

## Some Important Preparations

(Exodus 19: 1-25)

I We define “nations” in terms of territory, governance, and culture.

(Anthropologists will tell us that at that time in history, “nation” meant little more than a “city-state” kind of arrangement. In their kind of arrangement, a powerful tribal leader gathered a small army around him, and started collecting tribute from other tribal leaders, and thus became a petty-king. In the absence of strong leadership, groups like the Canaanites or the Amorites were called only “peoples” of a country. Then if the strong leader could impose governance on more than one city-state, then we call his territory a kingdom. This was the position of Pharaoh in Egypt. If some king could then extend his authority to the subjugation of people who were not part of his own ethnic heritage, we call his kingdom an empire. In the time of Moses there was a large number of “peoples” scattered over territories which they claimed to possess, and a small-but-growing number of petty kings, who organized governance in walled towns and villages, in small parts of those territories, and there were probably 6 places where city-state kings could extend their authority over smaller and relatively weaker petty kings in the territories surrounding their cities (they were Egypt, Ur, Babylonia, Elam, and Akkad). There would be no “empires” as we understand them until at least the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and no nation-states in the current meaning of the term until the late middle ages in Europe. So when God said that He would make Israel into a holy *nation*, and a *kingdom* of priests, their understanding of these words would have been different from our understanding of them.)

A (For the moment, let us leave History and Anthropology to the universities and return to the preparations that would be necessary, for them to become what God intended for them to be.) The word *holy* is an adjective, which describes the character of God. (If we employ a strictly Biblical definition for the word *holy*,

we soon understand that there is no other context in which we can use the word, because the character of God is the definition of holiness, and thus only that which God created (in the first Six Days of Creation) could possibly be holy. Once sin entered the world, and the curse of death because of sin, nothing in the created world was holy any longer, including the character of men. Mankind was (and is) born in sin, the same way we are born in a family. No one could change either the natural or the spiritual circumstances of their births (either then or now), which left the human soul in an uncomfortable position. Spiritually, no one could enter the presence of God while he lived because he was an accursed sinner, and because God is holy and Heaven is holy, no one could enter the presence of God when he left this life either. Thanks be to God for His Grace which He has revealed to us in the life and work of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, who has redeemed us from sin and thus from death and hell, because now we can be born again by our faith in Christ, and amen!)

B We ought also to define *sacred*, *sanctify*, and *consecrate* before we go on. (In spiritual matters, God does some things, people do some things, and rarely, if ever, do the deeds of one ever correlate with the deeds of the other. That is to say, even the best efforts of humanity are still humanistic, and even if they are done for the best of motives, they are still not done by the Spirit of God. So when we say that something is sacred (i.e., the tombs of our ancestors) we mean only that the place or the thing has special, even religious, significance to us; it does not mean that God considers it to be sacred. Similarly, when God says something is sacred (i.e. the holy ground where Moses stood in front of the burning bush), chances are good that humanity does not share God's opinion of the significance of that which God would call sacred. The name we use for the process of making something sacred, or holy, is sanctify. God sanctifies some things, like the lives

of believers, for examples, and people sanctify things too, by which we mean, dedicating a place or an item to special, religious purposes. Again we can see how God might sanctify something, like the Sabbath Day, for example, and then people do not regard it as especially holy; and those things and places which people sanctify, like institutional churches and their programs and agendas, are a mockery of the holiness of God. In only one case, *consecrate*, can men and God work together to make something sacred. So God told the Israelites to *consecrate* or *sanctify* or purify themselves for some special occasion, like meeting God in Exodus 19. We ought also to note that *consecration* begins with the command of God, not with the desire of men. Thus the choice of whom to consecrate as a priest (or apostle, or prophet, or pastor, evangelist, or teacher) is God's to make; we cannot accomplish consecration by graduating from a seminary, or by an installation ceremony in a church, no matter how solemn and pious that ceremony may be. God is the source of consecration, and so only God has authority to invest men with a spiritual office, too.)

