



Moses Lake Alliance Church

Live The Call

Discipleship Series:

The Journey of Disciple Making

Understanding the Old Testament

“Making disciples of Jesus, that make disciples of Jesus, that make disciples
of Jesus...”

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Part III: Understanding the Old Testament

1: Creation

Setting the Stage

The Bible tells a story. We tend to view the Bible as a bunch of fragmented bits of history, poetry, and moral tales, but in reality, the Bible tells a story. And it's a *true* story. It's a story that gives meaning to our existence, our daily lives, and to every other story on earth.

As you read through the Bible, pay attention to the story that is unfolding. But don't imagine that you're merely looking into the past when you read this story. This is a story that has yet to be finished. Though Revelation ties up the loose ends and tells us how the story will come to a close, we're not there yet. The story continues, and each and every one of us has a role to play. But we won't be able to play our part until we buy into the story so deeply that it shapes everything about our lives.

Ultimately, this is a story about God, the world He created, and the incredible plan of redemption that unfolds as He creates a people for His own glory. As you walk through key points in the biblical story over the weeks ahead, make sure you place yourself within this story. How do the actions, events, and truths presented in the story touch your life? How should you live now in light of this amazing story? (At CBC we have a deep desire to see our people living out their part in God's story every single day. If you aren't sure how to see this come to fruition please ask someone like one of our elders, deacons, or a fellow believer you know and trust. Find contact info at mvcbc.org.)

The passage you will consider in this session (Genesis 1–2) sets the stage for the rest of the Bible. In this section, we see the world as it should be. We see God crafting a world that is everything He desires it to be—no sin, no imperfection, everything glorifies God perfectly. Understanding this first part of the story will help us understand everything that follows.

1. Read Genesis 1–2. As you read, look for elements that will help orient you to the biblical story. Who are we introduced to in this section? What is being emphasized? What seems to be the point? After reading these two chapters,

make some notes below.

Who Is God?

The story begins with familiar words: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” With these words we are introduced to the most important character in the story. It’s interesting that although these are the first words in the entire Bible, the author doesn’t pause to tell us theologically or philosophically who God is. There are many questions that we could ask at this point: Where did God come from? What was He doing before He created? Why is He creating in the first place?

But Genesis proceeds in a different manner. The author teaches us about God by simply telling us what He did: He created. We’re going to find out so much more about God as the story unfolds, and at points we will get specific theological answers to some of the questions we may have. But it’s important to let the story drive our understanding of who God is.

2. Take a minute to reflect on what you read in Genesis 1–2. What do God’s actions in this passage reveal about who He is?

This Is God’s World

Perhaps the most obvious thing that we see in this passage is God’s absolute power and unrivaled glory. The story starts with Him alone. There is great significance to the fact that God is the only character in Genesis 1. He is the only eternal person or thing in the universe. This means that nothing else can be equated or even compared with Him.

Allow yourself to feel the weight of this for a minute. There was a time when our universe did not exist. Immediately before our world began, God existed—and that’s it! Then God began creating our world out of nothing

simply by speaking. He told land to form and it obeyed. He called light into being and it happened. Every single thing in our universe came into existence in obedience to God's command.

Try to get a feel for the absolute difference between this all- powerful God who has always existed and the creation that He called forth through the repeated refrain: "Let there be _____." There is no person, force, or thing that can compete with God or claim any importance in comparison with Him. It is this absolute distinction between God and everything else that leads the angels in heaven to cry out, "Holy! Holy! Holy!"

3. How should God's eternity and power in the creation account affect the way we view and relate to Him?

We cannot read Genesis 1–2 without realizing that this world belongs to God. If we were to begin with our own perception of the world, we might get the sense that the world belongs to us, that we are the rightful rulers of this planet. But Genesis tells a different story. God lovingly and powerfully created this world. No person or thing had any place in this world until God put it in its proper place. God alone can claim ownership of this world because He spoke it into existence.

This should lead us to great humility about our place in this world. We are not the center of the universe. God created this world and graciously placed us in the midst of it. But all ownership and authority belongs to God. As we will see, God does delegate a certain authority to us, but this is a derived authority, graciously given to us by God to be used in a specific manner. Any attempt to claim power for ourselves independent of God is like a clay pot challenging the authority of the potter who formed it. (This is an image, by the way, which Scripture uses to describe the foolishness of challenging God—see Is. 29:15–16, 45:9–10, and Rom. 9:19–24.)

4. How should God's power, authority, and ownership affect the way we view our place in this world?

In the Image of God

After creating every detail of every aspect of the universe in which we live, God looked at everything He had made and declared it good. But in the midst of this episode of creation, God paused to confer with Himself:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Gen. 1:26).

There is something absolutely unique about humanity. On the one hand, we are utterly unlike God because, just like everything else in creation, He made us. But on the other hand, *God specifically created us to be like Him*. This is impossible to wrap our minds around, but God created us like Him in some respect and then set us in the midst of this world to represent Him!

There is a lot of debate about what exactly the "image of God" is. Everyone seems to agree that being created in God's image is more than a physical resemblance—He is *Spirit*, after all (John 4:24). Ideas as to what God's image in humanity consists of are varied: our ability to reason, our ability to make moral decisions, our personalities, and our capacity for relationships are all leading views. Others suggest that the image of God relates to the dominion over the rest of creation that God gave to man (this ties Gen. 1:26–27 to Gen. 1:28).

Perhaps it is best not to attach the image of God to any one faculty or attribute of humanity. In the New Testament, we are told that Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Jesus is said to be "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). It seems that being the "image of God" is about reflecting God in some way. Jesus did this perfectly, but humanity has also been given a responsibility to show God

to the world—His handiwork, nature, and attributes are displayed in us in a way that they are not displayed in the rest of the creation. (Of course, this image has been tainted by sin, but that comes later in the story.)

In the ancient world, kings would set up an image of themselves as a visual announcement of who was in charge. It reminded the king’s own people and the surrounding nations that this land was under the king’s jurisdiction and authority. Psalm 8 says that God placed human beings in a privileged position amid the universe He created—it says we are “crowned with glory and honor” and that we have been given dominion over the works of God’s hands (v. 5). It seems that God made people to humbly and graciously mediate His rule on the earth. Human beings stand as a reminder that God is the King of this world.

So rather than trying to identify the image of God with a specific aspect of the human condition, perhaps we should simply acknowledge that God made us to reflect Him to the world. We represent to the world its rightful King and we illustrate His workmanship, attributes, and characteristics.

5. In your own words, describe why it is significant that God created us “in His image.” How should this affect the way we view ourselves and the people around us?

The Personal God of Genesis 2

Something interesting happens when we move from Genesis 1 into Genesis 2. In chapter 1, God is referred to by the title “Elohim,” which simply means “God.” It’s a lot like referring to a person based on his or her title: “Doctor, Professor, President, King,” etc. But when we get to chapter 2, the name for God changes. Now He is referred to as “Yahweh Elohim,” which combines the title “God” with a personal name: Yahweh. (For good but complicated reasons, most English translations render *Yahweh* as *the LORD* (notice it’s in all caps).)

This is significant because God tends to use His personal name, Yahweh,

when He is relating to His people in a personal way. God uses the name Yahweh when He enters into a covenant with His people. When God makes a covenant, He specifies what His relationship to His people will look like, makes them promises, and often charges them to be obedient in return. The personal name Yahweh is appropriate for this type of interaction.

Genesis 2 is a much more intimate account of the world's origins than Genesis 1. Whereas Genesis 1 gives a broad overview of how the world was made, Genesis 2 takes that account for granted and tells the story in a much more specific way. It tells the story of humanity—created in God's own image—and the privileges and responsibilities that God gave them.

We see God doing something unique with humanity. God first formed Adam out of the ground, then bent down and breathed life into his nostrils. This is a much more intimate form of creation than we saw in chapter 1, where God simply spoke the world into existence. Notice also that God spoke directly with the man in chapter 2. He told Adam about the garden—in particular, He told Adam what he could and could not eat. Right away we see that humanity was made to communicate with God. Even in his perfect state (before sin entered the world), Adam was dependent on revelation from God in order to live in the world that God made.

And then notice that God did not want the man to be alone. This is the first time that God said something was “not good.” He created a “helper fit for Adam.” It's easy to imagine God enjoying His relationship with Adam and lovingly watching Adam enjoy the perfect companion that God made for him. While it is important to see the implications for marriage inherent in this passage, we should also see that God did not want man to live in isolation. God solved Adam's loneliness by creating a wife for him, but keep in mind that Eve was not just a wife—she was another human being. In other words, God designed human beings to live in relationship with other human beings. This will have major implications when we begin discussing the concept of the church in the New Testament.

6. What can we learn about human beings and their relationship with God and each other by reading Genesis 2?

Life in the Garden

Genesis 1–2 also gives us an amazing vision of what God originally intended the world to be. After creating the earth and everything in it, God took the time to plant a garden (2:8). God placed people in the midst of this garden and gave them the specific task of “working it and keeping it” (Gen. 2:15).

We sometimes think that work is the product of the fall, a punishment for sin. When humanity sinned, God cursed the ground, and labor became frustrating and painful (Gen. 3:17–19). But God’s original intention for people was that we would be actively involved in caring for the creation. God placed Adam in the garden (keep in mind that a garden is different from a wilderness or jungle in that it is tended, planned, and ordered) and gave him the specific task of working it.

God intended for humanity to have a caring relationship with the surrounding world. God gave people dominion over the creation, placing it under their feet (Gen. 1:28 and Ps. 8:5–8), not so that they could exploit and destroy the earth, but so that they could lovingly care for it as a good creation of God meant to be protected and enjoyed.

It is also fascinating to read the account of Adam naming the animals (2:18–20). Here we get another taste of the interaction between God and humanity in a perfect world. Surely God could have named the animals on His own, but He chose to give them names by working together with Adam. At this early point in the story, it is clear that God’s rule over the earth will be exercised in conjunction with His chief creation, Adam.

We cannot miss the peace, harmony, and perfect beauty described in Genesis 1–2. It gives us a picture of the world as it was meant to be. It is a world that we all long for. But this is only the beginning of the story. As we will see in the next session (and as we all know from experience), something has gone

tragically wrong. But this peaceful picture where everything works in perfect harmony with everything else will reappear. The paradise that we lost will eventually be regained—surpassed even—when Jesus returns to set the world to rights.

7. Take some time to consider the picture of the world presented in Genesis 1–2. Why is this picture so appealing? Which aspects of life in the garden of Eden should we long to see restored in our world?

2: The Fall

You may not realize this, but you felt the result of Adam and Eve’s sin today. In fact, you can’t go five minutes without encountering the effects of the fall. Every aspect of God’s creation has been in some way tainted or distorted by sin. Everywhere we look we see pain, rebellion, brokenness, hopelessness, despair.

Even in our own hearts, we see the influence of sin. We are in a battle, and we feel it every day. No matter how badly we want to honor God, sin screams at us from all sides, begging us to rebel against God and pursue our own desires. We struggle with temptations, and we have a hard time making sense of the things we see happening around us. Every one of us has a profound sense that the world is not now as it was intended to be.

How did we get to this point? The first two chapters of Genesis describe a wonderful existence, but the next chapter takes a dark turn. Genesis 3 describes Adam and Eve’s tragic failure—their fall into sin—and the devastating impact this has had on our world.

The Story Takes a Sudden Turn

The initial chapters of Genesis paint a picture of earth as a paradise. This is the world as God intended it to be. Everything is good; there is no sin, sorrow, pain, or death. Humanity lives in perfect fellowship with God, each other, and with the creation.

But turn the page from Genesis 2 to Genesis 3 and the story takes a turn for the worse. We refer to this tragic part of the story as “the fall,” and it has affected each of us to the core of our being.

