

“A Time to Decide”

Exodus 24
January 8, 2006
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Today may be a special day for some of you in this place.

Today may be the day you move from religion to relationship; the day you move from merely calling yourself a Christian to being one.

Today may be the day you stop simply hearing about being a Christ-follower and actually begin to follow Christ.

Today may be the day you stop waiting to decide and instead you make a commitment.

Today may be the day you declare your loyalty to God.

Today you may be the day you say, “From this day forward I belong to him and live for him.”

You’ve grown up with Christianity,

you maybe had some moving religious experiences as a child –
you remember praying a prayer to ask Jesus into your
heart when you were younger,

you live with Christians,

maybe you married a Christian,

you’ve gone to a Christian church much of your life,

you’ve sometimes read the Christian Bible,

you’ve sometimes prayed to the Christian’s God,

you’ve usually tried to live by Christian principles,

but you have never committed yourself to Jesus - not really.

You have never, with an adult perspective, driven a stake in the ground and uncompromisingly committed yourself to following Jesus no matter the cost.

Christianity is all around you but it is not in you.

You have a measure of religion – you attend church, you give some of your money, you take the Lord’s Supper, you might even give some of your time in service.

You’re **counting** on your proximity to Christianity to be sufficient when you finally meet your Maker.

You’ve spent a lot of time around Christianity but you’re not sold out.

You’ve been challenged before in this way, but you’ve held out.

- You aren’t quite certain you believe it all.
- You aren’t quite certain you are ready to give up what you know is contrary to what Jesus teaches.
- You aren’t quite certain you dare to trust God in the way Jesus talked about it.
- You’re afraid that if you make a commitment you will be doomed to sacrifice, poverty, and boredom.

Well today is different!

- Today may be the day you make and declare a commitment – Today you may accept your covenant relationship with God.
- Today you may respond to the grace of God with the only response that matters – you will commit to trust and follow him.

In this matter of making such a commitment, I want us to see and learn from others who have gone before us.

When Jesus was here he said something that sounds strange to our ears:

John 6:53-54 “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

Just as your physical body needs food and drink, likewise the you that is not flesh and bones, needs spiritual food and drink.

Jesus is saying that to have life, that is not just physical, you need Him.

To wholly trust and follow Jesus is the way to life.

Most of those who heard him make that call to a commitment to him left him at that point.

John 6:66 “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

Jesus turned and asked the few who remained the same question I am asking you today.

John 6:67 “You do not want to leave too, do you?”

Can you imagine the thoughts that swirled through the minds of those followers?

“Hey, this is too much; this is too intense.”

“I don’t mind hearing what he has to say, but commit to it – I don’t know!”

But there were only two options open to them: leave or follow.

That is where I hope God will put some of you today – right into that place where you realize you can’t ride the fence any longer.

You can’t just hang around Christianity any more; it’s time to paint or get off the ladder.

It is time to decide!

Please understand, I am not addressing you who are new to Christianity, who are just learning what it is all about.

I’m addressing myself today to you who are “lifers” – you who have dabbled for years but have never dug in,

you who have hung around the edges of the crowd that surrounds Jesus, but have never committed to him.

I’m not saying you don’t have a modicum of religion (after all you’re a religious person in your own way); I’m saying you’ve never sold out to Jesus.

But it is another group that I most want us to learn from today.

For 400plus years the people had lived in slavery in Egypt.

Now just a few months before where our story picks up a man named Moses, who grew up as the Pharaoh’s son but was actually an Israelite, returned to Egypt after living in exile for 40 years for killing an Egyptian.

There is only one word to describe what happened in those next few months: miraculous.

That man Moses convinced the slaves, the Israelites, that he was sent by God to liberate them from their slavery and lead them to a land of their own.

One awesome experience after another resulted in 2 or 3 million Israelites literally walking out of Egypt and into the Sinai desert.

Would you stand with me please as I read God's word beginning in Exodus 19.

Exodus 19:1-6 “In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai...and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. ³ Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to...tell the people of 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, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

Then through Moses, in verses 7-15, God told the people, to prepare for God's appearance.

We pick it up again at verse 16 “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, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.”

Move to chapter 20 “And God spoke all these words: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. “You shall have no other gods before me.

There’s that loyalty issue. And at that the people heard (Deut 4:33) the voice of God speaking the 10 Commandments which we have looked at in detail in the past several weeks.

But let’s go back to the story: Verse 18: “When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

I can’t reproduce for you the same experience they experienced but I can declare on the basis of God’s word that it actually happened and that the God who did that is the same fearful, awesome God today who offers himself and his grace to us.

Verse 20: “Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you (give you a direct experience), so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites this: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold. Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings...”