II Israel had no identity as a nation, before Exodus 19. (There was no territory, until they took it away from the Canaanites. For them, governance was mostly limited to the authority of tribal elders to decide who should marry whom, and who should be night guards for the herds of animals. Most importantly, culture among the Children of Israel was not significantly different from that of any other semitic people. They probably had a written language, but it would have been a dialect of Aramaic. They had a monotheistic religious tradition, but there were (as there still is) too many compromises with secular concerns and the secular affairs of the temporal environment. How, then, were the Children of Israel significantly different from the people of Moab (descendants of Lot), or those of Midian and others (descendants of Abraham through one of his wives or concubines other

than Sarah, or of Edom (descendants of Esau)? The Children of Israel had a special Covenant relationship with God, which they inherited from their patriarchs, and their collective memory of that Covenant was the only cultural identity we can discern, to distinguish them from any other semitic people. We call that Covenant relationship the Messianic Covenant, traceable backwards to Adam, and forward to Jesus, although Israel did not understand it this way.)

A Their nation would be holy only if God made them holy. (We say again that the character of humanity is irremediably corrupted by sin. We call that condition *depravity*. The descendants of Abraham proved their depravity upon several occasions in the Book of Genesis, and we should recognize their behavior as examples of depravity, not as excuses for us to behave just as badly. Such a history no doubt aided the distortion of their perception of their Covenant Relationship with God, just as the forbearance of God distorts the perception contemporary church members have of His Mercy; but their perception would not change the reality of God's intention to use them to reveal His Glory to the World. God would sanctify the Children of Israel by giving them His Law. God would consecrate their priests, and them as a kingdom of priests, and nothing they could ever do or could change their role. We might note here that their future behavior would change the *way* in which God would reveal His Glory through them, but not the fact that they would be the people through whom God revealed His Glory. They would be a holy nation because they were special *to God*. And that specialness was limited to their role in the Messianic Covenant; now God certainly could and would have made more of their specialness if they had cooperated with Him better, but they never quite learned how to be special in the ways He wanted them to be.)

B God would define their Law for them. (Part of the definition of a nation is its governance, but our concepts in governance were not valid at a time when kingdoms were no more than walled towns and the agricultural areas that surrounded them. So we cannot interpret God's Law for Israel through any filter that is familiar from contemporary political science. We must understand instead, that God's Law was the mechanism by which He made them holy. That is to say, they were holy because God entrusted His Law to them; and it was the imposition of the Law, not their obedience to it, that made them holy to God. As we noted a moment ago, they never went beyond being the mere repository of the Law of God because they never embraced the Spirit of it. God summarized the Law for them, in *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might* (Deuteronomy 6:5). The Ten Commandments defined *how* God wanted them to demonstrate that love. God explained the importance of their obedience when He said: *All the commandments which I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live, and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers* (Deuteronomy 8:1).

Jesus defined the Law of Grace for us in a similar way, in Matthew 22:35-40. Let's read that together. Now, the Church is the repository of the Grace of God, just as Israel was the repository for His Law. *We* might make grace freely available to everyone who would enter into a Covenant relationship with God by faith in Atonement for sin by the Blood of Jesus, just as Israel might have made the Law freely available to any nation that would enter into the Old Testament Covenant, of which Israel was to be the administering priesthood. Can *we* succeed where they failed? We understand very well that no one can be righteous by keeping the Law; so the Ten Commandments define not our righteousness, but our *unrighteousness*. Forgiveness for sin is freely available in the Grace of God,

which is the Law in the Kingdom of God. The point is simply this: the Children of Israel tried to be a holy nation *by their own efforts* at obeying the Law of God, and only sporadically at that, and they failed to be holy. Modern church members must not try to make ourselves holy *by establishing our own righteousness*, in church membership, or its ceremonies and rituals, or its programs and agendas. The only righteousness we will ever have is the righteousness of Jesus, and we will have it only if God imputes it to us, by our faith in His great grace. This is the Covenant in the New Testament, and the Church is its administering priesthood. Holiness then, is our emulation of the character of God, as revealed in His Grace. Righteousness is our imitation of the behavior of Christ, specifically in our role as His physical presence in this world, in a Body called the Church. (We ought to distinguish that Body of Believers who are in fact this Church from the institutions that bear the same name; hence our use of a Capital C.) So let us learn to reveal the Grace of God in our world by showing them Jesus in and through our lives; the Holy Spirit will make us holy in proportion to our success.)

