



God's Story, Our Mission Week 4: God's Holy Nation for God's Mission

Facilitator's Guide

In this guide you will find:

- Objectives for study – after watching the video, use this to bridge the video content and the discussion questions
- Discussion questions for each part of this week's study
- Related scripture references for reflection

Part 1:

Objective: Our aim is to learn that Yahweh redeemed Israel to be in a specific type of relationship with them, a covenant relationship. Learn what God's covenant with Israel means for God's mission to the world.

Welcome back to God's Story, Our Mission. Last week, in week 3, we saw God's missionary heart in the book of Exodus, and how he reveals himself to Moses and the burning bush and how his revelation is bound up with his holy name, Yahweh. God wants to know us personally, and that means knowing his personal name: Yahweh. But, he binds that to his promise to be Israel's redeemer, their go'el, their family champion—because Israel had been oppressed in slavery for over 400 years in Egypt. By God's mighty acts of deliverance, he made his name known: to Pharaoh, to the Egyptians, to Moses and to the Israelites. We see this missionary purpose of making his name known through how he acts in history was successful. It wasn't just the Israelites who leave Egypt, but, as Exodus tells us, a mixed multitude leaves with the Israelites. Egyptians even came to know that Yahweh is God through his mighty acts of deliverance through the Exodus. They follow with the Israelites.

Today, in our session for week 4, we want to ask: what does that name mean for us as a people? How do we bear God's name? Not just as individuals, but as a people?

So we come back to Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 19. That's where we are going to start today. That's where Moses had first encountered God in the burning bush, but instead of a burning bush, we are going to see the whole mountain on fire. All of God's people are going to have an experience of God revealing himself on this mountain. He sets up his purpose. He saved his people Israel, he delivered them, he was their goel, their redeemer, so that he could bring them back to this mountain and make a

covenant with them. So we read in Exodus chapter 19, 3 months after the Exodus, 3 months after they had crossed the red sea, we pick up in chapter 19. "There, Israel encamped in front of the mountain, while Moses went up to God. Yahweh 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. Because all the earth is mine, 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."

Now we have the purpose for why God saved his people, delivered them and brought them to himself on Mount Sinai to make a covenant. But we start off with recognition and a remembrance of the Grace of God as our go'el, as the people of Israel's go'el. As he redeemed the people, they are to remember what he did for them. It's not because of their own actions God saved them, it's because that's who Yahweh is as he is committed to the family of Abraham, as he is committed to his promise to the people of Israel to be their champion, deliverer, redeemer. So we have to remember that that's the foundation for everything that we see coming after this. But God tells them that he brought them here for a purpose: to make a covenant with them. We've seen some covenants before, in how God dealt with Abraham. In Genesis 15 and in chapter 17 of Genesis we saw God cutting covenants with Abraham. He had made promises to Abraham and his descendants, but he ratified those promises with a ritual act. That's what a covenant is. So often in our life as Christians, and as we approach the Bible, we talk about 'God wants to be in relationship with us,' and we are called to be in relationship with him. And that is absolutely true! But oftentimes, we project our own understandings of relationships back onto God. While this isn't always inappropriate, we also need to hear how the Bible tells us these relationships work, our relationships with God. The way he has done it with the people of Israel, the way he has established his relationship is through a covenant. Now, a covenant in the ancient world was a ritual act that brought two groups together- sometimes two individuals, but also two groups of people. And in this special ritual act, it binds the two parties together in an enduring relationship. It also sets out the stipulations and the contours for that relationship. If you want to know what a relationship with Yahweh looks like, well it looks like his covenant with Israel. That's what God says here, that he has brought them to obey his voice and to keep his covenant. And by doing that, by obeying his voice, they will be a treasured possession, a *segulla* in Hebrew.