Chapter 21:1 “**These** are the laws you are to set before them.”

And then chapters 21-23 set forth those laws, which we will look at, in more detail, another time.

And so we pick up the story again in chapter 24:3.

“When Moses went and told the people all the LORD’S words and laws, they responded with one voice, “Everything the LORD has said we will do.”⁴ Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered

burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.” Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

May God bless the reading of his word!

Pray

You may be seated.

Back at the end of chapter 20 the people were awestruck by what they had just seen and heard – the smoke, the fire and the voice from heaven declaring God’s call on their lives, their loyalty.

God had declared that he loves them; that he delivered them.

Earlier he had said in Exodus 19:4 “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”

Now it is decision time.

Now is the time to respond to God’s grace.

And the proper response is loyalty.

So in Exodus 20:22 he says, “You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: Do not make any gods to be alongside me...”

Then, as we have seen in previous weeks, the commands God spells out are in part what loyalty looks like.

If you accept my grace, if you trust me, you will follow me.

And following looks like something, it has specificity, it means you think and act in certain ways and don’t think or act in other ways.

It means you imitate God’s character and pursue God’s goals in the world.

And notice this is not just obedience to abstract principles or compliance with a code of conduct but is loyalty to the God who loves them and liberated them

Many years later, Jesus was equally clear about what following means.

Luke 14:25-28, 33 “Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? ...In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”

This isn't irrational loyalty; this is carefully considered loyalty.

Elsewhere Jesus said, John 14:15 “If you love me you will keep my commands.”

Notice he doesn't say, “If you keep my commands you will earn my love” but “If you love me,” if you respond to my grace, if you trust me, you will keep my commands.

Obedience, following, and loyalty are expected in Christianity!

This is basic to any relationship with God.

The fundamental relationship is that God loves and redeems and we love and follow.

Following is assumed; it is axiomatic.

Loyalty is the logical and natural consequence of redemption.

The story is told that Abraham Lincoln visited a slave auction on one occasion and was appalled at what he saw.

“His heart was especially drawn to a young woman on the block whose story seemed to be told in her eyes.

She looked with hatred and contempt on everyone around her.

She had been used and abused all her life, and this time was but one more cruel humiliation.

The bidding began and Lincoln offered a bid.

As other amounts were bid, he counter-bid with larger amounts until he had won.

When he paid the auctioneer the money and took title to the young woman, she stared at him with vicious contempt.

She asked him what he was going to do next with her and he said, "I'm going to set you free."

"Free?" she asked "Free for what?"

"Just free," Lincoln answered. "Completely free."

"Free to do whatever I want to do?"

"Yes," he said, "Free to do whatever you want to do."

"Free to say whatever I want to say?"

"Yes, free to say whatever you want to say."

"Free to go wherever I want to go?" she added with skepticism.

Lincoln answered, "You are free to go anywhere you want to go."

"Then I'm going with you!" she said with a smile. (in Ryken, Exodus, 707)

That is the only legitimate response to grace.

What **grace** looks like has been seen in their deliverance from Egypt and God's protection of them in the desert.

What **loyalty** looks like, at least in part, has been spelled out in the commandments of God.

Now, it is decision time.

So God next calls on the Israelites to enter into a covenant with him:

Exodus 20:24 "Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings..."

God is saying, I want you to decide; I want you to make a commitment.

I want that commitment ratified, formalized.

I want us to make a covenant here and now – I love you and am calling you to follow me – will you?

But this is not just an emotional response to what they had seen.

I find it interesting in the text that twice Moses spells out what commitment looks like.

Chapter 24:3 He told the people all the words and laws of chapters 20 through 23.

And the people respond, “Everything the Lord has said we will do.”

Then the next morning, verse 4, Moses built an earthen rock-altar the way the Lord had earlier told him.

The altar would represent God and his grace.

He also set up twelve stone pillars to represent the 12 clans of Israel.

So here was a meeting of God and his people.

Altars and sacrifices were not new to these people and they were keenly aware of what was going on.

Now was the time for them to decide if they were in or out – God was calling them to make a commitment.

Next young Israelite men were sent to get the young bull calves to offer as sacrifices.

Two specific kinds of sacrifices are mentioned: **burnt** offerings and **fellowship** offerings – they signified different things.

The calves were killed and the blood was drained into containers – bowls.

Half of the blood Moses sprinkled on the altar.

And consistent with burnt offerings, the bulls dedicated to that offering were burned up completely on that altar.

- The symbolism is clearly spelled out in other parts of the Bible.
- These animals’ lives were given for the people.
- The animals died, their blood was shed, to atone for, to make possible the forgiveness of the sins of the people.