As Adam and Eve joyfully cared for God’s creation, the serpent (whom we later learn is Satan—see Rev. 12:9) entered the scene. In a seemingly innocent manner, he asked Eve a simple question: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (v. 1). God had given Adam and Eve every tree in the garden as food, and only the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was off limits. But as we might expect, this was the only tree that Satan wanted Eve to think about. He wanted her to feel that God was

depriving her of something. He told her that eating the forbidden fruit would open her eyes so that she would be like God. He promised her good things.

Of course, life in the garden of Eden was full of good things enjoyed through the grace and presence of God. But Satan began to promise goodness *apart from God*. With this simple twist, the world that God created to be “very good” changed dramatically.

1. Read Genesis 3. Based on the first three chapters of Genesis, why was it such a big deal for Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

Pay attention to a key observation from this story: Satan is subtle. He does not show up dressed in a red cape with a pitchfork saying, “I am Satan, and I am here to destroy you. Follow me.” Instead, he comes to us in ways that we would not expect and offers us things that seem good. This is what he did in the garden, and he does it to us today. He deceives people by making false promises. He takes what is evil and makes it appear beautiful. He takes truth and twists it.

It is also important to notice that Satan enters the biblical scene as part of God’s creation. This means that he is not all powerful. He is only alive because God gives him life. He is a deadly deceiver, but his power is infinitely less than God’s power. So we shouldn’t be terrified of Satan’s power, but we do need to be wary of his lies and manipulation.

In the case of Adam and Eve, Satan cleverly avoided asking them to reject God outright. Instead, he offered them the knowledge of good and evil. He gave them an opportunity to be in charge, to decide for themselves the difference between good and evil. God made people to be dependent on Him (that’s not a bad thing, by the way!), but from this moment on, every sin has involved men and women claiming the right to govern themselves. Sin is always a declaration of autonomy.

God had given Adam and Eve specific words to follow, but they failed to

view the word of God as the supreme authority. They allowed someone else's words to carry weight. They treated God's word as a lesser authority, putting their own desires above His. Whenever we disobey His commands, we are rejecting His authority and asserting our own. We basically say, "God, You may be the author of my life, but You're not the authority in my life. I choose what I do, not You. I'm in control here, not You."

2. Analyze the sin in your life in light of the rebellion of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Do you see the same tendency toward independence and rebellion in your actions? How so?

The World Became a Different Place

From this point on, the biblical story is saturated with the effects of the fall. Suddenly people find themselves separated from God, those around them, and the creation. Whereas Adam and Eve once enjoyed perfect fellowship with God, they now hid from Him in shame and were sent as exiles out of the paradise that had been their home. They once enjoyed a perfect relationship with each another, but now their relationship was filled with shame, distrust, and blame. Adam and Eve once happily cared for the creation, but now they would experience pain in childbearing, the curse upon the ground, and the promise of toil in the work they had once enjoyed.

The effects of the fall are also known as "the curse." In response to the sin of the first human beings, God cursed (1) the serpent, (2) Eve, (3) Adam, and (4) the rest of creation. The serpent was cursed to crawl around on his belly and, along with his offspring, to live in enmity against the offspring of the woman. Eve was cursed through pain in childbearing and strife with her spouse. Adam was cursed with pain and frustration in working the ground. And on Adam's account, the rest of the creation was cursed to produce thorns and thistles, or as Paul later stated it, the creation was "subjected to futility" and was placed in "bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:20–21). Of course the greatest consequence was death—spiritual death immediately, and physical death eventually.

Many Christians have heard the story of the fall so many times they have become anesthetized to just how tragic this event was. We don't know how long Adam and Eve lived in the garden, but they literally lived in Paradise. They inhabited a perfect world where everything and everyone did exactly what God designed them to do. They actually experienced a perfect human relationship! They enjoyed relationship with God—to the point that they would walk with Him through the garden! We are so far from this reality that it is entirely unimaginable.

But then they lost it. The action itself might appear harmless (how much harm can a piece of fruit cause?), but the outward act represented something far more sinister. The first sin was rebellion, idolatry, treason, and pride, all rolled into a single bite. Both Adam and Eve made a conscious choice to rebel against their Creator and live on their own terms. And we imitate their decision every time we choose our desires over God's.

3. Think back to the world of Genesis 2. Spend a few minutes imagining what our world would look like without sin, if everything had stayed the way God intended it to be. Make some notes below.

4. Now consider the ways that sin has affected our world. How is our experience of the world shaped by the fall? Be specific and describe how it affects you today.

From Cain to Babel

As we keep turning pages from Genesis 3, we see the effects of sin continuing to play themselves out. First we see Cain kill Abel. When his brother's sacrifice pleased God and his own did not, Cain acted in jealous passion and committed the first murder (Read Genesis 4 for the full story). As if this wasn't bad enough, we immediately find Lamech writing the first

poem recorded in the Bible in order to brag about being more vengeful than Cain. Clearly a trend has begun in the wrong direction.

In fact, sin and rebellion spread so quickly that before we get very far into the story, God felt the need to destroy the whole world. It's a stark reminder of the devastation that so quickly comes upon us when we live independently of God. Genesis 6 opens with a disturbing analysis: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (v. 5). The creature whom God crafted into His image to be His representative on the earth had now become so twisted that his mind and will were described as "*only evil continually.*"

Next, God punished them for their rebellion. He sent a flood that destroyed every person on the face of the earth with the exception of Noah and his family. God's purpose for the human race would start over through Noah and his descendants (Read Genesis 6-9 for the full story). You would think that the horror of the flood would cause Noah's descendants to live in obedience, but soon after the flood we find humanity joined together in rebellion against God.

This time people gathered together at Babel to build a tower to the heavens. Their purpose was to unite themselves in this great project and make a name for themselves. Once again, God looked down on humanity's declaration of autonomy and destroyed the fruit of their rebellion. This time He confused their language and scattered them across the face of the earth. As we come to the end of Genesis 11, humanity's ability to accurately represent God on earth—to live as His image bearers—is in serious question (Read Genesis 11 now).

5. Think about the current state of the world. In what ways is humanity still caught in the rebellion that led to the flood and the tower of Babel?

6. *In what ways are you involved in this rebellion?*

The Story Continues in Spite of Sin

Thankfully, the biblical story does not end with Genesis 11! We need to understand that the Bible could have stopped at Genesis 11, and God would have been completely fair and loving to end the human race right there. But in His perfect wisdom, God kept the story in motion. Now the stage was set for God's plan of redemption. God gave humanity a responsibility, but they completely failed, and now they needed someone to redeem them.

Even in these early stages of the story, we see snapshots of God's willingness to rescue and redeem. Immediately after Adam and Eve rebelled against God, we read God's promise in Genesis 3:15 that there will be enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring. God says, "He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." This imagery is a picture of a forthcoming battle between Christ and the serpent, and we are guaranteed that the serpent will be crushed. When we arrive in the New Testament, we find Paul encouraging Christians in Rome by promising that, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20).

We receive even more hope when God makes a covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:18, 9:9). A covenant is a promise from God, an agreement between God and His people that He will bless them in accordance with certain terms. As the story unfolds, we see God establishing a people through covenants. These covenants play a major role in how God relates to His people. With Noah, the covenant was about saving a people for Himself. Amid all of the people who would justly experience His judgment, God made a covenant with Noah. He called out a people by His grace and promised to preserve His creation.

The plan will continue to unfold as we continue in the biblical story, but Genesis 1–11 lays the groundwork and orients us to what is coming.

7. As you think back over Genesis 1–3 (and even the events we discussed from chapters 4–11), briefly describe how these chapters lay the groundwork for what is to come in the biblical story.

8. How should our understanding of the first chapters of the Bible affect the way we view ourselves and the world around us?

3: God's Covenant with Abraham

Though we are still at the beginning of the biblical storyline, a pattern has already developed: People sin, people face the consequences, God redeems. People sin, people face the consequences, God redeems.

As we saw in the previous session, when Adam and Eve sinned, God cursed the earth and then told Eve that her descendant would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15)—a promise that Jesus will one day destroy Satan and his works (Rom. 16:20). Only a few chapters later, we find people sinning continually, to the point that God destroyed all but eight humans by flooding the earth. But as soon as the waters subsided, God made a covenant with Noah, promising, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done” (Gen. 8:21). People sin, people face the consequences, and God redeems.

Once again, in Genesis 11, the human race gathered at Babel in defiance of God in order to “make a name for themselves.” God’s response was to confuse their speech and divide them. But just when we think that humanity has no hope, God launched a plan of redemption that was global: to create a people for Himself who would embody and spread His salvation to every group of people on the planet. After cursing and scattering humanity, God made a promise to bless all of the nations. And God set this plan in motion by calling one man living in the middle of an idol-worshipping nation away from everything he once knew. And He promised to change the course of history through this man and his offspring.

God's Promise of Redemption

God’s plan to rescue the world from sin started very quietly. God chose one man, Abraham, and said:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:1–3)

It may not sound like much, but with these words God put into motion a plan that would lead Paul to cry out in amazement about “the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God” (Rom. 11:33). This plan would eventually reach its climax in Jesus’s incarnation, death, and resurrection—events that took place at “the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4). In other words, human history was working toward this moment, the central point in God’s plan of righting what went wrong with the fall.

As soon as sin entered the world, God began to reveal His plan to reverse the effects of the fall. He would restore us and the world around us to what He originally created—and more. God made a promise to Adam and Eve, then to Noah, and here God made a covenant with Abraham. At a few key points in Abraham’s life (Gen. 12:1–9; 15:1–21; 17:1–14), God spoke with Abraham and revealed more about His plan. But the basics are clear from the beginning: God promised to make Abraham into a great nation, to make his name great, and to bless him so that he would be a blessing to “every family of the earth.”

1. Take some time to read and meditate on Genesis 12:1–9, 15:1–21, and 17:1–14. What stands out to you from reading the promises that God gave to Abraham?

2. What does God’s covenant with Abraham reveal to us about God?

3. What does God’s covenant with Abraham reveal about God’s plan of redemption?

4. Consider the biblical pattern: people sin, people suffer the consequences, God redeems. How have you seen this pattern in your own life?

The Covenant Confirmed

Land was an important part of God’s promise to Abraham. God’s initial call to Abraham involved leaving his own land and going to the land that God called him to (12:1), a land that God would promise to give to Abraham and his offspring (12:7; 15:7, 18–20). God was going to establish His people in the land of Canaan, the “promised land.” It would belong to Abraham and his descendants. In many ways, the rest of the Old Testament (and much of subsequent history) revolves around this land.

When God promised to give this land to Abraham, Abraham asked, “How am I to know that I shall possess it?” God’s answer to Abraham was to confirm His covenant by walking in between the separated halves of dead (sacrificed) animals (Gen. 15:9–17). Around the time of Abraham, covenant agreements often took this form, where the parties involved in a covenant would walk between animals that had been sacrificed. By doing this, each person was essentially saying, “If I break my word in this covenant, may I be cursed like this dead animal.”

In the case of His covenant with Abraham, God caused Abraham to fall asleep, and then He came down in the image of a smoking firepot and flaming torch and walked through the separated halves of the sacrificed animals by Himself. This gives us a picture of God’s commitment to His people. For one thing, it’s incredible to think that God would come down and make an agreement with a mere man. But it’s also amazing that God put Abraham to sleep while He walked through the animal pieces alone. He seems to have been showing that He was committed to keeping the covenant regardless of whether Abraham and His offspring were faithful to keep it or not. Theologians call this a unilateral covenant. God made this promise to bless Abraham and to use him to bless the world. This was God’s decision, and He will uphold the covenant no matter what happens.

5. In Genesis 15, God made it clear that His promises to Abraham were not dependent on Abraham. How should this affect the way we think about God's plan of redemption?

