

# FORMING A PECULIAR PEOPLE

## Exodus 19:1–6; 20:1–17 • Char Brodersen

**Introduction:** Good morning, church! This morning, we are continuing in our “Story of ...” series. As I’ve mentioned we wanted to do something new this year by taking our church through a biblical theology in order to know and understand how the whole of Scripture works together to tell God’s great story of redemption in and through Jesus Christ. This morning, we are carrying on with the Story of the People, all of which concerns the family of Abraham—the Jewish people and Nation—and how God takes a family of slaves and sets them free to be his peculiar people.

The Exodus is the Biblical Story. It’s not just Israel’s historical story. It is actually the great Meta-Narrative of the whole biblical story; the redemptive blueprint that Scripture keeps referencing again and again, like an orchestral melody that it picks up and carries. At times it descends, or drops out, but then picks it up and carries it to new heights and dynamics each time. Once you begin to see it, you can’t unsee it.

How do I mean?

Humanity, though created by God and for God to be in fellowship with him and to partner with him in building his kingdom, has rebelled against this one true God and Father of all creation, and now has found itself enslaved under the tyranny of sin, death, and Satan. God has seen our affliction and heard the cries of humanity and has come down to rescue us (Exodus 3:7–8). He has raised up a deliverer, and with his mighty hand and outstretched arm (the one who delivered from Pharaoh and Egypt), the same arm that Isaiah the prophet will foresee (Isaiah 52–53), he has humiliated the gods and powers of this world, defeating them by triumphing over them through his cross (Colossians 2:13–15). He has delivered us by the precious blood of the lamb (no spot or blemish, no broken bones), leading us through baptismal waters, as Moses led the people through the Red Sea, so that we are brought through cleansed and renewed—a new identity, a new humanity. Leading us and preserving us with his presence as we journey to the promised land of the New Creation.

But freedom from slavery to sin, death, and Satan is only half of the Exodus story and the biblical story. We are created for God, to know him, to love and be loved by him, to reflect his glory out into the world and back to him. We are created to partner with him in making the earth his good kingdom.

Theologians Andrew Wilson and Alistair Roberts remind us:

“Escaping from Egypt is only half of the exodus. It is easy for us to forget this, in an age where freedom is understood as merely being freedom from: oppression, from constraint or whatever. This aspect of liberation, as wonderful as it is, is only half of the deal. In the scriptures, more emphasis is placed on the freedom for: for worship, for flourishing, for growth in obedience and joy and glory. Human beings are not designed to be free from all constraint, slaves to nothing but our own passions, triumphantly enthroned as our own masters, even our own gods. Everybody serves somebody. So the point of the exodus is not just for Israel (or for us) to find deliverance from serving the old master. It is for us to find delight in serving the new one.”

—Echoes of Exodus

You see, Israel is now free from their slavery, but they have not yet learned what it means to be the people of God, a people who reflect the goodness of the promise of redemption that they have been called to carry and so God leads them into the liminal space of the wilderness—into the middle of nowhere, away from all nations and influences so he can form a new people through his presence and instruction who will bear his name and his promise of redemption for the world.

Last week, we considered Israel's freedom from slavery as the lens through which we understand our redemption.

Today, we want to consider their freedom *for YHWH*: how they are being formed to be God's people—the one's who will bear his name and take God's plan and promise of redemption forward—and how that informs our own understanding of our freedom now in Jesus Christ.

Let's read together from Exodus 19:1–6 and 20:1–17.

