A Kingdom of Priests and A Holy Nation

Exodus 19:1-25

Key Verse:19:5,6 “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, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

It is the season of graduation. Last week we had two graduation ceremonies, one for Lizzie at Wash U and the other for Luke Yang Jr. at SLU. One more is coming up next Thursday. I thank God for their perseverance to finish the race and accomplish their academic achievements. Whenever I attend graduation ceremonies, especially for colleges, I have mixed feelings before God. Do you know why? It is because most of those graduating are those whom I have never met or invited to Bible study. Of course there are some who were invited by me for Bible symposiums and CWS. As a missionary and pastor it is not easy for me to fulfill my priestly duty faithfully.

Today’s passage is a transitional chapter between the Exodus of the Israelites (ch.1-18) and the endowment of the Law to them at Mount Sinai (ch 20-40). Before the LORD gave his law through Moses, God made a covenant with him and his people. We call this covenant the ‘Mosaic covenant’ whereas we call ‘Abrahamic covenant’ and ‘Davidic covenant’ as covenants which the LORD God established with Abraham and David. What is a ‘covenant’? According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a covenant is a written agreement or promise under seal usually between two or more parties especially for the performance of some action. Biblically speaking, a covenant is a solemn and irrevocable contract between God and men. We’ll study more about the covenant later on. God made a covenant with Moses and the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land. Let’s study the contents of the covenant and God’s hope and vision for the Israelites behind the purpose of the covenant.

Look at verses 1-2. “***On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt---on that very day---they came to the Desert of Sinai After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.***” The Israelites left Egypt on the fourteenth day of the first month, Aviv, and after one and half months they arrived at Mount Sinai in the Desert of Sinai. We don’t know the exact site of Mount Sinai, but recently the most plausible site of the mountain was found in Saudi Arabia. At the mountain God called Moses. Look at verses 3,4. “***Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.***” God reminded Moses of God’s mighty deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt. God described this Exodus as a carriage by eagles’ wings. What does this metaphor mean? An eagles’ wing symbolizes God’s protection, compassionate love, and presentation of his power. An eagle is the king of birds. An adult eagle often carries their baby eagle on its wings and flies. It drops his baby eagle in the air to train them how to fly. The LORD God let the Israelites cross the Red Sea on dry ground through faith as an eagle carries its chick on its wings. The Israelites had no boat or ship or plane to cross the sea. But God opened the sea so that they could cross it by faith.

Why did God deliver them from Pharaoh, the king of Egypt? Because of His divine purpose and plan for them. God wanted to keep his covenant with Abraham and bring his people into the Promised Land. Look at verses 5,6. “***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, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites***.” In these verses God wanted the Israelites to be his treasured possession. What is a treasured possession to people? I believe that their most treasured possessions are their children. God desired to make the Israelites his children. In fact, God called them “my firstborn son” (Ex 4:22, Jer 31:9)

There was a condition for the Israelites to become God’s treasured possession. It was to obey the LORD God and keep his covenant. Here, the covenant is related to the Abrahamic covenant. God made a covenant with Abraham long ago. (Ge 15:18, 17:2-14)When God made a covenant with Abraham, he promised two things: first, many children, second, land. God promised to bless Abraham with many descendants so that he could become a great nation and that through his descendants all people on earth would be blessed. (Ge 12:2,3) God’s promise was fulfilled through Jesus Christ who came to this world from Abraham’s descendant as the Messiah and the Savior of the world.(Jn 4:25,42)

What was God’s covenant with his people at that time? In Genesis 17:7 God said, “*I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you*.” In his words, God wanted to become their God and them his people. This is like a marriage vow, which is confessed by a bridegroom before his bride, “I will be your husband and you will be my wife.” Jesus added in Matthew 19:6, “*So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate*.” In the past the Israelites belonged to Pharaoh as slaves. But now they belong to the LORD as his treasured possession. In the same way we also belong to the LORD as his children. We become children of God through Jesus Christ. John 1:12 says, “*Yet to all who did receive him (Jesus Christ), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*…” As children of God we belong to Him. We are his people and he is our God. In the past we were just people, but now we are the people of God. Once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy. (1Pe 2:10) People want to belong to someone or somewhere which they can trust. Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, said that all human beings have inherent desires for belonging and love. It is very important for us to know where we belong and who we belong to. If we belong to a bad company, we become slaves to sin. If a wife wants to belong to another man, she becomes an adulterer. When she keeps her marriage vow and belongs to her husband, she becomes a faithful woman. Likewise, when we belong to idols, we become idol worshipers. But when we belong to God, we become children of God and people of God’s kingdom. God wants us to become his people and him to become our LORD. The covenant relationship between God and the Israelites was like this.

What blessings did those in God’s covenant receive? What was God’s promise for the Israelites when they obey him and keep his covenant? The LORD God will make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Let us read verse 6 again. What does ‘become a kingdom of priests’ mean? It means that God would make the Israelites a priestly kingdom. A priest was the representative of his people as interceder and mediator between God and men. A priest offered sacrifices for the atonement of sins in the place of his people. He also read the Scriptures to his people so that they might know the way of the LORD and live as people of God. God wanted to make the Israelites do this priestly duty for the whole world. God wanted all peoples of all nations to know Him and worship Him through the Israelites. For this reason God gave the Ten Commandments and the law through Moses. God wanted the Israelites to become a shepherd nation for the whole world. God’s hope was to see the whole earth be filled with the knowledge of the LORD and with God-worshipers who belong to Him and who praise and sing for Him. God’s plan for the Israelites was the same as Jesus’ world mission command to his disciples in Matthew 28:19-20, which says, “*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

