

Sermon Transcript from February 14th, 2016
Act 3: Promise and Purpose
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Well, as we'll see in this five-part series, the overarching story of the entire Bible is that God loves His people and He wants to be with them. As Dave's talked about, N.T. Wright talks about, this is creation, sin, Israel, Christ and Church. And today, we're going to be in an Israel piece and we're going to be talking really by way of overview of how and why God uses Israel in the way He uses them. We're going to be dealing a lot with this concept of "covenant." That God's covenant that He makes with Abraham and with Israel and with King David and how God uses those covenants to shape them and form them and draw them to Himself.

Again, the theme for all this is that God desires to live with His people and God worked through all these covenants to draw His people to Him. In a very real sense, everything I'm telling you about today with Israel, everything that God is doing through these covenants, is why all of us are sitting in this room today. God worked through these covenants to preserve His Word to preserve His words of hope and the Gospel ultimately, and the fruit of it is all the believers throughout history, the fruit of it is all of us sitting in this room here today. We are created in this covenantal relationship with God.

Michael Horton, a theologian, says it this way:

"We were not just created and then given a covenant. We were created as covenant creatures—partners not in deity, not be sure, but in the drama that was about to unfold in history. As covenant creatures by nature, every person has a relationship with God."

So, as image-bearers of God, as those who are created in covenant, those created connected to God, we were all created to need God. At the core of every single human being, no matter what you believe or no matter what anyone believes, it doesn't change the fact that every human being was created to live with God and created to live for God. We were created to need Him.

So, we're going to look today at how and why God uses Israel in the way He uses them. We're going to ask why God is doing it this way. It seems so messy, it seems so complicated. If you're doing the Bible reading and you've been in the book of Leviticus, it seems really kind of messy and complicated. Why is God doing it this way? And we're going to see how God uses Israel and we're going to see how He invests in these human beings just like us to show them their need for Him. And we're hopefully going to understand this peace of how God's using Israel more as we go through today.

The main idea that I'm going to get out today is, first, that Israel needed God but, by extension, we need God. The theme of everything we look at in Scripture drives us back to the fact that we need God. We are created to need God. Everything about us needs God. So, first, we're going to look at Abraham and the forming of the nation of Israel. Second, we're going to look at Israel going through slavery and the wilderness and, finally, into the promised land. Third, we're going to see that Israel is in a world of hurt and we're going to talk about what was Israel's way forward? How did they make their way to newness? What was this promise God was giving them?

So, first here, Abraham and the forming of a nation. Let me just say on the side, I'm going to give you a lot of information today so we can understand more about who Israel was and why they were doing what they were doing and why God was working through them. But, my goal today is not to just give you doctrine or data. My goal today is that that data, that doctrine, that understanding of who God is and how immense He is and how amazing His work was, would drop down to our heart level and help us to love Him and to respond to Him.

So, if you get nothing else out of today, walk out of here today knowing that you need God and that God made you to live for Him. Alright, so start here with Abraham. In Abraham, we're moving from this kind of primeval history to the time of the patriarchs. You can see in Genesis 1-11 that there's this downward spiral. As Kent Hughes says, Genesis 5 stressed that death prevailed in the human race, whereas Genesis 11 stresses a movement away from death towards the promise, and it stresses life and expansion.

So, we see in Scripture, God is using genealogies, but He's using genealogies in a very different way than we use them. I use a genealogy – I've done some research on my

family – to chronologically track my origins. Most often, when we see a genealogy in Scripture, God is using it in a beautiful literary way to point us to something that He's doing with humans, something He's doing with our history. So, even in the genealogy of Abraham, you have the first five that come before him and it's just death and there's this emphasis on the fact that there really is no future.

Then it begins to shift in Genesis 11 and you see in this genealogy that it begins to speak about them having descendants and these descendants doing something. So, there's this subtle shift away from "no future, no hope and death," to "oh, there's a future and there's a hope." So, you start to kind of think, "Oh, well God's doing something different here."

That difference of what God's doing culminates in the person of Abraham. You see in the first chapters there that the nations were scattered as a response to the rebellion at Babel. God scatters them everywhere. And the question we're going to ask next is, "What does God do about this scattering?"