## 1. Understanding the purpose of the Law

### A. The Law—sweeter than honey, more precious than gold.

- i. It's interesting, we call this body of Scripture the Law of Moses, but the word the Jews used and still use today is the word Torah, which simply means instruction.
- ii. The Law, or Torah, laid out God's standard of right, of justice, of goodness for his people, Israel, that would result in Shalom (Peace in every aspect of life). The Law was a vision and implementation of God's kingdom culture practiced by his people, and it could be summarized in two commands—Love and allegiance to YHWH and love of neighbor. God's desire was to bring Israel to himself—to dwell in their midst as he had done with Adam and Eve in the Garden, and he was giving them the house rules. This is how we live together in harmony; this is what it looks like to be in relationship with me, what it means to be my special people.
- iii. Though Christians often speak negatively of the Law, this was and is not the view of Israel nor of Jesus and the early disciples. The Law, or Torah, contained the story of Israel and their covenant relationship with God—the story of how God was present in the world and working through one people group to rescue and redeem the world in order to bring it back to what God always intended for humanity and for the world to be.
  - a. All throughout the Scriptures, the Law—or Torah—is seen as something that is a wonderful, beautiful, a gift to God's people, which enlightens and gives life. You might be familiar with Psalm 119, which walks through the whole Hebrew alphabet, celebrating the goodness of the Law in an acrostic poem. It uses words like joyful, rejoicing, freedom, delight, and treasure to describe what the Law does and brings to the individual who lives in observance to it.

### B. This is understandable when you consider a number of things about the Jews' context in the world around them:

- i. **The Law was good—because it was clear in contrast to the silence of the gods of the other nations.**
  - a. In her book, *Bearing God's Name*, Carmen Imes, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Biola University and Talbot Seminary, mentions an ancient Babylonian prayer that was discovered, entitled A prayer to Any God, which depicts humans as unable to comprehend the ways of the gods and desperately trying to predict how to please them.
  - b. Just a portion reads, "*May my lord's angry heart be reconciled; may the god I do not know be reconciled; may the goddess I do not know be reconciled, may the goddess, whoever she is, be reconciled.*" (It goes on with more I do not know and whoever you are added to various petitions.
    - (i) This is just a sample of much of the ancient world's relationships to their gods—agnostic. We don't know, we can't predict—it's really all up to personal or tribal interpretation. There is no love, no real relationship. But not so with Israel's God.

- (a) Listen to what he says again: **“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” —Exodus 19:4**
  - (ii) Carmen Imes writes, “God took the initiative, he chose them, rescued them, established them as his people and then told them exactly what he expected. God spoke. No more guesswork. No wondering what would make him happy or angry. He made it all clear upfront.” —*Bearing God’s Name*
- ii. **The Law was good because of its simplicity and its broadness.** Though there are 614 applications of how this instruction is to be observed, which includes festivals and sacrifices, the purity of the judicial system, instruction to the lifestyle of a king and so on, the laws or values from which these applications come from is quite basic. God gives the people the Ten Words. (We call them the ten commandments, but the Scriptures and the Jewish people never do. They are simply known as the *Decalogue*, meaning the ten words.)
  - a. Think of the absolute brilliance and simultaneous kindness of God to meet this nation of uneducated slaves where they are at! Anyone, educated or uneducated, could memorize these ten words, and they would even have ten fingers to correspond to these ten words. It is believed that the original instruction would actually have read and sounded like something much more primitive: No other gods; no images, no steal, no kill, no adultery, no covet—You get the idea. So simple and memorable and so absolutely applicable. Have you ever looked at this list and thought—*how could we add to better it or take away to simplify it?* It is as basic as it gets and so incredibly broad in its application. Both basic and profound instruction for what it means to Love God and to Love Our Neighbor.
- iii. **The Law was good because it favored and protected the weak.**
  - a. The underdog, the weak, and disenfranchised, are singled out as special and near and dear to God’s heart and therefore deserve protection and care versus Hammurabi’s law that only benefited the powerful and rich.
  - b. In Leviticus, there is the command—**“Be holy, for the Lord your God is holy.” (Leviticus 20:7)** Now contrary to what many of us think about the word holy, it simply means dedicated or set apart. So literally, Moses is saying to God’s people, be different or set apart—like God—and don’t be like the nations that are all around you.
    - (a) **“Be Holy for the Lord your God is holy”**—doesn’t mean, then “you must be extra super religious and use such and such words, etc.” What God was doing in making them holy actually had a lot to do with having this down-to-earth practicality of right doing and justice. So, if you read the holiness laws (instruction) in Leviticus—where this command to be holy comes from—what follows is: God is commanding his people to be generous to the poor. To give fair treatment and payment to employees—both natives and foreigners. We find practical compassion for the disabled and respect for the elderly. You find instruction concerning the integrity of the judicial process. We find safety precautions to prevent endangering life. We find ecological sensitivity and instruction concerning the stewardship of the earth. We find laws about provision and protection for ethnic minorities. Instruction concerning honesty in trade and business. We continually find all of this down-to-earth practicality of right doing and justice through the codes and the laws given to the people of Israel.
    - (b) Theologian and Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright, says this about all of the Levitical code and laws: “We call such matters ‘social ethics’ or ‘human rights,’ and we think that we are very modern and civilized for doing so. We go to great lengths to get them written pompously into declarations for this and charters for that and codes for something else. God just calls them holiness.” *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*

