

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 4

LUKE 24:1-53

THE BACKGROUND

The initial impact of the good news of the resurrection has been softened by familiarity. It has been central to the Christian faith for nearly two thousand years. But on that first Sunday after Jesus' crucifixion, it seemed too incredible to be believed. However by end of that day, the evidence was too overwhelming for the resurrection to be denied.

Crucifixion normally resulted in a slow, excruciating death. The length of a crucified victim's life frequently was determined by the severity of the scourging that preceded execution. The excruciating suffering interfered with the normal breathing process. Exhalation could only be accomplished by pulling up with the arms and pushing up with the legs. Eventually exhaustion led to asphyxiation, shock, or heart failure. Death could be hastened by breaking the leg bones.

Roman crucifixion was public execution. Many of those who heard of Jesus' resurrection also had witnessed His death. They had seen His lacerated back bleeding profusely. Some may have heard the mallet pounding iron nails into human flesh. They also had heard His horrifying cry of feeling abandoned. They had watched His agonizing pain as He had clung to life. They had seen a Roman soldier thrust his spear into Jesus' lifeless body. The sight of Jesus' ghastly death was still etched vividly in their memories as Sunday morning began to dawn. Nothing in human experience had prepared them for what they were about to encounter.

1. AN EMPTY TOMB, AN EMPTY GRAVE (LUKE 24:1-8)

Verse 1: *On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices they had prepared.*

The first day of the week was Sunday. The Jewish day actually had begun at sunset on the previous day. The pronoun *they* refers to a party of supporters that included Mary Magdalene; Mary the mother of James, Joanna, Salome, and an unspecified number of other women (Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10). They had watched Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus bury Jesus (Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55; John 19:38-39).

The absolute honesty of the biblical record of the resurrection serves to verify its accuracy. The transformation of the women's emotional state from grief to joy can only be accounted for by a genuine encounter with the risen Christ.

Furthermore, the minor differences in the four Gospel accounts can be harmonized, but their occurrences authenticate the narrative. Different eyewitnesses inevitably recall different details or have slightly different perceptions of the same event. Even in our legal system if several witnesses give identical testimonies, collusion is suspected. Here the differences doubtlessly reflect the various people involved.

Luke (and Mark) recorded the women's activity took place very early in the morning (see Mark 16:2). John noted "it was still dark" when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb (John 20:1). Matthew reported that "the first day of the week was dawning" (Matt. 28:1). In all probability it was still dark when the women gathered and started to the tomb. In the time it took them to walk to the burial site the eastern horizon glowed with light from the rising sun.

Verse 2: *They found the stone rolled away from the tomb.*

First-century tombs around Jerusalem typically were carved out of the rocky terrain, especially where there was a vertical stone surface. They usually had a low door with steps that led down into the main room. Niches were cut into the wall for the small oil lamps of the period. Often a recessed floor left a ledge or shelf on three sides of the room. Sometimes a headrest socket was cut into the shelf. The body was laid on the slab for primary burial. After approximately a year in which the flesh decayed, the bones were transferred to a more permanent location.

The tomb was sealed with a large stone. These stones often were disk-shaped and rolled in a sloping groove that allowed the stone to rest so as to cover the entrance door. The tomb could be opened and closed by rolling the stone in the track.

Jesus' tomb was located in a garden near the spot where He was crucified. It was a new tomb that had not yet held a corpse. When the women arrived at the site, they immediately noticed the heavy stone had been rolled away from the tomb's entrance.

Verse 3: *They went in but did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.*

Although the sun was already visible on the horizon, the tomb chamber was black and foreboding. The grieving women slowly descended into the dark room. As their eyes adjusted to the darkness, they discovered the slab where Jesus' body had been placed was empty. The linen burial cloths were lying where His corpse once rested. Their presence implied conspirators or grave robbers were not re-

sponsible for the body's disappearance. With the increased security surrounding Jesus' burial (Matt. 27:62-66), grave robbers would not have taken time to disrobe His body.

Verse 4: *While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men stood by them in dazzling clothes.*

Instead of a sealed tomb with Jesus' body inside the women found an empty open grave. The unexpected situation perplexed the visitors. Suddenly they realized they were not alone in the tomb. Once again the four Gospels provide differing details. These variations confirm that the resurrection was not a fabricated account. Furthermore the prominent role of women validates the story's legitimacy. In the Roman world of the first century, the testimony of women was not formally admissible as evidence under most circumstances. This fact may be why Paul omitted any reference to them in his list of eyewitnesses to Christ's resurrection (1 Cor. 15:5-8). Their prominent role here can only be understood by the fact that the resurrection actually happened.

Luke recorded two men stood by the women; whereas Mark reported a young man was sitting to their right (Mark 16:5). Although Luke and Mark described the messengers as men, their description of the men's apparel suggests they were not ordinary men. The women's reaction hints they presumed the men were not human. Luke even indicated the women reported they had seen angels (Luke 24:23). John specified that Mary Magdalene saw two angels inside the tomb (John 20:12). They were seated on the slab where Jesus' body had been laid. One sat at the foot and the other at the head. Matthew mentioned only one angel who was seated on the stone outside the tomb (Matt. 28:2). However Matthew did not specify the angel was in that location when he spoke to the women. Matthew's description of the angel's dress coincides with that of both Luke and Mark. The angels looked like men but were dressed in dazzling white robes.

Reconciling these differences is not difficult. Since the angels did not stand beside each other, not all of the women saw both angels. The sudden recognition that a heavenly being was standing beside anyone would be sufficient to fixate that individual's attention and distract from a complete survey of the room. As for the change in posture, the seated angels simply may have stood to speak.

