

Presence and Sacrifice
(Exodus 25 - Leviticus 7)

Turn to Exodus 25. [As in introduction, I read the prayer at the end of this document, as a contrast to Israelite religion, to show by that comparison how rich the Israelites were under Moses.]

Four important things happen between God and Israel, starting with the rescue from slavery in Egypt. That's the first one.

These four events tell us a lot about what it means to be a child of God, what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We are connected to God, but how does that connection work? What does it look like? We can learn much about this from Exodus.

We come to God through Jesus, not through Moses, and there are some differences between these ways of coming to God. But overall, there are more things the same than different, because God has not changed and neither have the basic ways he treats people.

Four important things happen between God and Israel. We went over the first two in earlier Sundays, but I'll review them here. The first is RESCUE.

God RESCUED Israel from Egypt. They were slaves in Egypt, and the Egyptians literally tried to work them to death, work them so hard that the Israelite race would weaken. It says early in Exodus that in hard labour the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly, and made their lives bitter.

The Israelites cried out, and their cry went up to God (2:23). It does not say they cried out to God. Maybe they did, but Exodus never says that the Israelites cried out to God. God paid close attention to the Israelites, but we don't how much Israel returned that.

But God heard their cry. When God talked to Moses at the burning bush, he said he would rescue them because he loved them, and because he'd made promises long before to their ancestors, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God rescued them from Egypt.

The NT counterpart to this would be the death of Jesus to free us from sin. ⁶ *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.* ⁷ *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.* ⁸ *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* (Romans 5:6-8)

The second thing that happens is COVENANT. That means relationship, a relationship of loyalty. In Exodus 19, God says this to Israel: ⁴ *You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.* ⁵ *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, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

God has come to each of us in this way.

God says to each person, "I have carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, if you will put your trust in my and follow my Son Jesus, you will be one of my treasures, and you will become a part of my treasured people."

That is the story that has happened with each one of us that follows Jesus. That's how the new covenant works. And if that has *not* happened to you, that means that God has carried you on eagles wings and brought you to himself, and he's still waiting for your answer. And I urge you not to put it off any longer. Why are you waiting?

So Israel said, "yes" to God, and so there was a COVENANT between God and Israel. He would be their God, and they would be his people. That happens in Exodus 19 & 24.

First RESCUE, then COVENANT, and third is PRESENCE. God moves in.

It's important not to miss the sequence here. God rescued Israel because the Egyptians were treating them horribly, but God's purpose was not just to free them so they could live better lives. God wanted relationship with them.

God wanted to bind himself to them, and have them bind themselves to him. As soon as God got Israel rescued from Egypt, he proposed the covenant. He wanted their lives to be better, but that was not his real purpose.

He wanted a special people, a people who would be his treasured possession. That's why he rescued them, and that's why, as soon as they got out of Egypt, he led them straight to Sinai, his special mountain, and proposed the covenant to him.

And as soon as Israel has agreed to this relationship, as soon as Israel has agreed to this covenant, God makes plans to move in. God has no interest in having his relationship with his people from far away. He wants to live with them, be among them, his home.

Exodus 25:1-2, 8 *The LORD said to Moses, ² "Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give. . . ⁸ "Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.*

The rest of Exodus is almost completely filled with one thing: building the tabernacle and the furniture that went in it and around it. The tabernacle was an elaborate tent, not quite as big as this room, that Israel could take down and move and set up somewhere else.

The most important thing about the tabernacle, this special tent, was that God lived in it. The tent was set up in the middle of Israel's tents, and God's presence would be in the tabernacle, his tent. *Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.*

Right after COVENANT comes PRESENCE. The covenant with Israel, where they made promises to each other, like a wedding, is finished in Exodus 24, and that is not a long chapter.

And immediately after the covenant is made, first verse of Exod 25, God (like any other husband) makes plans to move in, to live with his bride: *have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.* I will live with them: presence.

Turn to Exodus 29. We'll read a few verses from the end of Exodus 29, and listen for all the ways God says that he will be there in that tent:

Exodus 29:42-46 *"For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the tent of meeting before the LORD. There I will meet you [Moses] and speak to you; ⁴³ there also I will meet with the Israelites, and the place will be consecrated by my glory. ⁴⁴ "So I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar and will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests.*

The next two verses are particularly important. In these verses God explains why he really brought them out of Egypt: ⁴⁵ *Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. ⁴⁶ They will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.*

God brought Israel out of Egypt so that he could live in their midst, so that he could live with them. I sometimes say that being a child of God, being a follower of Jesus, is at the center not about being a good person but about that relationship that we have with God, where He takes us to be his treasure, and we trust and obey him.