(c) These laws, commands, and instruction reflect the heart of who YHWH is. **“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” —Exodus 34:6–7**

2. **But what about those super cringy passages that you haven’t mentioned? The Law is not all goodness, righteousness, and roses.**

A. That’s right and this is good for us to consider because some of us either forget, pretend, or ignore the fact that there are really difficult passages of the Old Testament to receive and to see the goodness of God in, while others can only see these passages and can’t get past them. (Biblically illiterate culture using the Bible to critique a biblically illiterate church.)

B. To help us approach this subject, I want to begin with an analogy. How many of you are familiar with some of the wild laws that have been passed in the U.S. in our short history? You can look these up on a website called [Onelegal.com](http://Onelegal.com) (it’s a wild time—great for dinner conversations),

i. In Arizona: It is illegal for a donkey to sleep in a bathtub.

ii. In Kentucky: It is illegal to carry ice cream in your back pocket.

a. “The law about a donkey not sleeping in a bathtub was put into effect in 1924. The story is that a rancher had a donkey that frequently slept in an abandoned bathtub on the rancher’s property. One day, a local dam broke, and the water from the reservoir washed the bathtub and the donkey into a basin. Local authorities were called to help rescue the donkey, but it wasn’t easy to do. It required a lot of effort and manpower to finally rescue the animal. To prevent such a thing from ever happening again, they passed a law that prohibited donkeys from sleeping in bathtubs.”

b. “The law against carrying ice cream in your back pocket was originally passed to prevent horse theft. At the time it was passed, if you carried an ice cream cone in your pocket and walked by a horse, the horse would likely follow you because horses like sweet things. The horse would leave its owner and end up belonging to someone else. So a law was passed to ban ice cream in pockets as a way of preventing horse theft.” — *How (not) to read the Bible*, Dan Kimball, pg. 68

c. Now these laws are not even as old as our country, and we look back some hundred years and think—what in the world? But at the time and in the context, this seemed to be the right application of the law in these various situations. Now think of the Mosaic Law that concerns a culture and context thousands of years removed from us, in a part of the world that most of us have never visited. It may have us scratching our heads, but it most likely made perfect sense to the people who were receiving it at the time, and not only that, it was a radical contrast to the way the other nations lived.

d. One example of this comes to us in Deuteronomy 21.

(i) **Deuteronomy 21:10–14 (read it):** This is not timeless wisdom—nobody should do this. This does not sound loving, good, or right to us. It sounds archaic and abhorrent. But if you step back and consider this for a moment, in every other culture at that time, the victor warrior could do whatever he wanted with his captives of war—rape them, kill them, rape them for a season and then throw them away. But here, for YHWH’s people, God restricts the rights of the victor warrior. If a man desired a woman, he must first make her his wife—giving her all the legal and social status of a wife and of legal marriage, and

if he divorced her later, he had to give her all the rights due to her in a divorce. Also, he must not add one more ounce of shame than she has already received. Here's the deal, this still sounds pretty messed up to us, but this was so radically enlightening and progressive for its time.