Verse 5: *So the women were terrified and bowed down to the ground. "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" asked the men.*

The woman's initial reaction to the heavenly beings is not

surprising. They were frightened! Although there may have been an element of awe, nothing in life prepares a person for encountering angels at a tomb.

The angels initiated their message with a question, “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?” The primary function of this question was to emphasize the absurdity of the women’s behavior and elicit faith. Jesus had promised He would rise from the dead on the third day (see Mark 10:33-34). Therefore, coming to His grave to anoint His body was irrational. It was as if the women’s behavior was incomprehensible to these heavenly beings. Jesus had said He would rise from the dead after three days. Why didn’t the women expect it to be so?

Verse 6: *“He is not here, but He has been resurrected! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee,*

The men immediately articulated this fact. Tombs are for dead people. Jesus was no longer dead. He had been resurrected! He was alive! Therefore the women would not find Jesus in a tomb.

The two angelic messengers reminded the women of Jesus’ teaching in Galilee. Although the biblical references indicate that Jesus taught this truth in private to His disciples, it is apparent that these women were aware of this specific teaching. In addition to the twelve disciples, a small group of women evidently traveled with Jesus. They helped Him (Mark 15:40-41). They also helped support Him and the Twelve financially out of their personal wealth (Luke 8:1-3). Therefore it is likely they were present on occasion when Jesus instructed the Twelve. On the trip to Jerusalem Jesus clearly spelled out what would occur when they arrived in the city. However, His warnings may have been lost in the exuberance of His triumphant entry into the city.

Verse 7: *saying, “The Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and rise on the third day?”*

Specifically Jesus predicted He would be betrayed, crucified, and then raised on the third day. This prediction was not a one-time teaching but one He repeated on various occasions (see Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; Luke 9:22; 18:31-33). The title *Son of Man* was Jesus’ favorite designation for Himself. It had a twofold significance. First, it denoted His humanity. Second, it had clear messianic implications. The title was incontestably Jesus’ designation of Himself as the predicted Messiah. It made that claim and yet permitted Jesus to give it new meaning. The largest number of the *Son of Man* sayings concerned the second coming of

Christ. The second largest group of sayings involved the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The word *must* points to the purpose of Jesus’ mission. The Son of God became the *Son of Man* in order to redeem humanity from sin. Therefore He allowed sinful men to kill Him. But His resurrection demonstrated His complete victory over both death and sin.

Verse 8: *And they remembered His words.*

The angel’s statement triggered the women’s memory. They remembered what Jesus had predicted. They left the tomb and went back into the city. There they reported the morning’s encounter to the 11 disciples. Judas already had committed suicide. The women’s statements seemed too fantastic to be believed. Peter ran to the tomb to investigate (Luke 24:12). Although he did not see the two angels, his investigation confirmed what the women had reported. The tomb was empty! Hope in Jesus was revived.

Some women went to the tomb Sunday morning to anoint Jesus’ body with burial spices, but they were told by two men in dazzling apparel that Jesus had risen from the dead. The most amazing explanation of the empty tomb is true: Jesus Christ rose from the dead just as He promised He would.

2. FEAR NOT (LUKE 24:36-43)

Verse 36: *And as they were saying these things, He Himself stood among them. He said to them, “Peace to you!”*

Hope was about to take one more remarkable step. Despite the mounting evidence that Jesus truly had been resurrected, fear still controlled the assembly. Doors remained locked because the disciples feared arrest (John 20:19). As Jesus’ followers discussed the appearances that had transpired that day, instantly Jesus stood in their midst.

He spoke. “Peace to you!” *Peace* was a traditional Jewish greeting. In Hebrew it conveyed the sense of completion or wholeness. Its use here refers to the fullness the Messiah brings. The resurrected Christ gives salvation to those who will respond to Him in faith.

Verse 37: *But they were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost.*

Even in light of the earlier appearances, many in the room were not yet ready to accept that the crucified Jesus was the risen Savior. His appearance was terrifying. Rather than believe the Scriptures, they imagined they were haunted by some apparition.

Verse 38: *“Why are you troubled?” He asked them. “And*

why do doubts arise in your hearts?

Jesus addressed their misconceptions directly. His questions likely were intended to cause His disciples to recognize the error of their conclusion. His presence was not intended to trouble them. While doubts inevitably surface even in the hearts of believers, Jesus’ presence in the midst of His followers was intended to dispel disbelief and replace it with faith.

Verse 39: *Look at My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself! Touch Me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have.”*

Jesus offered those gathered in that room a unique opportunity. He invited them to touch Him. Luke was a physician. He carefully recorded that Jesus’ resurrection body was real. It was composed of flesh and bones. Furthermore, it bore the wounds from His crucifixion. These scars affirmed that the One standing before them was the same One they had followed before the crucifixion. At the same time, His ability to appear and disappear, to enter locked rooms, revealed some type of transformation had occurred in the resurrection. While His body was real, Jesus no longer had normal physical limitations.

Verse 40: *Having said this, He showed them His hands and feet.*

Jesus extended His arms and revealed His feet. His invitation was as real as His body. Even so, some of His disciples still had difficulty believing. Saving faith does not require one to have answers to all the difficult questions before believing in Jesus. Faith is trust in Him rather than indisputable proof. In one sense, faith can only exist where there is an absence of proof.

Verse 41: *But while they still could not believe because of their joy and were amazed, He asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?”*

This time Jesus addressed their persistent lack of disbelief subtly. He asked for food to eat. Ghosts and apparitions don’t eat. So Jesus’ question served as additional evidence of His resurrection.

Verses 42-43: *So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish, and He took it and ate in their presence.*

Fish was a diet staple in the first century. The reason the disciples had food was for their own nourishment. They certainly did not bring one broiled fish with them so they might test any appearance of Jesus to see if He was a ghost or a living Being.