Creating a People for Himself

We might have expected God to rescue the world through some loud and dramatic event. But it all started very subtly. God began to unfold His plan with a promise. But it isn't a small promise. It's a promise with huge implications. The entire plan of redemption that unfolds in the rest of the Bible is God's fulfilling His promises to Abraham. Literally, all of world history is related to the promises that God made to Abraham. God would make a great nation out of Abraham and his wife Sarah, and through that nation He would reform creation and transform the nations.

God's covenant with Abraham signaled the introduction of what would become known as the people of Israel, the covenant people of God in the Old Testament. In Genesis 17:7–8 God began using language that gets repeated throughout the Old Testament in the phrase: "I will be your God and you will be my people." First of all, don't miss the crux of this promise. God was offering the greatest blessing He could give anyone: Himself. He promised to be their God! We often forget what an honor it is that God would offer relationship. We can get so accustomed to people begging us to follow God that we forget what a miracle it is that we are invited. In making this covenant with Abraham, God made the tremendous offer of being his God and the God of his offspring. Here God was creating a people for Himself. In a special sense, God would belong to this people, and this people would belong to Him.

When we studied creation, we noted that because we are created in the image of God, we have a responsibility to reflect God to the world around us. By the time of Abraham, humanity had generally failed in this. But through Abraham and his descendants, God was forming a people who would embody God's intention for humanity. They would live in a close relationship with God and reflect Him to the world around them. With His promise to make a

great nation for Abraham and to bless all the nations through Him, God was once again commissioning humanity to live as His representatives on earth.

6. *In your own words, explain why it is significant that God created a people for Himself. What did God want to accomplish through this “great nation” He promised to form?*

The Gospel According to Abraham

It would be difficult for us to overestimate the importance of God’s covenant with Abraham. God was defining what His relationship with fallen humanity would look like and announcing His plan to bless the world. What we see in God’s promise to Abraham is nothing short of the gospel itself. Paul said:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, *preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham*, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Gal. 3:7–9)

Paul was saying that when God spoke these simple words to Abraham, “In you shall all the nations be blessed,” He was preaching the gospel. Though Abraham may not have known exactly what this blessing for all the nations would entail, He took God at His word (at least at this moment in his life) and trusted in what God would do.

From the very beginning, God called Abraham’s descendants, the people of Israel, to be a blessing to the nations. But as we will see as we study the rest of the Old Testament, they never really rose to that task. In fact, the nations were not fully blessed through Abraham until Jesus Christ, the ultimate descendant of Abraham, arrived. Jesus identified Himself as the fulfillment of this promise to Abraham: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). With Jesus, we finally see all the nations being blessed as they are called to join the people of God.

7. Consider God's intentions to bless "all the nations" through His promise to Abraham. What implications does this have for the way we view the world today?

God told Abraham, "I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). Don't miss this principle: God's blessings are meant to be shared, not hoarded. In blessing Abraham, God was intentionally seeking to bless the world. This is much different from the way most Christians view their blessings. We tend to think that God blesses us so that we can be happy, comfortable, secure, etc. We live as though our blessings were meant for us alone. But God's blessing for Abraham shows us God's plans in blessing us. When we receive God's blessings, we should immediately look around us to see whom we can bless.

8. Think about the ways that God has blessed you. How should these blessings be used to benefit the people around you?

The Faith of Abraham

The New Testament makes a big deal out of the faith of Abraham. And rightly so. In Genesis 15, Abraham stood before God and voiced his confusion over God's promise to make him into a great nation. Abraham said to God, "You've made these promises [back in Genesis 12], but I have absolutely no offspring. I have only a servant in my household to be my heir." God responded by bringing him outside and telling him to look toward the heavens and count the stars, if he was able to number them. And then God said, "So shall your offspring be."

And what did Abraham say in response to this? Nothing. Genesis 15 doesn't record a single word from Abraham in response. It seems that he was speechless. But the Bible does tell us one important thing about Abraham's

response: Abraham believed God. God made a huge promise that seemed impossible, and Abraham simply took God at His word. He believed it would happen just as God said. And then Genesis 15 adds a very significant comment: “He believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness” (v. 6). His simple belief in God’s promise was “credited to him” as righteousness. He was declared to be in a right relationship with God because of his faith.

Romans 4 adds an incredible commentary on this statement and applies it to those of us who follow Jesus today:

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 raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (vv. 23–25)

Paul was saying that Genesis 15:6 was written down for our sake so that we would believe in the Jesus who died to pay for our sins and the God who raised Him from the dead. Abraham lived some four thousand years before Jesus came to the earth, but he was declared righteous because he believed what God said about what He would do through Abraham’s descendant, Jesus Christ. We live some two thousand years after Jesus came to the earth, but we are declared righteous when we believe what God says about what He has done through Abraham’s descendant, Jesus Christ.

Through Abraham, God set into motion His plan to redeem the world by creating a people for Himself. And ultimately He would send His Son Jesus Christ, Abraham’s descendant, to set the world to rights. We will discuss Jesus much more in future sessions, but for now, it’s important to see the plan as it develops with Abraham.

9. Read Romans 4. Why do you think the New Testament makes such a big deal about Abraham’s faith?

10. How should Abraham's faith affect the way you think about and relate to God?

11. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to increase your faith in Him. Ask Him to make you more consistently aware of His plan of redemption and the role He wants you to play in that.

4: Exodus and Redemption

As we turn the last pages of Genesis, we see God working toward the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham. God's people had grown significantly, which was perfectly in line with His promise that Abraham's descendants would be "as numerous as the stars in the sky." But as soon as we start reading in the book of Exodus, it looks like something has gone wrong. Exodus begins with a significant problem: God's people are slaves in a foreign land.

Israel's Captivity

Understand that the first two chapters of Exodus cover four hundred years. We can quickly read over descriptions of the Israelites making Pharaoh's bricks and building Pharaoh's cities, yet overlook the fact that this had been going on for a long time! These short stories summarize a huge amount of suffering. Understandably, the Israelites seem to have given up hope by this point—after all, they were forced to continue in backbreaking labor day after day, generation after generation, without any indication that it would end.

This raises an important question: Was God really keeping His promises to Abraham if his descendants were slaves in Egypt? The answer is yes. In fact, God specifically told Abraham that this would happen:

The LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions." (Gen. 15:13–14)

God's promises to Abraham were exactly on track, and as the book of Exodus opens, the scene is being set for the greatest act of redemption that the world has seen to this point. Here we find God's people in an impossible situation without any hope of relief. If God is going to keep His promises to Abraham, then He will have to accomplish something spectacular. As it turns out, God's display of power in Israel's exodus is frequently mentioned in the rest of the Bible as clear evidence of God's commitment to His people and His power to redeem.

Moses's Encounter with I AM

Adding to the agony of slavery, Pharaoh commanded that all male Hebrew babies were to be drowned in the Nile River. It is at this seemingly hopeless time that we meet Moses. By his mother's cunning and God's provision, Moses survived this slaughter. At this vulnerable moment at the beginning of his life, no one could have predicted how greatly God would use Moses.

After Moses's mother saved him by floating him down the Nile in a basket, Pharaoh's daughter discovered, raised, and educated him. Though trained in the house of Pharaoh, it seems that Moses deeply understood his connection to the nation of Israel. In fact, it was an early attempt to fight for his people by murdering an Egyptian that led Moses to flee to the wilderness.

During this period of exile, God was preparing to rescue His people from slavery:

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew. (Ex. 2:23–25)

It is important to recognize that what God was about to do here was directly related to His covenant with Abraham. Though the situation seemed entirely hopeless, God “saw” His people, and He “knew.”

Just as He did with Abraham, God chose to begin this next phase of redemptive history through one man: Moses. As Moses tended his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness, Moses had an unforgettable encounter with God—an event that changed his life and shapes our understanding of who God is.

1. Read Exodus 2:23–3:22 carefully. It records one of the rare instances when a human being had an audible conversation with Almighty God. What stands out to you about Moses’s encounter with God in this passage?

When Moses saw the burning bush, he walked closer to see what was going on. As he approached, He heard the voice of God telling him to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. As God revealed His plan to use Moses to set Israel free, Moses asked God two questions.

The first question was “Who am I?” Who am I, God, that You would send me, a stammering shepherd, to defy a powerful king and lead Your people? The second question was, “Who are You?” When people ask who sent me, what should I tell them?

Though Moses was backpedaling from what God was calling him to do, these are both excellent questions. They are the most fundamental questions we could ever ask, because everything in our lives—not only here and now, but for all of eternity—is based on a right answer to those two questions: Who am I, and who is God?

God answered Moses’s first question by pointing to Himself. Moses asked, “Who am I?” and God simply replied, “I will be with you.” God’s response at this point should be fundamental to the way we view ourselves. From the very beginning, God’s people are known as those whose God is with them. We belong to Him, and there is no way that we can define ourselves apart from God. It is His presence with us that enables us to accomplish the tasks He gives us.

In response to Moses’s second question (“Who are You?”), God said very simply, “I AM WHO I AM.” This is not a dismissive statement. It is very significant, and there’s much to be learned from this declaration. God was explaining that He cannot define Himself by pointing to anyone or anything else. The name I AM speaks of His eternity. Whereas an appropriate name to describe us would be “I became” or “I was brought into existence,” God’s name is “I AM” because He has always existed. He is who He is, and that is

who He will always be. This is a statement of absolute being, absolute power, absolute importance. God is who He is, and He never changes.

When we examined the creation account, we briefly looked at God's personal name in Genesis 2. That name is "Yahweh" (translated in most English Bibles as "the LORD," with all capital letters), a name that comes from this statement to Moses. "Yahweh" carries the significance of God's statement to Moses: I AM WHO I AM. The name "Yahweh" is actually used over six thousand times in the Old Testament—three times as often as the simple name for God, "Elohim" (which is the title for God we saw in Genesis 1). The implication of this frequent use of God's personal name is that God aims to be known in Scripture not just as a generic deity, but as a specific person with a wholly unique character and a special relationship with His people.

It's impossible to convey exactly what this encounter must have been like for Moses. He walked away from his sheep because he saw something remarkable—a bush that was burning without being consumed—but he had no idea that he was actually walking into the presence of the living God. God immediately commanded Moses to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. As soon as Moses saw what was really happening, he hid his face. God's holiness was more than he could bear. All he could do was listen and obey.

Let My People Go

God then sent Moses back to Egypt to lead His people out of slavery and into the land that He had promised to give Abraham's descendants. When Moses arrived, he gave Pharaoh a simple command from God: "Let my people go!"

Not only did Pharaoh refuse to let Israel go free, he intensified their labor to the point that the Israelites got angry at Moses for provoking Pharaoh. Even Moses himself seemed to have lost heart at this point. But God continued to carry out His plan of redemption, showing His resolve to keep His covenant with Abraham and to free His people from bondage.

2. Read Exodus 5:22–6:13. What does this passage reveal about God and His relationship to His people?

Understand that this battle is nothing short of a showdown between Yahweh, the God of Israel, and Pharaoh, the supposed son of the sun god, Ra. The Egyptians earnestly believed that their king was a god, and as such, he was responsible for maintaining order in the natural world. When God used Moses to deliver the ten plagues, He was demonstrating His absolute power over everything that Egypt's god-king claimed control over. Many of the plagues seem to have been directed against specific Egyptian deities (e.g., the plague of darkness would have been an embarrassment to Ra, the sun god), but all of them would have undermined Pharaoh's claim to deity.

Just as we saw in the accounts of creation, the flood, and the tower of Babel, we are seeing that God controls every aspect of the world He created, and He will not share His authority with anyone. He fights for His own glory and proves that He is the ultimate power and only true God.

