

“The World for God” **By Lieutenant-Colonel (Dr.) Susan L. van Duinen**

Facilitator’s Notes:

The Story That Provides a Reason for Living

Who are we and what are we here for? What is the mission of God's people? Even at the personal level such questions are challenging. What is your sense of identity and what is the purpose of your existence in this world?

If we step back into the Old Testament, we could ask the same questions about the Israelites. Who were they, and what were they there for? And the way we answer has to come out of the big story they were part of. So at this point we take another step forward in seeing the significance of the grand biblical narrative. It matters to have a grasp of the meta-narrative.

Here, then, is God's own answer to those questions for the Old Testament Israelites: "Who are we and what are we here for?" It comes in one of the most influential verses in the Bible.

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 house 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. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. [5b] *For indeed* the whole earth is mine, and you will be for me a kingdom of *priests* and a *holy* nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." Ex. 19:3-6 (my italics and translation in v. 5b)

Now the story that formed the immediate context for these words was, of course, the story of the exodus, as we see starting in chapter 6 of Exodus. But even that is not a big enough story. That was just one part of God's great drama that shapes the whole Bible, that spans the whole universe, and that includes the past, present and future. It was the early episodes of the big story that told the Israelites who they were.

It is also the story that tells us who we are and why, for it is part of the story that gave us Jesus of Nazareth and his story. Indeed it was the story that confirmed to Jesus who he was and what he was there to be and to do, it is the story that drove the New Testament church out in its mission to the world – *The World for God*.

So then, in thinking about what it is about our identity as the people of God that necessitates our involvement in mission, we need to pay attention to the story - as God surveys it in this text.

The Story So Far

So as we turn in this chapter to study Exodus 19:3-6, think about building a biblical theology for life - which means that the theology we dig out of this story and God's comment on it can be applied to our own lives precisely because this is part of our story, part of the big story that gives meaning and purpose to our lives as God's people.

We know the story so far. The Israelites had been oppressed as an ethnic minority in Egypt. God, out of compassion and faithfulness, sent Moses to deliver them. After a series of plagues on Pharaoh and Egypt, they had escaped, and God sealed their deliverance by a miraculous crossing of the sea, celebrated by Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15. Then God had provided them with food, with water, with protection from their enemies, and with a bit of organizational common sense from Moses' father-in-law (Exodus 16-18).

But now at last, God had got the Israelites to himself, as it were, gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, as he had promised Moses (Ex. 3:12). It was time to explain. Time to make sense of the story so far. Time to help them understand the point of it all. Time to tell them who they were, and what they were to be and do for God in this new world situation in which they found themselves.

That is the thrust of Exodus 19:1-6. The speech of God at this point is a crucial hinge between the great story of redemption in the first half of the book and the making of the covenant, the giving of the law, and the construction of the tabernacle in the second half of the book. It is explanatory, encouraging and challenging all at once.

Most of all, this text gave to Israel (*and gives to us, as we will see once we build it into our biblical theology*) an identity, a role, and a mission in the world, along with the privileges and the responsibilities that go along with them.

So then, in verses 4-6 God points in three directions. He points back to Israel's recent past. He points forward to his future vision for all nations. And he points to the present responsibilities of Israel. And in every direction we find God's grace at work.

PAST GRACE: GOD'S SALVATION - EXODUS 19:4

The first words God tells Moses to speak to the Israelites are a reminder. "You yourselves have seen what I did..." And of course, so they had. It was a recent memory. Only three months previously (v. 1) they had been slaves in Egypt, enduring systematic state-sponsored genocide as an ethnic minority. But now, they are comprehensively liberated. A bit footsore and weary, perhaps. A bit bored of manna already, perhaps. But free, with the Egyptian oppression already fading into the past. And all of that was because God had taken the initiative. He had acted out of his compassion, love and faithfulness to his promise to their ancestors.

Whatever is going to come next in the story (which the reader knows, of course, but the Israelites in the story do not yet) will thus be founded on that historical grace of God. Soon we will be in the world of the Ten Commandments (ch. 20), the wider law in the Book of the Covenant (chs. 21- 23), and the making of the Sinai covenant (ch. 24). But all of that will be a matter of responding to the grace of redemption already experienced.

Grace came first, faith next, and obedience to the law a necessary third, as a believing response in action to what God had already done.

