

“The Incomparable God”

Introduction: We’ve been considering in these last few weeks the way Moses has been preparing the Israelites to break camp and head into the Promised Land where they will come up against the challenging culture of the Canaanites. How are they to shine the light of the Lord there? What can we learn from them about how are we, within our own challenging culture, can extend the hospitality of Jesus that we have received? In the last couple of weeks, Moses has been warning the people against two issues that would throw them off their mission – forgetting what the Lord had done, and idolatry, and last week we talked about the lure of idolatry, about the substitute gods we can create in our search for meaning and purpose and security in life. We said that the root of idolatry, of exchanging the real God for a substitute god, be it our career or our kids, a social cause or our social standing, our pursuit of power or pleasure, is believing the lie that the real God is holding something back from us, that he doesn’t have our best interests in mind, that we can’t trust his goodness or his commitment to our well being, and so we fall to the temptation to look elsewhere.

What would help us to resist such temptation, to really believe that God is for us, so that as we break camp and move out into our culture each and every day, carrying out God’s missional call to extend his hospitality to others, we would do so joyfully and gratefully and obediently? This is where Moses takes us as he finishes his first major address to the Israelites. He concludes by charging the people to keep the decrees and laws of the Lord when they enter the land (v. 40), and his flow of his thought is instructive. His charge comes after he has talked about both theology and history. And the flow is this: how we live, “ethics” (v. 40), flows from who God is, “theology” (vv. 35-39), and who God is flows from what he has done, “history” (vv. 32-34). If we can reflect on what God has done, and therefore who God is, it will go a long way toward helping us know that the LORD is God and there is no other. And, most importantly, that this incomparable God has our best interests in mind and is worthy of our trust and obedience.

I. What God Has Done in Human History (vv. 32-34)

A. Let’s begin where Moses begins, with what God has done. Moses does so by assigning his listeners some homework. It’s really a research project of cosmic proportions, massive in both its chronology and its geography. They are to examine across time, going back as far as the creation of the world, and across space, from one end of the heavens to the other. And the question they are to answer is: Who is like the LORD? Who is like the God who created the world, chose one particular nation to be his people, rescued them when they had been enslaved by another nation, and then verbally revealed to them his will? Really these are all rhetorical questions as the answer is that nothing like this has ever happened with any other god or to any other people. What God did in the events of Exodus and Sinai are unprecedented and unparalleled. There is a uniqueness to what Israel had experienced with this God. He had intervened in human history, rescuing them and revealing himself to them in a way no other people had ever experienced. This is what this God, whose name is the LORD, had done.

II. Two Theological Conclusions (vv. 35-39)

A. If this is what God had done in history, then what theological conclusions could his people draw? There were conclusions to be drawn about both him and about them. Concerning God, well,, simply put, he was incomparable; there is no god like him: “You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other” (v. 35). And then again: “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other” (v. 39). As a commentator named Christopher Wright colorfully puts it, “This is the theological freight that the rolling stock [of history] is carrying.” And it’s weighty freight indeed! Resting on it, the people of Israel could be confident that the

LORD was not merely some tribal god, somehow hemmed in and limited by the borders of nationality, nor was he a dumb or impotent god, unable to speak or act, as were the idols of the nations. The basic question was not philosophical: Does God exist? Rather, it was practical: What kind of God is this? The answer is that this is the incomparable God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the one who is out to redeem and restore and bless the nations.

B. The LORD was going to do this restoration work, and this is the second theological conclusion to be drawn from this “rolling stock” of history, through a particular people. Moses puts it this way: “Because he loved your ancestors and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you . . .” (vv. 37f). This choosing goes back, as we’ve noted before, to God’s call on Abraham, who became the father of this nation. And this nation was to be the people through whom God promised to bring blessing to all of the nations of the world (Ge. 12:1-3). To paraphrase a familiar NT text, “For God so loved the world that he chose Israel . . .”