The risen Lord Jesus appeared to His disciples and ex-

pelled their doubts about His resurrection by allowing them to observe and touch His body. Jesus' resurrection appearances to His followers provide compelling reasons to forsake any doubts and to believe in Jesus.

3. FOR ONE AND FOR ALL (LUKE 24:44-49)

Verse 44: *Then He told them, "These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled."*

We typically divide the Old Testament into five sections, the Law, History, Poetry, the Major Prophets, and the Minor Prophets. The Hebrew Scriptures were organized somewhat differently from our English Bibles. They were customarily divided into only three sections. The first was the Law of Moses and was identical to our modern division. It contained the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The second division of the Hebrew Bible was the Prophets. This division contains part of the books of our History division. It also contains all of the books in our Major and Minor Prophets divisions except Daniel and Lamentations. The third division commonly was called the Writings. However, sometimes Jews referred to it by its first and largest book, the Psalms. This third division contained all of the books not in the other two divisions. Hence the Hebrew Scriptures had every book in our Old Testament. The books were just arranged in a somewhat different order. Here Jesus was saying, "Everything written about Me in the entire Old Testament must be fulfilled."

Verse 45: *Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.*

As Jesus explained the Old Testament, His disciples came to understand the Scriptures. They learned that the Old Testament prophesied about Jesus, particularly about His death and resurrection. Contemporary Judaism in the first century failed to identify suffering with the Messiah. Consequently most Jews were looking for a Messiah quite different from Jesus. They expected a warrior king who would liberate them from the Romans. Jesus helped His followers understand the real enemy of humanity was sin, not Rome. By defeating sin, Jesus set humanity free to live as God intended. This freedom is not universal but rather is given only to those with faith in Jesus.

Verse 46: *He also said to them, "This is what is written: the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead the third day,*

Jesus explained that His crucifixion and resurrection are at the heart of all Scripture. The central message of both the Old and New Testaments is His death and resurrection. Passages like Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 so graphically relate to Jesus' death and resurrection that the connection is indisputable.

Verse 47: *and repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*

Jesus' death and resurrection is described in the New Testament as the gospel. The word *gospel* simply means "good news." Good news is meant to be shared. The proclamation of the good news is a call for humanity to repent. Repentance involves a change in direction or loyalty. Sin enslaves a person and dooms him or her to death, not only physically but to an eternal existence in the torment of hell. Salvation involves the redemption of the whole person, and is offered freely to all who accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Jerusalem was only the starting point. The good news was to be spread to all the nations. This phrase is comprehensive. Jesus included Gentiles as well as Jews. It requires the gospel to never be constrained to any nationality or ethnic group. It always must be shared with those who have not heard. Southern Baptists cooperate with each other to carry out this mandate through the work of the North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board. What are some other ways you can implement Jesus' command?

Observe that Jesus said the proclamation was to be done in His name. This fact means He has authorized His followers to proclaim the good news. Furthermore it indicates they do not depend solely on their own skill. When they act under His commission, they can depend on His power and wisdom.

Verse 48: *You are witnesses of these things.*

The expression *you are witnesses* indicates the disciples' role in the events of Jesus' death and resurrection. They were present in Jerusalem when He was crucified. They were present on this occasion and saw Him alive. Their eyewitness testimony has been passed from generation to generation. However, it is not merely on the basis of hearsay evidence that we share the gospel. In salvation each individual in an inexplicable sense experiences the authenticity and power of the good news!

Verse 49: *And look, I am sending you what My Father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high."*

Jesus cautioned His witnesses not to move out into the

world yet. He assured them the Father would send another Counselor, the Holy Spirit. The disciples were not to do anything, not even leave Jerusalem, until He came. Jesus' counsel remains crucial for His followers. We are never alone. The Holy Spirit always is present with believers. He is with us in order to guide us, to empower us, and to facilitate our becoming the persons Jesus died and arose to make us. So whenever we falter or fail, it's not the end. The good news always gives hope for the future. Our own past experiences enable us to testify to this truth.

The risen Lord Jesus used the Scriptures to remind the disciples of His Divine mission; thus as eyewitnesses of His life, death, and resurrection, the disciples were to proclaim God's forgiveness to all nations. Those who have experienced God's forgiveness through repentance and faith in Jesus are empowered to tell others that they too can be forgiven.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 11

EXODUS 15:22–18:27

THE BACKGROUND

The Lord delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Under the leadership of the Lord's appointed servant Moses, the people abandoned Egypt and plunged into the desolate wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. They journeyed to the land the Lord promised He would give to the descendants of Abraham. However before the conquest of Canaan could begin, the Lord needed to prepare His people.

The mass of people that exited Egypt was more of a disorganized crowd than a nation. They had little organization beyond tribal elders. Instead Moses, assisted by his brother Aaron, shouldered the full administration of government. They had not yet received the law at Mount Sinai on which to base decisions. Instead, Moses brought each case directly to the Lord. The number of cases generated by the size of the multitude made such an arrangement impractical.

In addition, the Israelites' military lacked adequate training and combat experience. It likely also was poorly equipped. Furthermore, the sheer magnitude of the logistics for moving the mass of humanity across the desert bode ill for the success of the journey.

Everything would depend on the Lord. Were the people capable of trusting Him and those He appointed to lead them? Were there individuals in the community who possessed the skills and talents to fill various roles the new nation needed? How would the people respond to new trials they had not anticipated? These were just a few of the questions yet to be answered in the initial weeks of the migration to Canaan.