Now, the *segulla* was the king's crown jewel. This is a term we hear again and again in the old testament, as God describes how he loves and is committed to his people Israel. But the point of a *segulla*, the crown jewel in the king's treasure chest, is not to be the distinction of the other treasures, but to highlight the desire of the king's heart among all his treasures. That's why God says, "You will be my treasured possession," because all of the earth, all people belong to Yahweh. But it will be through the special relationship with Israel that people will see just what a relationship with Yahweh looks like. So we see that missionary purpose is bound to what it means to be a treasured possession. As they are brought into the special relationship through the covenant, they will carry out the special purpose. And that is described in two other key terms. Yahweh says, you will be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. Now when we talk about priesthood, we need to understand how the bible talks about priests. That's what the book of Leviticus is all about, as we learn what the responsibilities of the priests of God were. We see a number of important responsibilities. They were to teach the word of Yahweh. They were to tell the people and to teach the people what it is that God's word says. They were also to perform the ritual actions of sacrifices. Not least of all, they were to provide the blessing to the people. We see in all of these things that the priests were mediators. Robert Kolb, in his book,

Speaking the Gospel today, makes the important illustration using the latin term pontifex, the latin term for priest. He uses it as an illustration to help us understand our role as priests, and Israel's role as priests among the nations, as a nation of priests. He says, 'a pontifex in latin is literally a bridge builder.' Well, that helps us think about what it means for Israel to be a kingdom of priests—a kingly, royal priesthood. The whole nation was to be for the rest of the world what the priests were for God's people: a mediator. As they live out this covenant and live in covenant relationship, we bear God's name. The people of Israel bear God's name and so reveal and mediate God's presence and blessing to the rest of the world. Now, we see that promise of Abraham taking on a whole national scope. That's at least God's plan here in Exodus 19. But God also says they will be a holy nation. Holiness is something we need to become very familiar with as we look at God's covenant with Israel in Exodus and in the rest of the Pentateuch.

To be holy means to be different. A lot of times, we associate holiness with moral perfection. But it really means to be set apart, to be distinct and unique. Israel is to be holy in its behavior, in its outlook on life, because Yahweh is holy. He is unique. And that's what the Exodus was about: by his mighty acts of deliverance, Yahweh sets himself apart from all the false claims to be God. He shows himself to be truly God, but he shows the way he is truly God is different from all the other ideas of what it means to be God. The gods of the ancient world did not reveal themselves very much. Many people have to abstract their way to understand what the gods were. They posited different personalities for their gods, but did not expect the gods to reveal themselves. That is completely different from Yahweh, who reveals himself precisely because he is committed to saving his people, to actually working in history. So we have that revelation of who Yahweh is, as the goel, the redeemer, and the creator. As Israel follows God in this covenant relationship, they are to be holy as God is holy, as Yahweh is holy. And that's where we come to the Ten Commandments.

It is the constitution of the covenant. As we look at the ten words, the Decalogue, we don't come to a set of arbitrary rules. They are not even laws in the way that we typically think of laws, but they set up God's program for his covenant. They set out his constitution. This is what God's people will be like as they follow God in this particular and unique and holy relationship. As they have been redeemed, they have been brought into this type of relationship and these are the things they are to care about. So God cuts a covenant with his people in Exodus 24. Moses makes a sacrifice on an altar before Mount Sinai after he has received all of the words of Yahweh, which constitute the covenant. And the people say that what the lord commands we will obey. Moses splatters the people in a ritual act, splattering them with the blood of the sacrifice to seal them in this relationship. They are bound together, Yahweh and his people Israel.

Now, I want us to continue thinking about what it means to be holy, because, as we see in the Pentateuch, as we go and continue through the laws and regulations as God gives his holy statutes and instructions, as he gives the tabernacle and all of the regulations and regulations for holiness in the temple, we see that holiness, among God and his people, is about preserving God's presence with his people. They are to be holy because God is going to dwell with his people. And that's how the nations will be blessed. As Israel has the presence of God with them, they will mediate that as a nation, as a royal priesthood. We read in Leviticus 19, what does it really mean for God's people to be holy? Leviticus 19 says "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: 'You shall be holy because I, Yahweh your God, am Holy.'" That's what he tells Moses to instruct them.

