

Sermon Transcript from April 3rd, 2016 It Happens All The Time Pastor John Mark Comer, Bridgetown Church

2 Samuel 2. Okay. If you are new or visiting or are here kind of post-Easter, first off: welcome. Secondly, to catch you up to speed, we as a community are in this year-long series on the Bible. That's actually a little misleading. It's more like a collection of series', or "seri." I don't know what the actual correct grammar is there. And we did one on the Bible itself in January and then we did one on the story of God, kind of that we believe that the library that is the Bible actually tells one unified story that leads you and me, the reader, to Jesus. And we did that.

Then, next up on the docket starting right now is a series on Israel. So, we are reading through the Bible together as a community. Hopefully you're still on the bandwagon. The reading for the coming week is, I believe, 1 King 1 all the way to 22, and there's one video on the docket. It actually wasn't up this morning, so hopefully tomorrow or the next day the video for 1 King. So, right now, we as a community are reading all the Israeli history books. Now, there's a lot of weird stuff in there. Am I right? There's a lot of dudes that have more than one wife.

What was that? I don't even actually want to know. Never mind.

There's a lot of, you know, kinky sex stuff. There's a lot of violence. There's a ton of warfare and it's like God is kind of sort of involved in it. Maybe. Maybe not. It's just really weird. So, case in point: 2 Samuel 2. If you're reading along with me and with our community, you woke up on Easter Sunday morning. It's like, "Alright. Jesus is back from the dead. My pastel shirt is ready to go," and then you read this.

2 Samuel 2:8: "Meanwhile, Abner son of Ner, the commander of Saul's army, had taken Ish-Bosheth son of Saul and brought him over to Mahanaim. He made him king of Gilead, Ashuri and Jezreel, and also over Ephraim, Benjamin and all Israel."

So, 10 tribes up in the north.

"Ish-Bosheth son of Saul was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he reigned [a whopping] two years. The tribe of Judah, however, remained loyal to David. The length of time that David was king in Hebron..." – down in the south – "...over Judah was seven years and six months.

"Abner son of Ner," – here's just a great story – "together with the men of Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, left Mahanaim and went to Gibeon."

It's kind of a meeting place in the middle.

"Joab son of Zeruiah and David's men went out and met them at the pool of Gibeon."

This is not a pool party. Keep reading.

"One group sat down on one side of the pool and one group on the other side.

"Then Abner said to Joab, 'Let's have some of the young men get up and fight hand to hand in front of us.'

"All right," – sounds like a plan – "'let them do it,' Joab said.

"So they stood up and were counted off—twelve men for Benjamin and Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, and twelve for David. Then each man grabbed his opponent by the head and thrust his dagger into his opponent's side, and they fell down together. So that place in Gibeon was called Helkath Hazzurim."

Or, "Field of Daggers."

"The battle that day was very fierce and Abner and the Israelites were defeated by David's men.

"The three sons of Zeruiah were there [three brothers]: Joab, Abishai and Asahel. Now Asahel was fleet-footed as a wild gazelle."

That's fleet-footed, guys. I mean, that's like, sisters, if you're like, "There's a hot guy and he's a runner," that's a line right there. Just give it a shot.

"He chased Abner, turning neither to the right nor to the left as he pursued him. Abner looked behind him and asked, 'Is that you, Asahel?'"

"It is,' he answered.

"Then Abner said to him," – I imagine like heavy breathing, you know? – "Turn aside to the right or to the left; take on one of the young men and strip him of his weapons.' But Asahel would not stop chasing him.

"Again Abner warned Asahel, 'Stop chasing me! Why should I strike you down? How could I look your brother Joab in the face?'"

"But Asahel refused to give up the pursuit; so Abner thrust the butt of his spear into Asahel's stomach, and the spear came out through his back."

That is so Quentin Tarantino.

"He fell there and died on the spot. And every man stopped when he came to the place where Asahel had fallen and died.

"But Joab and Abishai pursued Abner, and as the sun was setting, they came to the hill of Ammah, near Giah on the way to the wasteland of Gibeon. Then the men of Benjamin rallied behind Abner. They formed themselves into a group and took their stand on top of a hill.

"Abner called out to Joab, 'Must the sword devour forever? Don't you realize that this will end in bitterness? How long before you order your men to stop pursuing their fellow Israelites?'"

"Joab answered, 'As surely as God lives, if you had not spoken, the men would have continued pursuing them until morning.'"