1. BE COMMITTED (EXODUS 16:2-4)

A month after the exodus from Egypt the people of Israel were traveling through the wilderness (see 12:6,29-32; 16:1). The provisions brought from Egypt had been consumed. Once more the people grumbled. Again their complaint pertained to the basic needs for food, water, and protection. Their selective memory recalled their full stomachs in Egypt. They forgot the harsh taskmasters and the oppression. And despite the visible reminder of the pillar, they forgot the providential care of the Lord.

Verse 2: *The entire Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.*

The word *grumbled* is the same word that occurs in Exo-

dus 15:24. Once more the low tones of complaining rumbled throughout the community. However the undercurrent had a new focus. No longer was attention restricted to an unpleasant circumstance. Moses and Aaron also had become the blatant objects of the people's discontent. Grumbling against the two leaders would become too common among the Israelites (Ex. 17:3; Num. 14:2; 16:41). Complaining about leaders the Lord has appointed ultimately is complaining about the Lord. Consequently that was one of the reasons that generation would never reach the land the Lord promised (Num. 14:29).

Verse 3: *The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by pots of meat and ate all the bread we wanted. Instead, you brought us into this wilderness to make this whole assembly die of hunger!"*

The crowds confronted the Lord's two servants with a bizarre conclusion. Their freedom from slavery was a mistake. Life was far better in Egypt, and they would have preferred that the Lord had killed them there. According to their distorted memory, they ate well as slaves. However, their comments reflect a disconnection with reality. They no longer remembered the hard labor and suffering. Instead they recalled pots of meat and an inexhaustible supply of bread. While it is likely the Egyptians provided ample bread, meat would have been unusual. Egypt's fertile soil produced good crops of barley and wheat, making bread the staple food. However, meat was expensive. Among the lower classes of society it was probably reserved for festival days. Therefore it is highly unlikely that detested foreign slave labor received significant meat rations. Rather, people's minds frequently corrupt facts so they remember bad events in a more favorable perspective. The people's need for food was real. The wilderness did not have an adequate food source for the large number of people. Without faith in the Lord's providence, returning to slavery seemed the only logical solution.

Verse 4: *Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. This way I will test them to see whether or not they will follow My instructions.*

The Lord responded to the people's grumbling by promising to rain bread out of heaven. Testing proves the quality of something often through adversity or hardship. Behind these tests was the Lord's desire to develop people's loyalty (Deut. 8:2-3). Whereas the majority of that generation would prove

unworthy, Joshua and Caleb became two of the most faithful men in history. The next generation enjoyed victory as they followed the Lord's leadership with far less grumbling.

2. BE CONFIDENT (EXODUS 16:11-15,18)

Verse 11: *The LORD spoke to Moses,*

The people rejected the leadership of Moses by grumbling. The Lord repeatedly affirmed Moses' leadership by His continued use of him as a spokesperson.

Verse 12: *"I have heard the complaints of the Israelites. Tell them: At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will eat bread until you are full. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God."*

In response to the complaint of hunger, the Lord declared He would provide the people food. That evening they would eat meat. The next morning they would be satiated with bread. Throughout the Book of Exodus the Lord acts so that various people will know that He is the Lord their God. The purpose behind the mighty acts in Egypt had been so that the Israelites, Pharaoh, and the Egyptians would know that He is the Lord (Ex. 6:7; 7:5,17; 14:4). The Lord demonstrated His power so that those who witnessed its employment could reach only one conclusion: The Lord is God! The Lord desires people to experience the reality that He is God.

Verse 13: *So at evening quail came and covered the camp. In the morning there was a layer of dew all around the camp.*

At evening quail flew into the camp. Their large numbers covered the ground. This verse is the only mention of quail in the chapter, and apparently this event was a one-day provision. The quail would provide meat one evening, whereas the manna would provide food daily for the next 40 years.

The discussion of manna begins with a statement that dew formed all around the camp the next morning. Various explanations for the manna have been presented. Secretions left on the tamarisk bush by insects feeding on the sap resemble the description given in Exodus. However, whether these secretions was the manna the Lord provided for the Israelites or whether it was something else is irrelevant. The emphasis remains on the Lord's miraculous provision for His people. He supplied their basic needs precisely as He promised.

Verse 14: *When the layer of dew evaporated, there on the desert surface were fine flakes, as fine as frost on the ground.*

Dew is formed when the air cannot hold existing moisture, and it condenses on the surface of the ground. When the sun burned away the dew, fine flakes remained on the sur-

face. This residue resembled the appearance of frost.

Verse 15: *When the Israelites saw it, they asked one another, “What is it?” because they didn’t know what it was. Moses told them, “It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat.*

When the people first saw the flakes they asked, “What is it?” In the Hebrew language this question is pronounced *man who*. Thus the question became a wordplay for the name of the food, manna. The question confirms that the people had not witnessed this phenomenon before that specific morning on which the Lord promised to feed them (see Ex. 16:31). Moses identified it as the bread the Lord had promised. Bread had been a staple food in Egypt. Hence the term *bread* conveys the idea of that which is essential to maintaining life.

Verse 18: *When they measured it by quarts, the person who gathered a lot had no surplus, and the person who gathered a little had no shortage. Each gathered as much as he needed to eat.*

Each day the people gathered the manna left on the ground. Some collected more than others. Yet, the collection was precisely correct for that individual. If the people saved any for the next day, it spoiled overnight. However, on the sixth day, they collected twice their customary amount and it did not spoil. For the seventh day was the Sabbath, and no manna appeared on the ground.

3. SHARE WITH OTHERS (EXODUS 16:32-34)

Verse 32: *Moses said, “This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Two quarts of it are to be preserved throughout your generations, so that they may see the bread I fed you in the wilderness when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.’”*

The manna had unusual preservation qualities. It spoiled overnight except for the Sabbath. Uncollected manna disappeared in the hot desert sun. But the Lord instructed Moses to preserve two quarts so that later generations might see how the Lord provided for the needs of His people. By preserving the manna through subsequent generations, the Israelites were reminded of their dependence on the Lord’s providence.