The Passover Lamb

Though God clearly demonstrated His power over Pharaoh and all of Egypt's gods through the first nine plagues, it was the tenth plague that ultimately got Pharaoh's attention. God warned that unless Pharaoh released His people, every firstborn in the land of Egypt would be killed. Tragically, Pharaoh refused, and the consequences were devastating:

At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. (Ex. 12:29–30)

It is difficult to image such a scene. It is morbid and hard to stomach, but it teaches us an important lesson about God. Just as He is faithful to keep His

promises of blessing, God is also faithful to carry out His warnings of wrath. This is important to keep in mind in a time when so many doubt and even ridicule God's intention to punish.

Notice that God had graciously offered the Egyptians an alternative before it got to this point. Pharaoh could have submitted to God's call and his nation would have been preserved. God also provided an alternative for the Israelites. Any Israelite who put the blood of a lamb on their doorpost would be "passed over"—the angel of death would move on to the next house.

Imagine what this would have been like for the Israelites. Imagine bringing a cute lamb into your house, a lamb that you and your kids feed, care for, and play with. And then, just when your kids are getting used to this nice little lamb, you slaughter it. You take its blood, and as your children watch, you wipe it across the doorpost over your home. That's an image that sticks with a kid—and a family.

And imagine your little boy or your little girl asking, "Why did you do that, Daddy?" And your response would be: "The lamb was a substitute. Instead of someone in our family dying, the lamb died. Look at your brother, and realize that the lamb died instead of him."

The stark reality of that night is that the only people who were exempt from judgment were those who put blood on their doorposts, and in so doing, trusted that death would pass over them. It's not that the Israelites didn't experience God's judgment because they were better people. They escaped God's judgment simply because they trusted in the sacrifice provided by God. And everyone—even slaves—who trusted in that sacrifice was spared on that night.

This is the picture we see throughout Scripture, and it is important to keep in mind for the next session when you read about God's covenant with Moses and the laws that God gave to govern His people. Keep in mind that from the very beginning the only way to receive forgiveness was through trusting the Forgiver. The only way to be a recipient of the promises of God is to trust God. The people were saved only because they trusted God as they saw the blood of a spotless lamb over their doorposts.

This night was the first Passover, an event that the Jews have celebrated once

a year ever since. It is full of significance that Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, recast the Passover celebration in terms of His own death and resurrection. Jesus could hardly have been clearer that He was laying down His life for His followers, as their Passover Lamb. Paul makes this connection explicit in the New Testament where he told us, “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

3. How does God’s provision of the Passover Lamb for the Israelites help us understand Jesus’s sacrifice for us?

Through the Red Sea

Though the death of every firstborn in Egypt convinced Pharaoh to release the Israelites, he soon changed his mind and chased after them. This provided the backdrop for one the most memorable events in salvation history. As Israel sat with their backs to the Red Sea, Pharaoh’s army approached rapidly. It seemed certain that their exodus from slavery was over immediately after it began.

But nothing is too difficult for God; nothing can stop Him from fulfilling His promises. He proved this by splitting the waters of the Red Sea, allowing His people to walk across on dry land, and then destroying Pharaoh and his army as the waters closed in around them. As God redeemed His people by leading them out of slavery, He demonstrated in dramatic fashion that Israel’s God is unlike any other so-called god.

4. Read Exodus 15:1–21. How did the Israelites describe God’s act of redemption immediately after He led them out of slavery?

Take a minute to consider the exodus account. Though God sometimes makes direct statements about who He is and how we should relate to Him, He often reveals Himself to us through His actions. Reflect on what God did

as He called His people out of Egypt and answer the questions below.

5. What do God's actions in Israel's exodus teach us about God?

6. The story of the exodus sets the paradigm for what God's redemption looks like. How have you seen God's hand at work in your own life?

A Forgetful People

As we close this session, it may be helpful to take note of Israel's long-term reaction to God's incredible deliverance. What did they do, time and again, in response to God's redemptive grace? They forgot! They complained! They longed for the days when they were back in Egypt.

As we read these accounts, it seems unbelievable. How could this people who had so clearly seen God's hand at work stop trusting God and begin complaining about their circumstances?

But before we become too critical of the Israelites, let's look at our own lives. We may not have been saved from an oncoming army by walking through the sea on dry land, but those events are a part of our heritage. Not only that, but we have seen God come through for us in incredibly powerful and personal ways. No matter what we try to make ourselves believe in our darkest moments, every one of us has unmistakably seen the hand of God in our lives. But we forget. We complain. We lose our trust in God and try to go back to doing things our own way.

Take some time to learn from Israel's example and focus on remembering God's provision in life's most difficult circumstances.

7. What does Israel's tendency to forget God's redemption and begin

complaining teach us about humanity?

8. Make this more personal. Take some time to write about the times that God rescued you. What can you do to keep yourself focused on who God is and what He has done?

9. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to make the story of Israel's exodus vivid to you. Ask Him for the faith to believe that He will come through on His promises to you no matter how desperate the situation appears. Pray that God would help you trust Him for your salvation.

5: God's Covenant with Moses

Try to place yourself in the shoes of the Israelites. They quickly went from being the slaves of one of the most powerful nations on earth to being set free through a series of frightening miracles. They watched as God made fools of Egypt's gods and Egypt's "divine" ruler through the ten plagues. They marched out of Egypt as their former masters showered them with gifts of gold, silver, and clothing. They witnessed the impossible as God led them along dry ground through the midst of a parted sea. They saw God single-handedly destroy the most powerful army in the region by simply unparting the sea.

Picture Israel standing on the far side of the Red Sea, having just witnessed some of the most dramatic events in history. They had just been claimed and rescued by a God whose power was clearly uncontested. After the glow of their exodus had worn off, the Israelites had to face some important questions: Who exactly is this God and what are His intentions for us? What does it look like for us to live as the people of this God?

At the Base of Mount Sinai

As they walked away from the Red Sea into the wilderness, the Israelites did not know exactly what to expect. The first few months of their journey were filled with turmoil. The Israelites complained about lacking food and water. Then, when God miraculously provided fresh water and rained bread (manna) from heaven, they complained about the monotony of their diet. At one point they even got so upset that they wanted Moses dead. But everything changed—at least for a time—when they approached Mount Sinai.

When Israel arrived at the base of Mount Sinai, they discovered that God had chosen this place to reveal Himself to His people and enter into a covenant with them. Moses went up the mountain to meet with God, and God immediately explained His intention for Israel:

The LORD called to him [Moses] out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a

holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” (Ex. 19:3–6)

Here God defined Israel. First of all, they were the people whom God had miraculously rescued from slavery. It would be impossible for God’s people to define themselves without making reference to God’s act of redemption in their exodus. But this was not all. God had “brought them to Himself.” They were now God’s “treasured possession.” God was using this moment at Mount Sinai to identify Himself to His people and to tell them about their new identity. They could now rest in the security of being treasured and protected by God! It was also here that God would set the terms for how their relationship would work.

Before they could begin this process, however, the people of Israel had to prepare themselves:

The LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.’” (Ex. 19:10–12)

The Israelites had to “consecrate themselves.” Basically, they had to set themselves apart for a specific purpose; they had to prepare themselves for an encounter with God. This is what a relationship between a holy God and sinful people requires. While Moses met with God on Mount Sinai, the mountain was surrounded by smoke, lightning, and thunder. The people were not even allowed to touch the base of the mountain lest they be killed. God was doing something unique here, and He demonstrated this reality in dramatic fashion.

1. Read Exodus 19. Explain the significance of the people’s cleansing themselves and staying clear of the mountain.

2. How should Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai affect the way we view Him?

A Holy God and Sinful People

At Sinai, God entered into a covenant with Moses and the rest of the Israelites. When God made His covenant with Abraham, He promised to make his descendants into a great nation, to give them the land of Canaan, and ultimately to bless all the nations of the earth through him. The covenant that God made with Moses built upon the covenant He made with Abraham. As they waited at the base of Mount Sinai, Israel learned that they were the great nation that God had promised to Abraham; they were the ones who would inherit the land of Canaan, and ultimately, their responsibility was to be a blessing to all the nations. The implications of this covenant were clear: the LORD would be Israel's God, and Israel would be His people.

As we might anticipate, however, there were some potential problems with a holy God binding Himself to sinful people. How could this sinless God maintain a relationship with people who were prone to rebel and do the things He hates? Israel would need to know what God expected of them and what it looked like to live as the people of God.

This is where the Old Testament Law came in. Unlike the covenant with Abraham, the covenant with Moses included an extensive code of conduct. This Law spelled out God's expectations for His people in their civil, religious, and moral lives. The Law began with the Ten Commandments, but from these ten simple laws followed more than one hundred specific laws related to all aspects of the life of the people of God. These laws were not intended to be comprehensive; they were meant to provide judiciary precedents through which Israel's judges could make wise decisions about any issue that might arise.

These laws were legally binding on the people of Israel in the Old Testament. When we read the New Testament, however, Jesus explained that He fulfilled the Old Testament Law (Matt. 5:17), and it is no longer binding on us as Christians (Rom. 6:14, Gal. 5:18). This means that we should not simply read the Law and directly apply it to our lives. At the same time, we cannot discard it or consider it meaningless. The Law gives insight into the character of God and His intention for His people.

For example, God commanded Israel to leave some of their produce in the fields and on the vines when they did their reaping and harvesting (Deut. 24:19–22). Strange as that may sound, it was God’s way of making provision for the “sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.” As we read this command today, we don’t need to literally leave some of the fruit on the vine when we harvest (how many of us actually harvest, anyway?). The point is, we need to provide for the poor. This command teaches us about God’s character and about the way He wants His people to function in the world He created.

Another thing we learn from the Law is that God has every right to dictate to His created beings how they must act. He *can* tell people what they can or cannot eat, what they can or cannot touch, etc. He determines what is morally right and has the freedom to set boundaries on our conduct. This is an important lesson given the prevailing arrogance in our culture.

3. Read Exodus 20:1–21. What do the Ten Commandments reveal about the character of God?

4. What do the Ten Commandments reveal about the way God wants humanity to live?

Maintaining the Relationship

The Law poses some difficult theological questions for Christians today. We

know that we are saved by grace and not by works. In other words, there is no way that we can earn our way to God by keeping rules and doing good deeds—we are too sinful to be sufficiently obedient, and God saves us by grace through faith. When we read the Old Testament Law, however, it appears as though God is giving the Law to Israel so that they can be made right with Him by rule-keeping and good deeds.

But there is nothing in the Law that tells the Israelites that they will receive ultimate salvation if they perfectly keep every aspect of the Law. In fact, the Law itself assumes that the Israelites will fail in keeping it—that’s why the sacrificial system was included (we will discuss this more in the next session). The Law does promise blessing for obedience and a curse for disobedience (we will discuss this in a moment), but this is not the same thing as salvation by works. Even now God blesses us for obedience, and we suffer consequences when we rebel against Him.

In reality, the Law was never intended to give the Israelites a moral ladder they could climb and thereby earn God’s favor by showing what good people they were. Instead, the Law was about maintaining a relationship with God. The Law solved the problem of how a holy God can bind Himself to a sinful people. It gave the people of Israel a tangible code of conduct that would allow them to faithfully live out their identity as the people of God. It taught them to relate to God and one another appropriately. We put too much strain on the Law when we try to make it into a system of salvation through good works.

5. Explain the difference between Israel’s keeping the Law in order to earn God’s favor and keeping the Law in order to maintain a relationship with God.

6. In your own words, explain why it was important for God to give Israel the Law.

Blessing and Curse

While the covenant with Moses was an extension of God's covenant with Abraham, there is an important difference between the two. With Abraham, the covenant was unconditional. In other words, God was making a promise to Abraham that was not dependent on Abraham's actions—God would fulfill this covenant no matter what Abraham did or didn't do. With Moses, however, God added a conditional element. God would bless Israel, bring them safely into the Promised Land, bless them in the land, and make them a blessing to the rest of the nations *if* they were faithful to observe God's Law.