- e. The Scriptures even say this: “See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ 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? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?” —Deuteronomy 4:5–8
  - (a) Wise, understanding, righteous—this is what the nations will see, they will be in awe, when they observe Israel’s customs and Laws that they live by—Sweeter than honey more precious than Gold.
  - (i) As modern “Enlightened” westerners, it’s really hard for us to fathom parts of the Mosaic Law as being progressive and forward thinking, but it was radically so.
    - (a) Author Thomas Cahill writes, “This long-winded, unwieldy compilation of assorted prescriptions represents an overall softening—a humanizing—of the common law of the ancient Middle East, which easily prescribed a hand not for a hand but for the theft of a loaf of bread or for the striking of one’s better and which gave much favor to the rights of the nobility and virtually none to the lower classes. The casual cruelty of other ancient law codes—the cutting off of nose, ears, tongue, lower lip (for kissing another man’s wife), breasts, and testicles—is seldom matched in the Torah. Rather, in the prescriptions of Jewish law we cannot but note a presumption that all people, even slaves, are human and that all human lives are sacred. The constant bias is in favor not of the powerful and their possessions but of the powerless and their poverty; and there is even a frequent enjoinder to sympathy: ‘A sojourner you are not to oppress: you yourselves know (well) the feelings of the sojourner, for sojourners were you in the land of Egypt.’ This bias toward the underdog is unique not only in ancient law but in the whole history of law. However faint our sense of justice may be, insofar as it operates at all, it is still a Jewish sense of justice.” —Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*
    - 1. “God is not calling his people to live in an eccentric, unhistorical fashion: they are to be genuine people of their own historical time and place. And yet God recasts common law to reflect his own character and creational intentions, and so it has some quite distinctive elements. For example, while some law of that time valued property above people and made the punishment for stealing greater than that for murder, Israel’s law always places the value of people above that of mere property, for only people, of all God’s creations, have been fashioned in his own image.”—Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*
    - (b) We need to understand that God’s law, through Moses, does not outlaw every less than perfect cultural practice of its day; rather, the Law took the practice as it was and improved upon it. **God in his kindness and grace is accommodating to human brokenness and cultural norms, but his instruction is always forward looking—it is progressive moving toward the ideal reached in Jesus and the New Creation.**

- (c) As the people of God lived in this distinct way, two aspects of God’s redemptive work are moving forward. First, God is coming to live in their midst—the ideal that was experienced in the Garden of Eden. The people are experiencing the blessed way of life in fellowship and partnership with God to make the land they are living in this Holy space where they live with God and with one another in peace.
- (d) Secondly, they are partnering with God to be a light to the nations. As they lived in this distinct peculiar way, the nations around them would be see their light, their right doing, their just ways, and practices—their blessedness—and be curious, question, and inquire and come to know the true God and join his family and experience his redemption.
- (e) God called Israel to be the light of the world. Israel was the people through whom God intended to shine his bright light into the world’s dark corners, not simply to show up evil but to enable people who were stumbling around in the dark to find their way to him.

### 3. The Law is good but not good enough.

- A. Though the Scriptures celebrate the goodness and blessedness of the Law or Torah and those who observe it (like in Psalm 1), it never teaches that it is the fullness of God’s revelation or the end goal of his plan. In fact, the Scriptures teach the opposite. The Law is good but it’s not good enough—it’s a sign pointing forward.
- B. The prophet Jeremiah spoke of a day when the Law would pass away and all that it was pointing to would be fulfilled and brought to completion: “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord.” I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. *[This is whole person, righteousness language.]* I will be their God, and they will be my people. *[This is king—kingdom language.]* No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” —Jeremiah 31:31–34
- C. As I mentioned, the Law is good, the problem is humanity’s incapability of living up to its righteous standard of goodness. Though the people of Israel will affirm the goodness of the Law and say that they will faithfully observe it, they never do. In fact, they royally fail right out the gate by molding a golden calf and worshipping it. Their biblical history as a whole is a failure to be the distinct and peculiar people of God that will show his glory and goodness to the surrounding nations to draw them to the one true God. Their redemptive calling and vocation goes off the rails, much like Adam and Eve.
  - i. Thousands of years Later, in light of Jesus the Messiah, God’s anointed Redeemer and Savior, Paul the apostle will write—“For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh [human failure and inability], God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” —Romans 8:3–4
  - ii. We mentioned a few weeks ago that through Abraham and his family, God is redeeming the human project and launching his new creation—To be king over all of creation, to make the world his dwelling place with humans, and to partner with humanity to spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth, and nothing will stop him in his loving determination to do so. God will come himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, and like Paul says here, he will do what no mere human