Well, we see this amazing thing that God does. He decides to choose one nation. Really to choose one family, beginning with one man. This is the first time in Scripture that we see the language of God choosing or electing a people or an individual. And we see in this story that God chooses the family of Abram. But He doesn't just choose the family of Abram so He can bless them. He chooses the family of Abram so He can work in them and then work through them. God makes it clear from the very very beginning that He's going to choose Abram and that He still has His heart set on drawing all of humanity to Himself, on drawing all families and all nations to himself. But, He's going to use Abram in a unique and wonderful way to be the instrument of drawing all those peoples.

So, Abraham was chosen to be bless, but then to be a blessing to the nation. He was chosen to have this unique relationship with God, but then so he could spread that relationship with God to the nations. God commits Himself to this one family. He calls the people of that family to a high level of trust and obedience. And here's the tension we see in Scripture: we are simultaneously seeing that all this action depends on God, God's under it, God's around it, God's the foundation, God's empowering it, and yet He's calling His people to faith. He's calling them to obedience. The way they're living matters.

So, we see early on in Abram's story that God's not looking down and saying, "Okay, here's all these different nations. Which one of these nations would have the highest probability of being a successful nation?"

Right? Let's pick a big family. Let's pick an influential family. Let's pick a family that's got lots of money. That's not what God does. God looks down and picks the most obscure of nations – and we'll see that in a minute. He picks an old couple with no kids, with no real wealth. They're moon worshippers. I mean, He is picking people that are far off from Him and He's choosing them and He's going to draw them to Him. And Abram, from the very beginning, responds to God.

It's incredible. I mean, we read it and it's so familiar to us that we read through it. But, you look at his genealogy and they're all worshipping the moon, they're named things around the cult of moon worship, and yet Abram meets this God for the first time and God says, "I'm calling you to lead the land of your forefathers and go someplace new." And Abram says, "Yes."

That's kind of nuts. So, we see that something new is happening. We see a human being that's responding in a positive way and obeying God and then we know there's this anticipation that God's going to do something wonderful.

So, in Genesis 3-11, you have this fivefold curse. You have the serpent's cursed, Adam's cursed, Cain's cursed, Lamech's cursed, Canaan's cursed. And then Abram, in chapter 12, you have a remarkable turnaround from all those curses to a fivefold blessing. God tells Abram that He's going to make him a great nation, that He's going to make his name great, that he will be a blessing, that He will bless those that bless Him and that He will curse those that curse Him. And lastly, He tells them that all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through what God is going to do in Abram.

God is doing something amazing. But, you can understand, right? So, Abram responds in faith and he's following God, but God's telling him that He's going to make him into a great nation. But, if you're an old man and your wife's pretty old and you've never been able to have kids in your entire life and you know you don't have much going for you and God's telling you He's going to do great and wonderful and amazing things, Abram believed

and he knew God would do it, but you can understand him doubting.

And God, in the midst of Abram kind of doubting and saying, "God, how are we going to do this? How is this going to work? You know what you're getting here. You know my wife can't have kids. You know I'm not bringing much to the table. How are you going to do this?"

And God takes Abram out – imagine this kind of scene – and He tells him, "Look at the stars of the sky. Your descendants are going to be as numerous as that and I am going to bless all nations through you."

And then God does something that is my favorite chapter in the entire Bible. Genesis 15. He shows Abram a sign of what He's going to do in his midst. You see, in the ancient world, there were these covenants that they would cut and there would be the suzerain, the greater king, and there'd be the vassal, the lesser king. And the suzerain and the vassal would enter into an agreement where there would be kind of this mutual commitment to each other. So, this was a structure that Abram would've understood.

Mike Horton says this about these structures. He says:

"What is often present in these ancient treaties and missing in modern notions is the fact that these were not merely legal contracts, but involved the deepest affections. The great king was the Father adopting the captives He had liberated from oppression. Consequently, He was not simply to be obeyed externally, but loved. Not only to be feared, but revered. Not only known as the legal Lord of the realm, but acknowledged openly as the rightful sovereign."

So, God begins to show Abram what He's going to do and He says, "Bring these animals. Bring these animals and do these sacrifices."