God would always keep His promise to Abraham, but the promises He made at Mount Sinai to bless Israel were dependent on faithful obedience. These blessings were not dependent on Israel's sinless perfection—remember that God built a system of sacrifice, atonement, and forgiveness into the Law itself—but God required the Israelites to faithfully uphold their end of the covenant. If they did, they would be blessed and receive the promises. If they didn't, they would be cursed and taken into exile.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Israel stood at the brink of the Promised Land (many years after Israel stood at Mount Sinai) and prepared to walk in and claim the land that God was giving them. But before they entered the land, Moses gathered them together and reminded them of this covenant.

Deuteronomy 28 clearly explains that if Israel would be faithful to God and keep this covenant with Him, He would bless them unimaginably. But if they rebelled and failed to keep their end of the covenant, God would send them a curse instead. The second half of Deuteronomy 28 is hard to read because God painted a horrifically vivid picture of what would happen if Israel chose to disobey. As we will see, the rest of the Old Testament shows Israel's failure to remain faithful to this covenant and the consequences they suffer for it.

7. Read Deuteronomy 28. How do these promises of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience help us understand the importance of God's covenant with Moses and Israel?

A Kingdom of Priests

Though God’s covenant with Moses promised blessings for Israel, there was more at stake than the wellbeing of a single nation. Just as God promised to bless Abraham so that he would be a blessing to “all the families of the earth,” God intended His covenant with Israel to be a blessing for every nation.

In Exodus 19:5–6, God told Israel that they were to be a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation.” These two titles are extremely important for understanding Israel’s calling. A priest has two responsibilities: to represent a holy God to sinful people, and to represent a sinful people to a holy God. As a kingdom of priests, Israel was meant to represent their God to the nations around them. Collectively, they were to show the world who their God was and what He demanded of the world. On the other side, God meant Israel to represent these nations to Himself. In other words, they were to pray on behalf of the people around them, asking God to bless them. These concepts are also present in the title “holy nation.” They were meant to stand out, to be clearly different from other nations. They were set apart for God’s purposes. They were to minister on God’s behalf, to show the holy character of God to the world around them and be a light to the nations.

As the rest of the Old Testament unfolds, we find that Israel was largely unfaithful to this command. But that did not change God’s heart. Israel was still God’s “treasured possession,” but that did not mean that God wanted Israel to feel superior to the world around them. They were special because God chose them for a specific purpose: to show the world that the LORD is God and to call them into a relationship with Him. God’s heart has always been to restore every part of His creation, and He still calls His people to join Him in this work.

8. As a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation,” what was Israel’s responsibility to the nations around them?

9. We are not the nation of Israel, but God uses similar phrases to describe the church (see 1 Peter 2:5, 9). How should God's covenant with Moses and the Israelites affect the way we view ourselves as the people of God?

10. Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for reaching down into this broken world and choosing to work in and through broken people to accomplish His purposes. Ask Him to give you a heart that is set on obedience and a passion for reaching out to the world around you.

6: Sacrifice and Atonement

This is the best news in the world: God invites humanity into relationship with Him. However, as God makes covenants with people, it creates a serious

tension. After all, isn't it impossible for a holy God to stay connected to sinful people? At this point in the biblical storyline some important questions develop. Will God need to lower His standards? (Could He lower His standards even if He wanted to?) Will God's people be able to live sinless lives so they can enjoy God's presence?

Of course, the answer to these questions is no. God would never and could never lower His standards or diminish His holiness. And since the fall, human beings are incapable of living sinless lives and enjoying God's presence on the basis of their own moral purity. So if God is going to bind Himself to human beings, something has to be done about the sin that inevitably enters the lives of the people of God.

God's solution for the problem of sin is sacrifice.

Most Christians today understand that when Jesus died, He was serving as a sacrifice on our behalf. What many don't understand, however, is the major role that sacrifice played in the Old Testament. Most Christians today understand that Jesus's death on the cross paid for our sins and allowed us to have a relationship with God. But we rarely consider that Jesus's death was the culmination of a larger story of sin and sacrifice that develops throughout the Old Testament. Only when we understand the Old Testament sacrifices can we see how the Old and New Testaments dovetail perfectly into one amazing story. Jesus didn't decide on a whim that the problem of sin could be solved by dying on a cross; the Old Testament sacrificial system demanded a sacrifice for sin, and Jesus offered Himself as the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf.

1. Explain what you already know about the Old Testament sacrifices. Have you ever thought of Jesus's sacrifice in light of the Old Testament sacrificial system? How so?

Sacrifice in the Unfolding Old Testament Story

Sacrifice is seen throughout the Old Testament. Think back to your study of Adam and Eve. As soon as they ate the fruit that God had forbidden, they felt

ashamed of their nakedness and tried to cover themselves with leaves. God's response to this problem foreshadowed the way He would continue to deal with human sin: God made clothes for Adam and Eve out of animal skins. The text doesn't tell us much about the significance of these new garments, but think about it—where did those animal skins come from? Being careful not to read too much into it, we can make a simple observation: an animal had to die so that the shame of sin could be covered. As soon as sin entered the world, God made a way to deal with that sin through sacrifice.

The sacrificial method isn't fully developed or explained until we get to the book of Leviticus, but the unfolding story of the Old Testament does point to sacrifices being made prior to this point. One example from Abraham's life is particularly helpful in understanding how sacrifice works.

In Genesis 22, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. At first glance, this request can appear cruel or even absurd. How could God ask Abraham to do such a thing? But as the story continues (and especially the larger story of the whole Bible) the beauty of this request becomes obvious. Keep in mind that God had promised to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation, and Isaac was Abraham's only descendant. Imagine the struggle that Abraham must have gone through. Should he obey the Lord? Wouldn't it make more sense to protect his son in order to pursue the promise that God made to him? Abraham decided to obey the Lord, trusting that God could do anything, including raise his son from the dead (Heb. 11:19). Abraham arrived at the place that God designated for the sacrifice, prepared the altar, and raised his hand to sacrifice his only son. But at the last moment, God stopped him and instead provided a ram for Abraham to sacrifice in place of Isaac.

As amazing as this story is in itself, don't miss what it teaches us about the nature of sacrifice. First, it suggests that God could *potentially* accept a human sacrifice for sin—though He did not allow it to go to this point until the death of Jesus. And second, it shows us that God could accept a substitute—in this case, the ram was sacrificed so that Isaac wouldn't be. Of course, it's not until we see the sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament that the significance of Abraham's offering becomes clear. Like many things in the Old Testament, Jesus's life, death, and resurrection takes these beliefs and rituals and displays them more beautifully and powerfully than anyone could

have imagined.

2. *Why was sacrifice an important theme in the Old Testament?*

Sacrifice in the Law of Moses

We see occasional sacrifices throughout the first part of the Old Testament, but it wasn't until God gave the Law to Moses that animal sacrifices became an integral part of the life of Israel. The Law encompassed many things. It dictated their civil life and government, their moral behavior, and their religious and ceremonial practices. The Law was specific about when to sacrifice, what to sacrifice, and how to sacrifice. There were a variety of sacrifices or burnt offerings, and each type of offering served a different function. But in general, these sacrifices were designed to show gratitude to God, to demonstrate a contrite heart before God, and to atone for sin.

That word *atone*, or *atonement*, is significant theologically. An easy way to remember the meaning of *atonement* is to break it down like this: at-one-ment. Essentially, atonement is all about reconciling, making amends for what has gone wrong, and reestablishing peace where there was conflict. Atonement allowed people who were distanced from God because of their sin to once again enjoy being "at one" with God. So in addition to providing avenues for expressing love and gratitude for God, the Law of Moses gave the Israelites specific instructions for making atonement for sin. Animal sacrifices gave the Israelites a tangible way of showing their sorrow and desire to have their relationship with God restored. Sacrifices also provided a substitute that could be offered in Israel's place.

A proper understanding of sacrifice and atonement is so helpful for those of us who tend to do good works in hopes of making up for the wrong we've done. Just as the Israelites found atonement through the sacrifices, we must learn to put all of our hope in a sacrifice. The New Testament clearly explains that the sacrifice we must trust in was made by Jesus.

3. *Summarize the role that sacrifices played in the way Israel related to their*

God.

A Graphic Reminder of Sin

One of the most striking features of the Old Testament Law is the blood. There seems to be blood splattered everywhere in Leviticus! It's because blood was necessary for an effective sacrifice: "The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life" (Lev. 17:11).

Try to imagine yourself in ancient Israel. Like every other group of people on the face of the earth, your community is prone to sin. But on a regular basis, you are required to bring the appropriate sacrifices in order to make atonement for your sin and restore peace with God. Every time a sacrifice was offered (which was often), an animal would die, its blood would flow, and the blood would be splattered on the altar. Imagine standing there watching this. It would have been messy, bloody, and smelly. Every time you witnessed this, you would be reminded of the seriousness of sin and its awful consequences. You would see a graphic representation of what your sin requires, and you would be thankful that that lamb, goat, or bull died in your place.

Even though we don't need to make animal sacrifices for sin today, this Old Testament practice still gives us a vivid picture of the seriousness of sin.

4. How should the Old Testament sacrificial system put our sin into the proper perspective?

The Day of Atonement

We have already raised the question, "How can sinful humans live in proximity to a holy God?" The answer is found in the sacrificial system

generally, but there is one event in the middle of Leviticus that cuts to the heart of this question: *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement (an event that Jews still celebrate today). Every year the Israelites would celebrate the Day of Atonement and God would atone for His people's sins and enable them to dwell with Him.

5. Read Leviticus 16. What stands out to you from reading this description of the Day of Atonement?

As we read through Leviticus 16, it is clear that God takes His worship very seriously. The chapter begins as God gave Aaron (Moses's brother and the first high priest) very specific instructions on how to enter His presence. The rest of the chapter describes what is supposed to happen on the Day of Atonement. On this one day out of the entire year, one man out of all the Israelites (the high priest) was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place, the Holy of Holies, and stand before God on behalf of the people.

The high priest was to take with him the blood of a spotless animal. Actually, three animals were involved in this ceremony. First, he was to sacrifice a bull as an offering to atone for his own sins, because he could not come into the presence of God on his own accord—no one, not even the high priest, is holy or perfect. Then the high priest would offer two goats. The first goat would be sacrificed, and its blood would be smeared on the cover of the ark of the covenant just as the bull's blood had been. Picture the significance of this. Inside the Holy of Holies, God's presence was looking down on the ark of the covenant, which contained a copy of the Law that Israel had broken through their sin. Then the lid (also referred to as the "mercy seat") of this ark is smeared with sacrificial blood. This blood satisfied the wrath of God because a substitute was offered in place of the people who deserved His wrath. So instead of seeing the Law that was broken, God looked down and saw the blood of atonement. Essentially, this sacrifice died in place of the entire community of God's people.

Try to picture the intensity of this scene. Imagine waiting outside of the Holy of Holies as the high priest entered to make his offering on behalf of the

people. Here was a sinful man entering into the very presence of Almighty God! Imagine the joy you would feel as the high priest safely emerged from God's presence, a sign that the sacrifice had been accepted and your sins had been atoned for.

The priest would then take the second goat (the first goat had been sacrificed), symbolically lay his hands on the head of the goat to represent the sins of the people being transferred to this animal, and then release that goat to "bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area." This was another powerful picture of what was happening with the sins of God's people. Their sin was being removed, carried off to a remote location, never to visit them again. Their guilt and condemnation were gone.