"So Joab blew the trumpet, and all the troops came to a halt; they no longer pursued Israel, nor did they fight anymore."

So, there's that.

It's pretty weird, huh? Is that really moving for you? Your heart, your soul, your relationship to Jesus? How many of you read that last Sunday morning? Did any of you think to yourself something along the lines of, "What the heck? What is the point of a story like this?"

It's really confusing. In particular, because so many people, at least in the late modern west – and I think this is unique to America in particular. But, so many people kind of think of the Old Testament – that's the first part of the Bible – like a collection of short stories, each with a moral point. And there's bits and pieces of truth in there, but there are all sorts of problems with reading the Old Testament that way. Here's one: what do you do with a story like this? What's the moral point? Exactly. Aim for the belly when you stab your opponent or be careful with the butt end of your spear or trail running is great, but there's a time when you need to just stop?

Like, what exactly is the takeaway here for you and for me? Is there any? Or, to reframe the question: what does an ancient, primitive, violent story about tribal warfare and a blood feud have to do with you and me and Jesus?

So, here's the plan for tonight, because you're all reading this every day. I want to show you how we, as followers of Jesus, three plus millennia later, on the other side of the world, in a whole other culture and day and age, not in an ancient tribal violent, but here in urban, progressive, secular Portland, how you and I read every single story here. How we read

ancient Hebrew history. Does that sound like a plan? Yeah? Okay.

Turn in the New Testament to Romans 4. If you're new to the Bible, there's a table of contents in the beginning. But, this is about three quarters of the way through. Romans 4. The New Testament writer, Paul, who's the author here, is a huge help because he spent a lot of time working out the relationship between the Old Testament and Gentile – that's a way of saying "a non-Jewish person" – followers of Jesus. So, Paul is Jewish, so he knows the Old Testament like the back of his hand. But, he spends a lot of time working it out for people like you and people like me. For example, in his letter to the Romans, he retells the story – and there'll be a quote in a minute – of Genesis 15.

So, let's read Romans 4:18: **"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed..."** – man, is that a great line or what? – **"...and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead."**

If you know this story.

"Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why it was credited to him as righteousness."

So, that line right there, that's a quote from Genesis 15. Now, listen to this. Watch what Paul does here.

"The words 'it was credited to him...' – this is Paul teaching the Old Testament – "...were written not for him alone, but also for [who?] us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."

Okay. The first thing that you need to wrap your head around is that the Scriptures weren't written to us, but they were written for us. Here's what I mean by that: Paul, in this example, takes a story from Genesis 15, from the Old Testament, a story about Abraham that was written millennia ago even in his time, on the other side of the world by Hebrews and to Hebrews in Hebrew. And he says, "Actually, that story, that ancient story? Yeah. It's actually for you and it's for me. In fact, every single person, if you believe that Jesus is Lord, that story is for you."

Now, because it wasn't written to us, we have to work overtime to make sense of the Bible. It was written in a whole other language. Hebrew in the Old Testament and bits and pieces of it are in Aramaic and Greek in the New Testament. And it's in a whole other time and day and age and culture. It's an honor/shame culture. We don't remotely get that, at least not here in the West. And there's background and history and lead up and narrative. So, we just have to work really hard to make sense of the Bible. It's not like you can just wake up tomorrow morning, pull out your NIV English translation of the Bible, read 1 Kings and be like, "Yeah, I get it. That makes sense. That makes sense. Cool. No problemo."

If that's you, you're weird. Like, no. You don't exist. It's not like that. We have to work really hard because it was not written to you and to me. But, that said, it was written for you and me. So, that's why we wake up tomorrow and we read it. That's why I'm here teaching it and why we set aside time week after week. It's why we read books. It's why we think and we jump in. Because this, all of this stuff, was written for you. Paul and the New Testament writers deeply believed that this ancient Hebrew collection of writings that we now call the Old Testament, it's for us as followers of Jesus.

So, then the question becomes: Okay, so, it's for us. Great. To do what exactly?

Well, keep reading. Turn over to Romans 15. In verse 3, Paul quotes from the Old Testament.

"For even the Messiah did not please himself but, as it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.'"

That's a quote from Psalm 69. But then watch what Paul does next.

"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have

hope."

Everything that was written in the past – that's Paul for "the Old Testament" or the Bible of his day – all of it was "written to teach us." Now, who's "us" in the story here? Who's "us?" Yeah. Followers of Jesus. Somebody said it. Well done. You and me. It was written for us to teach us. So, there's more going on when you read a story – like that kind of obscure one in 2 Samuel 2 – than entertainment. Like a story for you to read and be like, "That's cool, but Hunger Games is better."

