

After Pentecost, Then What?

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Moses writes the story of the Israelites making the Old Covenant with God in Exodus 19-24. Most of the text of those six chapters is devoted to listing the terms of their agreement. The way the ratification of the covenant is presented in Exodus 24:1-8 can give the impression that the Israelites' acceptance of the terms was almost casual. Perhaps they felt overwhelmed by God's presence, and under the circumstances, they could only agree to it.

They would have been truly inhuman not to be impressed with God's overpowering presence on the mount. Moses, however, shows that they were so overwhelmed and fearful that they refused to hear any more of God's voice beyond His presentation of the Ten Commandments. The remainder of the terms were given solely to Moses as their representative.

When Moses returned to Israel's camp from the mount, they very quickly accepted the covenant's full terms. It is difficult to tell in the text how long it was until it was ratified, but the impression is that it was indeed a short time. The people's quick acceptance seems to indicate that they were largely oblivious to what they were binding themselves.

This is not to say that their agreement was not in their best interests. The covenant was a terrifically good deal for them—they could hardly lose! It was a wonderful agreement with benefits for them at every turn. Because they stood to gain so much, they must have been grinning from ear to ear!

In the previous few months, they had witnessed many awesome demonstrations of God's power in freeing them from bondage in Egypt. Now, this same loving Personality had promised to bless them individually and as a nation with every physical thing they needed to be prosperous, powerful and dominant in this world. Surely, they must have thought, He will do it!

However, subsequent history reveals that they greatly overestimated *their own* ability to live by the terms of the covenant. The flip side of this is that they vastly underestimated the difficulty of the way.

The Difficult Transition from Slave to Free

God's states His purpose for them in proposing the covenant in Exodus 19:5-6:

"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.

Except for Moses, every Israelite had spent his entire lifetime in slavery. Though the intensity of the pressure of that bondage would have varied from person to person, the broad spectrum of people had little idea of the responsibilities liberty imposes. Despite the fact that they were human, they were a people who were little more than tools, beasts of burden, things to be used by their owner. Their

master provided for them just as he would an animal, regulating their lives so that he would get the most from them. When they wore out, he cast them aside. So someone else determined the purpose and direction of their lives. They had few opportunities to use their God-intended, free moral agency.

They could dream of and yearn for the freedoms and powers God desired all to have. They must have spent hours talking of it among themselves and crying out to God for His deliverance. But if deliverance came, how would they use it? Would they spend it in self-centered dissipation or in responsible obedience to the great Creator's law of liberty?

There is another *very* important factor of which the Israelites were unaware when they made the covenant: The Bible indicates that they never considered the nature that was driving them to make their choices. God knew, of course, for He laments in Deuteronomy 5:29, "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!"

The children of Israel grew into a nation during their stay in Egypt, yet they had never had their own land. Though they had lived in their inheritance, even the fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were never able to put down roots and settle into it. Thus, the generation of the Exodus was ill-prepared to administer a nation.

The administration of a country involves more than the ability of the government to control and maintain it. In addition, a truly successful nation needs every citizen to function within its laws for the good of the community. As the artisans of Egypt, the Israelites undoubtedly had mechanical skills. From the top to the bottom of the labor force, they were largely responsible for much of Egypt's grandeur. But for the purpose God had in mind for them under the covenant, those skills do not a nation make.

Into the Wilderness

In Exodus 13:17, as the Israelites were marching out of Egypt, God suddenly led the Israelites south, at a right angle from the most direct route to the Promised Land. God was very concerned that they were not ready to fight a war. As the books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy clearly show, they were not ready for many other experiences they were soon to face. This turn south is the first indication that God had much more in mind than merely taking them to Canaan.

The journey of the children of Israel through the wilderness has been termed "wandering." However, it is wandering only in the sense that they crisscrossed through the Sinai Peninsula following the cloud rather than heading straight to Palestine. Their route was not a whimsical meandering because God was purposefully leading them in the cloud and the pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21).

The journey might have lasted "only" two years had the Israelites been willing to obey as they had promised when they made the covenant. But indications of serious flaws in the people's character began to surface almost immediately, even before they reached Mount Sinai. Before the crossing of the Red Sea, they accused Moses of leading them out to die in the wilderness (Exodus 14:10-12). This was followed by bitter complaining at Marah (Exodus 15:22-26). Then, one month to the day after leaving Egypt, they complained about the variety and quantity of food provided (Exodus 16:1-12). Within a few more weeks, they were at it again, tempting God about His provision of water (Exodus 17:2-7). Chapter 18 shows that there were so many disputes between individual Israelites that Moses was wearing himself out judging their controversies.