Keep in mind that as amazing as this feeling of joy over the cleansing of their sin must have been, it inevitably faded. This ceremony was to be repeated every year because Israel would not stop sinning. And the Day of Atonement was supplemented by an ongoing and detailed sacrificial system because Israel's sin was constant. Sin is not an external problem; it runs through the core of each of us and continually manifests itself in a variety of ways. Dealing with sin was therefore an important and familiar part of the everyday lives of the Israelites.

6. What does the Day of Atonement teach us about the nature of sin and the reality of forgiveness?

The Problem with Animal Sacrifices

The need to constantly repeat these sacrifices points to a limitation inherent in the Old Testament sacrificial system. But that wasn't the only problem. The effectiveness of these sacrifices was never based on the mere performance of a ritual. From the very beginning, it has been about the heart of the worshipper, not about the value of his or her offering. God said explicitly through the prophet Hosea, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (6:6).

Probably the most startling picture of the shortcomings of animal sacrifice is found in the book of Malachi. In this short book, God spoke forcefully to His people about the uselessness of their sacrifices. They had kept up the outward forms and rituals of the sacrificial system, but their hearts were not behind it. Consequently, they were no longer offering God the best of their flocks; they were simply going through the motions. God said explicitly, “Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand” (Mal. 1:10).

Surely God would rather have *something* than nothing. Even if what we offer Him is less than our best, He must be pleased that we are giving Him some consideration. Right?

God actually said the exact opposite. He would rather someone shut the doors and prevent sacrifices from being offered at all than to have people making casual sacrifices. Why? Because God is holy and His name is great: “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 1:11). God is actually so offended by these false displays of piety that He threatens to take the dung from their sacrifices and smear it in their faces: “I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it” (Mal. 2:3). This is a vivid reminder that God takes worship and sacrifice very seriously—and so should we!

7. How should God’s emphasis on the heart of the worshipper affect the way we approach God in our worship and in our everyday lives?

The Ultimate Sacrifice

Everything we have been saying about the Old Testament sacrificial system finds its culmination in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The sacrifices that Israel offered on a regular basis laid the groundwork for the coming of Jesus. When

He arrived, the full significance of the sacrificial system finally came into view.

Take a minute to read Hebrews 9:11–10:25. This gives you an opportunity to apply what you just learned from the book of Malachi. Here is a way that you can worship God with excellence: Read this passage with all of your heart. Don't just skim through it, but study it carefully, reverently, as an act of worship.

8. Read Hebrews 9:11–10:25. In light of what you've studied about the Old Testament sacrificial system and what you read in Hebrews, how does the Old Testament system of sacrifice and atonement help us to better understand the significance of Jesus's death?

9. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to affect your heart with the significance of the sacrifice that Jesus offered on your behalf. Ask God to break your heart over the sin in your life. Ask Him to give you the strength and motivation to identify and uproot that sin. Pray that your life would be the "living sacrifice" that Paul described in Romans 12:1. And most of all, thank God for sacrificing Jesus as a substitute for you.

7: God's Presence on Earth

Does anything matter more than God's presence with us? Think about it: What could be worse than being separated from Almighty God? The Bible is

filled with stories that describe the blessings that come with His presence and the horrors that accompany His rejection. God's presence with people is a central theme of the Scriptures.

God made *covenants* to show that He wanted to be present with humanity. He gave the *Law* to show people how to conduct themselves in His presence. And He established *sacrifices* when sin separated people from His presence. So much of what we see in the Old Testament relates directly to the presence of God.

One of the most fascinating features of the Old Testament Law was a tent, referred to as the tabernacle. This was where God would meet with His people. God had been leading Israel through the desert as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. With the tabernacle, God was creating a home for Himself on earth. The tabernacle would go with Israel wherever they went—from this point on Israel would be known as the people who literally had God dwelling in their midst.

The establishment of the tabernacle and the presence of God on earth were huge events. But in order to understand the full significance of what was taking place here, we need to go back to the beginning of the story.

God's Presence in the Garden

In the perfect world that God created, humanity lived in the presence of God. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve could interact with God without the division that comes through sin. They lived in peace with God, His creation, and one another. The distance we feel from God now was not a part of the human experience prior to the fall. But as we've seen, the fall changed everything.

When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, their fellowship with Him was destroyed. First Adam and Eve broke the relationship by sinning, then they tried to hide from God's presence when He entered the garden. This separation was only intensified when God expelled them from the garden and placed an armed angelic guard at its entrance. Since then, nothing has been more important for humanity than regaining God's presence.

1. Why is the presence of God so important for humanity?

The Tabernacle

After Adam and Eve walked out of the garden, people struggled to find the presence of God. Of course, God's presence is literally every- where, and He was active throughout the Old Testament, just as He is active today. But encounters with God only show up here and there, and God's presence—in the sense that Adam and Eve experienced it—was missing. This is why the tabernacle is so significant. God was offering a solution to what went wrong in the garden. His presence was gone, but now He would live with His people again.

In the previous session, we focused on the Old Testament sacrificial system. This sacrificial system centered on a specific location: the tabernacle. The tabernacle was essentially a tent where God's presence would dwell on earth. The centerpiece of the tabernacle was the ark of the covenant. This ark was basically a box, covered in gold, that contained a copy of the Ten Commandments, a jar of the manna that God used to miraculously feed the Israelites as they journeyed through the wilderness, and Aaron's rod, which God had caused to bud as a sign of His life-giving power. On top of the ark were two cherubim, and God's presence sat atop the ark, enthroned between these angelic figures.

The tabernacle was God's creating a way for His presence to dwell on earth in the midst of His people. Because the laws governing the tabernacle, its design, and the ceremonies involved are so complex, it is easy to miss the significance of the tabernacle as we read the Old Testament. The stunning truth was that God once again blessed His people with the greatest gift He could give: Himself.

At this point in Israel's history, God still led them from place to place with a pillar of cloud or fire. Every time God wanted His people to stop, His presence would descend on the tabernacle until it was time to move on again. The tabernacle meant that God would now be with His people wherever they went. It was a clear sign of God's presence on earth. It was a glimpse of the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. It was a taste of

the garden of Eden that went with them from place to place.

2. Read Exodus 25:8–9 and 17–22. What is so significant about the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant?

God’s Blessing without God’s Presence

Before Israel had a chance to take God’s presence for granted, they almost lost it. As soon as God delivered the covenant to Moses on Mount Sinai, Moses walked down the mountain to convey it to the people. But what Moses encountered was shocking. He left a discussion with God Himself only to find the people of Israel dancing and worshipping a golden calf that they had created. The first two commandments (Moses had just watched the finger of God carve these into stone) were “You shall have no other gods before me” and “You shall not make for yourself a carved image ... for I the LORD your God am a jealous God” (Ex. 20:3–5). It seemed that God’s covenant with Israel was over even before it began.

The way that God responded to Israel’s idolatry was devastating in at least two ways. First, about three thousand men died as a direct result of their sin. Second, the nation of Israel came uncomfortably close to losing the presence of God. In Exodus 33, God reaffirmed His promise to give Israel the land He had promised them, but He added a twist. He basically said, “I have promised to give the land of Canaan to you and your descendants. Now go and take it, but I will not go with you. I will send an angel to lead you instead.”

The language that God used in Exodus 33 has changed drastically from what we have seen thus far. He referred to Israel as “the people” instead of “my people.” Even in sending an angel as a replacement for His presence, God’s language was impersonal. He said He would send “an angel,” when previously He had talked about “my angel” (compare Ex. 23:23 and 32:34).

Keep in mind that in the preceding chapters, God had outlined the plans for the tabernacle. God had just said, “Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (25:8). Now we see Him using the same terminology to

express a devastating concept: I will not dwell among you (33:3).

At this point, Israel was facing life without God. As terrible as that sounds, think about what God was really offering here. God was offering to bless the Israelites apart from a relationship with Him. From a practical standpoint, this makes a lot of sense. The people are going to keep on sinning, so maybe it would be easier if they accepted God's blessing and went on their way.

And sadly, isn't this exactly what most people today really want? God's presence is nice, but what we really want is what He can give us.

3. Read Exodus 33:1–6. What makes this such a devastating pronouncement for the Israelites?

4. Consider God's presence in your own life. How would you respond to the prospect of God's blessing apart from God's presence? Forget about how you "ought" to answer this, try to answer honestly.

At this moment in history, Israel was standing at a crucial turning point. Moses's response to God's offer of the Promised Land without His presence shows that Moses knew exactly what was at stake here. He said:

If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth? (Ex. 33:15–16).

Moses recognized that Israel had no hope—that there was no point in being the nation of Israel—if they did not have God with them. God's presence is what made them distinct. Israel could not be the people of God without the presence of God.

5. Read Exodus 33:7–23. What stands out to you about Moses's response?

6. *As you think of the experiences Moses and Israel had with God, how might it affect the way you interact with God?*

The Temple

Ultimately, God went with His people, and they carried the tabernacle from place to place until God gave them the land of Canaan as He had promised. After Israel was well established in the land, David became the king of Israel. David decided that he wanted to build a temple, a permanent dwelling to replace the tabernacle. Because David had been a man of war, God told David that his son Solomon would build the temple instead.

It took Solomon seven years to build the temple. It was carefully constructed and elaborate. When it was finally completed, Solomon dedicated the temple to God, and there was a tremendous celebration as God filled the temple. Just as God's presence had resided in the tabernacle, now it would fill the temple. The most significant difference between the tabernacle and the temple was that the temple was not portable. Remember back to Abraham and to God's promise that He would give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan. Now that God had fulfilled that promise and His people were living in that Promised Land, God decided to take up a permanent, stationary residence on earth. The land of Canaan, the Promised Land that He had given to Israel, was the one place out of the whole world where God chose to dwell.

With the temple, God was delivering a powerful visual message. Though mankind had rebelled against God's authority, God was reestablishing His reign on earth. The kingdom of Israel, with the elaborate temple in its midst to house the presence of God, was a glimpse of what the world ought to be. It was a picture of God's dwelling in the midst of His earth, ruling over and blessing His people.

When Solomon finished construction on the temple, he dedicated it with a solemn prayer. This prayer shows that Solomon understood the importance of this moment in human history.

7. Read 1 Kings 8:1–13 and 27–30. What does this passage reveal about God’s glory and the significance of God’s dwelling among His people?

An Important Warning

As soon as God’s glory descended and filled the temple, God warned Solomon that His presence would dwell among them only as long as they remained faithful to His covenant and obeyed His Law. In other words, God was dwelling in the midst of His people, but only as long as their lives acknowledged His presence. As soon as they began to take God and His presence for granted, as soon as they turned their backs on God and His commands, then He would leave them to their sin. Instead of the blessing that comes with God’s presence, Israel would experience the judgment that comes with rejecting God.

8. Read 1 Kings 9:1–9. What does God’s warning to Solomon teach us about what it means for God’s presence to dwell in the midst of His people?

Tragically, God’s warning in 1 Kings 9 became a reality. In the book of Ezekiel, God’s people found themselves in exile as a punishment for rejecting God’s reign (we will discuss this more in a future session). Ezekiel records the glory of God departing from the temple (Ez. 10–11), an event that was just as dramatic as God’s glory filling the temple in 1 Kings 8. Once again, God’s people found themselves alienated from God’s presence on earth. It had become clear that the tabernacle and temple would not be the ultimate solution, so how would humanity be able to live in God’s presence?

God Became Flesh

Once again, Jesus solves the problems raised by the events in the Old Testament. John opened his gospel by describing Jesus as the Word, who was with God in the beginning, and who was God. Then John said something that is shocking in light of what we've been saying about God's presence on earth: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

That phrase, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," carries huge significance. The word John used for "dwelt" literally means "set up a tent." John's word is a Greek translation that comes from the Hebrew word for "tabernacle" used in the Old Testament. So John was announcing that the tabernacle has once again returned, but this time, the tabernacle exists in the person of Jesus Christ. With Jesus, the problem of God's presence among people is solved once and for all. Jesus shows us what it looks like for people to dwell with God and what it means for humanity to embody the presence of God. With Jesus, we never have to worry about losing the presence of God—He came and dwelt among us, and we are joined to Him because of His death on the cross.