And, again, I want you to kind of imagine this scene. If you're squeamish and blood bothers you, don't imagine this scene too vividly. He brings these animals – and, again, this is a structure that would've been familiar to the culture and familiar to Abraham and he would've seen this. And he cuts these animals in two. Basically, there's a pile of bloody flesh on this side and a pile of bloody flesh on this side and there's a blood-stained path in between them. And, in an ancient world, what would've happened is the suzerain, the greater king, would've walked through, the lesser king would've walked through behind him, and that would've been their way of sealing the deal. That's where we get the modern terminology of "cutting a deal" from.

They literally would cut this deal and what they're saying in walking through here is, "May this happen to us if we break this covenant."

It was called a maledictory oath. They're saying, "May I be cut in two, may I be no more, if I break this covenant."

But here's what God does that's so amazing: God puts Abram in this kind of dream or vision-like state, much like what He had done with Adam, right? And God has Abram not walk through the path with Him, but God has Abram just witness it. God, in the picture of this smoldering pot and torch, God walks through alone. It's what theologians call a self-maledictory oath. What God is saying, in some mysterious and wonderful way, is that He is going to see to it that both ends of this deal are fulfilled.

Would've been amazing to think about, right? Abraham's sitting there thinking, "Okay, there's a greater thing and a lesser king. I know how this goes. But, I'm not walking through and somehow God's going to do it on His own. He's going to work through me, but He's going to do it."

If you were Abraham, or Abram at that point in time, and you were doubting and you were wondering, "Could God fulfill this? Could He do it? Can He really work through me?" What an incredible blessing that God gives to him.

R.C. Sproul describes it this way. This is what he kind of imagines the words of God to be:

"Abraham, I'm putting my very deity on the line here. I'm swearing to you by my holy nature. If I don't keep this word, I will no longer be God. God made a covenant with Abraham. He made a promise and He backs up that promise, which is not just to Abraham, to all of God's people. He makes a promise that He seals with an oath based upon His own very

nature. There is no conceivably higher guarantee than that."

So, we'll see in the rest of Israel's story, whenever they're in deep trouble, whenever things are going bad, there is always an appeal back to promise. All the way forward in Galatians 3, there's an appeal back to "God said He would do it."

And He does it. And there's a deepening trust in who He is and what He's done. And God, to make it overwhelmingly clear to Abraham what He's going to do, says this to him in Genesis 17:1, **"When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God almighty; walk before me and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly.'**

"Then Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, 'Behold, my covenant is with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram; but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.'"

God blessed him and He changed his name. He is making it so clear in the story at this point in time that His purposes will be accomplished. And Romans 4 drives it home when the Apostle Paul is teaching us further on this passage.

It says, **"Abraham grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. This is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness. But, the words it was counted to him were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him, who raise from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."**

And again, let me remind you: Abraham struggled. He found his way forward of faith, God worked through the covenant to bring his heart and to knit him close together, but Abraham struggled. This is a guy that sold his wife twice into slavery or to another man, right? If you're struggling as a husband, you're not doing that bad. But, God's going to work through him. Happy Valentines Day. But, we're still a little uneasy in the story at this point in time, right? How's God really going to do it? I know He's going to do it, but how?

Well, God's marching us forward towards Israel. So, Abraham has kids. He has Isaac. Isaac has a kid, Jacob. Isaac and Jacob, like Abraham before them, try to manipulate and control their situation. This is what's amazing to me. You're reading along in the story and you're thinking, "Okay, well maybe this is going to go okay," and then you get to Jacob and Jacob's a schemer. Jacob's always trying to control and manipulate and make things go his way and, amazingly enough, Isaac, like his father, not only sold his wife to somebody else, but he sold her to Abimelech. The exact same guy that his father had sold his own mother to.

Like, you're reading this story going, "Goodnight, God. How are we going to do this?"

But, in the midst of the struggle, no matter how much they're faltering in faith, there's this inner drive in them to want to obey and to want to serve God. And God works through that inner drive and shows them how He's going to bring them forward to faith. So, as I'm looking at this and studying this week I'm thinking, "You see this desire in this heart of Jacob to manipulate and control and he doesn't want to let go to God. So, the more he controls, the more he destroys."