The same basic principle flows through biblical theology, ethics and mission. Commands follow grace. *Generosity* is commanded in Deuteronomy, but obedience to that command is motivated by blessing already received. "Give to them as the LORD our God has

blessed you" (Deut. 15:14). Love is commanded by Jesus, but our obedience starts with his love for us: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Mutual forgiveness is commanded by Paul, but our obedience is based on being forgiven ourselves: "forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). We are sent out in mission by the command of Christ. But the prior reality was God's grace in sending Jesus into the world (John 17:18).

If we were to transpose God's words to Israel into a New Testament theological context, it would be as if God were to point to the cross of Christ and say to us, "You have seen what I have done " After that, whatever action we take, in ethical or missional obedience, is a matter of grateful response.

Like the Israelites, we need to remind ourselves of God's past grace demonstrated in historical redemption and then go on to understand our identity and our mission in the light of it.

FUTURE GRACE: GOD'S MISSION - EXODUS 19:5B

I wonder what the view was like from the top of Mount Sinai. In the pictorial, metaphorical language of the story, that is where God "was". That is where he spoke from. That is where Moses, and later the elders, had to go to meet with him (Ex. 24:9 - 11).

Down at the foot of the mountain, the only people around were the Israelites. The Amalekites had been scattered in defeat. It may have been easy for Israel to imagine they were the only people God was interested in. They were the ones who had been rescued, fed, watered, protected and brought to this place for an awesome encounter with the living God. And of course, at one level they were right.

A Special People, but Not the Only People

There was indeed a unique and special relationship between God and this people, established through Abraham. Israel was, as God had instructed Moses to tell Pharaoh, "my firstborn son" (Ex. 4:22). And God would reinforce that special relationship in 19:5 ("my treasured possession"), and then consolidate it in the Sin covenant a few chapters later. But it was far from being exclusive in the sense that YHWH could be considered as merely the local god of one particular people.

YHWH never had been and never would be the God of Israel alone (cf. Ro 3:29). On the contrary, from his elevated mountain-top altitude, as it were, God surveys "the whole earth", and "all the nations", and they all belong to him. In other words, that unique and special relationship with Israel must be placed within wider universal framework of God's global ownership.

Yes, God had just rescued one particular nation out of bondage. But his ultimate goal was to offer salvation to all nations. Yes, God had just demonstrated sovereign power in one particular land, the land of Egypt. But even while doing so he had made it repeatedly plain to Pharaoh himself that his intention was to prove that the whole earth belongs to him and his sovereignty knows no boundaries (9:14, 16, 29). This is the universal scope of God's mission.

Unfinished Business

"But of course it is!" we might exclaim. For who is this God who is speaking, after all? This is the God who introduced himself to Moses at this very place, at the burning bush on Mount Sinai, with the words, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6). And we know enough now about the God of Abraham to understand that his intentions include all nations. This is the God who spoke repeatedly in Genesis of his promise to bless Abraham and through him all nations on earth.

That, then, is the big picture. That is the reminder of the big story, which is the long-term biblical story of God's bringing all nations into the sphere of his blessing. That's what told the Israelites who they were. That's what made sense of the part of the story they had just lived through, and that was the foundation for what God expected from them.

And so this is the story of our own lives as Disciples of Christ in every generation. This frames the mission of God's people. All our missional response to God lies between the past and the future, between grace and glory, between historical salvation and ongoing mission, between what God has done and what God will yet do, between where we have come from and where we are going.

Who, then, are we and what are we here for? We are the people (1) whom God has redeemed out of bondage and sin (past), and (2) through whom God is working to bring blessing to all nations on earth (future).

So what? What, then, did such a location within the past and future grace God mean for Israel, and by extension, for us? Between the past and the future lies the present, and so we move on to our third observation in this text.

PRESENT GRACE: GOD'S PEOPLE IN GOD'S WORLD - EXODUS 19:6

"You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

These phrases are not immediately obvious to us. First, "kingdom" and "nation" are more or less neutral. God is saying, "Of course you will be a nation and probably also a kingdom. But the point is, what kind of nation and kingdom?" The emphasis, then, is on the descriptive words. Israel was to be priestly and holy. These are the words we need to work at understanding properly.

Priestly

To understand what it meant for Israel as a whole to be called God's priesthood in relation to the nations, we have to understand what Israel's priests were in relation to the rest of the people. Priests stood in the middle, between God on the one hand and all the rest of the people on the other. In that intermediate position, priests had a twofold task, a job that meant working in both directions:

Teaching the law of God to the people. The job of the priests was to teach God's law to the people (see Lev. 10:11; Deut, 33:10; Jer. 18:18). They were appointed to make known the

ways, word and commands of God. Through the priests God would be known to his people. That's why, when the people went so badly astray, the prophets said it was because there was no knowledge of God in the land. And whom did they blame? The priests, for failing to teach (Hos. 4:1- 9; Mal. 2:6-7).