Beyond that, God's presence now dwells in us through the Holy Spirit! In fact, Paul said that we are "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19). He said that we are joined together as the church and we grow "into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:21). In Jesus we are "being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (v. 22).

9. How does what you have studied thus far help you understand the significance of God becoming man in Jesus and of the church being identified as a dwelling place for God?

God's Presence Will Fill the Earth

The Bible ends with a beautiful vision of God's glory filling the entire earth (Rev. 21–22). From the moment that the Holy Spirit filled the early church in Acts 2, God's presence has dwelt on earth through His church. But when Jesus returns to set the world to rights, the whole world will be filled with God's presence. What Adam and Eve enjoyed in Eden will be experienced on every point on the globe as renewed humanity enjoys God's renewed presence in a renewed creation.

10. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to help you understand the significance of His presence on earth, and to help you live together with the other Christians in your life in a way that reflects His presence and glory in your midst.

8: The Kingdom of God

Finally, after years of Israel's sin and struggling in the desert, God marched His people into the Promised Land! Israel witnessed God's unmatched power

firsthand as their army consistently destroyed enemies that were far bigger and much better armed.

At this point in the story, you would think that we would see Israel thriving, rejoicing in God's power, enjoying God's presence, walking in His ways, and living happily ever after. But tragically, that is not how the story goes.

Whereas the book of Joshua records God's faithfulness in delivering the Promised Land to Israel, the book of Judges records Israel's unfaithfulness and refusal to live as God intended. Judges feels like a roller coaster: Israel falls into sin and apathy; God raises up a leader to deliver them; the people once again acknowledge God; Israel again falls into sin and apathy; God again raises up a leader to deliver them, and on and on it goes.

But Israel entered a more hopeful period as Samuel came on the scene. Samuel was a prophet of God and the last of the judges.

With Samuel, Israel received a godly leader who faithfully delivered God's word to the people. It was during this time that Israel became a monarchy. But to understand the significance of this shift, we have to look back to the beginning once again.

The King of Creation

Maybe you have never thought about the creation account this way, but Genesis 1 and 2 present God as the King of creation. This King is so powerful and His word is so authoritative that He has only to speak to call things into existence. Genesis 1 and 2 depict the King creating a realm over which He will rule. In the garden of Eden, everything functioned in perfect harmony; everything operated in perfect submission to the King's rule. In the first pages of the Bible we find a beautiful picture of what the world looks like when everyone and everything joyfully embraces the King's reign.

Though we often see human beings rejecting God's authority and trying to establish their own, God originally created humanity to rule on His behalf:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen. 1:26–28)

The picture we are given here is of God, the absolute Ruler over creation, delegating His authority to mankind. We were created to mediate God’s gracious rule to every part of His creation. Humanity was made to function under God’s kingship.

But when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they abused their freedom and rejected God’s kingship. With this simple act, God’s rule on earth was challenged. Adam and Eve chose to follow the serpent, Satan. This reversal is so significant that Satan is now referred to as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31). The reality in which we now live would have seemed inconceivable to Adam and Eve before the fall. Could God’s kingship really be disputed in the world He created? Would humanity really reject God’s reign and live in defiance? As strange as it would have sounded before the fall, this is the struggle we experience every day of our lives.

1. Take a minute to think about what you learned about God by reading Genesis 1 and 2. How is God’s kingship established and displayed in the creation account?

The True King of Israel

We get another powerful picture of God’s kingship when He led His people out of slavery in the exodus. Through the ten plagues, God showed that He

was the supreme Ruler of this world—He entered the dominion of Pharaoh and of Egypt’s gods and asserted His ultimate authority. By defeating the false gods of Egypt and leading His people victoriously out of slavery, God demonstrated that He was the true King of Israel and of the whole earth.

The covenant that God made with His people at Mount Sinai was an expression of His kingship. This type of covenant, where the conquering king would establish terms for how his people would relate to him, was common for nations at the time. We can see this clearly in Exodus 19:5–6:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

God was the King, and Israel was His kingdom. The tabernacle and the temple were dwelling places for the King—they were His palaces. Remember that the ark of the covenant, where God’s presence dwelled, was the centerpiece of the tabernacle and the temple. The Bible actually refers to the ark as the footstool of God’s throne (1 Chron. 28:2, Ps. 132:7). This shows us that the tabernacle and temple were about more than containing God’s presence as some sort of good-luck charm or spiritual force. These dwelling places acknowledged the kingship of God; they were a reminder that God was in the midst of His people, ruling over and caring for them.

After God led Israel into the Promised Land, the people consistently chose to move away from God and the clear direction He had laid out for them at Sinai. Instead, they chose to do whatever seemed good to them at the time. We read in the book of Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6, 21:25). Not only does this statement indicate that Israel ignored God’s laws, it also suggests a solution: Israel needed a king. God was the rightful King of Israel, but they were unwilling to view Him as such. It looked as if God’s kingdom would never be fully established in Israel.

Israel Takes a King

At first glance, it might seem like a good idea for Israel to be ruled by a human king. The period of the Judges was chaotic, so it would make sense to establish a clear ruler who would lead and govern the people. Besides that,

every nation that surrounded Israel had a king, so they must have felt conspicuous. All they had was a tent and an imperfect series of leaders whom God appointed to govern His people for a time. Wouldn't they be better off with a human king?

This is the line of reasoning that led Israel to ask God for a normal king. Read the account in 1 Samuel 8 and pay special attention to the warnings that God gave about what was really at stake with this decision.

2. Read 1 Samuel 8. What does this passage tell us about the significance of Israel's choosing to be ruled by a human king?

The problem is apparent right away: Israel wanted a king so they could be "like every other nation." But Israel had never been like the other nations—and that is basically the point throughout the Old Testament. Israel was to be unique because their God was unique. They were set apart from everyone else because they had Almighty God dwelling in their midst. Becoming like the other nations was a huge step in the wrong direction. God warned them of this, but they didn't see the significance of what they were doing. In choosing a human king, Israel was rejecting God as their king.

First, God appointed Saul as the king of Israel, but he turned out to be a poor representative of God's reign. The people learned firsthand why God had warned them about taking a human king. Once again, Israel had come to a dead end. Israel's history continually teaches us that if it weren't for God's plan and His persistent grace, all hope would have been lost long ago.

God's Covenant with King David

But God still had plans for Israel. When God rejected Saul as king, He called Samuel to anoint David, a shepherd, as the next king. The concept of

anointing is important. The king of Israel would literally be anointed with oil, and then he would be known as “the Lord’s anointed,” an idea that finds its fullest expression in Jesus.

Though it took some time and confidence in God’s promise to him, David eventually became the earthly king through whom God would relate to His people as the heavenly King. David was far from perfect, but the Bible describes him as a “man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), and he set the ideal for what the king of Israel should look like.

The significance of what God would accomplish through David is brought out in 2 Samuel 7, where God makes a covenant with David. In the context of this chapter, David looked at all the blessings the Lord had given to him and decided that he would honor the Lord by building a house for the ark of the covenant. (This “house” would be the temple we looked at in the previous session.) God said that David would not build the temple—this task was left to Solomon, his son—but God also affirmed His purposes for David by making a covenant with him. This covenant built upon the covenants that God made with Abraham and with Moses. It also expanded these covenants and made promises that find their perfect fulfillment in Jesus.

3. Read 2 Samuel 7. What promises did God make to David in this passage?

God’s covenant with David shows that He is still at work to fulfill His promises to Abraham. Think back to God’s covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 12:1–2, God promised to make Abraham’s name great. In Genesis 15:18, God promised to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan. In Genesis 17:3–7, God told Abraham that He would continue His covenant with Abraham’s descendants and that from Abraham would come nations and even kings.

Now consider what God promised to David in 2 Samuel 7. God promised to make David’s name great (v. 9), to plant Israel in the land of Canaan (v. 10), and to raise up David’s offspring and keep David’s line on the throne (v. 12). The promises that God made to Abraham were reiterated in the covenant He

made with Moses and now again in the promises He made to David. Despite Israel's faithlessness, God was still at work to accomplish His purposes for His people.

Before Israel entered the Promised Land, God prophetically told His people that after they settled into the land they would reject Him and choose to be ruled by a human king (Deut. 17). Knowing this would happen, God had already established a way for Israel to continue to pursue His purposes for them as a kingdom. The intent was that God would reign as King over His people through His relationship—His covenant—with this earthly king. The earthly king of Israel would follow God's rule and submit to God's reign. In doing so, he would be a reflection of the true King of Israel. In addition to this, God continued to give Israel prophets who would hold the power of Israel's kings in check, showing that God is the true King and ensuring that these human kings were ruling on God's behalf.

The Coming King

What God did through David as the king of Israel is a picture that reflects what He had been doing through His people from the time He formed them. But it also points forward to what God would do through His Son, Jesus Christ. It shouldn't surprise us that David ultimately failed to be the perfect king of Israel. He failed in several respects, most memorably by impregnating Bathsheba and then having her husband murdered in an effort to hide his sin. David received God's forgiveness and was still the standard by which all other kings were compared, but his imperfect obedience left God's people longing and waiting for another Ruler.

The prophets continued to revisit the idea that a Ruler was going to come from the line of David and that this Ruler would put the kingdom of Israel—and all the kingdoms of the earth—back in order. This coming King would restore the world to what it was intended to be. Isaiah 11 describes this King as a “shoot from the stump of Jesse” (Jesse was David's father) upon whom the Spirit of the LORD would rest. He would rule Israel and the nations perfectly. Jeremiah 23:5–6 describes the King as a “Branch” from the line of David who will “reign as king and deal wisely” and whose name would be “The LORD is our righteousness.” Ezekiel 34:23–24 describes the coming King as a perfect shepherd for God's people. Amos 9:11–12 says that God

will rebuild the fallen house of David, and Hosea 3:5 envisions Israel once again pursuing the LORD under the reign of “David their king.”

God’s future for Israel was very much tied to the concept of Israel as a kingdom under the reign of the Lord’s Anointed, who would mediate God’s sovereign rule. Notice the imagery God used as He spoke about the future of His people in Ezekiel 37:

My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. (vv. 24–28)

4. Spend some time thinking about these promises of a coming King (consider looking up the passages mentioned in the last two paragraphs). How does the concept of a King arising from the line of David set the stage for Jesus’s arrival in the New Testament?

Searching for the Kingdom of God

After the reign of King David, Israel had a disappointing line of kings. Eventually, the kingdom of Israel grew so wicked that God sent them away from the Promised Land and into exile (a period in Israel’s history that we will explore in the next session). Once Israel lost the kingdom, their national identity was at stake. They desperately wanted to regain the kingdom. But not until the arrival of Jesus would this become a reality.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record a partial return of God’s people

from exile, but there is still no kingdom. The book of Daniel promises that the kingdom will come in the future and that the “Son of Man” will rule all the nations.

As we turn the last pages of the Old Testament and begin reading the New Testament, we find that the kingdom of God is still a major issue. In fact, Jesus came onto the scene preaching “the gospel of God,” saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14–15). This is an incredibly exciting proclamation in light of Israel’s history as a kingdom! The kingdom has finally come—the good news that Jesus was preaching was that the kingdom of God had once again returned and Jesus was there to rule as God’s anointed! In fact, from the moment Jesus’s birth was announced, it was clear that He was the coming King, the Ruler from the line of David who would bring the perfect kingdom of God to earth.

5. Read Jesus’s birth announcement in Luke 1:26–33. How does the language used here help us see Jesus in light of the Old Testament kingdom?