Yahweh is unique. So what does our uniqueness really look like? What does the people of Israel's call to be different look like? We know from the Ten Commandments and other regulations and statutes that

it means worshipping Yahweh alone. Only Yahweh is god. God's people are to be devoted to Yahweh alone. So it's unique in its worship: not giving in to the pluralism of the world around Israel. But it's not just in worship in the sense of who you worship; it also is how you worship. It's according to the rituals and the sacrificial system that Yahweh has given to the people of Israel and the Pentateuch. The way they conduct their worship is to be different. There will be atonement for sins. There will be freewill offerings, and other ways that the priests will continue to maintain the blessing of God's presence with his people. But it's not just in these overtly religious ways that God's people are called to be holy; it also has to do with the moral world, and the moral life of God's people. Yahweh is unique and holy in how he is committed to justice and righteousness. That's what he told us in Genesis chapter 18- that's what we read. That Abraham was to learn to walk in the way of Yahweh, to learn righteousness and justice. We also read in Leviticus 19 in this call to be holy, we read about economic loss: how we are not to disenfranchise the poor, how we are to have fair business practices. It has to do with how we use our bodies. It even talks about sexual purity. The whole life of God's people is to be unique, to reflect the unique character of Yahweh.

Discussion Questions:

- 1.) In Exodus 19, Yahweh says he redeemed Israel in order to bring them into a covenant relationship with himself. This relationship is for a special purpose of making Israel a royal priesthood and a royal priesthood. How does this covenant relationship connect back to our previous lessons? How does God's covenant with Israel provide more information about our mission than in those previous lessons? Compare and contrast!**
- 2.) Priests are mediators between God and his people. In the lesson we identified a number of ways that the Levites were to mediate between Yahweh and his people. They are the bride builders as it were. How can a whole people then be priestly for the rest of the world? How can we in our congregation be bridge builders in our community between God and others?**
- 3.) Israel, in the covenant relationship with Yahweh was also called to be holy. Holiness is about being unique and different in accordance with how Yahweh is different and unique. Do we in our congregation do a good job being different in how we reflect the character of God or do we look more like just like everyone else? In what ways can we continue to reflect and grow in our God given holiness for others?**

Part 2:

Objective: Our aim is to understand that a holy way of life is not to isolate God's people from the world but to reveal the character of Yahweh to those who don't yet know him. Holiness of life is meant to draw the attention of others so that they can come to know God.

We should come to understand that ethics and our works as God's people is just as much about mission and witnessing as our words.

Turning to Leviticus 26, we understand exactly why this is. Yahweh says in Leviticus 26 that as they are obedient to this covenant and this instruction to be holy, this new, unique way of life, he says: "I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you. You shall eat old store long kept, and you shall clear out the old to make way for the new. I will make my dwelling among you. And my soul shall not abhor you. I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall not be their slaves. I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you to walk erect." That's what he says in Leviticus 26: 10-13. So we see that this call to obey God's covenant, to live a holy life, not just as individuals but as a whole people, God promises his presence among them as they maintain their holiness, and that God will bring blessing. Just as we saw what God promised to Abraham as an individual and as his family, now we see God doing this for an entire nation, the nation and people of Israel that God had made by his mighty acts of deliverance.

But it's not just for themselves. Holiness is not just so that God's people would be isolated from the world. They are actually to be for the world, as they are called to live in the land that God is bringing them to, the land of Canaan. They are to be unique and different, not just for themselves, but for the nations that will observe them. That's what we read as we come to Deuteronomy chapter 4. We see the missionary purpose of Israel's holiness of life and God's call for them to be holy, just as he is holy. It's not that they would be saved by their obedience. We know that they have already been saved by God's mighty acts of deliverance, just as Abraham was saved by God's promise being declared righteous through faith. But there was a purpose for obedience: So that others might inherit the blessing so that others would be brought into relationship with God. So we read in Deuteronomy chapter 4 the purpose that they are to be different in their way of life, their communal way of life. Not just as individuals but as a whole people. Deuteronomy 4:5-8 reads, "See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" Israel is on the world stage and is meant to invite observation and scrutiny of the nations so that they will be drawn in to learn about Yahweh who is unique among the "gods" of nations. Israel is to be a witness by how they actually embody the wisdom and revelation found in God's instruction—his Torah. Israel's mission is just as much, if not more, about their way of life that is meant to be observed as it is about the words they use about Yahweh.