Bringing the sacrifices of the people to God (Lev. 1 - 7, etc.). Israelites who had sinned in some way would bring their animal to the sanctuary, lay their hands on head, and slaughter it. The priest would take the blood and throw it against the altar, representing God. Then the priest would declare to the worshipers that their sins were atoned for and that they could come back into covenant fellowship with God. So then, through the priests and their work of atonement, the people could come to God.

The job of priests, then, was to bring God to the people and bring the people to God. So now, with rich significance, God says to Israel as a whole people:

"You will be for me, to all the rest of the nations what your priests are for you. Through you I will become known to the world, and through you ultimately, I will draw the world to myself."

In addition to those twin tasks, it was also a prime privilege and responsibility of the priests to bless the people in the name of YHWH (Num. 6:22 - 27). So the Abrahamic task of being a means of blessing to the nations also constituted being a priesthood in the midst of the nations. Just as it was the role of the priests to bless the Israelites, so would be the role of Israel as a whole ultimately to be a blessing to the nations.

This dual movement in the priestly role (from God to people, and from people to God) is reflected in prophetic visions concerning the nations, which included both outward flowing and inward flowing dynamics. There would be a going out from God and a coming in to God.

The mission of God's people, then, includes being God's priesthood in the world. We are a representative people. Our task is to represent the living God to the world, and to bring the world to acknowledge the living God. This fits exactly with the way the New Testament also presents our responsibility as Christians.

Certainly this was exactly how Paul saw his own life's work as a missionary to the Gentiles - the nations. He reminds the Romans of "the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the gentiles. He gave me *the priestly duty* of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 15:15 -16; italics added)

In other words, Paul saw his role as bringing God to the nations and bringing the nations to God, and he pictures himself as a priest in doing so. Paul could never, of course, have functioned as a priest in Jerusalem. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, not Levi. But he says he had a priestly job - not in some professional ordained function within the church, but in his evangelistic missionary work among the Gentiles. Evangelism is a priestly task.

Peter applies the very same text (Ex. 19:6) to all believers, writing probably to a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers scattered over several provinces in Asia Minor.

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. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. [12] Live such good lives among *the nations* that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:9-12, my italics and translation in v. 12)

Notice in this rich text how Peter combines several Old Testament references, including Exodus 19:6, and goes on to insist that it affects how we are to live among the nations.

"You [plural] are that priesthood," says Peter. We are God's representatives in the world.

But how can we function in that way? What sort of life can produce that kind of effect? That is where the second of our two phrases becomes crucial.

To be God's priesthood, we have to be holy.

Holy

In Old Testament terms, being holy did not mean that the Israelites were to be a specially religious nation. At heart, the word "holy" (in Hebrew, *qados*) means different or distinctive. Something or someone is holy when they get set apart for a distinct purpose in relation to God and then are kept separate for that purpose. For Israel, it meant being different by reflecting the very different God that YHWH revealed himself to be, compared with other gods. Israel was to be as different from other nations as YHWH was different from other gods.

There were several aspects to Israel's holiness in the Old Testament that we must understand before we consider how they apply to us as Christians and to our mission.'

Holiness - a Given Fact

First of all, holiness was a given-a fact of Israel's existence. That is to say, God had set apart Israel for himself. It was God's initiative and choice: "I am the LORD your God, who has sanctified you" (Lev. 20:24, my trans.) - that is, the God who has made you holy, separate, distinct from the nations. Just like the choice of Abraham and the exodus experience of redemption, holiness is a prior gift of God's grace. Israel's own priests were set apart by God as holy within Israel (Lev. 21:8, 15, 23). The same thing is also said of Israel as a whole in relation to the nations:

You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and *I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.* (Lev. 20:26; italics added; cf. Lev. 22:31-33)

The same thing is said about Christians in the New Testament. We are those whom God, in his grace, has chosen to "sanctify" (which is the same basic word), that is, to set apart for himself. This is the New Testament meaning of the word "saints". It does not refer to

especially religious people, or those who have achieved higher status than anybody else through great spiritual exertion or supremely moral living. It simply means those whom God has identified as his own.

Holiness - A Given Task

But then second, holiness was an imperative. Israel was required to live out in daily life the practical implications of their status as God's holy people. "Be what you are," was the message. "Be different!" It could not be put more clearly than in this text:

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 18:3-4)

The two country references are more than geographical. Egypt was characterized by the idolatry of military power and empire. Canaan was characterized by the idolatry of fertility and all that Baal was supposed to bring by way of sex, success, prosperity, and the like. These idolatries are still with us in potent and seductive forms, and part of the mission of God's people is to be different.