Now, I should mention that in a couple of weeks we’ll talk about the “driving out” bit that we see in v. 38, and how God’s call for the Israelites to bring blessing to the nations would include a call to destroy some of them. Briefly, God’s promises that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham’s descendants did not mean that particular nations in history would not be judged, or that God wouldn’t use his people to be the agent of that judgment, however difficult it may sound to our ears. Importantly, this was something unique to the nation of Israel, at that point in the history of redemption. Further, God’s judgment fell upon the Canaanites only after centuries of immorality and disobedience (cf. Ge. 15:16; Deut. 9:4). Finally, God is not beyond protecting and preserving the truth of his revelation when threatened by the polytheistic and idolatrous ways of the nations. In the end, while along the way judgment may happen, God’s ultimate goal remains the salvation and restoration of the world.

C. What was important for God’s people to understand at this point was that their uniqueness as a people had nothing to do with them! Why did God love Israel’s ancestors? Why did he choose them and not another nation? “Because why?” The only answer is “because God,” because God chose to! As Moses will repeat on several occasions, it was not because they were larger, or more righteous, than any other nation. It had nothing to do with them and everything to do with God and his wisdom and his love. As a result, they were not to think highly of themselves, and always to remember that they had been chosen for the purpose of bringing God’s blessing to others

So the theological conclusion that this people was to draw from the way the LORD had intervened in human history was that He was incomparable, and that he had called them for a particular purpose. All of which meant that they could break camp and enter the challenging, Canaanite culture with the utmost of confidence that God would be with them, for them, committed to them, and by their side. Importantly, they did not need to look to exchange him for any other god.

III. No Other Name (Acts 4:12)

A. Now, we’ve talked about how this call upon Israel to be a light to the nations has now become God’s call on the church. We’ve been given the designation of chosen people, kingdom of priests and holy nation, called to live in such a way as to reveal God’s grace to others (1 Pet. 2:9). But how are we to think about this incomparable God who goes with us? Does how this God has acted in human history at Exodus and Sinai have anything to do with us in the age of the church? It absolutely does because it helps us to think about the uniqueness of Jesus in our modern-day context of pluralism, if we keep in mind that what God began in and through the history of Israel he brought to completion for the world in the person of his Son, Jesus.

B. That is, Jesus did not come to start a new religion; he came to complete, in his death and resurrection, the saving, redeeming work of the Creator God who reigns, who had rescued his people from Egypt, revealed his will to them at Sinai, and called them to be his unique, missional people to reveal his love to others. The Bible is one single story which comes to a climax in Jesus. If what we see in the OT is that salvation comes from the LORD, and that we need him to work in human history to rescue us, what we see in the NT is how he does this. That's why, when Jesus met the distraught disciples on the road, trudging back to their home in Emmaus after the crucifixion, he showed them how the OT pointed to him and what he had come to do.

So Peter can declare, not only the unique call on God's people that has now come to the church, but the uniqueness, the incomparable nature of Jesus himself. This he does, for instance, when he and John had been hauled before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling counsel, for proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. There, speaking of Jesus, Peter said: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Ac. 4:12). This incomparability of Jesus, "no other name," is grounded in the incomparability of the LORD, "no other God," whom Jesus has personally revealed.

Illustration: Bill Clark was sharing with a couple of us last week about his recent trip to his barber. At some point while his hair was being cut, Bill asked this fellow if he was a believer. "Yes I am," was the barber's fairly quick response. "So," Bill continued, "does that mean you believe in Jesus?" The barber paused for a bit and then said, "Yes, I suppose so." Bill pressed still further, "So you believe he died on the cross and rose from the dead?" This time the scissors stopped. "Well," the barber finally said, "I'm going to have to think about that."

C. Indeed, he will, and all of us should. As we reflect on what this means for us, the place to begin is with what God has done in Jesus. This same God who revealed himself in the Exodus and at Sinai has continued that revelation on the cross and in the empty tomb. These are incomparable events! What do we think of them? Who is this God we believe in? What makes him incomparable? Is he for us? How do we know? What do they mean for how we think about God (our theology) and how we are to live (our ethics)?