But God here takes it a step past that, and we should not miss it: what God really wants is to be with them, with us. Even the covenant, the relationship, seems here to be the way to the next step, which is his presence with them.

God rescued them so he could make the covenant with them. But he made the covenant with them so that he could be present with them, and live in the middle of Israel.

I cannot see any reason why it would be different with us. God sent his Son to die so we could be rescued from the ways sin makes us slaves, and he brings us to himself so that he can be our God and we can be his people.

But as soon as we become God's children, followers of Jesus, **he comes to us.**

John 14:16-18 *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper to be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*

Acts 2:38 *Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Repent and be baptized: that's covenant, that's entering relationship. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. That's presence.*

1 Corinthians 6:19 *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? Our bodies are a temple, a tabernacle.*

The Holy Spirit is God's way of moving in with us. We think of the Spirit as a helper, a guide, someone who does things for us. But from God's side there is something more basic going on, the simple desire to live with his people, to be right in the midst of them.

And if it is true of individual followers of Jesus, and it IS true of individual followers of Jesus, it's even more true of the gathering, of believers as a group. Jesus said, *where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them*" (Matthew 18:20).

Eph 2:21-22 *In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

The group, the gathering, is a holy temple. And new believers are joined to the dwelling, the house, in which God lives by his Spirit.

By far the most important thing that happens in a gathering like this is that we meet with God, that the Lord Jesus is present with us through the Holy Spirit.

The worst thing that could happen at a gathering like this is that people would come into the presence of God, and leave, and never have known that we were in front of God. I urge you to do some kind of simple preparation for this before you show up on Sunday.

What would you say to God if you were in front of him? How would you act? Before you come through that door, get ready for this. In Israel, they did lots of preparation before they met God. We don't need to do all that. But some talking to ourselves ahead of time about this is a good idea.

Also, don't come to the gathering and then test the air to see if God is present or not. That's preposterous. That assumes that we would want to meet with God, but he would not show up. There is absolutely no chance of that.

There is a fair chance that he'd want to meet, and we'd not show up, either by not coming at all or by coming and not knowing he was here. But that we would want God in the gathering, and he would not be there, will never happen.

In Deut 4:7 Moses says, *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?*

If it was true under the Moses covenant, that God was unusually near to Israel whenever they prayed to him, it will certainly be even more true for us under the Jesus covenant, that he is very near to us whenever we pray to him.

So the rest of Exodus describes the tabernacle, God's tent. Here's how Exodus ends: Exodus 40:34-38 *Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* ³⁵ *Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.* ³⁶ *In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out;* ³⁷ *but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted.* ³⁸ *So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels.*

God moves in. From then on, he was with them day and night, always with them, always moving with them, always leading them. That's how Exodus ends. Rescue, Covenant, Presence. Now let's go straight to the first four verses of Leviticus.

Leviticus 1:1-4 *The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting. He said,* ² *"Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you bring an offering to the LORD, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock.'* ³ *"If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you are to offer a male without defect. You must present it at the entrance to the tent of meeting **so that you may be acceptable to the LORD.*** ⁴ *You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and **it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you.***

As soon as God moves in, he gives instructions about sacrifices. This is the fourth thing that happens between God and Israel: Rescue, Covenant, Presence, Sacrifice.

Back in "covenant," Israel promised to obey God. I'm not sure if Israel thought they could actually do that, but God knew they would fail. So right after he moved in, the very next thing, he makes a way for them to get forgiveness for their sins and failures.

The logic seems to be that if God was far away, his peoples' sins would not be such a big problem; but God is not far away. He's present, right with his people, and that is why their sins (and our sins) are a big problem. So, as soon as God moves in, he shows them the way to have their sins forgiven. Sins don't end covenant or presence!

God knew they could not keep his ways perfectly, so he showed them how to deal with it. They were going to sin, that was going to happen, God knew it, and he showed them how to make atonement. Atonement means that our wrong before God is made right.