But then the story turns and he begins to trust in God and to follow God and God begins to transform him. And it was the same thing that happened with his father and it was the same thing that happened with his grandfather and it was the same thing that happened, really, in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. Right? And it's the same thing that's happening in my heart and it's the same thing that's happening in your heart.

There's a daily struggle in our hearts where we are convinced that if we could just control all the variables of our life, we can make everything come to pass in a way that would serve us the best. It's a lie. It's a lie that goes all the way back to Genesis, right? All the way back to the very beginning. What we see is that as we believe God and as we turn our lives over to Him and as we trust Him deeply, as we struggle to trust and obey, it comes back to our relationship with God and we're assured that God is good. We need to believe that, right? Because, if God's not good and God's not real, when real life comes our way, we cannot possibly get through it.

Let me just share with you a little bit about my life over the last year. About a year ago, to a week or so, my older cousin that I was raised with and loved dearly had a heart attack in the shower and slipped into a coma. So, the beginning of all kinds of struggle and turmoil. He had a whole life of addiction and all kinds of struggles there. But, the family's kind of dealing with that and then about six or about seven months later, his father, who kind of had lost the will to live a bit when he went into a coma – you can imagine if your youngest son's in a coma what that would do to you. And he had some health struggles anyway. He unexpectedly drops dead in September. My mom's sister's husband.

Then, come towards the end of the year, my mom's little brother, living up in the foothills of Mount Lassen, has a seizure. Praise God he's with some friends. He gets life-flighted up to Redding and has a golf ball sized tumor removed from his head. And they haven't found the source of the cancer yet. Two days later, my dad's sister's husband, life-long track coach, hall of fame track coach, in better shape than I'll ever be in my life, has a stroke. Up and down for about two weeks and he's at home on hospice about to pass away.

His brother-in-law on the other side of the family came to visit him on Thursday of this last week just to say his goodbyes. On his way home, he has a massive heart attack and dies. Then there's a dear old woman in our congregation. This woman's name is Flossy. She had struggled with her faith for the longest time. She was raised as a Jehovah's Witness. She comes down with cancer about six months ago, loses the ability to talk for the last two months of her life.

But, what's amazing is, in talking to Flossy, in talking to my family and in dealing with all of this stuff, if I don't believe that God is good – it doesn't mean I have to understand how everything's working out. I don't understand why so many of my family members are struggling and dying, right? But, if I don't believe He's good and if I don't believe that I was created to live in a relationship with Him and that I need Him, I can't live. I can't deal with anything in life.

And you may be going through a time in life where you're facing something huge that seems insurmountable or maybe life's going pretty well for you. But, the reality is that life is going to come with struggles. So, us getting into this story of God isn't just about theology and date. It's about being thoroughly convinced that through thick and thin and no matter what, whether you're selling your wife into slavery, whether you're rejecting God, that if there's this faith that's in us that pursues God, God will never give up on us. That we desperately need God more than anything else and that God will always be working His purposes and assuring us of His love for us.

So, I can tell you it's been a rough year, but it's been a year that has put me face to face more than ever before with God's goodness. I believe that He's good. I believe that He's working in my family in wonderful and powerful ways. I believe that my relatives that passed away, all but maybe one of them, I think had genuine faith. God is going to work through our ups and our downs, and digging into this story reassures us of that fact. This isn't just about church on Sunday. It's about our life every single day of the week.

So, there's the foundation of our patriarchs. Next, we're going to move forward through Jacob. Jacob has 12 kids, the 12 tribes of Israel. The 12 tribes of Israel, point number two here, find themselves in slavery and the wilderness and then, ultimately, into the promised land. So we're going to again do a flyby here.

Jacob's 12 sons were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph and Benjamin. Again, these are the 12 tribes of Israel. But, if we're looking down and we're thinking, "Okay, well, God's finally got His aces, right? Their fathers and their grandfathers were a little bit of a tough ride, but these guys are finally going to get it done."

Not the case, right? These guys get jealous of their younger brother Joseph and what do they do? They sell him into slavery and basically give him up for dead. At every turn, they are struggling, like their fathers before them, to come forward and to trust God and to obey God. They want to control everything. So, in their minds, Joseph is an obstacle to their father's favor. Joseph is an obstacle to their own inheritance. So, what has to happen to Joseph? He's got to go away. At every turn they're doing that, but God, like with their forefathers, is drawing them back in and using all these things to teach them to turn to Him.