can do. He will do what the Law failed to do. He will condemn sin, in and through his own body on the cross—there he will be the atoning sacrifice for all humanity’s sin and failure, and he will simultaneously fulfill, complete, and accomplish all that the Law was pointing to—a human being who would perfectly love God and neighbor, who would succeed where Adam and Israel both failed. And now the victorious Jesus, who has accomplished all that the Law pointed to and has done what Adam and Eve failed to do, who has died for our sins and failures and risen from the dead—invites us, his people, to learn his way—the way of the New Humanity, the peculiar people of God—in order that we might discover our true vocation and calling as humans—to show the world the goodness, the righteousness, the justice, and peace of our God.

- iii. That we, like Israel was intended to, would be a light to the nations, to all people—and through the conduct and character of our lives, modeled by the way of Jesus himself, taught in his Sermon on the Mount—would invite all people everywhere to know this great God and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and to join his family and to experience true and lasting freedom under his kingdom reign and instruction.

**Conclusion: Let Jesus teach you and me his way.**

I’m reminded again of the words of C. S. Lewis: “Our faith is not a matter of hearing what Christ said so long ago and ‘trying to carry it out’, rather, ‘The real son of God is at your side. He is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as Himself. He is beginning, so to speak, to inject his kind of life and thought, his ZOE, into you; beginning to turn the tin soldier into a live man; the part of you that doesn’t like it is the part that is still tin.” —C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

The real Son of God is at our side. He is here even now offering to instruct us in his way, in order that his own life, his righteousness, might permeate every part of our being, and that we might live now under his Kingly reign. Walk with Jesus, be with Jesus, follow and practice his way of being; become like Jesus and do what he did.

*“Jesus came among us to show and teach the life for which we were made. He came very gently, opened access to the governance of God with him, and set afoot a conspiracy of freedom in truth among human beings. Having overcome death he remains among us. By relying on his word and presence we are enabled to reintegrate the little realm that makes up our life into the infinite rule of God. And that is the eternal kind of life. Caught up in his active rule, our deeds become an element in God’s eternal history. They are what God and we do together, making us part of his life and him a part of ours.”*

—Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*

Only through Jesus, through his life, death, and resurrection, only through following his instruction and his way of life can we enter into the true freedom of our redemption and the true freedom that God created us for—to live under his reign, to live in deep relationship with him, in peace with him and others, and to partner with him that through our lives his kingdom reign and redemption would be made known.

**Communion:** As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, we come as a people who have been set free from slavery to sin, death, and Satan. I imagine for many of us there are still reminders in our lives of our past—our slavery to sin and to Satan. Maybe that is manifest in your current struggles with sin and temptation.

This table is a weekly physical reminder—That we have been set free by the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We are washed, we are clean. We have been given a new identity and a new purpose in Christ Jesus, and that is to live for God and to live with God—and he is leading us forward to new creation. The more we take hold of this truth, the more we believe it, the more we live it, our old self, the past—our sin, our slavery—will become a distant memory as we live into the new self and this newfound freedom under King Jesus.

**Come to the table. Ask Jesus to set you free, to help you live into that freedom, to follow him. He will meet you here. He will wash you, he'll cleanse you, he will renew and strengthen you.**

We know that because of human sinfulness and brokenness, there is not one of us who has lived up to the ideal of what God created us for—to love him supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So as we come to the table this morning, we come as a people in need of forgiveness and in need of redemption and salvation. And that is what Jesus offer us at this table—forgiveness, redemption, and salvation. His life for our life; his righteousness for our sin and brokenness.

### **Prayer**

*Most merciful God,*

*we confess that we have sinned against you*

*in thought, word, and deed,*

*by what we have done,*

*and by what we have left undone.*

*We have not loved you with our whole heart;*

*we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.*

*We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent.*

*For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,*

*have mercy on us and forgive us*

*that we may delight in your will*

*and walk in your ways,*

*to the glory of your Name. Amen.*