There's more going on there. It's written to teach you and teach me. So, the next question becomes: okay. So, it's written to teach. To teach me what exactly?

And notice that Paul does not say "doctrine," what to believe, or "practice," how to live, which, at least if you're me, is what you would expect. But instead he writes, "Written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have..." – what? Hope. Remember that word. Hang on to it. I want to come back to it at the end of the teaching. Now, I think the Old Testament does teach doctrine; what to believe and practice and how to live. But, we all know that most of our doctrine and practice all comes from the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the New Testament, not the old.

So, what if the main point of the Old Testament – in particular as you think about a history book like Samuel or Kings – is something else? Remember what the Bible is. We said this in January. The Bible is covenant documents. Remember that language? It's a collection of writings for people who enter into covenant and into a marriage-like relationship with God. Remember how we said that the Bible is not authoritative for the city of Portland or for the United State of America? It's true for all people for all time, but it's not authoritative. It's authoritative for you, for me, for people that actually, of our own free will and volition, step into a covenant-like relationship with God. And it's to teach you and I how to be in that kind of a relationship with God.

Could it be that the main point of the Old Testament is to tell us what God is like and how you and I relate to God? Dallas Willard, he writes this about the Old Testament stories:

"The moral of the story often will have much more to do with what we learn of God than an identifying with a particular character."

In other words, the characters are meant to be an example for us to avoid or imitate, but ultimately we are meant to encounter God in a fresh, new way. So, yes, as you read through the Old Testament there are characters that set an example; positive and, more often than not, negative. But, the main thing that the stories teach us – and please hear me right now. The main thing kind of at the top of the pile is how to relate to God. That's why so much of the Bible comes as stories and not as proposition. It's why the Bible is not a systematic theology textbook. You know, "Chapter one: Ecclesiology. Chapter two: Missiology. Chapter three: Christology."

You're thinking, "I don't even know what that is."

That's okay. That's my job to nerd out. You get to just listen. Okay? But, that's not how the Bible reads. There's no index at the back. You don't look up your subject of choice in page 1,348. That's not what it is. How does it start? What's the opening line? "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Here's what He did in day one. Here's what day two was like. Here's what day three was like. It is a story. Why? Because stories teach you how to relate to other people far better than abstract truth. Okay, we all get this. It's why we ask questions. I was with somebody recently a few weeks ago in South Africa. I was with this pastor who had just an amazing relationship with his wife and an amazing marriage. I said, "Alright, dude. Help me out here. I'm a young husband. I'm a young guy. Teach me how. You have a such a great marriage. What's it like?"

He did not have some abstract idea out there. He started to tell me stories of what he does to be a good husband. Stories of how he and his wife keep life and love and romance and all of that alive. It was story after story after story because stories teach you and I how to relate. But, all that to say that doesn't mean that there isn't a moral point to the stories. Turn over to the next letter over. 1 Corinthians 10.

So, this is another letter also written by the exact same author, Paul. And I absolutely love what he's up to here. 1 Corinthians 10. I want to wait for you all to get there. You guys okay tonight? Brenton, man, you've got a tank top on. It's not that hot, but you are. Well done. That was funny!

1 Corinthians 10:1: **"For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud..."** – now, pause right there.

"Our" ancestors. Okay. Paul is Jewish. If you know anything about the church in Corinth, for the most part it was not Jewish. It was made up, for the most part, of Greco-Romans. So, here's Paul writing a letter. He's a Jew writing to non-Jewish people and one of the lines is "our ancestors" and he starts to talk about ancient Israel, Abraham and the rest. That's weird. Imagine if I were to get an email from somebody in China who were to lead with "our ancestors." I would email back saying, "Well, you're Chinese. I'm American. We are a very different country, a very different ethnicity. Your ancestors are not my ancestors."

Right? Not in a good or bad way, just your ancestors are not my ancestors. So, what exactly is Paul up to here? Paul is drawing out the continuity between Israel and the Old Testament, an ethnic community made up of Jews and Jews only, and then the Church in the New Testament, a kind of non-ethnic or an a-ethnic community made up of Jews and Gentiles or non-Jewish people. Greeks and Romans and Americans and Chinese and Russian (a lot of Russians here.) Like, all of it. And he's saying it's one kind of through line all the way through. It's the exact same family of God. This is what Paul is saying: that Israel's story is our story. That Moses is your ancestor. Moses. You're like, "But I'm not Jewish. I'm from Thailand."