They end up enslaved back to the nations, but they're not in Babel this time as humanity. They're in Egypt, and Egypt's worse. There's dehumanization, there's slavery, there's abusers, there's oppressors. And, for hundreds of years, they are enslaved in Israel. But,

God's not done with them. God's going to continue to work and God's going to bring them forward out of slavery. So, all these different, amazing things where all seemed lost and all seemed hopeless, but God moved. These movements of God that are a part of this story are becoming part of the identity of the people of Israel.

How is God going to redeem the nations? He is going to use this group of people. This group of people that seem like the most unlikely of folks. But, this is what I love. If I thought, if you thought, that God's purpose is being accomplished on this earth dependent upon our performance or how good we did, how hopeful would that be? There's no Gospel in that. But, if I told you that God is always with you and His Spirit's always working through you and no matter where you go God goes with you and no matter what happens in your life, God will ultimately accomplish His purposes, that's Gospel. That's good news. And that's what God's doing here.

Deuteronomy 7, God tells the people of Israel this: **"For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you are more in number than any other people that the Lord set His love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But, it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that He swore to your fathers that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations."**

They are loved. They are chosen. God is going to work through them, He's going to work in them and He's going to accomplish His purposes. They need God. God wants them. He's going to be their God and they're going to be His people. But, again, we see their story, like their forefathers before them, they rebel in the wilderness. They don't have food and they're complaining to God and God miraculously provides manna and quail from heaven. But then they get tired of manna and quail and say, "God, can you put something else on the menu?"

Can you imagine that? You've gone through the Red Sea. You've seen God part the Red Sea. You were up against the sea and the Egyptian army was coming down upon you and it's hopeless and you're like, "God, you've finally failed us. This can't go anywhere."

And boom! The Red Sea parts and you walk through. And in the evenings you're being guided by a column of fire and in the day you're being guided by a column of cloud and God's presence is with you because God wants to be in the midst of His people. So, you're out wandering in the wilderness and He's supernaturally providing you food. When they need water, He made water come out of a rock. I mean, God is with them demonstrating His love and His care. But they, in their humanity, are always struggling.

They want to be in control. They want to control the variables. They don't want to need God. I'd like knowing that I can turn to God, you like knowing that you can turn to God. But do you like to need God? Do you like to wake up every morning and say, "God, I can't get through this day without you?"

No. If we're honest, we don't like that. I'm like, "God, let me see how the day goes and, if I need You, I'll call You in."

That's how we live, if we're honest. But God wants us to wake up everyday and that's why we have these stories. That's why we have this history saying, "I need you today, God. I can't get through today without You. But, it's not just about me. I know that You want to use me and use my community and use all the believers and use the Church to accomplish your purposes. So, if I don't throw myself on You and proclaim my need of You, not only will You not work in me, but You're not going to work through me."

But we know that God will. So, despite their rebellion, despite all they're doing, the whole long story of Israel is kind of a case study of the human condition. We know that humanity in general is screwed up. We saw that in Genesis 1-11. But here, God's going to take a people and He's going to draw them closer into Him and He's going to reveal more about Himself to them and He's going to give them His laws and He's going to show them what it looks like to love and to trust and obey.

It's kind of this grand experiment. How does this experiment go? Does it work? Kind of. But not in the way you would've thought. It's not a people that goes, "Yes. We get it and we're going to go forward," it's a people that continues to struggle. A people like us.

This is one of my other favorite scenes in Scripture. Moses is up on Mount Sinai and he's getting the laws and he's going to establish this nation. And these people that were not a people, we read in the book of Numbers, suddenly there's 605,000 people that are ready for combat, minus the Levites, right? So, there's now towards a million people in this nation going from this ragtag bunch of people called out of this random land to a million people. This is a nation. God's finally doing it.

