



## "God Forms a People"

*Exodus 24:3–4; Acts 2:1–13*

***Through the Law and a dwelling place, God shapes a people. On Pentecost, God reshaped his people, now reborn in Christ.***

God creates. I'm sure that when we hear those two words, our minds turn to Genesis 1 and 2; I know mine does. But even the creation of this world was a means to an end. As Simon Chan once put it, "God made the world to make the church." Rocks and trees and mountains are a means to create a people whom God loves and who love God. This creation of a people is the story of the book of Exodus and even the story of Pentecost.

Yes, God had come to Abraham making big promises to him and Sarah about all the families of the earth being blessed through them. But God had asked little of them and, by the time of the Exodus, the Israelites had forgotten much and were not a people through whom God could rescue humanity. So God took them to Mt. Sinai, promising them that if they obeyed God and kept covenant with God, they would be God's treasured possession, a holy nation (19:5-6). Terence Fretheim helps us get deeper into these central phrases of obedience and covenant:

*"Obey my voice and keep my covenant."* [19:5] First to be noted is that the matter is presented in personalistic terms: I did; I bore you; brought you to myself, giving heed to my voice, keeping my covenant, being my own possession, being to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. That which is called for on Israel's part is couched in language that speaks more of personal commitment to God himself than to particular commandments. There is as yet no specified content to the voice to be obeyed.

Second, obeying the voice of God is a concern already expressed in Exodus (see at 15:26). We have seen that issues of obedience are not simply associated with the law revealed at Sinai but also emerge in connection with various situations in Israel's life. Hence, when combined with the lack of specificity, there is an openness here regarding the shape of Israel's obedience, a recognition that *to obey the voice of God entails more than obeying the laws given at Sinai*.

Third, much the same point can be made regarding the phrase "keeping my covenant." . . . Israel as a *community* for the first time responds as Abraham did. Keeping covenant has as broad a reference as obeying the voice of God. In the widest sense, it is doing justice to, being faithful to, the relationship with God in which the people stand, *a responsibility that is more extensive than obedience to Sinai law*.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, though the plagues in the Exodus story capture people's imagination, the heart of the Exodus story is the encounter between God and his people at Mount Sinai. There, Moses climbs the mountain to appear before God, who reminds the people of what God has done for them and then proposes a covenant with the Israelites: "If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my special treasure" (see Exodus 19:1-6).

When Moses returns from the mountain, the leaders of the people meet and agree to accept the covenant, "to do everything Yahweh asks of us." Nonetheless, it is very important to realize that the Israelites agree to the covenant; they sign on for the project. They will obey God, not just in lawkeeping but in all that God asks of them. Yes, they will love God and love others! After everything God had done for them, the Israelites' willingness to accept God's covenant shouldn't surprise us. Sadly, neither will their failure to keep it.

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 210–211.

After the people accept the covenant with God, the most amazing thing happens. God tells Moses that he will come to the people in a cloud of smoke so they can hear the audible voice of God! God is going to spell out clearly the terms of the covenant Israel has accepted so that all can hear. Thus, Moses assembles the people at the base of the mountain where God, in smoke and fire and announced by the blowing of a ram's horn, addresses his people.

### ***Instruction in the covenant***

In God's address to the people, YHWH lays out a series of ten terse commandments. In these commandments, God begins to shape a people who will be holy, who will reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin God's instruction on how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. This entire passage (Exodus 20-31) is foundational to the biblical narrative, and there are several keys to understanding why this is so.

First, God's choosing and saving of Israel was never simply for their own sake but for the sake of the whole world. Looking back from Mount Sinai, the Israelites can remember God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). More than a thousand years later, Jesus would remind his disciples that they were to be the light to the world and not hide their light under a bushel basket (Matthew 5:14-16). But to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom God would restore all creation, God's people had to grow in holiness. Their character had to reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin to show the Israelites what it means to love God and to love neighbor. The abstract "to love" is made concrete by the commandments.