No one could have a relationship with a holy God unless his or her sins were paid for.

And God has determined that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

And God declared that the lives of the animals would substitute for the lives of the people.

But the Covenant wasn't completed.

From a human perspective, the question remained, would the people respond, would they trust God in this, and would they commit their loyalty to him in obedience to him?

Now interesting to me is that before going further with the sacrifices, Moses read the commitment one more time.

The "Book of the Covenant" is a reference to the commands of Exodus 20-23.

He read to them again **what loyalty looks like**.

- Are they serious about this?
- Do they understand that trusting God is not just about warm feelings of acceptance and security but is also about life-changing loyalty to this God who loves them and called them to his service?

What will the people do?

Exodus 24:7 "They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey."

They **declared** their commitment, their loyalty to God!

And with that Moses took the blood of the "fellowship offerings" and sprinkled it on the people.

As gross as that sounds to us, it was very effective in symbolizing what was happening.

The blood on them connected them to the blood on that altar.

The life of another had been given for their lives.

The sacrifice of another made possible their relationship with God.

And notice please, that relationship was consummated **before** the Israelites had actually done anything.

They hadn't obeyed the laws yet because they **weren't** accepted by their ability to keep the laws.

They were accepted by God's gracious provision of the lives of the animals who died for them.

But it is also true that the covenant was completed when they received that sacrifice as for them, when they trusted God, when they decided to trust and follow Him.

Now the other offerings, the “fellowship offerings,” were placed on the altar but not consumed; they were cooked and the people ate together in the presence of God and one another as part of God’s family.

Now this is where it gets very interesting because with Moses’ final words in the covenant ceremony, he brings us right up to the time of Jesus and consequently to us.

I’m referring specifically to chapter 24:8 “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

We find those words again 1500 years later in Hebrews 9:19-20 “When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves...and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you...”

With that event in mind, the author links to Jesus: Hebrews 9:26-28 “But now Jesus has appeared once for all...to do away with sin by the sacrifice of **himself**. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed **once** to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

Using the same language of sprinkled blood that God used with the Israelites, we see that now Christ’s death and blood is applied to us. Hebrews 10:22 “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience.”

“Having our hearts sprinkled” is in the perfect tense – a past act with continuing results meaning Christ has done it for us and we now live in the on going results of his sacrificial death and resurrection.

And so the Bible says, in 1 John 1:7 “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light (as we follow Jesus), we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies (keeps on purifying) us from all sin.”

Because of what he has done we now have the right to draw near to God with full assurance.

It doesn't mean we won't feel appropriately guilty for doing wrong things but that the larger issue of our relationship with God has been settled.

Romans 5:1 “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

God calls us into a covenant relationship with himself through his son Jesus.

Somewhere along the line Christianity got cheapened and we got cheated.

Christianity was turned into a religion of asking Jesus to forgive our sins so we wouldn't go to hell when we died.

When all along it was really God calling us to himself.

We turned it into getting our Christian “Costco card” so we could get whatever we wanted or a Christian “get out of jail free” card that we could turn in when we died.

That kind of Christianity has little or nothing to do with biblical Christianity, with following Jesus, with commitment, with loyalty, and with God's calling on our lives.

But God calls us to a real Covenant.

A covenant he has made possible by the sacrificial death of his own son.

That's why, when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper with his disciples, we find this:

Luke 22:19 “And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

As the bodies of those bulls were offered to atone for the sins of the people in Moses’ day, so the perfect Christ was offered once only for the sins of all God’s people of all the ages.

Luke 22:20 “In the same way, after the supper Jesus took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.

He held up that cup containing BLOOD red wine and he said, in essence, this represents my blood, which was poured out for you so that you can enter into a new relationship with God – a Covenant of grace and loyalty.

That blood of Jesus was sprinkled on the last altar of God – the cross.

The cross is our altar and the sacrifice has been made.

And God now calls you to that altar, to his Son.

It’s decision time!

Will you receive his grace and follow his Son?

I began the message today with these words:

- Today may be a special day for some of you in this place.
- Today may be the day you move from religion to relationship; the day you move from merely calling yourself a Christian to being one.
- Today may be the day you stop pretending to be a Christ-follower and actually begin to follow Christ.
- Today you may say, “From this day forward I belong to him and I will live for him.”

In the next few minutes you will have the privilege of laying your own hands on the very emblems of Christ’s sacrificial death for you – the bread of his body and the cup of his blood.

For you who are already following Jesus, will you renew your vows today?

And for you who have been, up until now, merely “hangers on,” will you today enter into the covenant offered by God - receiving Jesus and committing to be a follower of his.

I implore you to make that commitment today, even as you eat the bread and drink the cup this morning.