They're down and they're at the base of Mount Sinai and they're going to get their royal charge from God and they're going to go into the Promised Land and everything's looking great and wonderful, right? No. What happens while Moses is up on that mountain? Before he can even get down with these tablets, they've pretty much broken every single thing on those tablets and more. Right? Far from being there and devoting themselves to the one true God, they're down there and Aaron has crafter a golden calf. Aaron, Moses' brother, right? Can you imagine Moses coming down going, "Seriously, Aaron? What? I wasn't gone that long."

But, here's what you see that's amazing in this story. Moses is coming down and sees this incredible scene and sees people that are worthy of being separated from God forever. Sees people that have earned God just swallowing them up on the earth. And, if Moses' hope is that Israel, on their own, will be able to reform themselves and change themselves, what does he say to God?

He says to God something like, "Give them a second chance. I haven't even given them the law yet. Let me go down there. We'll get some study groups going. We'll show how this kind of stuff works. Let me set some goals and do a quarterly review and see how we're doing."

He doesn't do that though. What does he say? He says, "God, remember Your promise to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob? Remember that self-maledictory oath? Remember, God? You ratified that deal. Remember? You were the one that's going to work through us no matter what. And I promise we will repent and we'll turn back to You. But, God, do not forget Your promise."

Every single time, whether it's Moses or King David or any Israelite or a prophet or whatever, when they're in the midst of it and they're in the thick of it and they're up to their necks and they're about to drown, they don't say, "God, give me another chance," they say, "God, remember Your promise. I know that You're good and I know that You're going to accomplish Your purposes."

Their hope is always in promise. There's nothing Moses could've done to make up for it. His only hope is in promise and our only hope is in turning to Him. Christopher Wright says it this way:

"No sacrifice that Moses could offer could possibly have been adequate or appropriate. The only hope lay in a broken and contrite heart and in the character and promises of God. Our only hope in humanity still, Israel's only hope then, our only hope now, is to recognize that God is accomplishing His purposes through His promise and that we get to participate in that and the primary way we participate is coming to Him with a broken and contrite heart and saying, "God, I need You. Please forgive me. I believe. Help my unbelief. Show me how You're going to work."

That is the character of God we see from beginning to end. Even the laws that they give and you read all those laws in Leviticus, you read Moses' laws. All those laws were designed to draw them back to promise. The Apostle Paul says in Galatians 3, something that comes 430 years later, all these laws, does not annul the promise that was ratified by God Himself. We're always a people of promise. Then and now. We are always dependent upon that.

Now, I have the joy of having three sons. They're about 14, 9 and 6. I say about because two of them are about to have birthdays. My youngest son, in every good and bad way, is the one most like me in the midst of it. So, he's the one that kind of just comes up and pushes me in ways that are mostly funny, but sometimes just crazy.

So, my wife goes off the other night to take my oldest son to a music rehearsal and she had bought donuts for the kids a special Valentines Day treat. So, knowing my younger son, because I know myself, I said, "Don't touch those donuts. They're for after dinner and we don't want to ruin your dinner."

So, then I go sit on the couch and I'm doing some reading and my son, who turns six years old tomorrow, plops down on the couch next to me with a donut in his hand, takes

a bit out of it and smiles at me. I'm like, "What are you doing?"

He says, "Oh, Dad. I'm not eating dinner. I figured since I wasn't eating dinner I could just go ahead and go straight to the donut."

I said, "Look. You know that that's not up to you. You know I would never let you do that. I'm not just saying don't go to the donut because I'm trying to rob you of all your joy, I'm saying that because you actually need protein and you need some sustenance in your body before you go to the sweets."

So, I'm trying to explain this to him that actually I'm doing this for his good. And what's his response?

"You just don't want me to have the donut. I'm just going to throw it away."

He goes into the kitchen and he's about to ditch the donut into the trash. So, I'm out there and I'm following him into the kitchen and I'm trying to explain to him that, no, this rule is for your good, really. And I felt like – I've been immersed in Israel this whole week and I feel like I'm the prophet and I'm talking to Israel. Like, "No. I'm good. I'm trying to help you see what's best for you."

And it took a while to kind of talk through and work through. And then here's the other that goes, right? Then he says, "Sorry."

I'm like, "Well, I don't want you just to say sorry. I want you to kind of understand this and to be sorry."

He's like, "Look, I said sorry!"