Verses 33-34: *Moses told Aaron, “Take a container and put two quarts of manna in it. Then place it before the LORD to be preserved throughout your generations.” As the LORD commanded Moses, Aaron placed it before the testimony to be preserved.*

Moses directed Aaron to place the manna before the

testimony. This phrase anticipates the later construction of the ark of the covenant. Later the jar containing the manna would be placed inside the ark (see Heb. 9:4). Even though the people accused the Lord of starving them, He fed them. The Israelites ate manna for 40 years until they entered Canaan (see Josh. 5:12).

This forward look did not end with the construction of the ark. Jesus related the Lord’s provision of manna to His mission. He identified Himself as the Bread of life (John 6:32-35). Just as manna sustained the Israelite’s lives, Jesus is the Lord’s provision for eternal life. Aaron did as Moses instructed. Such obedience demonstrated faith because the Lord had given the instructions to Moses.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 18

EXODUS 19:1–24:18

THE BACKGROUND

Everything that had occurred previously in Exodus was preparatory to the events narrated in chapters 19–24. The Lord summoned the Israelites to Mount Sinai in order to establish a covenant with them. Covenants were the ancient world’s equivalent to international treaties and private contracts. The Lord’s covenant with the people of Israel was similar in form to other covenants of the period.

The events preceding the ratification of the covenant at Mount Sinai are described in Exodus 19. The Lord specified certain precautions and preparations the people would need to make before meeting with Him. His awesome presence manifested itself in dramatic fashion. There were thunder and lightning and smoke on the mountain.

Exodus 20:1-17 sets forth the terms of the covenant. The covenant was not a negotiated agreement. It was an expression of the Lord’s grace. As the superior Party in the agreement, He prescribed its conditions. These terms commonly are designated the Ten Commandments. They are broad and general in scope. A series of case laws follow in Exodus 20:22–23:33. These laws are commonly referred to as the Book of the Covenant. In them the various Commandments are applied to specific cases. Both the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant governed the Israelites’ actions toward the Lord and one another.

The covenant between the people of Israel and the Lord was ratified in a formal ceremony. This event is described in Exodus 24. The use of blood emphasized the serious nature of the agreement and warned the people of the folly of violating the covenant’s terms.

1. GOD ALONE (EXODUS 20:1-6)

Verse 1: *Then God spoke all these words:*

This verse identifies the Ten Commandments as the very words of the Lord Himself. They came into existence through Divine revelation, not by human intuition. They were rooted in the Lord’s redemption of the Israelites from slavery.

Verse 2: *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.*

The words began with the Lord’s identification of Himself to His people: “I am the LORD.” The upper case letters indicate that the Hebrew text has the personal name *Yahweh*.

The speaker was the same God who identified Himself to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14). The additional identification *your God* asserts the Commandments were for people who were in a right relationship with the Lord. This relationship was the result of what the Lord had done, not who the people of Israel were.

The covenant and its stipulations the Ten Commandments were based on the Lord’s salvation of His people. The Israelites were free because the Lord emancipated them from slavery and brought them out of the land of Egypt. Henceforth the people the Lord set free must freely decide to live by His standards. This design was not merely exchanging one master for another. Whereas the Egyptian taskmasters governed so as to receive the most benefit for themselves, without any concern for the welfare of the Israelites, the Lord’s demands here were designed to provide the people of Israel with the optimum benefit for themselves.

Verse 3: *Do not have other gods besides Me.*

The phrase translated *do not have* is a strong prohibitive in the Hebrew language. In the ancient world, other nations worshiped many gods. In one brief statement the Lord demanded the absolute loyalty of His people. The Lord alone was God. Israel’s sole allegiance belonged to the Lord. Every prohibition that follows presupposes agreement with this command.

Verse 4: *Do not make an idol for yourself, whether in the shape of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth.*

In the ancient world, an idol of a god or goddess was considered essential. This image could be fabricated in a variety of forms. Some looked like human beings. Some appeared as animals. Others were combinations of humans and animals. Some were depicted as elements of nature such as the sun or stars. However, none of them were real.

The verb *make* suggests fashioning an object from existing material. Thus the object produced was inferior to the person who fabricated it. On the other hand, the Lord is the Creator of both the person who made the idol and the material from which it was produced. Therefore the Lord was superior to both.

Verse 5: *You must not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the fathers’ sin, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,*

The word translated *worship* literally means “serve.” Bow-

ing down to an idol enslaves an individual to an object conceived by another human being. The Lord warned that such absurd behavior results in terrible consequences. These consequences could affect three and four generations.

The Lord identified Himself as a jealous God. Generally we consider jealousy a selfish attitude. However such is not at all the idea here. The term translated *jealous* also can be rendered “zealous.” The idea is that Lord is concerned about the welfare of His people. Thus He always acts in ways that are in the best interests of His people. Sometimes that action involves judgment. The word *sin* comes from a root meaning “to twist.” It has the sense of moral crookedness, that is, behavior that does not conform to the covenant’s demands. The term *hate* can convey the sense of “reject.” Therefore the Lord declared that if a person chose to reject the only true God and to bow down to a contrived object, then the Lord would allow such twisted thinking to produce its own consequences.

Verse 6: *but showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commands.*

In contrast, if a person determined to love and obey the Lord, this decision likewise created a specific result. The Lord shows faithful love to those who love Him. We demonstrate that love by keeping His commands. The concept of *faithful love* in the Old Testament is similar to that of grace in the New Testament. It was the Lord’s undeserved favor or loyalty to those in a covenant relationship with Him. The use of *a thousand generations* contrasts with the reference to a third and fourth generation in the previous verse. The Lord’s preference is to show mercy rather than for people to experience His judgment.