God wanted the Israelites to become a holy nation, too. The word, ‘holy’ means ‘separate or different from the world, or ‘set apart for the LORD.’ The LORD God chose the Israelites to set them apart from the worldly for his good purpose for the whole world. They should be different from pagans who worshiped idols and followed their sinful desire. God wants America to be a holy nation. God set apart this nation for world salvation since our Founding Fathers knelt down and prayed before they signed the Constitution. God has sent countless missionaries and Bible teachers to other countries so that many countries in the world including Korea could hear the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. Let us pray for this country to renew this priestly duty for the whole world and to become a holy nation. Let us pray for each person to become a holy nation. Apostle Paul said in Romans 12:2, “*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is---his good, pleasing and perfect will*.” In order to become a holy nation and holy people, we must obey the LORD and live according to his word, not by our sinful desire. Holiness does not come through nature, but through obedience. When we deny our sinful desire and obey God’s word, the Holy Spirit helps us overcome sin and become free. In the past the Israelites lived as slaves, not only to the Egyptians, but also to their sinful desires. But now they are free from the Egyptians and have become the people of God. They had to live as God’s people by obeying the law of the LORD and following his way. In the past they were lawless people, but now they are the people with the law of God.

In this covenant which the LORD God made with the Israelites, we come to know who God is and what hope is God put on each of us. God’s covenant and promise with the Israelites were immeasurable blessing for the Israelites, who used to be slaves under the foreign kings for 430 years. In this world who dares to hire long-term slaves for their great project and plan? Who dares to make them their own children? Who can sacrifice his One and Only Son Jesus Christ on the cross to make us children of God? He is no one but the LORD God. Our God is the God of hope. He does not look at our present situation, but our future glorification. He is not disappointed with our poor condition, but is satisfied with our identity as people of God. Our God has a big picture and a big future for us. Who can put hope in slave people like the Israelites, but God alone? God saw their future through Jesus Christ, and he was glad.

When God anointed the king to succeed Saul, people looked at outward appearances such as physical strength, size, and age. But God looked at their hearts. (2 Sa 16:7) God chose a man after his own heart, David, rather than his brothers who were tall and strong. We don’t know the future of young men and women because we don’t know how God will change them and use them. Kit taught the Bible to Bo and Bo was baptized right after he came back to China. It looked small and insignificant. But who knows what lies ahead for Bo’s future and the future of China through Bo? We heard the testimony of Pastor David Ryu, who shared his heart-moving and grateful testimony during the ISBC last year. One Korean missionary taught him the Bible when he was in college. He left the ministry after he graduated from college. But a few decades later, God changed him and made him a pastor, who serves the biggest church in Washington DC. I had a slippery bible student when I was in LA. He was a typical PK. I forgot him after I moved to Chicago. But, when I met him again last year in LA, he became a pastor. I didn’t expect him to become a pastor, but God loved him and blessed him to become his servant. We have to see people with the eyes of God and with the hope of God. This is because our God is the God of hope with a big picture and a big future.

Peter used to be a fisherman. His life was tossed by the amount of fish that he caught. But since he accepted Jesus Christ as the Lord and followed him, his life was changed. He became one of the most influential people in human history. He wrote a letter to the scattered Christians who were hiding themselves from threatening persecutors. He wrote in 1 Peter 2:9. “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*.” Peter saw the suffering and hiding Christians as chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God’s special possession. This was because Peter saw them with the eyes of God and with the hope of God. God calls each of us today as Peter did. Lizzie graduated and left home yesterday. But I believe that missionary Esther Lee’s labor for her spiritual growth will be never in vain. Who knows Lizzie’s future? We don’t know how God will use Lizzie for his kingdom for the rest of her life? Dr. Melissa is doing a priestly duty for two Chinese girls through Skype every weekend. Can you imagine the work of God in these two Chinese girls’ life and for the future of China? I will not be disappointed with current situation and present problems. This is because in God’s time he will make all things good and beautiful according to his good purpose. Let us open wide our short-sighted eyes to see people of the whole world with the hope of God, starting with our children. Amen!

In verses 7-25 we see God’s advent on the Mount Sinai and his encounter with the Israelites. Moses went back and called the elders of the people and delivered God’s message to them. They all responded, “***We will do everything the LORD has said***.” They responded with ‘yes’, as a bride responds to the priest who asks her devotion to her husband saying, “Yes, I will do!” So, Moses brought their answer back to the LORD. In this way the covenant between God and the Israelites was verified with a mutual agreement.

Now the LORD God told Moses about his descent on the top of the Mount Sinai and the preparation of the Israelites. The LORD God is holy, so too should they be holy. They had to consecrate themselves before they met the Holy God. Moses asked them to wash their clothes, abstain from sexual relations, and restrict their foot from not touching the site of the mountain. (10,12,15) This was like a preparation for a pure bride before she meets her bridegroom. Make clean, pure and holy!

Let’s see how the LORD God descended on the Mount. Look at verses 16-19. “***On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of the God answered him***.” God’s descent on the mountain and his appearance made the Israelites tremble with fear. No one dared to come to the LORD God because he was too holy for them to even approach. But now we thank God that we can approach Him with confidence and freedom, and even call Him Abba Father, through Jesus Christ. (Ro 8:15, He 10:22) On the Mount Sinai God appeared as fire with fear and power. But, in the town of Bethlehem, God appeared as a baby in a manger with peace and comfort. This is the reason why we call Jesus the Everlasting God and Prince of Peace. (Is 9:6) When Jesus comes again, he will arrive in a different form. He will come from the cloud with great power and glory as a judge. We will meet him again in the air as he promised. He will receive us as his bride because of the covenant which he had made in his own blood (Mt 26:28, Mk 14:24, Lk22:20). Then we will belong to him forever. The Lord will be our God and we will be his people forever in his kingdom. As Revelation 5:10 says, at that time we all hear a new song for us, “*You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth*.” Amen!