C God was implementing His Covenant with Abraham. (Wresting Palestine from its indigenous Canaanite inhabitants was only part of that Covenant, yet it seemed to be the only part that Israel understood. God's Promise to Abraham was *in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed* (Genesis 22:18). That seed was to be Jesus, and the blessing was to be reconciliation with God, by faith in His Grace, revealed to the world in the life and work of Christ, who died to atone for all sins of all humanity. Thus Jesus redeemed humanity from the curse of death, the very antithesis of eternal life in Heaven with God. Jesus makes that eternal life available to everyone who will believe in Him. This is the New Testament Covenant: vicarious atonement for sin in the death of Jesus, the Son of Man; and eternal life for all who believe, in the life of Jesus, the Son of God.)

III The Children of Israel would be a Kingdom of Priests for God. (We think of priests as the officials in religious activities. Now let us note that *religion* is most properly and adverb, describing how fervently we do something. If we repeat this fervent activity on a regular schedule we call it a ritual, or in ecclesiastical terms, a *rite*. If our ritual also has a symbolic purpose, we call it a ceremony. For Israel, ceremonial rites meant sacrificing animals on altars to represent the sacrifice of Christ in vicarious atonement for sin. For New Testament believers, ceremonial rituals are our baptism and our sharing of the Lord's Supper.)

A (We have seen that the priest has two primary roles, and Jethro explained these to Moses in Exodus 18.) The priests must represent all humanity in God's eyes. (As a kingdom of priests, Israel was selected out of all the peoples of the earth, to receive God's Law (in the form of the Ten Commandments, and the accompanying judgments and decrees). Now Israel would not obey God's Law perfectly any more than any other people could do; so they also represented all the guilt of humanity in the eyes of God. Then as Israel offered the blood of sheep and goats on the Altar, on the Day of Atonement each year, God received that sacrifice on behalf of all humanity. And the symbol goes further still. Just as Israel was called out of the world and sanctified by God to serve as His kingdom of priests, so the Tribe of Levi was called out of all the Tribes of Israel to be their priests. The direct descendants of Aaron, among all the Levitical Priests, were to be the High Priests, who would enter into the holy-of-holies once each year to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial animals on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant. This should have served as a symbol for them, of their role as priests of God for all the world; and it should serve us (e.g. the Church) as the same kind of symbol. We (the church) are called out of all the nations of the earth to become the Body of Christ and administer the New Test-ament Covenant of Grace. Then

just as the descendants of Aaron were the high priests, there is a clergy in the church; and just as the high priest entered the holy-of-holies once each year on the Day of Atonement, so our High Priest, Jesus Christ, entered the holiest holy place of all —the presence of God— to offer His own Blood as the once-for-all sacrifice, in atonement for all sins of all people of all times.)

B (The other role of the Priest is to represent God to men, too.) Israel would receive God's Law on behalf of all humanity. (The Levitical Priests were to teach God's Law to the Children of Israel. Israel, in its turn, was to teach God's Law to all other nations. We might say that the didactic method should have included integrity in international trade and commerce, justice in the administration of civil affairs, and honorable treatment of vanquished enemies in future wars.