2. NO DISRESPECT (EXODUS 20:7-11)

Verse 7: *Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God, because the LORD will punish anyone who misuses His name.*

The Third Commandment sometimes has been translated “Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” This prohibition covers more than just profanity. In ancient Israel, one’s name was not merely a title of identification. It reflected the character of the individual to whom it was given. Thus the name of the LORD your God encompasses the nature and being of God. The Hebrew words rendered *do not misuse* have the sense of using something in an insubstantial or worthless manner. Thus the Commandment prohibits using the Lord’s name lightly or falsely. It includes profane oaths

and frivolous references to any Person of the Godhead. It also includes professing a right relationship with Christ by calling oneself a Christian but deliberately making choices contrary to His revealed will. Such use of the Lord's name does not take God seriously, and the Lord cannot tolerate such misrepresentation of His nature and character. Such frivolous portrayals of the Lord have serious consequences. Therefore for the good of both the individual and the community, the Lord promised to take appropriate action toward any who took His name lightly.

Verse 8: *Remember to dedicate the Sabbath day:*

The instruction *remember* in this context denotes a mental act that is accompanied by appropriate outward action. The Lord previously had commanded the people of Israel to observe the seventh day as a holy Sabbath (Ex. 16:22-26). The Lord's people were instructed not to engage in the routine of gathering manna on the seventh day. The seventh day was set aside to the Lord. Therefore the activities of the day were limited to those that designated the day as special.

Verse 9: *You are to labor six days and do all your work,*

People were to use the first six days to accomplish those things necessary for their physical well-being. The Lord created humanity to work (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). The phrase *do all your work* suggests the Lord's people should use their time wisely so as to fulfill all their responsibilities.

Verse 10: *but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. You must not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the foreigner who is within your gates.*

Just as the Lord prohibited the generation that Moses led out of Egypt from gathering manna on the Sabbath, He likewise prohibited subsequent generations from doing any work on the Sabbath. Nor were the Lord's people to force others to violate the Lord's Commandment.

Verse 11: *For the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything in them in six days; then He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and declared it holy.*

The reason given here for observing the Sabbath day was the Lord's activity in creation. Before his death Moses again addressed Israel and recited the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:6-21). In this later recitation he made no reference to creation in connection with the Fourth Commandment. Rather he cited the Lord's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt as the explanation of its significance (Deut. 5:15). Perhaps Mo-

ses implied that the deliverance of the people of Israel had overshadowed creation in its significance for the Israelites' relationship to the Lord.

3. TREAT PEOPLE LIKE THEY MATTER ... BECAUSE THEY DO! (EXODUS 20:12-17)

Verse 12: *Honor your father and your mother so that you may have a long life in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

The verb *honor* means to give the proper respect, attention, and obedience to persons in positions of responsibility and authority. The Commandment directs children to give parents the respect due their role in life. This Commandment continues to govern the parent-child relationship even after the child becomes an adult. On the basis of this Commandment Jesus condemned religious traditions that hindered adults from giving their aged parents suitable care (Mark 7:8-13).

Within the home, the Lord delegated certain authority to parents. A person learns to respect the Lord by first learning respect for one's parents. Thus this Commandment is often described as a bridge between the first four Commandments that deal with a person's relationship with God and the remaining five Commandments that focus on an individual's relationship with other people.

This commandment contains a promise: that you may have a long life in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. The land was Canaan. This promise linked obedience of this Commandment with the length of time the people of Israel occupied the land of Canaan. Such a correlation indicates that the duration of any society is related to the health of its family units.

Verse 13: *Do not murder.*

The remaining Commandments demanded that the Lord's people treat one another rightly. The Hebrew verb rendered "kill" in some English translations means *murder*. The term refers to such actions as premeditated murder and manslaughter. Taking one's own life or ending someone else's for so-called purposes of "mercy" are also breaches of this Commandment. Jesus insisted that anger and contempt likewise are violations of this law (Matt. 5:21-22).

Verse 14: *Do not commit adultery.*

In the Old Testament era those who violated the fidelity of marriage were put to death. If every human effort failed to disclose an act of infidelity, Divine mediation could be sought

(Num. 5:11-31). The interpretation of Jesus once more penetrated the outward action and exposed the attitude that produced the unfaithfulness. Sexual attraction to one's spouse is a healthy, God-given sentiment. However contemplation of any other person as the object of one's physical appetite is wrong. In the New Testament the relationship between a Christian husband and wife serves as an analogy of the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22-30).

Verse 15: *Do not steal.*

The basis of this prohibition went beyond what we identify as property rights. The Lord is Creator of all things. Therefore He is the rightful Owner of all things. Other ancient Near Eastern law codes prohibited stealing. In other cultures, death or mutilation was common punishment. Old Testament laws about theft placed greater emphasis on restitution than corporal punishment (see Ex. 22:1-4)).

Verse 16: *Do not give false testimony against your neighbor.*

The prohibition against bearing false testimony originally was intended to ensure justice within Israel's judicial system. However, its application quickly was expanded to protect individual reputations within the covenant community. Honesty is a fundamental ethical quality the Lord's people are to demonstrate.

Verse 17: *Do not covet your neighbor's house. Do not covet your neighbor's wife, his male or female slave, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

The word *covet* here refers to the specific act of desiring that which does not belong to you. The Tenth Commandment is sometimes referred to as the blanket Commandment because breaking it often leads to violations of the preceding Commandments.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 25

EXODUS 25:1–31:18

THE BACKGROUND

After setting the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt, the Lord brought the people to Mount Sinai. There He entered into covenant with Israel. The Lord promised to be Israel's God if the people kept the terms of the covenant. These terms were specified in the Ten Commandments and the laws that followed. The people of Israel agreed to the Lord's demands and made a covenant with Him. Following the covenant ratification ceremony, Moses ascended the mountain to receive the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai.

