



Making Living Arrangements

Exodus 32:1-14; Isaiah 25:1-9; Matt 22:1-14; Phil 4:1-9

We often hear of people making various living arrangements. The tabloids are ever concerned with which latest actor or actress is modifying their domestic relationships. Children move out of home, back in with their parents, or parents move in with their children. Families fall apart or merge together in new ways. We are familiar with all these relational struggles. Perhaps not as obvious are the changes to the living arrangements we make with God. What role does God really play in our lives? Reports estimate that over 40% of the US population reports no role at all for God in their lives. Aside from showing up at church, what living arrangements do we have with God and God's presence in our lives?

The Hebrews felt disconnected from God and anxious while Moses was removed from their presence. They wanted a visible representation of God in their midst. They were accustomed to idols, as their use had been prevalent in Egypt and in their own worship there. We tend to think of this Exodus crowd as monotheistic and serving *Yahweh* as a matter of course, tradition, and historical allegiance. That does not do the reality of their religious lives justice. They were just getting used to the idea of serving a God with no image or idol. They were still getting used to the concept that they should serve one deity alone.

The Egyptians had many gods. They worshipped the sun, the moon, the sky, the earth, and the various others gods of Egypt. While there was a primary god to be served, the others were served as well, considering their participation and importance in Egyptian life. When *Yahweh* offered a covenant relationship through Moses and attached a list of instructions on how that would play out, they heard the words. Maybe they did not go in one ear and out the others, but neither had the people taken the time to process the meaning of the covenant words, nor their importance to daily living.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, God wanted their supreme allegiance, no idols, and all that yada, yada, yada. Now they just wanted to get on with life. They wanted a physical representation of God they might see and touch. They wanted a more tangible expression of this *Yahweh* or maybe even some other god, as well. Moses had delivered his speech, but now he had slipped away. It was time to get on with life as they knew it. Covenant, commandments, they were great at the time, but now the people wanted to get on with their interests and purposes. There is just something about an idol that relegates the divine to a much smaller package we can see, manipulate, and limit to a specific sphere of our lives. They wanted the divine confined to a segment of life limited by their own desire to interact and ask for help.

They built an idol of gold—a calf similar to the idols of the neighboring peoples who worship Ba'al as the god of rain and fertility. "These are our gods who brought us out of the land of Egypt!" they proclaimed. *Yahweh* was forgotten, laid aside to allow them to pursue their own ambitions, plans, and direction.

By all rights, the covenant was destroyed. It was rendered null and void as the people ignored its basic premises and their responsibility to serve *Yahweh* and *Yahweh* alone with no idol or image by which to limit and understanding of *Yahweh's* presence. Even so, God deals in mercy with this wayward people. For the sake of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel—for the sake of *Yahweh's* own reputation—God chooses to deal in mercy and grace. God calls the people once more back to live up to their covenant living arrangements.

They wanted their relationship with God to be convenient. It should not interfere with their plans, goals, dreams, ideals, and desires. They were enjoying their newly gained freedom from slavery. They did not want to be free only to bow to the dictates of a God they could not see. They wanted the blessings of liberty without the responsibilities of live in covenant with *Yahweh*. They wanted God around to bail them out of their troubles, but not to infringe on their freedom to do as they desired. God required commitment, but was willing to deal in grace—to give them a chance to turn to accept the living arrangements of the covenant God proposed.

Isaiah declared confidence in God's restoration. He spoke of a messianic banquet and a time of rejoicing in recognition of *Yahweh's* sovereignty and blessing. He spoke of God's caring provision for the people—not only for Israel, but for all nations. It was a picture of peace, joy, and resting in the grace of God's protection and care. It was a far cry from where the Exodus crowd found themselves before the golden calf. It was a far cry from where the Jews found themselves before Jesus.

The Jews had all the structures of worshipping *Yahweh* with dignity, honor, respect, and zeal. They were meticulous in their religious observance, but far from fulfilling God's will for their lives. They had relegated God to their religious structures, routines, and formulas. In the process, they had missed the message of grace, dependence upon God, and their responsibility to care for others as a means of God's provision.

Jesus' banquet parable spoke to the fact that the establishment was much too busy to relish God's presence and invitation to join in fellowship with God. They were consumed with buying, selling, producing, and pursuing their own dreams to give God the time of day. They were too busy to worry with God's plans and direction. Their lives were misdirected from fulfilling the demands of grace, mercy, and righteousness. As the festal participant without the proper attire, the legalistic righteousness of their lives did not translate into living according to mercy, grace, and love for those still outside the reach of the gospel of grace.

Paul addressed practical gospel living as he urged the setting aside of disagreements to lay hold of the unity to which we are called in Christ Jesus. Our joy in living is not to come from being right and winning an argument, but rather from the presence of Christ Jesus. God's living in us should spill over into every area of life as we give Christ the prominence of being truly Lord. Our actions that proceed from fear and anxiety should be laid aside by the confidence we have in the presence of Christ and God's provision for our needs. We need not act and react from fear, but from faith in God's caring presence.

Paul closes this section of his letter from prison reminding us to focus our lives on the attributes of Christ Jesus. It is on dwelling on the attributes of God and God's willingness to be present in our daily living that we can enjoy true and lasting peace. There is no real blessing in relegating God to some distant corner of our lives. That is not freedom, but enslavement to our anxiety and fear.

We have a choice as to God's role in our lives. We can choose to run from God, ignore God, or relegate God to some distant corner to call on when we find ourselves in need. We can also allow God to live in the center of our lives, fully participating in our daily activities, priorities, and choices. We are invited to the feast, but to often choose to ignore God's invitation. What kind of living arrangements with God have we made? Is it time for a change?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*