This is hardly an auspicious beginning to the covenant relationship God proposed in chapter 19! It becomes obvious that God would have to use the time between Mount Sinai and crossing the Jordan River to prepare them for living in their inheritance.

So ingrained was their Egyptian slave mentality, though, that they never gave God a chance to really work with them. Two years after leaving Egypt, those 20 years old and above had the death penalty pronounced on them. Because they would not allow Him to prepare them, the wilderness became strewn with their corpses. It is estimated that they died at the rate of about 90 people per day over the next 38 years! Each was a victim of his lack of faith, vision and yieldedness. Rather than trusting God to lead them for their good (Hebrews 3:16-19), they consistently and impatiently second-guessed Him right into their graves!

Our Own Wilderness

Understanding this is of critical and practical importance to us because the pattern established by God through these people is intended for our edification (I Corinthians 10:11). Tradition places the giving of the law on Pentecost. About 1,500 years later on the same holy day, God gave His people the Holy Spirit. But after we have received it, then what? Like the Israelites at Mount Sinai, we have only just begun.

We have been the unwitting slaves of an invisible, perversely intelligent, deceitful, powerful and heartless master who is the god of this world (II Corinthians 4:4). He has created cultures with ways of life appealing to our self-centered natures. He stimulates our spirit through corrupt music, literature, art and religion. He diverts our attention from more important concerns of life by means of entertainment with erotic visual and auditory impact. He has enslaved our minds by appealing to the desires of the flesh and of the eyes and the pride of life (I John 2:16) almost from the time we were born. He confuses us by hiding or shading the truth, denying absolutes, distorting reality, emphasizing vanity, and making available such a spectrum of opinions that disagreement is the standard operational feature of life. He pits us in competition against each other and makes us feel defensive, insecure and untrusting.

By the time we are adults and God calls us, it takes a miracle mightier than God ever expended liberating the Israelites to even begin to free us from the demonic clutches of the pharaoh of this world, Satan the Devil!

But God—by His calling, granting us repentance, giving us His Spirit, helping us understand the gospel of the Kingdom of God and the revelation of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice—has brought us to a place that is spiritually identical to that of the Israelites after the Old Covenant was confirmed. Thus, Deuteronomy 30:15-20 cries out to us with great forcefulness:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you

may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.

The world, and even some who claim membership in the church of God, tell us that salvation is secure once we have been justified by God's grace. They say that salvation from that point on is unconditional. If salvation is unconditional from justification on, why does God admonish us to choose between life and death? Why does He command us to choose to keep His law so that we may live and inherit the land? Why does God threaten us, His children, with the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:15)? Are His threats hollow? Are they lies because there really is no Lake of Fire?

If salvation is unconditional after we receive God's Holy Spirit, then the death of an entire generation (except for Joshua and Caleb), lost because of faithlessness, is nothing but a misleading waste. God, then, expended over a million lives for no good reason. But I Corinthians 10:11 says, "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."

Notice what Paul writes on this subject:

For if we [Christians] sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins [Christ's sacrifice no longer applies], but a **CERTAIN** fearful expectation of judgment, and **FIERY** indignation which will **DEVOUR** the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:26-29)

These verses can only be speaking of Christians because we are the only ones under the blood of Jesus Christ.

In John 15:2, this same Jesus Christ adds that branches (Christians) who do not bear fruit are cut from the vine. He adds in verse 6 that those who do not abide in the Son—and certainly a branch cut from the vine no longer abides in it—will be cast out as a branch and thrown into the fire.

Hebrews 6:4-6 gives great difficulty to those who believe in an unconditional salvation:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift [forgiveness], and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

It is very clear that anyone who fits that description will not be in God's Kingdom.

If it were not possible for us to fall away, why would Paul even write as he did in I Corinthians 9:27? "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified [*castaway*, KJV]." He also warns in Colossians 1:22-23:

In the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and irreproachable in His sight—*if indeed you continue in the faith*, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.

We Have Responsibilities

This does not deny that God is merciful or that He will not supply our needs in overcoming, even as He so clearly supplied Israel's physical needs in the wilderness. But it should help us see that we cannot take God's mercy for granted. Responsibilities have devolved upon us as a result of entering into the New Covenant with God. We must make choices, grow, and overcome our sins, the world and Satan.

We must:

- » choose whom we will serve in our journey toward the Kingdom of God.
- » make efforts toward completing the wonderful salvation that has begun in us.
- » continue steadfast in Bible study and prayer.
- » be willing to sacrifice the desires of our human nature which wants to be disobedient to God.
- » use our faith even though the "old man" frequently revives and attempts to dominate us as it did in sinful Egypt.