During this period the Lord also provided Moses with blueprints for constructing a place of worship and guidelines for worship in this new facility. This worship center was called the tabernacle. The Hebrew word is derived from a verb meaning "to dwell." Thus the name implies the tabernacle was God's dwelling place. It represented the Lord's presence among His people.

The Lord's instructions are recorded in Exodus 25–31. Chapters 35–40 are similar but describe how the Israelites carried out the Lord's instructions and built the tabernacle. The design is impossible for us to duplicate entirely today because the biblical instructions were dependent on some visual images Moses saw on the mountaintop (Ex. 25:40; 26:30).

1. DON'T YOU WORRY, HE'LL BE THERE (EXODUS 25:8-9)

As Moses climbed Mount Sinai, a cloud associated with the glory of the Lord engulfed him. He stayed on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights. During that time the Lord spoke to Moses. Therefore the design of the tabernacle was not the product of human imagination, but the revelation of God. The construction of this worship facility was to be made possible through the people's contributions. Some of the items such as gold and other metals had been given to the Israelites by the Egyptians on the day Israel departed from Goshen (Ex. 11:1-3; 12:36). Other items were produced by the Israelites themselves. Some items such as acacia wood and manatee skins were indigenous to the Sinai Peninsula and the Red Sea. All reflected Divine providence.

Verse 8: "They are to make a sanctuary for Me so that I may dwell among them."

The Lord instructed the Israelites to make a sanctuary for Him. The word *sanctuary* literally means "holy place." The purpose of this sanctuary was so the Lord might dwell among His people. The Lord cannot be limited by time and space. He is always present everywhere. Here, however, the Lord's statement expressed His desire for His people to center their lives around Him. Although the Lord is vastly different from humanity, He desires to maintain a personal relationship with people. Elsewhere this desire is expressed in one of the names that designated the coming Messiah. He was to be called "Immanuel, which is translated, 'God with us'" (Matt. 1:23). God is not distant and aloof, but is near and active. The sanctuary would become a visible reminder that the Lord was present with His people.

Verse 9: *You must make it according to all that I show you—the design of the tabernacle as well as the design of all its furnishings.*"

The appearance and form of this sanctuary were not to be determined by the desires of the people. In fact the opinion of the congregation was not sought. The plan of both the tabernacle and its furnishings were revealed to Moses by the Lord. The Lord's plan for worship is not determined by our personal tastes. Rather the Lord reveals to us what we should do if we are to experience His presence. Jesus expressed it as follows: "But an hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). The primary purpose of worship is to glorify God. In achieving this goal, external paraphernalia is secondary to internal motivation. The Lord can be honored by a variety of styles of worship if the worshipers' hearts are right and the message is true.

The Lord indicated He would provide Moses with plans for both the tabernacle and its furnishings. The word *tabernacle* is a derivative of a verb meaning "to dwell." This verb underscores the idea of nearness and closeness. Moses was to build the structure in which the Lord dwelt and the furnishings used therein exactly according to the design given to him by the Lord. The term translated *design* also means "likeness." Here the word has the sense of the modern architectural concept of blueprints and specifications. It stressed that construction was not to deviate from the plan the Lord provided.

The Lord instructed the Israelites to build a sanctuary for Him so He might live among them. When the Lord's people regularly gather in designated places and worship the Lord

as a community of faith, they show their firm conviction that He is present among them.

The revelation of the Lord's design began with the tabernacle's furnishings. The contents of the innermost room were described first. Entrance to it was restricted to the high priest, and he could only enter inside one time annually. The first object described was the ark of the covenant. It was a small wooden chest, about 45 inches long, 27 inches wide, and 27 inches high. It was designed to contain items specified by the Lord. It was constructed of acacia wood, but its exterior was covered with pure gold plating. Acacia wood is a derivative of the shittah tree, which is plentiful in the Sinai Peninsula. Two long poles were provided to transport the ark without touching it because touching the ark could be fatal (2 Sam. 6:6-7).

2. LISTEN UP! (EXODUS 25:17-22)

Verse 17: *Make a mercy seat of pure gold, 45 inches long and 27 inches wide.*

A lid for the ark was to be made out of solid gold. The function of this lid was far more significant than covering the wooden box. It is called a *mercy seat*. The Hebrew term conveys the idea of covering over. The root of this term refers to atonement and reconciliation. In Old Testament worship the mercy seat served as the spot where reconciliation between a holy God and sinful humanity was portrayed symbolically by sprinkling blood around and on the mercy seat. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the room where the ark was located. He sprinkled the blood of a sacrificial bull and a goat there as an appeal for the Lord's forgiveness for the people's sins (Lev. 16:14-16). The inadequacy of this ritual was revealed in the fact that it must be repeated annually.

Verse 18: *Make two cherubim of gold; make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat.*

Cherubim were a class of winged angels. Old Testament references to them primarily occur in visions of the Lord's throne or descriptions of the place of worship. They functioned as guardians or attendants. Here the term denotes a representation of cherubim placed on the mercy seat. The two cherubim were fashioned from gold. Gold is soft and malleable. So the cherubim were shaped by beating them with a hammer. These figures did not violate the Second Commandment because they were not to be worshiped.

Verses 19-20: *Make one cherub at one end and one cher-*

ub at the other end. Make the cherubim of one piece with the mercy seat at its two ends. The cherubim are to have wings spread out above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and are to face one another. The faces of the cherubim should be toward the mercy seat.