And then he goes back out to the kitchen and he grabs the donut. I'm like, "What are you doing?"

He says, "Well, I said sorry. So I can just go back to the way things were, right?"

It was amazing to me. Like God had scripted this situation to show me the narrative of the Israelites. Like, I'm trying to appeal to wisdom and appeal to what's good for him and all he's trying to do is find his angle to get his own thing. And I realized, in looking at him, that that's my heart and that's all our hearts. We're looking for that angle, we're looking for that way to kind of like – we're sort of, kind of okay with doing God's thing, but we don't really want to live a life of complete trust that responds in complete obedience. We don't really want to recognize and say, "God, I need You. I can't live without You."

We want supplemental God, but we don't want core to our being kind of God. But, that's what God wants for us. God told the Israelites, "What do I need with the blood of bulls and goats? I don't. What I need is I'm trying to draw you into relationship with me."

Over and over again in the prophets, we see this theme. This beautiful phrase or this beautiful kind of practice in Hosea 2, God says, **"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt."**

You have in Hosea, you have in all these different prophets, a God that, despite Israel's rebellion, is wooing her back saying, "I love you. I will be your God and you will be my people. I am adopting you into my family and you will be my son, you will be my daughter, and I'm going to bring you back."

They fumbled and they failed, but there's so many that found faith. And they found faith when they recognized that at the core of their being they need God. They were image-bearers of God, created to live like Him. My strongest encouragement to myself and to all of us and to my church is that we don't just read this story as data that exists out there, but that we enter into this story and find ourselves in it. That we recognize that we are like Israel, who desperately needs God, but desperately wants to battle against God at the same time. We recognize that God wants to draw us into relationship and bring us back because that's what we are created for.

So, if there's a part of your life where you're struggling to really enter in and see God at work, I want to encourage you today to respond to God's Word. That oath that God swore to Abraham where He would accomplish His purposes through His people, we're

a part of that. We're in Christ. God will accomplish what He's going to accomplish. So, Israel fails over and over and over again, and yet there's a seed of faith that God's preserving in their midst. There's this drawing back continually, but what's going to be their way forward? Are they going to continue to just be in this endless loop? No. God points us towards the end of the Old Testament to the promise that He is going to provide a new way out.

Number three, we're going to look at the way forward. It's this way of new hearts or a newness of life. They sin, they fail, all looks hopeless, but the prophets teach us that God's promise is more powerful than Israel's sin. That God's promise to accomplish His purposes is more powerful than any struggle you're going through. God will accomplish His purposes through His people. Tim Keller says it this way:

"God sees us as we are, loves us as we are and accepts us as we are. But, by His grace, He does not leave us as we are."

God knows you. He knows me. He knows our brokenness, He knows our sin, He knows our temptation and He loves you and accepts you 100% on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done for you. But He doesn't just do that transaction, say you're good and leave you. No. He wants relationship. He wants to draw you into relationship with Himself. And then He wants to use you to accomplish His purposes. He wants you to be a part of His family and He wants you to get about what the family's doing. It's a great and wonderful and beautiful thing.

So, at the core of Israel's identity, we see that they are learning that they need God. They are learning that God is a God of promise and through exile and through all kinds of war and through all kinds of terrible, destructive things that are happening, God is preserving them. He is building them as a people of promise, a people founded on His covenant and His promise to Abraham, a people that, though they were wandering, they learned to depend upon Him. He was leading them and sustaining them. That though they were in exile, He was always their hope.

This is God's desire from the very beginning. He says this in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, **"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on your door posts of your houses and on your gates."**

God is telling Israel back then, "My story, the divine drama I'm unfolding in the universe today, is your story. I want you to know this story, I want you to rehearse this story with your kids, I want this story to form the very core of your identity."

God is continuing to work in the middle of everything. No matter what's happening, God's working. He is promising them that He is going to bring them forward. Moses and the prophets told them, "Israel, you have a hardness of heart and you need your heart to soften."