Second, God is going to dwell with his people. But just how does a holy God live with an unholy people who remain very much the children of the rebellious and disobedient Adam?<sup>2</sup> So, beginning in Exodus 25, God gives them instructions for building a tabernacle,<sup>3</sup> a moveable shrine in which God will dwell. The Israelites didn't imagine that God could be contained in a tent, but they knew that God's presence would be with them in a way that he was not with other peoples. God would dwell with them! Imagine that God came to you and told you that he would live upstairs in your home. What a privilege; what a responsibility.

Third, God sets up a system of rituals, priests, sacrifices, and festivals so that the people can begin to learn that some things are holy and some are not. They must learn that the two do not mix. The priestly system teaches the people that God cannot be approached by a sinful and unholy people. Thus, the priests and sacrifices accomplish, after a fashion, the reconciliation of God and his people. But still, all the rituals, priests, and sacrifices are only signposts to the real thing; they could never be the "real thing" itself. They are like a splint put on a broken leg; one can get by but it is not a healing. That will await the arrival of God's own Son (Acts 4).

Finally, the Law was not given to the world, but to the Israelites, the family of Abraham. They were the ones who worshipped YHWH and he gave these teachings to his people. God would dwell with them in a way that he did not dwell with others. Thus, in a way, the Law can be seen as a manual on what it means to live with God. None of us would be surprised to be handed a list of house rules if God moved in upstairs. All of this is to say it is foolish to try to separate the two tablets, to strive to live by the ethic of the second tablet while ignoring the first.

### ***What does God want from his people above all else?***

Jesus summed up all of the Law, God's Instruction, in two teachings: love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love others (Leviticus 19:18). The first tablet speaks to our relationship with God. We are to have no other gods or

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<sup>2</sup> We are all children of Adam in the sense that we are all sinful, failing to love fully God and our neighbor. It is the separation and estrangement created by "sin" that must be fixed.

<sup>3</sup> The tabernacle was a moveable tent, suitable for a nomadic people. Inside was a place set apart from the rest that was called the Holy of Holies. In it was kept the Ark of the Covenant containing the stone tablets brought down the mountain by Moses. Centuries later, when the people were settled in the Promised Land, they would build a permanent temple in Jerusalem. It was patterned on the tabernacle described in the book of Exodus.

take God's name in vain and so on. The second tablet speaks to how we are to live with others. We are not to steal or give false testimony. We are to honor our parents and our marriages. We are to forsake murder and so on. All of it seeking to answer the question, "What would love do?"

If you took all of God's teachings set forth in the Law of Moses, mixed them up in a pot, and boiled them down to their essence, love of God and others would be what is left. Think again of the two tablets – the first one focused on what it means to love God, the second on what it means to love others. If you let this sink deep into your mind and heart, your understanding of Scripture will be revolutionized. You will come to know Jesus as you have not before.

Indeed, God created a people to live in love and fellowship and through whom God would rescue humanity. And when the community failed to love as they promised, God provided one faithful Jew who would and did -- Jesus.

### ***Jesus and the Covenant***

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what God's Law is all about. When tested by the young lawyer, Jesus said that all the Law can be summed in the commandments to love God (the first tablet) and to love neighbor (the second tablet). All the do's and don'ts one finds in the Old Testament are simply concrete expressions of those two commandments for an ancient people.

The small book, *Smart Choices*, is an excellent introduction to decision analysis (which is a fancy way of saying deciding among choices). The authors take the reader through a straightforward presentation of how to state the problem, define objectives, create alternatives, evaluate tradeoffs and so on. They are business school types who want to help managers make better choices.

But for Christians, any talk of the good life or making better choices or living ethically must *first* begin with God. This isn't to say that sound analysis is unimportant, but that the analysis must start with God. It is God who is good. It is God who made this world. It is God who made us in his image (the *imago Dei*). Thus, it must be God who points us toward the better choices. It is God who establishes what a smart choice is. It is God who takes away our blindness and enables us to see the life that we seek and the life that God desires for us.

This is what the Law of Moses does for us, when we learn in Exodus 22:21-22 that "you shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien . . . you shall not abuse any widow or orphan," it speaks volumes to us about how to live and what God values, i.e., it tells us about the character of God.

### ***A new people***

And so, we turn now to Pentecost, when God formed a new people, reborn by the Holy Spirit, reborn in Jesus Christ. A people that would transcend the family of Abraham even as they remained the root of the tree. Jesus sends his disciples out "to make disciples of all nations," (Matthew 28) being his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1).