Moses is your ancestor. Your great great great great great great great great, multiply, grandfather. Israel's story is our story. Israel was the family of God and now, if you know the story of the Bible, you and I, as followers of Jesus, have been adopted into the family of God. I become a son, you become a daughter. God is our Father. A family no longer based on ethnicity, but now based on faith in Jesus. This is what He is up to. Now, keep reading.

1 Corinthians 10:2, **"They [Israel, our ancestors] were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food [manna] and drank that same spiritual drink [the water from the rock]; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was the Messiah. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness."**

So, what is he up to? Paul is drawing parallels here. He's saying, "Think about it. Just as Israel went through the Red Sea. Hey, we went through the waters of baptism."

We'll see that tonight in just a few minutes.

"Just as God gave Israel a savior in Moses, God gave you and me a savior in Jesus. Just as God gave Israel the manna and the water from the rock, God gave you and me the bread and the wine."

Now, this is not allegory, okay? The Old Testament – and please hear me, particularly if you grew up in the Church – is not an allegory. This is far more profound. Paul is drawing parallels between Israel and us. He's saying, "Hey, their story is kind of like our story."

That's how you read the Old Testament. You keep your eyes open as you read through it and you look for parallels. In Paul's case, the parallels are a warning to the church in Corinth. So, in context, if you read Paul's letter to the Corinthians as a whole, Paul is dealing with a very specific problem in the church: idolatry. This is a Greco-Roman city, it's a Pagan, heathenistic, non-Jewish kind of super progressive culture, and idolatry is a huge part of the life. So, Paul is dealing with this problem in the Church, idolatry, how? By teaching a group of non-Jewish followers of Jesus from an ancient Hebrew story, and he's drawing parallels. He's saying, "Hey, in the same way that Israel was saved, Israel was 'baptized,' but still, when Israel got into idolatry, it was the end. So, just because you're saved and just because you're baptized doesn't mean, 'Hey, if you get into idolatry, no worries. It's okay.' No. Don't play with fire."

It's a warning from Paul. Now, keep reading. Look at what he does in verse 6.

1 Corinthians 10:6, **"Now these things occurred as examples to keep us..."** – there it is again – **"...from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some**

of them were; as it is written:"

Here's a quote.

"The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in sexual revelry."

That's from Exodus.

"We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel."

So, clearly, there is a moral point to a lot of this. But, these things happen to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you're standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. And Paul goes on. Notice that twice Paul writes that these things happen to them as examples. That word "examples" here in Greek is "tupos." Can you say that? Great. And, it can be translated "mold" or "model." It was used in Paul's day for a prototype of something to be made later. So, think of like an architectural model of a house that's this big made out of cardboard. That's a tupos, or a mold or a model of an actual, full on house to be made later.

So, these examples that we read all through the Old Testament are essentially case studies. "This is what happens when..." – you fill in the blank. This is what happens when.

You could put it this way: it happened and it happens. So and so did this thing a long time ago on the other side of the world and it happened, and it happens all the time. King David was a man after God's own heart. Incredible guy, used by God. But, there was a long running character flaw. One of many. In particular, his relationship to women and to sex and when he was older – 50 years old or so in life – he started to get apathetic and kind of tired of the fight and lazy and he ended up having an affair. And out of that affair, his entire family started to crumble to pieces and the after-effect was brought on not only David and his wife, but his family and his nation as a whole. There was just this collateral damage all over the place.

Yeah, that happened and it happens all the time. A lot of you are like, "Yeah. That's my family. That's my dad. That's my mom. That's me."

King Solomon's son was an amazing guy. I read this morning, the zenith of Israel's story. Everybody was under their own vine and their own fig tree. You read that line? I might be a day ahead. Maybe that's tomorrow morning. That's a great line. Like, who doesn't want their own vine and their own fig tree? You don't? Okay. I think that sounds great. I'm a fig guy. Trader Joe's figs? Why? No way. I have my own fig tree. I don't think we're in the right climate. Anyway. That's a tangent. I digress.