Leviticus 4:26 *In this way the priest will make atonement for the leader's sin, and he will be forgiven.* ³¹ *. . . In this way the priest will make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven.* ³⁵ *. . . In this way the priest will make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven.* (See also Leviticus 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7.)

That's the Moses covenant, forgiveness for the ongoing sins of God's people. The Jesus covenant is similar. 1 John 1:8 - 2:2 *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. ² My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

Rescue, Covenant, Presence, Sacrifice.

As soon as God rescued Israel from Egypt, he wanted to make a covenant with them, he wanted to bind himself to them, and have them bind themselves to him. It was their choice, they did not have to, but it's what he wanted, he invited them, they said "yes."

That was covenant. As soon as the covenant had been made, God made plans for presence. He gave instructions for them to build a tabernacle, a special tent, so that he could live with them, could have his home in their midst. *I brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them*, he says (Exod 29:46).

And as soon as God moved in, in the last verses of Exodus, he showed them sacrifice. He showed them how they could make atonement for their ongoing sins, how his covenant people could be forgiven when they failed him.

That was all a part of covenant. Half the Law of Moses is how to get forgiveness for their sins. Israel eventually failed, but not because they sinned too much. They failed because they left God, they fell in love with other gods, and turned to other gods.

Covenant life is built around the Presence of God with us, his people, and that means there needs to be forgiveness for ongoing sin. That they had, and that we have.
RescueCovenant, Presence, and Sacrifice.

In the OT they had covenant renewal from time to time. In a sense that's what we do at the Lord's supper, but we can do it any time. View this teaching as God saying to you who are followers, "This is how it works. I still want to be your God. Do you still want to be my people?"

And if your answer is "yes," make sure you have said that to him before you leave. And if you've never said "yes" to this, than you should hear God saying, "This is how it works. I want to be your God. Do you want to be one of my people?" Talk to me after, please.

We will be silent for a few minutes, for you to reflect and to answer to God. Then I will close in prayer.

Prayer to an Unknown God (sometimes called "Prayer to Every God")

Pages 391-2 in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, edited by James Pritchard, 3rd edition with supplement. The prayer is written in a Sumerian dialect, with an interlinear Akkadian translation. It dates from about 700 BCE.

The one praying this prayer knows he has done something to make some god angry. Three crucial things he does not know, which every Israelite knew: he does not know which god he offended, he does not know what he has done wrong, and he does not know how to correct the problem. The Israelites under Moses were in an incomparably better situation than the ancient person praying this prayer.

May the fury of my god's heart be quieted toward me. May the god who is not known be quieted toward me. May the goddess who is not known be quieted toward me. May the god whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me. May the goddess whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me. May the heart of my god be quieted toward me. May the heart of my goddess be quieted toward me. May my god and goddess be quieted toward me. May the god who has become angry with me be quieted toward me. May the goddess who has become angry with me be quieted toward me. In ignorance I have eaten that forbidden by my god. In ignorance I have set foot on that prohibited by my goddess. O Lord, my transgressions are many; great are my sins. O my god, my transgressions are many; great are my sins. O god whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are many; great are my sins. O goddess whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are many; great are my sins; The transgression which I have committed, indeed I do not know. The sin which have done, indeed I do not know. The prohibited place on which I have set foot, indeed I do not know. The lord in the anger of his heart looked at me. The god in the rage of his heart confronted me. When the goddess was angry with me, she made me become ill. The god whom I know or do not know has oppressed me. The goddess whom I know or do not know has placed suffering upon me. Although I am constantly looking for help, no one takes me by the hand. When I weep they do not come to my side. I utter laments, but no one hears me. I am troubled; I am overwhelmed; I can not see. O my god, merciful one, I address to you the prayer, turn toward me. I kiss the feet of my goddess; I crawl before you. How long, O my goddess, whom I know or do not know, before your angry heart will be quieted? Man is dumb; he knows nothing; mankind, everyone that exists, what do they know? Whether they are committing sin or doing good; they do not even know. O my lord, do not throw your servant down. He is plunged in the waters of a swamp; take him by the hand. The sin which I have done, turn into goodness. The transgression which I have committed, let the wind carry away. May my misdeeds strip off like clothing. O my god, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions. O my goddess, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions. O my god whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions. O goddess whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions. Remove my transgressions and I will sing your praise. May your heart, like the heart of a real mother, be quieted toward me. Like a real mother and a real father may it be quieted toward me.