But we know that this is only part of the story in the Pentateuch. Israel is given this covenant relationship with Yahweh but they are unable to keep it. Meant to be a light to the nations, Israel succeeds mainly in acting just like the rest of the world. In fact, all the way back at Mt. Sinai, in the book of Exodus, as Moses is up on the mountain receiving the instruction of Yahweh for this covenant, the children of Israel break the covenant they said they would keep by forging the golden calf. This sets up Israel's main characteristic of being stiff necked and rebellious, even though they are God's covenant people with a holy purpose. Throughout the covenant stipulations in the Pentateuch, Yahweh is clear: If you break the covenant relationship, you get kicked out of the land. That's what happens.

But Yahweh does ever abandon his mission and that means he never abandons his people Israel. Though they do get expelled from the land as Yahweh uses Assyria and Babylon as instruments of his judgment, taking the people of Israel into exile, Yahweh nevertheless promises to renew his covenant with Israel. Two key passages that promise covenant renewal for a rebellious Israel are found in Jeremiah 31 and in Ezekiel 36. Speaking to a people in exile, Yahweh promises through Jeremiah, "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. 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," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "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 they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." And in Ezekiel 36 we read, "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God."

Both of these Old Testament texts show Yahweh's solemn promise, not to abandon his people who broke the covenant, but to renew that covenant. But there is a clear difference between the old covenant at Sinai and this renewed covenant to come—where as the first was written on tables of stone, the renewed covenant will be written on the very hearts of God's people with his own Holy Spirit. God's grace promised in this renewed covenant will ensure this holy and distinct life for Yahweh's people so that God's mission moves forward. What human beings are unable to do by themselves because of sin, God's grace actually accomplishes.

This New Covenant is ratified in no other way than through the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the last supper, in fact, which in Jesus' day was a Passover meal for the Jewish people to remember God's redemption and covenant making was the occasion where Jesus identified his death as shedding of the blood of the new covenant, presumably that renewed covenant promised by Yahweh through Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In the words where Jesus institutes the sacrament of communion, we hear Jesus explicitly say that the cup is the blood of the new covenant. Just like Moses ratified the covenant on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 24 by sacrifice and sprinkling the blood on the people of Israel, we also are ratified in God's renewed covenant through the blood of Christ shed on the cross but which is given to the Church in communion. It should come as no surprise then, in the Gospel of John's account of the last supper Jesus uses language very reminiscent to covenant language found in the Pentateuch. In John 15 we read, As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay

down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” And in John 13 Jesus says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” In Jesus then, God’s covenant is renewed so that an abiding relationship with God can be had not by the law that has the power to accuse and kill but now fully in and through the grace of God through Jesus and his Holy Spirit. While we are ensured the forgiveness of all our sins through Christ, the grace of God offered in this freeing forgiveness is also that which makes our whole life holy and unique in accordance with Jesus’ own life. Our renewed covenant is just as much concerned for a distinct and unique shape of life for the sake of others knowing God but now it is fully realized as life in Christ and relationship to God through Christ.

For next time we will continue with the next great moment in God’s story as Yahweh institutes a king over Israel first in the tragic figure of Saul but ultimately in David with whom God makes another advance on his mission for the world. God Bless.

Discussion Questions:

- 1.) In Leviticus 26, Yahweh says that Israel’s covenant holiness maintains the conditions for God to dwell with his people. Saint Paul in 2nd Corinthians 6:14-7:1 quotes Leviticus 26 to call Christians in the new Covenant in Christ to continue their concern for unique holiness in the world. In our context what are the temptations we face as a group and as individuals to dilute our Christ-centered Holiness?**
- 2.) Deuteronomy 4:5-8 teaches a main missional reason for Israel’s call to be holy in a covenant relationship with God. By living in accordance with God’s instruction on the world stage, other people will see and be drawn to inquire about God. Do we welcome other people’s scrutiny of our Christian life and faith? Why or why not?**
- 3.) Israel is called be part of God’s mission by their distinct way of life. This teaches us that being part of God’s mission is as much about our way of life than it is about our words. How do we that our congregations draw the attention of others? Do we hide away from our community in order to isolate ourselves or do we actively attempt to be present on the stage of our community to reflect God to others as a community of faith? How can we do better?**

For Next Time

Deuteronomy 17; Judges 8:22-23 and 9; skim 1st Samuel 7-10 and 15-17; 2nd Samuel 7; Psalms 2 and 72; Isaiah 9:1-7 and Isaiah 11; Amos 9:11-12; Luke 1-2; Acts 15; Romans 1:1-6.