So, it's this great moment in the story and here's Solomon, he's son of David and he's over Israel and its zenith and asking God for wisdom and it's just this beautiful moment. But then, slowly but surely over time, his heart turned. Through what? Money, sex and power. And his heart warped out of shape and he became the antithesis; the hero became the villain. He became the slaver, the new Pharaoh, over a brand new Egypt. Wow. But, it did not happen at once, right? It did not. Over a very long period of time. That happened. It happens all the time. We could go on with story after story, example after example, tupos after tupos. It happened and it happens all the time.

The novelist Frederick Buechner, any fans in the house? That's not a lot of you. Okay. He had this to say:

"The Bible is a swarming compost of a book, an Irish stew of poetry and propaganda, law and legalism, myth and murky history, and hysteria. Over the centuries it has become hopelessly associated with tub-thumping evangelism and dreary piety with superannuated superstition and blue-nosed moralizing with ecclesiastical authoritarianism and crippling literalism. And yet, just because it is a book about both the sublime and the unspeakable, it is a book also about life and the way it really is. It is a book about people who, at one and the same time, can be both believing and unbelieving, innocent and guilty, crusaders and crooks, full of hope and full of despair. In other words, it is a book about us."

What you find in the Bible is that somebody else has been through what you're going

through and they've written about it. Someone from another time, from another place has written in startling detail about what you are going through right here and now and it's surprisingly, and shockingly at times, relevant and helpful. That's one of the reasons that the Bible is so brutally honest about the messiness of life and how screwed up we are in the human condition.

You know, there are a lot of ways that the Bible is very similar to other ancient writings. It's written in Hebrew, it's an ancient Semitic language and very much a byproduct of the culture of the day where polygamy was the norm and slavery and so on and so forth. But, there are also a number of ways in which the Bible is so very different. It stands literally apart. There are no other ancient writings like it at all. One such example is the fact that there are no heroes in the Bible other than God and Jesus. But, there are no heroes. The closest you get is somebody like David, who is kind of the Hebrew hero to this day. But, did you read the David story? It's story after story about character flaw after character flaw, about mistake after mistake. And the ending of the story is like there's this great middle of the story and then the Bathsheba thing and then it's just this.

The ending of the story is really depressing. He's this bitter, angry, old man with a really hot girlfriend. Did you read that story? That's a whole other thing. Here's the beauty of that: we can relate to messed up people who are trying to follow Jesus, but who stumble along the way. We can't relate to heroes because we're not heroes. But, we can relate to David and his friends. You know, the Bible, I think, reminds me of the difference between a commercial plot and a literary plot. So, stay with me for a minute. I think this is helpful.

So, I just – this is so nerdy – finished writing a novel a few weeks ago. And don't think it's all like, you know, "I'm cool." It's young adult sci-fi novel. I wrote it for my kids. Okay? So, I started a year and a half ago on my Sabbatical. I had three months off and, by the need, I was starting to get a little bored. So, I started writing my novel. Reading's a huge part of my family. Especially my oldest son is this avid reader. We both read at least one novel a week. And even my wife now. So, you come over to our house on Sabbath and half of the day it's like we're just sitting on the couch reading. So, it's a huge part of our life. So, I started writing this novel just, honestly, kind of as a gag and then for my kids.

Then I finished it. So, I have no idea if it will ever see the light of day. I don't know if I want to embarrass myself that much. But, as part of it, in my spare time over the last year and a half or so, I was learning a brand new trade. So, I write books, but it's non-fiction. That's totally different. So, I read all the material out there on plot and character and dialogue and genre and all of that. One of the first things that you learn is about the difference between a commercial plot and a literary plot.

So, here's a diagram from James Scott Bell's book, "Plot and Structure." So, this is what a commercial plot looks like. So, think of, I don't know, if it's a movie, think of The Avengers or something like that. The characters are either good or evil. So, there's a protagonist, there's a good guy and there's a bad guy. Right? There's kind of rising action through the whole thing and a problem here and setback there. But, you overcome the problem, you overcome the thing and then you move forward. And then the end is this kind of climax. In writer-speak, it's a "knock-out" ending or whatever. It's like, "Yes! They saved New York!" Like nobody's ever done that before in film ever. "They saved New York from an alien invasion!"

And you're like, "Yes! Awesome!" and you throw the popcorn in the trash and you walk out and you go home. Alright? That is a commercial plot. We love it all summer long. This is what a literary plot looks like. A literary plot, it's not this rising action. It's more about the inner-journey of the character or characters. The characters aren't black or white. There's not a good guy and a bad guy. The characters are mixed and kind of this grey in-between. And, depending on who you read, sometimes the ending is hopeful or hopeful-ish, kind of, sort of. But, if it's really a literary writer, then the ending is just so depressing. Like, you know you're reading really good fiction when you get to the end and you don't know what the book was about and you're just really depressed. You're like, "Wow. Wow. Faulkner. Oh, my gosh. It's amazing."