God's salvation is clearly revealed to be a process consisting of His calling, justification, sanctification and glorification. In the Exodus account, justification is exemplified by Israel being called out of slavery, coming under the blood of the lamb on Passover and passing through the Red Sea in a type of baptism. Like us under the New Covenant, the Israelites were then prepared to make the Old Covenant with God.

Glorification is pictured by their passing through the Jordan River and entering into possession of their inheritance. If we measure the time required for their justification and glorification, we can see they were very short periods. But sanctification, the in-between period during which the Israelites were preparing to possess their inheritance, took a long forty years.

Becoming Sanctified

Sanctification is a crucial biblical doctrine concerning the way we live our lives before God. As early as Abraham, God's charge is, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me, and be blameless" (Genesis 17: 1). This clearly shows that God demands holiness to be essential to any relationship with Him. We who are in Christ are Abraham's seed (Galatians 3:29), and as his children, things required of him are also required of us.

The Greek word *hagiamos*, translated "sanctification," "holiness" and "consecration," indicates the process of being made, remaining and progressing in holiness. Just as the Israelites could not free themselves from Egypt, save themselves from the death angel and part the Red Sea to be ready to make the covenant with God, neither can any man make himself holy. Sanctification is the result of God making someone holy. Notice II Thessalonians 2:13: "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because *God* from the beginning *chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit* and belief in the truth." I Peter 1:2 adds, "Elect

according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in *sanctification of the Spirit*, forobedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ."

Though we cannot make ourselves holy, once God has made us holy, we become very important players in whether we remain holy and progress in holiness. Once we are consecrated as holy by God, our pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God truly begins in earnest. We are at that critical point which Deuteronomy 30:15-20 describes.

Peter commands us, "But as He who called you is holy, *you also be holy in all your conduct*, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'" (I Peter 1:15-16). John adds:

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And *everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself*, just as He is pure. (I John 3:1-3)

Similarly, Paul enjoins us in Philippians 2:12-15:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without murmuring and disputing [remember Israel in the wilderness], that you may *become* blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

Later, in Philippians 3:12-16, he urges us to strive for perfection, a perfection which he says that he did not yet have (verse 12). He did not mean the divine perfection of absolute purity that we can never possess in the flesh, but rather a maturity to which we can attain. He gives the definite impression of progressing toward a goal set for us by God.

A Joint Effort

Sanctification is thus shown to be a joint work of both God and the Christian. God begins the process and continues with us throughout our entire pilgrimage, supplying our need of grace. Indeed, God says in Philippians 1:6, "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." Again, Paul adds in I Thessalonians 5:23-24,

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.

Our efforts involve growing and overcoming, motivated by faith and guided by the Spirit of God. This cooperative effort is also shown by Israel in the wilderness. God led the Israelites, but they would never have reached the Promised Land if they had not followed the cloud and walked.

After making the covenant with God, we must shift our focus to striving for sinlessness. Sinlessness expressed with beauty is the highest, greatest glory a human can attain. Its purpose is not to save us

but 1) to give witness to the glory of God as shown in our lives, and 2) to add our small part in working with God to build godly character in us.

We cannot justify ourselves, and salvation is by grace. We cannot make ourselves righteous, but we can, with the help of God continue to change the direction and conduct of our lives which He began with His calling. This is why Peter writes,

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct. (I Peter 1:13-15)

Paul adds in Titus 2:11-14,

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.

The Long Summer Months

After Pentecost, after receiving the Holy Spirit and entering into the making of the New Covenant, there yet remains a long, sometimes arduous and sometimes spiritually dangerous pilgrimage to our inheritance. Pentecost signals the approach of the long summer months before the fall festivals. Interestingly, a commentator once wrote that it is thought that most of Israel's problems in the wilderness occurred during the summer.

The reason most of the problems cropped up in summer may be because it is the season when we are most easily distracted from our goal. The colder, more rainy seasons have a way of confining our activities, especially those outside the home. But summer opens possibilities to do many more things, which, though they may not be evil in any way, grab our attention and consume our time. We lose our focus and our spiritual discipline. God becomes a secondary priority. As our spiritual strength wanes because of a lack of contact with God, problems that may have been held in check surface and intensify.

The same commentator also said that there was only one lengthy stretch of time when few serious problems occurred. This period fell during the building of the Tabernacle when Israel's focus was on God's work. Moses writes of wonderful displays of God's gifts given to ensure the beauty of His dwelling place. Everybody cooperated rather than fight each other, Moses or God. It is a powerful witness of what direction our lives ought to take.

All of us need to make personal effort to ensure that we take advantage of all the time God affords us in making our pilgrimage. Considering what we are in comparison to Him, we need all the time it takes to be sanctified completely and be holy like He is. May your summer months be spiritually focused and fruitful!