The New Testament Church has a corresponding role in the Grace of God. We received the New Testament Covenant in the Blood of Christ from Jesus, at the Last Supper. We ought to demonstrate the Grace of God with respect to our interpersonal relationships by our love for one another (as Jesus said in John 13:35, *By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*), and it is the business of every believer to evangelize unbelievers with the Gospel of Salvation by Grace through faith in Jesus: let us read Matthew 28:19-20 together. Now note particularly the part about making disciples and teaching them to observe all things that He commanded us. The role of the Capital-C Church is to reveal the Grace of God to the world. To pretend to be the institutionalization of that great grace is one of the greatest of all blasphemies! Just as Israel was the repository for the Old Testament Law, the Church was the repository of the Grace of God. But no one reads the Old Testament and then says that Israel *was* the Old Testament Covenant; that consisted in the Promises of God to the Patriarchs and the occasional observance of ceremonial rituals by

people who did not understand them. Similarly, no one who understands the New Testament would say that the contemporary church *is* the Grace of God. Grace is an expression of God's character to us, and the contemporary church has lost its ability to make that expression. In other words, while some of us might say that we are believers because some faithful Christian once did the work which God gave the Church to do, no one would say that Christians are changing from sinners into saints because of the programs and agendas of the contemporary church. The Holy Spirit has to make that change, and He only changes those who have been born again by their faith in Jesus.)

C As Moses revealed God to Israel by giving them God's Law, so Israel would reveal God to all the world, by implementing the Law. (We must never forget the role of Jesus, even in the Book of Exodus. It's all about Jesus, and as soon as we dilute His role in Creation, or Redemption, or the ongoing Revelation of the Grace of God in and through the lives of believers, then we miss the whole point with God. We have seen, in previous chapters of Exodus, how Moses was the Prophet of God, and Aaron was the spokesman for him. (This, too, is a symbol, in that as Moses was unable to speak to all Israel due to his speech impediment, God was unable to speak to humanity due to His holiness, and our depravity). So Aaron served in the role of priest, and Moses spoke only to him; Moses, on the other hand, had the connection to God. Thus Moses was to Aaron and Israel what Jesus is to the New Testament Church, and to the rest of the world, through the faithfulness of the Church in its testimony for Christ.)

IV God's unapproachability represented an uncrossable chasm. (Sin opened that chasm, in the Third Chapter of Genesis. It is uncrossable, by us, because we are the sinners and God cannot allow sin or sinners in His presence. He would not be holy if He did. God represented these circumstances for Israel by ordering them

not even to touch the mountain where He was to come. Later, He would represent it with the Veil in the Tabernacle, and the Temple, between the “Holy Room” where Priests (but not ordinary worshipers) could go, and the “Holy of Holies” where the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Ten Commandments and the Mercy Seat was located.)

A Moses and Aaron could cross the chasm in a symbolic representation of the life and work of Jesus. (God chose Moses; Moses did not choose himself. God called Moses from the Burning Bush and sent Him to Egypt, to speak to Pharaoh and to Israel on His behalf. This is a symbolic representation of the incarnation of the Word of God in the person of Jesus, Who came into our world to reveal the Grace of God to us. Here, God told Moses to go get Aaron and bring him up onto the mountain too. Aaron could not have gone without that special invitation. This is another representation of Aaron’s role as priest. Aaron was to represent all Israel, when he climbed the mountain with Moses; and Moses represented Christ, Who takes us all into the presence of God in Heaven, by our faith in Him. Again, Aaron could not have gone up the mountain without the escort of Moses, and we could not enter the presence of God in Heaven without the escort of Christ.)

B Thereafter, only the High Priest would be permitted to enter the presence of God. (Aaron was the first of these high priests, and his sons after him would continue in that role. The high priest was responsible to perform a complicated set of rituals by which he became ceremonially clean. Only then could he enter the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle, or later, the Temple, to make atonement for the sins of Israel by sprinkling the blood of a sacrificial animal on the Mercy Seat and praying for them. He only went in one day each year, on the Day of Atonement (the morning after the night of the first full moon after the spring equinox), and he had to continue to move around, while inside, so some little

bells on the bottom of his robe would continue to jingle. He also had to wear a special rope around his waist, so that other priests could pull him out, in case God took him in death while he was inside in the presence of God, because no one but the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, under any circumstances.)

C The death of Jesus made atonement for all sins of all people of all times.