So, it's usually this downbeat or kind of ambiguous ending. Like, you know, in a literary novel or in a film, there's no resolve. It doesn't tie off neat and clean. And what that does, the genius of that is it gets you thinking about it. I'm still thinking about this novel I read a few months ago. "The Window on the Door." The ending was so violent and depressing and ugh. And I don't even know what it's about, but I'm still thinking about it. I think it's about something. I'm not sure what it is, but I still think about it as I cycle to work or whatever. That's what a really good story does. But, here's the deal: a literary plot is imperfect characters with imperfect

stories that lead to imperfect endings.

Listen, here's my point: the Bible is way more like a literary story than a commercial story. Why? Because life is way more like a literary story than a commercial story. How many of you feel like you're living The Avengers? How's that going for Thor? Like, "Ah, problem of the day: I lost my hammer."

Whatever. No. We feel – no. I mean, maybe your life is like that. Mine is not. Mine is more like, "Wait, what's going on in my life right now? I'm really confused. Is this going somewhere, God? I'm confused. Am I good or am I bad? Or am I... yes. And what about that mistake and what about that mistake?"

That's what life is far more like. We watch The Avengers to escape from reality. We read East of Eden, or whatever you're into, to better understand reality. So, Paul's point is like, "Listen, these stories are messy about the human condition, about how screwed up you are and I am and we all are," and that's why you and I relate to it. The stories are for you and me as followers of Jesus. And there is a moral point here and there, and there's a lot of warnings. Most of the examples in the Bible are negative examples. A lot of warnings of, "Hey, watch out for idolatry. Watch out for this. Watch out for money, sex, power. Watch out for family dysfunction."

Whatever the thing is. "Hey, watch out. There's a warning here to help you and I navigate life as we follow Jesus."

Now, all that to say, let's circle back to 2 Samuel 2 and let's read the story again with fresh eyes. So, one more time, turn back there to the left to 2 Samuel. Just a couple of more things to remember. This part here is all review from our series back in January. Remember, one, that the Bible is a story. Okay? It's not timeless truth or an encyclopedia or whatever. It is a story. Upwards of half of the Bible, statistically, is narrative. And, as I said, it's brutally honest. That's one of the reasons that I trust it. There are no skeletons hiding in the closet of the Bible. Everything is out in the open for you and I to look up and blog about. But, because the Bible is so honest about the human condition, listen, it's easy to manipulate.

The Bible has been used to justify all sorts of heinous evils – slavery, polygamy, war, the Crusades – because all of that stuff and more is "in the Bible." We have to remember the Bible is a story, and it tells it like it is, not necessarily like it should be. Does that make sense? Most of the time what you're reading is just the author saying, "This is how it is." It's not the author saying, "This is how it should be."

"Oh, he had wife number seven."

That's not like, "Go for it. Have fun."

Like, the point – in fact, if you keep reading the story, whatever the example is, slavery, polygamy, violence, most of the time, if the narrative is anything, the narrative is an indictment against that evil. Does that make sense? So, it's a story. You have to read it like a story.

Secondly, it's one story. The Bible is a library – we said that – of all sorts of writings. But, when you put it all together, we really believe that it tells one long, drawn out, complex but coherent story. I love this quote from Tim Keller:

"The reason for our confusion is that we usually read the Bible as a series of disconnected stories, each with a moral for how we should live our lives. It is not. Rather, it comprises a single story telling us how the human race got into its present condition and how God, through Jesus Christ, has come and will come to put things right. That's what the story is about."

And then, finally, one more thing: just remember where we're at in the story. So, we just finished a six-part series on the story of God that we broke down into six chapters. Do you remember that? Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus, the Church, New Creation. So, when you step into something like this, 2 Samuel 2, where are we at in that story? Chapter 3. Israel. So, what's going on right now in the kind of overarching story of the Bible? What's going on is God is calling out a people to set up His Kingdom on earth. Okay? That's what's going on. To save the world that's gone awry. With all of that in mind, let's reread at least bits and pieces of it one more time.

So, 2 Samuel 2:8: **"Abner son of Ner, the commander of Saul's army, had taken [this**

dude] and brought him over to Mahanaim. He made him king over Gilead, Ashuri and Jezreel, and also over Ephraim..."

