

God's people – the church. Session 1 The holy community (OT background)

The subject of the church is enormous. We will only scratch the surface and there is always more to learn and apply. If we wanted to start at the beginning we would look at how God wanted to be in relationship with the human beings he had created, as we see in the Garden of Eden where God walked with the man and the woman. But this was spoiled by their disobedience. So for the rest of the Old Testament we see God calling out a specially chosen people who would live in a way that demonstrated to the nations around what God is really like.

NOTE: Though we are thinking about 'church', it's worth noting that the Bible does not use this expression. In the NT there are 'churches' (the church in Ephesus, the church in Jerusalem), but the word used (*ecclesia*) comes from the OT expression for God's gathered people 'the assembly', so a church is simply where God's people meet together, wherever that may be.

Usually thinking about God's people starts with Genesis 12:1–3, where God calls Abraham to go from his father's house to another land, and promises that he will

- make him a great nation
- bless him
- cause him to be a blessing to "all peoples on earth"

Later God reaffirms this promise: **Read Genesis 15:1–6**

- *What is Abraham's complaint to God and how does God answer him? Bearing in mind that Sarah was past the age of childbearing, if you had been Abraham, how do you think you might have felt at this? How does Abraham react and in turn, what does God do? What had Abraham done to deserve this? What does this show us about the importance of faith in following God?*

In Genesis 17 God specifically makes a covenant (a solemn treaty) with Abraham and gives him circumcision to be a sign of the covenant.

God began to fulfil the promises to Abraham through his son, Isaac, his grandson Jacob (Israel) and then Jacob's 12 sons who became a nation. By rescuing them from slavery in Egypt God made it clear that the Israelites belonged to him.

Exodus describes how God made another covenant with the people, at Mount Sinai, which is repeated and summarised in Deuteronomy. **Read Deuteronomy 7:1–11.**

- *What makes the Israelites different from other nations (v6)? What's the reason for this (v7)? How are they to maintain their difference? How does this apply in a spiritual sense to those of us who are New Testament believers?*

The many laws in Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy are all concerned to keep God's people distinctive and to be able to worship God. The best known part of these are the 10 Commandments. **Read Exodus 20:1–21.**

- *Of the 10 commandments why do you think the first four are concerned with God? What follows from this? How would these commandments help people to see what God himself is like? How will obeying them help God's people to live as people who are "holy to the Lord their God"*

But what happened when God's people failed to do this? The story of Achan in Joshua 7, right at the start of Israel's life as a nation in the promised land, gives a very dramatic example of the consequences – read it for background, it's quite a long passage. We will look at another passage from the end of the nation's life in the land.

Read 2 Chronicles 36:11–21

- *We tend to think of sin as an individual thing but what does the author of Chronicles say was the reason for the exile? What does it show us about God's care for his people? What does it show us about the consequences of not living as the people of God?*

God said that Abraham would be a blessing to the peoples of the world. There are indeed stories in the OT of people who were drawn to follow or acknowledge Israel's God: e.g. Rahab the Canaanite (Joshua 2 esp vv 8-13); Ruth the Moabitess (Ruth); Naaman (2 Kings 4); the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7–24); Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4). And it's worth noting that Exodus 12:38 says that there were also "many other people" with the Israelites when they left Egypt.

Many of the psalms talk about praising God among the nations and throughout the world. Read **Psalm 96**. The psalm uses God's personal name, Yahweh (LORD in our English translations). God's people who know him personally, call the world to praise him.

- *Why is God to be praised (in contrast to the 'gods' of the nations)? What is the particular reason that the whole world, creation and people, should rejoice (vv 10–13)? Is this still a good reason for calling the whole world to praise the living God?*

Read **Isaiah 2:1–5** (Micah 4:1–5 is almost identical).

- *What future does Isaiah see when people follow God? How does this relate to the way God's people walk in the present (v5)?*

However as the passages from Joshua 7 (if you read this) and 2 Chronicles show, God's people failed to "walk in the light of the Lord" and were therefore scattered, not gathered, in the exile. Even though the people came back to the land, they still only imperfectly demonstrated to the world what God's people should look like. Our next study will look at the nation at the time Jesus came. So to conclude:

- *In what ways can we as God's people today "declare his glory to the nations"?*
- *How can we better encourage one another to be the sort of people God wants us to be?*