifice was small in comparison to the relationship it restored. God allowed His people to walk with Him and receive His blessings despite their sin – that's no small thing. Now some crimes could not be atoned for, such as murder, adultery, or witchcraft. The penalty for these acts was death. God pardons some who commit these acts based on their repentance and their relationship with Him, but only as a sign of His mercy.

So we have these three requirements of relationship with God before us – obedience, a dwelling place, and atonement. Sometimes we read all this and think, what does this have to do with Jesus? The thing is, *these three requirements have never changed*. We are still called to obedience. In Matthew 22, Jesus was asked, "What is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commands." We've never been told it is OK to disobey God. In fact, Jesus makes our need for obedience far clearer than the Old Testament law ever did. We aren't called just to refrain from killing our neighbor but to steer clear of hatred. We are told not just to avoid adultery but lust. God doesn't just want our actions to be right; He wants our thought lives to be right too.

As the Israelites prove over and over again, keeping the law was impossible enough...but keeping a clean conscience too is impossible times a thousand! How can we ever get right with God? The good news is, Jesus serves as our great high priest. With His blood, He made permanent atonement for the sins of everyone who would come to Him in repentance and faith. We couldn't make the sacrifice ourselves; it had to be made for us. Jesus did that through His own life and death. And unlike the never-ending series of sacrifices of the Law, Jesus' sacrifice covers sin once and for all. Through Him, any kind of sin can be pardoned. Everything can be forgiven by the God who gave His life for our sakes. As we talked about last week, when we repent and turn in faith to Jesus, He is our Passover lamb, and God "passes over" our sins. Even those sins that could not be atoned for in the Old Testament, Jesus takes those upon Himself as well for anyone willing to come to Him. In this we are truly blessed.

God dwelt in the tabernacle of the Israelites. But God has found an even better home for Himself – through Jesus' work on the cross, God now resides in the believer's heart through the Holy Spirit. We sometimes think that the church building has taken the place of the tabernacle or the temple of ancient Israel, but that's not true. You and I, we who are believers – we are the church. We are the place where God dwells. In John 14:23, Jesus says, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." He means this literally. The Holy Spirit lives in us and allows us to be in communion with all three members of the Trinity every single day. That's a huge relief for us. God has not abandoned us. In fact, He is at work in you right now, even as you are listening...God is doing His reconstruction of your soul at this very moment. And He's not going to stop the job until He's finished. That's truly good news.

I want to wrap up today with a note of warning and a note of transformation from our readings this week. The first is the cautionary tale of the Israelites. These folks are double-minded in the extreme. On one hand, they are freaked out by God. God comes to the mountain and is ready to speak to the people, but they tell Moses that God should just to speak with him instead. They are terrified of God's presence. Now move forward five weeks. They're impatient. They tell Aaron, "Moses has vanished and we don't know where God went, so make some gods for us." Weak-willed Aaron does just that, and the whole community suffers because of it.

This story reminds us of the danger of our own impatience with God and our quickness to pursue our own interests. These people saw the LORD bring plagues on Egypt, lead them through the Red Sea, and even appear before them as a pillar of cloud and fire...what more did they need? But just a few weeks later, they are willing to worship a golden cow! We think that it's insane, but are we so different? When God is not answering our prayers quickly, do we question His power? Are we content with the gods of our culture, the distractions of sports and television and everything else, rather than wholeheartedly pursuing the God of Scripture? The Israelites paid a heavy price for their forgetfulness of God and their pursuit of idols. Will we pay the same kind of price for our lukewarm devotion to God, or will we take the call to love God and our neighbor seriously?

The note of transformation, meanwhile, happens in Moses. Remember last week how God finds Moses out in the desert, 80 years old, far away from Pharaoh and from the Israelites in slavery. When God tells Moses to go, Moses begs God to send anyone else. He doesn't want the job. He's too tired to care. The bad memories of Egypt are forty years behind him. He goes to Pharaoh the most reluctant of servants. But look at how God has changed Moses!

There's this whole mess with the golden calf. The Israelites commit a sin for which there is no atonement...only the death penalty. God is rightfully angry with them. God offers to bring justice on the Israelites and to make Moses into the nation that was promised to Abraham. But Moses instead pleads for the Israelites, and God shows mercy. God has transformed Moses. This man who wanted nothing more to do with the Israelites has now thrown his lot in with them completely. He asks God to blot *his* name out of the book of life if God cannot forgive them.

God has given Moses a heart for the Israelites...His own heart. Moses now shares God's view on the Israelites. He knows they are desperately wicked, prone to fight God tooth and nail to serve their own ends...but He loves them. Moses has fully embraced the role God gave him to lead God's people out of slavery and into freedom...not just out of the bonds of Egypt, but out of the bonds of sin and self-worship and into the freedom and righteousness of God.

So the question comes back to us...are we going to have God's heart for people? Who has God laid on your heart this week to reach out to? What person who seems beyond hope can you share the hope of Jesus Christ with this week? I'm going to encourage you to write that person's first name on your bulletin right now. God made Moses into an awesome leader of His people. God may not make you into a Moses, but He will share His heart with you. And when He does, you will know that sharing His heart is something we were made to do.

God made a way to be with the Israelites through obedience, through a dwelling place, and through atonement. He still does that today for us. We are citizens of God's Kingdom, and He has shown us our rights and responsibilities as servants of the King. Go out into the world this week ready to obey Him, following the Spirit's leading as God lives within you, confident that even when you fail, God has made a way for you to be in relationship with Him through His Son Jesus Christ. Amen.