

An important part of the overall picture of what God truly intends for us to be is revealed by a phrase that appears at least 17 times in the Bible. It relates to an idea that appears countless times. This phrase is, 'They will be my people, and I will be their God.' It seems simple enough, yet it contains a wealth of information. This is all that God wants us to be: his people. He wants us to have him as our God, with all of the love, honor, and obedience that goes along with that. It is a relationship that he seeks, not just the rigorous adherence to a set of rules that we do not fully understand. He wants us to become like him in our hearts, obeying him because we have His principles instilled in us.

God spent over a thousand years of history showing mankind that salvation could not be attained through the law. The rejection of this idea reached its height in the time of Christ in His condemnation of the Pharisees and their attitude. But this concept persists today! We still want to work our way into heaven, pushing aside the helping hand of the grace of God, demanding attention through our own supposed worthiness. I am afraid that God will have to say to many, "I'm so sorry! You have simply missed the point." Christ said almost the exact same thing in Matthew 23 with the well known 'Woe to' passage directed towards the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees.

The first real idea of God's desire for a people is from the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:1-8. This is one of the really important events in our early history; this is where God chooses Abraham, because of his obedience, to be the father of a multitude of nations. These people were to be God's people, and he was to be their God. God has been searching for a people whom he could call his own; a people whom he could fight for, a people who would not be ashamed to call him their God and obey him. He establishes an agreement or covenant with them through Abraham and confirms it many times later. He tells them what he will do and what is expected of them. Later, when they become oppressed by the Egyptians, God sends Moses to them. From this point on he has Moses address Pharaoh with the words, 'Let my people go!' God steps into the breach for these people, claims them, and delivers them through his Almighty power.

This key idea occurs again in Leviticus 26:12. We see that God promises several things in return for obedience to his will, or to Israel's response to being his people. He will give fruitful harvests, peace, the ability to overcome hundred-to-one odds, the presence of God, and freedom. But for disobedience he will return sudden terror, sickness, heartache, plagues, hunger, and pursuit continually by their enemies. God says that if we are his people, five shall chase a hundred and a hundred shall chase ten thousand. If we are not his people, the sound of a driven leaf shall put us to flight with terror in our hearts.

The sad part of this story is that after all the Lord did to save and protect the nation of Israel to make them his own people, they turned away from him and forsook him. When they found themselves in trouble again, they would call upon God again until he had solved the problem. This cycle of obedience and disobedience, which seems to be mirrored in our own lives so much of the time, repeated itself until finally God decided that he had had enough. As a way of washing his hands of 'his' people, he allowed them to be carried off into captivity. But his dream of a people he could call his own continued, and we find the key phrase used again and again throughout the Old Testament. Here, however, he is mainly dealing with what he calls the 'remnant'; those who will survive the captivity and return.

One verse which contains this phrase is well known because of its relationship to the emphasis on the heart, Jeremiah 31:31-33. We see that a change of heart from the old Israel is necessary to achieve what God really wants. This is what all followers of God must have to be pleasing to him. Almost every time this theme of the new heart is mentioned in the Bible our phrase of interest is found nearby. How can we fail to miss the point? God wants us as his own people. And He wants to be our God. We should respond to this desire with all of our heart.