(The Gospel of Matthew tells us that when Jesus died, there was an earthquake, and the rocks were rent (broken apart). We also read that the Veil (or, big curtain) in the Temple, that protected the Holy of Holies from the view of ordinary mortal men, was torn in two, from top to bottom. The Book of Hebrews tells us that when Jesus died, He entered the Holy of Holies, indeed the Holiest of all holy places, the presence of God Himself; not to sprinkle the blood of sheep and goats on the Mercy Seat to fulfill the requirements of the Old Testament Covenant, but to sanctify the way into the presence of God for us all, by the once-and-for-all atonement for all sin, made by the shedding of His own Blood. As the Son of Man, the death of Christ satisfied the requirement of death for sin; and as the Son of God, His sinless life became the sinless life of righteousness which God will impute to all, if we have faith in the Grace of God.)

V Most people spend most of their lives preparing for something. (Perhaps we would do well to reflect on just how much time students spend preparing their assignments for school, or how many years of schooling are necessary to prepare for the work we will do in life. Then once we begin a career, we spend most of the rest of our lives preparing for the time in life when we expect to be too old to continue to work, and then, almost as an afterthought, old people start thinking about making preparations for eternity —if they live long enough.)

A (Yet) The preparations we make for eternity are the most important of all.

(In Christian education, we tell students that if they learn how to live, then God

will take care of how they make a living. The part about “how to live” refers to our moral character. This is the part of our lives in which our souls are born dead in trespasses and sins, and in which the human spirit pretends to keep the soul of humanity alive, with entertainment, education, philosophy, music, art, and so on. To suggest that someone needs to learn how to live is to challenge them to recognize the reality of their spiritual situation and turn to Jesus, Who is the only one Who can revive a dead human soul with eternal life from God. The preparations necessary for eternal life in Heaven with God are repentance of sin and being born again as a child of God, through faith in the Grace of God, as it is revealed in the life and work of Jesus Christ. Then after we believe, we incur a great responsibility under the Great Commission, to evangelize other unbelievers and tell them that God will forgive their sins too, if they repent and receive Jesus as Christ and Lord. We who know these things are responsible before God to teach them to other believers. And let us be sure of this: no sinner will meet Jesus until someone who knows what faith in Jesus means preaches the Gospel to them; and no one can preach the Gospel until they understand it, and no one will understand it until someone who already understands it explains it to them. We must not get these things backwards. As we see in Romans 1:17, in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed from faith unto faith from first until last. We contend that the Old Testament is a model of the New Testament for the Children of Israel, and we hope that everyone here will understand that the preparations they were required to make in Exodus 19 are symbolic representations for the preparations we all must make, in our own New Testament Covenant relationship with God in Christ. We must understand these things in order to fulfill our roles, as the royal priesthood of Christ, Who is present in this world only in the lives of true believers as they constitute the real, Capital-C-Church.)

B Jesus helps us make those proper preparations. (We have shown that the Grace of God proceeds from the character of God and is revealed to humanity in the life and work of Jesus. We who believe in Jesus are born again, and the eternal life of God in Christ becomes our eternal life, and our presence in this world becomes His presence here in a Body we call the (Capital-C-) Church. The purpose of the life and work of Jesus was to reveal the Grace of God to the world and so that is our work as well. The Holy Spirit is the Teacher sent from God by Christ to teach us all things and call to our remembrance all things that He said. Thus we who are born again learn from the only begotten Son of God, how to be sons of God; the only one who knows how to be a Son of God must teach anyone else. He accomplishes that teaching through His Word, in the mouth of the believer who has learned things of the Spirit from the Spirit. The Holy Spirit sanctifies us (or, prepares us) for the eternal Kingdom of God by teaching us to be more and more like Jesus is, and less and less like the sinners we used to be. We must not get these things confused. The contemporary church has been ruined by people who tried to impose humanism upon spirituality.

We must prepare ourselves to meet God, just as the Children of Israel had to do in Exodus 19. Their preparations and ours are remarkably similar: all these preparations are about Jesus. His Holy Spirit prepares us to be children of God for all eternity by conforming us to His image. That preparation of conformity to the image of Christ, learning to imitate His behavior by our loving of what He loves (e.g., godliness) and our hatred of what He hates (e.g., worldliness), is the most important of all preparations that we will ever make. Amen)