So now, basically, a kingdom of 12 tribes is already divided. Like, that's not... the kingdom is not off to a good start. Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, he's king up in the north over ten tribes. David is king down in the south over two tribes. And then there's two generals in twelve.

Abner son of Ner, he's over Ish-Bosheth's army up in the north and then Joab son of Zeruiah, he's over David's army down in the south. So, the two meet up. You have that whole crazy story. "Let's have some of the young men fight and fight hand to hand in front of us."

"Alright, let's do it." Joab said.

They stood up, they were counted – twelve from Benjamin and twelve for David. Each man grabbed his opponent by the head, thrust his dagger into his opponent's side. They fell down together.

So, notice here how cheap life is? This is a primitive story. I don't mean that in a derogatory way. This happened a really long time ago. But, in it, violence is almost like a sport. You know? It's like you have Portland Timbers and then you have the pool thing where 12 people stab each other in the belly. That's how cheap life is in this day and age. And then, of course, you have the whole thing about the three brothers, Joab and Abishai and Asahel and the chase and all of that. The younger brother goes after Abner, he dies, which then starts a blood feud between Abner's family and Joab's family that runs all the way through to 2 Samuel, if you've read it over the last week.

Joab later kills Abner in revenge and then Joab is killed by this dude Benaiah. It's like the violence goes on and on and on. And that key line is right there in 26.

"Abner called out to Joab, 'Must the sword devour forever?'"

These are like the literary moments where you stop and you think.

"Don't you realize that this will end in bitterness?"

Which is exactly what does happen.

"How long before you order your men to stop pursuing their fellow Israelites?"

This is about the Kingdom of God. This is about the family of God who, here, are killing each other. So, what is this story about? What's the point of all of this? Well, what if it's about our collective ache for the Kingdom of God? For reality where God is King, where His will is done on earth as it is in heaven, where what He wants to see happen actually does happen? But what if it's also about the problem with that? The deep crack in the human condition that you and I call "sin," our bent away from what is right and towards what is evil? What if it's about the ways that we deal with sin in our life and our community and our world in our effort to usher in the Kingdom of God?

One way is through violence, in particular at that time and age. Through coercive force. We see this in Joab and his brothers. What if the point of all of the violence here is that violence just begets more violence? Sociologists call this the "myth of redemptive violence." It's very popular, even in the world today. The myth that more violence will create less violence. That is rarely true. I mean, case study from recent history: what created ISIS? The Iraqi War. What created the Iraqi War? The Gulf War before that. What created the Gulf War? Well, depending on who you read, World War I. And what created World War I? Well, on and on and on we go.

You punch me; I stab you. You stab me; I shoot you. You shoot me; I bomb you. You bomb me; I nuke you. And violence spirals out of control. So, that's not the way. Violence is not the way. The other way is through avoidance. We just kind of close our eyes, believe in human nature and hope for the best. We see this in David. Where is David in this story? Where is he? He's not there, right? He's not there. You quickly realize – and David's the King. This is his kingdom. You quickly realize in the story that David, this poet warrior with the courage to literally run after Goliath as a teenage boy, after a giant, that same guy has a long-

running character flaw: avoidance.

He just doesn't know how to deal with problems. In particular, in relationships. He is passive aggressive at times and then just passive at other times. And in the end, this avoidance, this character flaw, it wreaks havoc in his marriage (or marriages), in his family and then, out of that, in his nation. If you read the whole story in 2 Samuel about how he has all sorts of kids, he's a polygamist. One of his sons rapes his half-sister, but David doesn't deal with it. So, her brother, Absalom, kills off the rapist brother, but David doesn't deal with it. Then Absalom is so angry that he leads a coup over David, but David doesn't deal with it.

And, even to the end, and then Absalom ends up dead, on David's deathbed, the last thing he's dealing with is political machinations between Solomon and this other son and this wife and that wife. It is just all coming back to haunt David. So, what if this is a story about how the two human ways of dealing with evil, violence or avoidance, or, in the language of psychology, fight or flight, that neither are the way forward.

The Kingdom of God will not come about through violence, but neither will it come about through avoidance. Somebody has to do something. So, what if this is a story about the Kingdom of God, about how Israel was the people that were supposed to save the world? But, here's the problem: Israel's a wreck. Israel needs to be saved. Israel needs a savior. Israel needs a brand new kind of a king. David's great, but he's not it. Solomon's okay, but he's not it. And then it just gets worse. We need a new kind of king to usher in a new kind of kingdom. Not through violence and not through avoidance or kind of fuzzy belief in human nature, but we need someone to do something about the world and to overcome evil with good.