And Jeremiah tells us this: **"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."**

That's God's driving passion to have a family for Himself. To be with us and to have us living with Him and living for Him. And He tells the prophet Ezekiel this: **"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey all my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses."**

This is God's plan from the very beginning. This is God's plan today. And so we see this story at the end of the Old Testament hanging with Israel and they've been in this cycle of failure, but there's this breaking in on the cycle of failure to point them forward to a

newness. And that's what we're going to get at next week. I'll be doing that at Christ Church, you guys will be doing that here. And we'll see how God has always been intent on working through a people. He's always going to do it. He's not going to bypass that.

We asked the question at the very beginning, "Why did God use Israel? Why is He doing that?"

Because, what we see throughout the entirety of Scripture is that the very core nature of God is that He is going to work through community. He is going to work through humanity. Humanity will not escape its responsibility, nor will humanity escape the great privilege that God has. He is going to draw us through in all of our failure and all of our brokenness and all of our struggle, just like Israel, into Himself and into His purposes as we learn to trust and obey. As we learn to joyfully say, "God, I need you," and live for Him, God is going to accomplish His purposes.

Jesus is that human being. When God parted those bits of the animals with Abraham and they walked through, Abraham must have been thinking, "How is God going to accomplish both the divine and the human part of this covenant? That doesn't make any sense."

But Jesus told the disciples in His ministry in John 8, what did He say? "Abraham looked forward to my day. He saw me and he rejoiced."

In some kind of way, Abraham knew that Jesus Christ would be the one that would do it. He knew the Messiah would come. And that's what we get to look at next week. It's how Jesus becomes the faithful Israel where Israel was not faithful. Jesus becomes the one that would perfectly fulfill the covenant in Abraham's place. Jesus becomes the one that would perfectly fulfill the covenant where David failed. At every turn, God will accomplish His purposes in our life. God is forming a people for Himself and we get to be a part of that.

There's a story I go back to a few times, and I'll close with this. But, I go back to this story because it reminds me of what I need to know. See, it's not just enough for us to be convinced that God is sovereignly accomplishing His purposes. If I am not persuaded and you are not persuaded that God is good at the core of His being, that God is good at the core of His identity, then it doesn't matter if we think He's in charge. We have to be persuaded of His goodness.

There's an author, Scott Hahn, that wrote a story, a powerful story, about an earthquake in Armenia in 1989. It was an 8.2 earthquake. And, in four minutes, 30,000+ people in Armenia were dead. That morning, a father had dropped his son off at school. His son's name was Armand. He dropped his son off at school and, like he told his son every single day, he said, "I will not forget you. I'll be back for you. I'll always be here for you."

And then he walked away and the earthquake hit. The first thing that Armand's father thought was of his promise to his son. So, his father rushes to where the school was and, to his dismay, just sees a pile of absolute rubble and people standing around mourning and grieving. And for a moment, he's kind of taken back. He can't breathe and he's in incredible grief, you understand. And then he runs to where he knows his son's classroom is in this pile of rubble.

He begins digging with his bare hands. Taking off chunks of plaster, taking off chunks of concrete. People come by and they're just saying, "You're a fool. They're dead. Let them go."

And he says, "I promised my son and I won't give up. Why don't you help me and stop complaining?"

So, he does it for two hours. Does it for four hours. Does it for eight hours. Does it for ten hours. Does it for ten, twenty, twenty-eight hours and he's about ready to give up. But, he thinks of his son and he says, "If there's any chance my sons alive, I'm going to get to him."

The guy dug for 36 hours straight, tearing plaster and tearing concrete and throwing it all aside because of the promise he had made to his son and because of the hope that his son might still be alive. Just after the 36th hour, he's crying out, "Armand!" and he hears this muffled voice from down beneath the rubble, "Papa."

He digs his son out and saved 33 kids that day. And then he hears his son say to his friends, "See? I told you my father would come for us."

This author, Scott Hahn, says, "That's the kind of love we have from our heavenly Father. And, because we have that kind of love, we can trust Him, we can obey Him and we can live for Him."

Never doubt God's love for you no matter what's going on. And I pray that we would all, as Christians in San Francisco and all around the world, have the courage to be His people, to let Him work in us and to let Him work through us because God's going to do amazing things in our city. He already is, right? Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that You are our God and we are Your people. We thank You that You made that promise to Abraham and You fulfilled that promise through Israel and through all of history. We praise You for that and we thank You for that. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.