6. Why is it important for us to see Jesus as the culmination of the kingly line of David?

When the angel announced Jesus’s birth, he used essentially the same terminology that we saw in 2 Samuel 7 when God made His covenant with David. Jesus was the true King of Israel:

You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:31–33)

We have almost arrived at the New Testament. Most of us are more familiar with the teaching of the New Testament, but understanding the Old Testament helps us see more clearly what the New Testament is telling us. Ultimately, the New Testament is all about Jesus Christ. That term *Christ* is a title, not a last name. It is actually the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for “Messiah,” or “Anointed One.” When Jesus walked onto the scene, He came as the anointed King of Israel. His role is to mediate the sovereign reign of God over His earth and His people. We still have a part to play in this, but first we need to see that the kingdom of God has a long history.

7. How should the kingship of God and of His Anointed affect the way we view our relationship to God and His Son?

8. Spend some time in prayer. Pray that God would help you to lovingly submit to His rule as the King of creation. Pray that God’s reign over this world would be established and that this rebellious world would see Jesus as the true King.

9: Exile and the Promise of Restoration

God’s Faithfulness and Israel’s Disobedience

Time and again, God was faithful to keep His promises to His people. He multiplied Abraham's descendants into a great nation; He planted the Israelites in the land of Canaan, and He established David's kingly line. But God had also promised Israel that if they disobeyed, they would be conquered by a foreign nation, pulled from their homeland, and led into exile. God had promised this judgment if Israel disobeyed Him, and after generations of patiently waiting for His people to repent, God remained faithful to His promise.

It's hard to read the Old Testament without being blown away by Israel's constant disobedience. As Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness, they continually complained. When Moses went onto Mount Sinai to receive the Law from God, they created a golden idol and worshipped it. When God placed them in the land of Canaan, they kept turning away from Him to worship idols. Idolatry shows up throughout Israel's history. Though there were times of reform, Israel seemed bent on rejecting God. God dealt with this idolatry patiently, but His justice would not be detained forever.

The Curse for Disobedience

When God made His covenant with Moses and Israel, He gave them the Law to show them exactly what was expected of them as the people of God. He promised them that if they obeyed His Law, they would be blessed and would live in the land of Canaan in peace and security. But if they disobeyed, God promised them that they would experience His judgment rather than His blessing. Among other things, this meant that they would be pulled away into exile.

1. Read Deuteronomy 28. Based on what you have studied in the previous sessions, how did the blessings offered in verses 1–14 become a reality in the life of Israel?

2. Summarize the judgments in verses 15–68 that God said would come upon Israel if they disobeyed.

The Promise of Exile

Every one of the judgments listed in Deuteronomy 28 is terrifying. Israel was defined by their unique relationship with God. They were known for receiving special favor from God, so the thought of experiencing God's judgment rather than His blessing would have been devastating. The promises of agricultural failure and military defeat were bad enough, but the exile brought a much deeper level of judgment. Israel would be abandoned by God, defeated by a distant enemy, and then torn from the land that God had given them. Without the presence of their God and the land He had given them, Israel would lose their identity.

Imagine the horror of hearing these words from God:

The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone.... Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you. (Deut. 28:36, 47–48)

If Israel would not serve their God, they would end up serving their enemies. They would worship carved images, crying out to blocks of wood and stone to deliver them. Notice that when God spoke these words, it was merely a warning: Israel had not even entered the Promised Land by this point. Yet Israel's disobedience was inevitable, and the only real surprise was how long God waited before punishing Israel.

A Divided and Defeated Kingdom

We mentioned in the previous session that the book of Joshua shows Israel's

taking over the land of Canaan, and that the book of Judges records the chaos, apathy, and idolatry that characterized Israel after they had settled into the land. We also talked about David's becoming the king of Israel and God's promise to establish His kingly line. But a mere generation after David's kingship, the Israelites became so stubborn and power hungry that they ended up dividing into two camps: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.

Israel never fully recovered from this split. The northern kingdom (Israel) was almost completely godless—they followed ungodly kings into every form of sin. The southern kingdom (Judah) had a few good kings and experienced some good years, but overall they followed the same pattern of ungodliness and idolatry. In 722 BC, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and carried them away into captivity. The southern kingdom of Judah should have learned from Israel's mistakes—God allowed them to hold on for over one hundred years longer, but eventually they suffered the same fate. In 597 BC, Babylon conquered Judah and carried them off into captivity.

3. Read 2 Kings 17:1–23. This passage describes Israel's being taken into exile. The author did not simply describe the event; he included a theological explanation for what happened. According to this passage, why was Israel sent into exile?

God's judgment on Israel was totally appropriate in light of what they had done, but it is important to recognize that this was never God's intention. In other words, God didn't want to send His people into exile. Hear the anguish in God's voice as He lamented the loss of His people:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. (Hosea 11:8)

God hated the exile, and the history of Israel shows that He moved slowly and regretfully toward it. God kept sending prophets to warn His people, but they refused to listen. Ultimately, Israel chose exile for themselves, and God remained faithful to His promise to punish Israel for their rebellion.

4. In light of Israel's persistent rebellion, why do you think it still grieved God to send them into exile?

Israel in Exile

With the exile, Israel's future seemed uncertain. But God was still working. God still spoke to the exiles through the prophets. Even after removing Israel from their land, God still called them to repent and promised them a future.

How could God still love and pursue His people at this point? They did not love Him, and they proved that through constant rebellion. They had long since turned from God to trust in themselves. They followed foreign kings and worshipped false gods. They deserved the wrath and judgment that God showed them. But they still were not completely destroyed. Why not? The Old Testament is filled with stories of God's destroying entire nations for their godlessness. Why didn't God do this with Israel?

God had too much at stake to destroy Israel. His purposes of redemption were wrapped up in the nation of Israel. They were His people—He had created them, claimed them, and was working out His plan to restore the world through this unique group of people. Israel was known as God's people. When Israel was conquered and taken into exile, the other nations assumed that it was because their God wasn't strong enough to give them military victory. Listen to the way God explained this situation:

In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, "These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land." But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. (Ezek. 36:19–

21)

In this passage, God made it clear that Israel deserved their punishment. But He also gave the ultimate answer as to why He was not going to give up on His people: His name. He was going to preserve them out of concern for His holy name.

5. Read Ezekiel 36:16–38. Why was God promising to restore Israel? Why is this significant?

6. Look closely at verses 25–27. God promised to cleanse His people, to give them a new heart, and to empower them by His Spirit. What is the significance of these promises?

The New Covenant

While Israel was in exile, God made promises to Israel in Ezekiel 36 and other passages. He guaranteed that He would bring them back to the Promised Land. He would once again be their God, and they would be His people. In many ways, God was reaffirming the covenants He made with Abraham, Moses, and David. Without question, Israel's exile would not last forever. In fact, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah record God's amazing provision in sending Israel back to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall and the temple, both of which had been destroyed. But even still, something was missing. Only a relatively small number of Israelites returned to Jerusalem at this time; the rebuilt temple could not match the grandeur of the temple that Solomon had built; the glory of God did not return to the temple, and the kingdom of God was not restored to Israel. God's people knew there had to be more. And there was.

God made huge promises to Israel in Ezekiel 36:25–27 and restored hope to a desperate nation. Israel had become defiled through their idolatry, but God

promised to cleanse them. Israel had a heart of stone that was incapable of loving God, but God promised to remove that heart of stone and give them a living heart made of flesh. Israel had proven that they were incapable of obeying God's commands, but God promised to place His Spirit within them and enable them to follow His commands. These promises show that God's plan for His people would involve a lot more than simply bringing them back from exile. God was going to recreate His people. They were going to be changed from the inside out.

Recall from the previous session that God made a promise to David that his kingly line would continue. Even though the kings who followed David failed to be good stewards of God's kingly authority, the prophets believed and taught that a king would come who would establish God's perfect reign over His people. This king would be one of David's descendants, and he was sometimes simply called by the name David. Soon after promising to restore and recreate His people, God told Ezekiel that this coming king would establish a new, eternal covenant with His people:

My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. (Ezek. 37:24–28)

The promise of a new covenant raises an obvious question. What was wrong with the old covenant? The answer is simple: sin. Because of their sinful hearts, the people of Israel were constantly breaking God's covenants with them. Throughout most of its history Israel was idolatrous and immoral. The sad reality is that they were incapable of anything different. Despite the hundreds of times that God's prophets called the people to repentance, they continued in their rebellion. But that was all going to change.

Listen to the way Jeremiah described this new covenant:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and 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. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31–34)

The new covenant was different in significant ways. In the old covenant, the law was written on stone. In the new covenant, the law would be written on human hearts. Under this new covenant, God’s people would no longer get caught up in external religion; they would experience spiritual change—they would be made spiritually alive. Obedience would no longer be a condition for entering the covenant; obedience would be a promise that God’s people would experience through the new covenant.

Under the old covenant, God’s people came into contact with Him through the mediation of flawed men (the priests). These flawed men would offer up continual sacrifices, and God would patiently pass over their sin. But under the new covenant, God’s people would encounter God directly through the mediation of a flawless man—Jesus Christ. And this flawless man offered Himself as a sacrifice once and for all. Jesus’s sacrifice did not pass over sin; it paid for sin and permanently removed it.

7. Take some time to meditate on Ezekiel 36:25–27 and Jeremiah 31:31–34. What makes this new covenant so unique and important?

It is easy to read the Old Testament and get fed up with Israel. We get tired of their rebellion and want to scream, “Why don’t you understand this? Stop worshipping idols! Turn to God!” And to a certain extent, the Old Testament is meant to show us how unwise and destructive our sin can be. But we need to be careful not to be too harsh with the Israelites. In reality, their problem is our problem.

We need to be careful not to get so caught up in their stubborn rebellion that we overlook our own. In fact, Jeremiah described Israel’s sin in universal terms:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (17:9)

We all face the same problem. Sin is not some external factor that we encounter from time to time. It pervades every human heart. Israel’s sin is our sin—we were all covenant breakers by nature and incapable of obedience. And because we faced the same problem that Israel did, the new covenant is good news for us as well. We can now enjoy the benefits of being recreated by God, changed from the inside out.

This new covenant would include the key elements of the older covenants that God had made with Abraham, Moses, and David. It still centered on God and His people—notice that important phrase, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people”—and it still promised restoration for Israel, but the new covenant also included hope and healing for all the nations of the earth (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 55:3–5, 56:4–8, 66:18–24). God’s plan of redemption had always been to redeem all of His creation, but Israel had lost sight of this calling. The new covenant would bring together Jew and Gentile. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, the whole world fell under the destructive power of sin. But now with the new covenant, all creation would experience God’s power to redeem and restore.

The New Covenant in Jesus’s Blood

As the Old Testament draws to a close, we see Israel’s future was still

uncertain. But we are left with two very important promises: (1) God was going to send His Messiah, a King from the line of David, and (2) God was going to make a new covenant with His people that would recreate them and enable them to follow His rule.

From the moment of His birth, Jesus demonstrated that He was God's Messiah. His ministry demonstrated that He was Israel's true King. And before Jesus was crucified, He gathered His disciples together and celebrated the Passover. Remember that the Passover celebrated God's act of redemption in setting His people free from slavery and that immediately after this exodus, God had established His covenant with Moses and Israel. When Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples, He broke the bread and passed around the wine and told His disciples that these elements would now represent His crucified body and His shed blood. With great significance, Jesus took the wine and said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). With Jesus, the new covenant had arrived. And we will continue to discuss the beauty of this as we study the New Testament.

8. As the Old Testament comes to a close, we see that God promised to send a King in the line of David and to make a new covenant with His people. How should these promises affect our lives today?

9. Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to address the sin in your heart and to give you a heart that loves Him and submits to His rule. Thank Him for His promises of redemption and for the amazing reality of the new covenant established in the blood of Jesus.