When Acts 2 opens, Jesus' disciples have gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost. The city is packed, with the population having swelled to perhaps 150,000 people. Jews are there from all over the Roman Empire. In the weeks before the festival, the disciples had been with the resurrected Jesus, who before returning to the Father had told the disciples that they were to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had explained that God's Spirit would come upon them with power so that they could be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and "to the ends of the earth" (see Acts 1).

One can only imagine the anticipation and, perhaps, anxiety that the disciples felt. Only weeks before, they had been cowering in an upstairs room waiting to be rounded up by the Roman soldiers after Jesus' crucifixion. But Jesus had passed through death. His resurrection changed everything. They didn't know what to expect, but they wouldn't have to wait long to find out what was in store for them. As Luke tells it, they were gathered when "from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . Divided tongues, as of fire . . . rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other

languages” (from today’s passage). As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit had returned with power.  
*Returned??*

Ever since the flight from Egypt more than a millennium before Christ, God had been present with his people in a way that he was not present elsewhere. Indeed, God’s dwelling place had been the temple in Jerusalem. But God’s people had been unable to live as they should in the presence of God. Consequently, God’s presence had departed the temple, “Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house . . .” (Ezekiel 10:18). God’s Holy Spirit is God’s empowering presence. Thus, when God was no longer present with his people as he had been, it meant that God’s Spirit had left.

Yet, although God would no longer dwell in the temple with his people, God had not forever abandoned them. God promised that one day he would put within them a new Spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (see Jeremiah 31). In essence, God promised that he would one day return to his temple (Malachi 3:1). Now, as the disciples sat together during Pentecost, that day had come. But it would not be as they expected. They would be God’s temple, collectively and individually (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:16-17).

### ***At last***

After Jesus’ ascension (his return to the Father), the believers returned to Jerusalem to wait. There, they stayed together and devoted themselves to prayer (see Acts 1:12-26). They also had to restore the circle of Jesus’ closest disciples to twelve by replacing Judas Iscariot. Just as there were originally twelve tribes of Israel, the inner circle of disciples had to be twelve, representing the restored Israel. So, they cast lots (rolled dice!)<sup>4</sup> and Matthias was added to make twelve again.

The believers prayed and waited, but I wonder what they thought would happen next. Jesus had said that the Father would send them the Spirit, who would teach them everything and remind them of what Jesus had said (John 14:26). Whatever the believers imagined, I doubt it quite measured up to the dramatic reality of that Pentecost day.

The believers were all in one place on that day. It was early, about 9am. Suddenly, there was the sound of a huge wind and tongues of fire leapt from believer to believer. These were theophanies, dramatic manifestations of God. God was suddenly with them in a way that God had not been with them before.

The Spirit, God-present, then gave each believer the ability to proclaim God in languages they couldn’t know. It would be like me suddenly preaching Sunday’s sermon in Russian—if someone who only spoke Russian needed to hear. What they said wasn’t gibberish; rather, it was the undoing of the multiplicity of languages following God’s destruction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). It signified the restoration of God’s creation, which God had already accomplished in Christ though it was not yet fully consummated.

Peter, now empowered and led by the Spirit, then rose to speak to everyone within shouting distance. You can bet that the commotion caused by the believers and their astonishing language skills had drawn a big crowd from the throngs in Jerusalem for the festival. Peter began by invoking the words of the prophet of Joel, for what was happening that morning was not merely a fulfillment of what Jesus had promised the disciples, it was a fulfillment of the story told by Scripture. Indeed, God in the persons of Jesus and the Spirit, had stepped into space and time to restore and renew his creation, as God had promised he would do. The Day of the Lord had arrived. It might not have looked like what everyone imagined it would but God’s victory over sin and death had been won, shaking the cosmos to its very core.

And the Church was born, a fellowship created and empowered by the Holy Spirit. A reborn people, “a chosen people, a holy nation” in whom the Spirit of God dwells. evidence of God’s work in our lives, now and for all eternity.

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<sup>4</sup> The casting of lots put the decision in God’s hands so far as the believers were concerned.