So too in the New Testament, holiness is a calling. Many times the apostles tell their readers to live out what is true of them, to demonstrate in practice the holiness of life that is consistent with the holiness of their status as God's people. Peter's first letter is virtually a whole tract on exactly that point.

Holiness -In All of Life

The strong ethical demand of holiness in Old Testament Israel meant living lives of integrity, justice and compassion in every area - including personal, family, social, economic and national life. The most comprehensive single text that articulates this ethical dimension of holiness in Israel is Leviticus 19.

Leviticus 19 is the finest commentary we have on Exodus 19:6. "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 19:2). The opening verse expresses God's fundamental demand. It could be translated more colloquially, *"You must be a different people, because YHWH is a different God."*

For Israel to be holy, then, meant that they were to be a distinctive community among the nations. Or to be more precise, Israel was to be "YHWH-like", rather than like the nations. They were to do as YHWH does, not as the nations do (Lev. 18:3 -4). Holiness for Israel meant reflection on earth of the transcendent holiness of YHWH himself.

Perhaps we would expect a list of religious rituals. But we find few "religious" laws in this chapter. The bulk of the Leviticus 19 shows us that the kind of holiness that reflects God's own holiness is thoroughly practical, social and very down-to-earth. Simply listing its contents highlights this dominant note.

Holiness in Leviticus 19 involves:

1. respect within the family and community (vv, 3a, 32)
2. exclusive loyalty to YHWH as God; proper treatment of sacrifices (vv, 4, 5 - 8)
3. economic generosity in agriculture (vv, 9-10)
4. observing the commandments regarding social relationships (vv, 11-12)
5. economic justice in employment rights (v, 13)
6. social compassion to the disabled (v, 14)
7. judicial integrity in the legal system (vv, 12, 15)
8. neighbourly attitudes and behaviour; loving one's neighbour as oneself (vv, 16-18)
9. preserving the symbolic tokens of religious distinctiveness (v, 19)
10. sexual integrity (vv, 20-22, 29)
11. rejection of practices connected with idolatrous or occult religion (vv.26-31)
12. no ill-treatment of ethnic minorities, but rather racial equality before the law and practical love for the alien as for oneself (vv, 33 - 34)
13. commercial honesty in all trading transactions (vv, 35 - 36)

And all through the chapter runs the refrain: "I am the LORD", as if to say, "Your quality of life must reflect my character. This is what I require of you because this is what reflects me. This is what I myself would do."

That, then, was what it would look like for Israel to be different from the nations. Not just that they worshiped a different God from their gods, but that they actually lived and behaved differently in every dimension of personal and social life.

The call to distinctiveness is heard strongly also in the New Testament. Perhaps the simplest and clearest example is Jesus' telling his disciples that they were to be salt and light.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:13-16)

Salt and light are distinctive, penetrating, transforming-utterly contrasting to corruption and darkness. That is what Christians are called to be, Holy, as Israel was called to be holy. Once again, then, we find that an essential part of the mission of God's people is nothing other than to be what they are- by living out the holiness of God in practical everyday living in your home and in your neighbourhood.

Once again we ask the question, How? How are we to be such a holy people? And that brings us back to our text, this time to verse 5a. "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant ... " (Ex. 19:5a). Obedience is the key to being priestly and holy.

Covenant Obedience

In the Old Testament context, of course, Exodus 19:5a means obedience to the law of God. That law comes in the context of the covenant-making ceremony of Exodus 24 (in which the Israelites did indeed undertake to do all that the Lord commanded them, with some irony in view of the history that followed).

Only through covenant obedience and community holiness could Israel claim or fulfill the identity and role here offered to them. The mission of priesthood among the nations was covenantal, and like the covenant itself, its fulfillment and enjoyment were inseparable from ethical obedience. God was saying, "If you live in this way, you can fulfill this role." In other words, for Israel (as also for us), obedience was a matter of grace and response.

What we have in these verses is the grace of obedience, responding to the grace of salvation and living in the grace of mission. Obedience, here as throughout the Bible, is ultimately for the sake of God's purpose of bringing salvation and blessing to the world of nations.

There is no biblical mission without biblical holiness.

Conclusion

The World for God starts with the questions "Who are we?" and "What are we here for?" Those are the questions we started with. The answer from the texts in this study should now be clear.