The two cherubim were to be constructed so as to face each other from opposite ends of the mercy seat. The ark and the mercy seat represented the presence of the Lord in Israel. The Lord was envisioned as being seated on an unseen throne above the two cherubim (2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Pss. 80:1; 99:1).

Verse 21: *Set the mercy seat on top of the ark and put the testimony that I will give you into the ark.*

The first item placed inside the ark was the testimony, the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed by the finger of God (Ex. 31:18). Later, a golden jar containing some manna and the rod of Aaron that budded were placed in the ark (Heb. 9:4).

Verse 22: *I will meet with you there above the mercy seat, between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the testimony; I will speak with you from there about all that I command you regarding the Israelites.*

The Lord promised to meet with Moses. The idea is that the Lord would reveal Himself to Moses in that place. Furthermore, this revelation would be for the purpose of giving the Lord's instructions to the Israelites. The Lord was going to speak to Moses in order that the people could know what He expected them to do. The Lord does not leave His people without guidance.

The Lord directed the Israelites to construct an ark and a mercy seat to sit atop it, for the Lord would speak to the Israelites from the mercy seat. The Lord's people can confidently anticipate He will help them understand His ways and instructions through their times of worship.

3. GIVE IT UP (EXODUS 29:38-42)

Verse 38: *"This is what you are to offer regularly on the altar every day: two year-old lambs.*

In Exodus 29:38-42 a few of the priests' duties were described. These duties included the offering of certain daily sacrifices. This regular sacrifice was a costly offering. Restricting the sacrifice to two year-old lambs ensured the offerings consisted of fully grown, valuable animals. God's people should only give to God the very best.

Verse 39: *In the morning offer one lamb, and at twilight*

offer the other lamb.

Each morning one lamb was offered. Each evening at twilight a second lamb was offered. Thus the day began and ended with the giving of gifts to the One who is the Giver of everything.

Verse 40: *With the first lamb offer two quarts of fine flour mixed with one quart of crushed olive oil, and a drink offering of one quart of wine.*

At both times the animal sacrifice was accompanied by a grain offering and a drink offering. Mixing flour and oil is a recipe for bread dough. The inclusion of wine and bread with the meat of the animal sacrifice yields a complete meal. This practice suggests the offerings of God's people should be comprehensive and complete.

Verse 41: *You are to offer the second lamb at twilight. Offer a grain offering and a drink offering with it, like the one in the morning, as a pleasing aroma, a fire offering to the LORD.*

A pleasing aroma represented conveying the offering to God. Anyone who has smelled meat cooking over an open fire or barbecue grill can relate to this phrase. The sacrifice was identified as a fire offering. Fire consumed every combustible item. Hence the meat, dough, and wine vanished from sight, visually representing God's acceptance of the sacrifice.

Verse 42: *This will be a regular burnt offering throughout your generations at the entrance to the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet you to speak with you.*

The animal offering was identified as a burnt offering. The skin of this offering was given to the priests. The remainder was burnt in its entirety. The sacrifice symbolized complete dedication and consecration to the Lord. The language that surrounded this offering is that of a meal. The worshiper sought to please the Lord as a delightful meal satisfies a dinner guest. Thus every element of an ordinary domestic meal is provided: meat, bread, and drink. The fire from this sacrifice was not to be extinguished (see Lev. 6:13). The idea of a continual offering suggests the dedication of the people was to be continuous.

The presentation of the offering took place at the entrance to the tent of meeting. This name for the tabernacle focused attention on the function of worship as an encounter between humanity and the Lord. These instructions as well as others declared the Lord's sovereignty over worship. Any effort to present the offering at another location had the effect of prescribing to the Lord when and where the giver would

meet with Him. One must accept the Lord as He reveals Himself. We must conform to His choices, not He to ours.

4. A STANDING "O" (EXODUS 29:43-46)

Verse 43: *I will also meet with the Israelites there, and that place will be consecrated by My glory.*

The verb consecrated means to set something apart from the normal and place it into the sphere of that which is holy. Thus the tabernacle was no ordinary tent. It was to be set into the realm of sacred objects. This transformation was to be effected by God's glory. The basic meaning of the root of the noun *glory* is "to be heavy'." Hence the noun refers to that which is weighty or important. When used of the Lord, the term denotes the visible manifestation of His presence and power. Thus it refers to His self-disclosure to His people. The Lord promised that He would meet with the Israelites at the sanctuary. He promised to make the place of worship sacred by revealing His presence there. When the tabernacle was completed, the glory of the Lord filled the place in the form of a cloud that covered the tent. Thereby all the Israelites knew the Lord was in their midst (Ex. 40:34-38).

Verse 44: *I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; I will also consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve Me as priests.*

The Lord indicated that in addition to the tent of meeting and its furnishings, He also would move the altar into the realm of that which was holy or set apart. Specifically, this altar was the one on which the various sacrifices were burned. It was located in the courtyard. Likewise, Aaron and his sons were set apart to serve as priests. They too were to be considered holy. The term *holy* specified an object or person had been separated from the ordinary and given to the Lord for His use.

Verse 45: *I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God.*

God would dwell among the Israelites. The result of the Lord's presence was that the Israelites would become His people and He would be their God. With this covenant language, the Lord laid claim on the people (see Ex. 6:7).

Verse 46: *And they will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.*

The explanation given here for the Lord's presence among His people, and hence for their obedience and worship, was His intervention in history on their behalf. The Lord rescued the Israelites from Egypt in order that He might live among

His people. The claim declares both the Lord's nature and His activity on behalf of His people. Humanity can know God only because God has revealed Himself to people. Not only has His activity in history demonstrated that He is really God, it likewise has shown what kind of God He is. He is a God of grace, delivering people not because of their merit, but because of His nature.