What if that's what this story is about? And then what if you and I were to read it millennia later, tomorrow morning in our little apartment with our cup of Chemex coffee or whatever? What if we were to read the story and we were to look for parallels between Israel's story and our story? Between their life and my life or your life? What if we were to ask, "What are the warnings here?" The warnings against the ways that we use violence as a society and then as men and women? Coercive force to manipulate, bully people, push people around to get what we want, even good stuff that we want? Or avoidance. The way that we just don't really deal with problems in our life.

Isn't it so crazy how often we have the courage to run after the Goliath of whatever it is for you, but in the end it's the normal, ordinary, Monday through Friday stuff that we excuse and we explain away and we justify and we ignore and we procrastinate and that's the stuff that comes back to kill us in the end? So, what if this is a stirring for you and I to take a long, hard look at our life? What is there that God is calling you or me to deal with before it gets out of hand and spirals out of control?

Then, finally, in the language of Paul, is there any encouragement here? Remember that line that we read in Romans about how with the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide, we might have hope? Is there any of that in a violent, tribal, primitive story like this? Encouragement and hope? Is any of that in here? Absolutely. What is it? Well, at the top of the list, it's that through all of the mess, through all of the violence, through all of the lies and the deceit and the blood feud and the revenge, through all of it, God is there. God is involved with this really hyper-dysfunctional family and He's at work. He's at work to usher in the Kingdom of God. Good overcomes evil.

You see that in the end of the story. If you look down at verse 30, Joab stopped pursuing Abner. Verse 31, David's men had killed all these Benjamites. They took Asahel, buried him in his father's tomb in Bethlehem. Then Joab and his men marched all night and arrived at Hebron by daybreak.

So the south, kind of Judah, comes out on top.

2 Samuel 3:1: "The war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time. David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker."

What's that about? Remember earlier in the story? Did you read Genesis 49 of how God made a promise that a king, a ruler, would come from the line of Judah or the tribe of Judah who would rule over all Israel who would unify Israel together as the Kingdom of God. So, here is God – and this is what's just so scandalous and disturbing and beautiful about the Old Testament. God is actually working through screwed up people, violent stuff that God is actually against, God is actually in it, involved and working through it to bring good out of evil, because that's what God is like.

One of the greatest takeaways from reading the Bible is that God is involved in the mess that we make of our life and that, through everything, He is faithful to overcome evil with good. Here's my one-sentence summary of the entire Old Testament:

It's about Israel's failure and God's faithfulness.

That's it. That's the Old Testament, in my opinion. So, to end, what does all of this mean for you and me tomorrow morning when we wake up? Well, the most obvious, super easy, wrap your head around it, is just a fresh new call for you to read your Bible every single day. We're reading through the Bible together as a community. If you're new, just jump in. Start in 1 Kings tomorrow. If you fell off the bandwagon in Leviticus, nobody here blames you at all. Nobody here blames you. Just get back in. Catch up if you can. But, if you're a ways behind, just jump in and catch up on vacation or whatever. Just start tomorrow, wake up, make your coffee or whatever your routine is, open the Scriptures, take a deep breath, invite the Holy Spirit and start to read and to talk to God and listen to God and use it as a jumping-off point for intimacy with Jesus.

But then, at a deeper level, there's so much hope in a story like this. I'm not sure what your life is like, but my life usually feels far more literary than commercial. I don't usually feel like Thor, at least not most of the time. Often I'm confused. "Where exactly is my story going?"

In particular, lately in my life I'm just confused about a number of things. I have character flaws. I don't feel like the hero of my story. More often I feel like, "Ah. What is wrong with me?" I make mistakes on a regular basis. I'm still dealing with mistakes that I made years ago. My guess is I'm not alone. But, what I see in this story is that when messed up people like me and like you come before God and repent and open up and turn in humility and say, "God, you're God and I'm not," that God is right there, right in the middle of all the stupid stuff we say and do and think and believe. Right in the middle of all of our flaws and all of our failure, every mistake we've ever made or are making right now and will make, past, present and future. That God is faithful. He's there to lead you, to guide you. Another step forward to become who God made you to be and to live the life that God is calling you into and to usher in the Kingdom of God. That's what God is like. Let's stand and pray.