Like Old Testament Israel, we are people who have experienced past grace - God's historical acts of redemption, at the exodus and supremely, of course, at the cross.

Like Old Testament Israel, we are people whom God wants to use for the mission that is driven forward by his future grace- bringing people of all nations in the whole earth into that multinational family of those who know him, love him and worship him alone.

Like Old Testament Israel, we are people who are called to live in response to that grace, with lives that represent God to the world and that show the difference between the holiness of the living God, seen especially in the face of Jesus Christ.

In other words, we the New Testament Christians are exactly as Peter describes us, with the same identity, the same mission, and the same ethical responsibility as those described in the Old Testament.

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. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing

wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (I Peter 2:9-12)

Peter applies Exodus 19:4-6 directly to Christians: "You've had your exodus experience [out of darkness]," he says. "You've tasted God's grace and mercy. You are his precious, treasured possession, his very own people. Now then, live by that story. Live out that identity. And live with such attractive obedience of 'good lives' that people will be attracted to the God you worship, and whatever they say about you, they will come to glorify him." – it is for the sake of the world for God.

Resources:

Matthew Henry Commentary

Bible Background Commentary

New American Commentary

The Mission of God's People by Christopher J. H. Wright

What Jesus Demands from the World by John Piper

God's Passion for His Glory by John Piper

“The World for God”
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Bible Study Worksheet:

Introduction:

The Story That Provides a Reason for Living

Who are we and what are we here for? What is the mission of God's people? Even at the personal level such questions are challenging. What is your sense of identity and what is the purpose of your existence in this world?

If we step back into the Old Testament, we could ask the same questions about the Israelites. Who were they, and what were they there for? And the way we answer has to come out of the big story they were part of. So at this point we take another step forward in seeing the significance of the grand biblical narrative. It matters to have a grasp of the meta-narrative – “the world for God”.

The Story So Far

- **Past Grace: God’s Salvation – Exodus 19:4**

Grace came _____, faith came _____, and obedience to the law came a necessary _____.

- **Future Grace: - Exodus 19:5b; Exodus 24:9-11**

A _____ people, but not the _____ people.

- **Present Grace: God’s People in God’s World – Exodus 19:6**

Priestly responsibilities:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

To be God’s priesthood, we have to be _____.

Holy:

Holiness – a given _____

Holiness – in all of _____

Holiness in Leviticus 19 involves:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____

Your quality of life must _____

- **Covenant Obedience**

What we have in these verses is the _____, responding to the _____
and living in the _____ .

There is no biblical mission without _____ .

Conclusion:

The world for God starts with the questions:

1. _____

2. _____

Like the Old Testament, we are

_____.

Like the Old Testament, we are

_____.

Like the Old Testament, we are -

_____.

In other words, we the New Testament Christians are exactly as Peter describes us, with the same _____, the same _____, and the same _____ as those described in the Old Testament.

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Grace came first, faith came second, and obedience to the law came a necessary third.

- **Future Grace: - Exodus 19:5b; Exodus 24:9-11**

A special people, but not the only people.

- **Present Grace: God’s People in God’s World – Exodus 19:6**

Priestly responsibilities:

4. Teaching the law of God to the people
5. Bringing the sacrifices of the people to God
6. Bless the people in the name of YHWH

To be God’s priesthood, we have to be holy.

Holy:

Holiness – a given task

Holiness – in all of life

Holiness in Leviticus 19 involves:

1. Respect within the family and community (vv, 3a, 32)
2. Exclusive loyalty to YHWH as God; proper treatment of sacrifices (vv, 4, 5 - 8)
3. Economic generosity in agriculture (vv, 9-10)
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6. Social compassion to the disabled (v, 14)
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8. Neighbourly attitudes and behaviour; loving one's neighbour as oneself (vv, 16-18)
9. Preserving the symbolic tokens of religious distinctiveness (v, 19)
10. Sexual integrity (vv, 20-22, 29)
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Your quality of life must reflect His character.

- **Covenant Obedience**

What we have in these verses is the grace of obedience, responding to the grace of salvation and living in the grace of mission.

There is no biblical mission without biblical holiness.

Conclusion:

The world for God starts with the questions:

1. Who are we?
2. What are we here for?

Like Old Testament Israel, we are people whom God wants to use for the mission.

Like Old Testament Israel, we are people who have experienced past grace.

Like Old Testament Israel, we are we are people who are called to live in response to that grace, with lives that represent God to the world.

In other words, we the New Testament Christians are exactly as Peter describes us, with the same identity the same mission, and the same ethical responsibility as those described in the Old Testament.