

## Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament

### J. Embracing God's Priorities

#### 30. Sharing God's Heart for the World

We've been talking about embracing God's priorities. We are helped to do that by the proper use of Scripture and Prayer. Both of these also help us immensely in understanding and sharing another of God's most important priorities: his love for the world. To be sure, the Old Testament is clear about God's love for his chosen people. But we don't have to wait until the New Testament to see how much of a heart God has for the rest of the world.

To start with, Jesus' own ancestry shows evidence of God's intent from the beginning to show mercy to more than just the physical descendants of Abraham. This is particularly apparent in the first section of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1-6). None of the men listed here were even close to perfect. And in fact, several had significant moral failings. Even so, they weren't questionable by typical Jewish standards.

But in the opinion of some who had not really understood God's grace, and his love for outcasts and outsiders – in their opinion the women listed here just didn't belong in the family tree of someone as important as God's Messiah. Or if they did belong, it would be something that you just wouldn't want to advertise.

- Tamar, had married one of Jacob's grandsons, and then became a neglected widow until she tricked her dead husband's father into keeping his promises to her.
- Rahab had been a prostitute of Jericho, who helped Israel's spies and thus was protected during the fall of Jericho, and then herself became part of Israel.
- Ruth had been a member of the detested Moabite nation.
- And Bathsheba, who had been married to one of David's soldiers, had been forced to go to bed with the King and when she became pregnant, David murdered her husband so the evil deed would not come to light.

All four were Gentiles, with an ancestry outside of the chosen people of God: Tamar was a Canaanite, Rahab was a native of Jericho, Ruth was from Moab, and Bathsheba was a Hittite. Except perhaps for Ruth, none of these women would have been used by Hebrew parents as positive role models for their children. For that they would have turned to Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Leah, the wives of the patriarchs. This is not to say that scripture places a word of blame against any of these four, but, these four women, often because of the Jewish men with whom they had been associated, had been involved in messy and sordid situations. So their presence here in Jesus' genealogy is a testimony to the mercy of God in preserving his people, despite their disobedience. And it is a testimony to the fact that God can and does use anybody to advance the progress of his Kingdom. Furthermore, as Matthew makes clear, from the start, God's work has been interracial and international in scope. The bloodline of the Messiah was extended through history by gentile as well as Jewish parents.

Now, let's look at a few more interesting Bible stories that confirm what I'm calling God's heart for the world. The first involves the prophet Elijah, who, in the middle of a significant lesson to Israel about the futility of trusting in false gods (1 Kings 17-18), took a side trip to Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Sidon was the homeland of the wicked Jezebel, who facilitated Israel's worship of her fertility gods. Elijah, speaking for God, said "NO" and emphasized it by proclaiming a stop to the rains in Israel.

In the middle of this drought, the Lord sent Elijah to the godless Sidon and empowered him to show God's grace to a widow there. First, Elijah miraculously provided a continuing supply of food for the widow's household, and then, after her son died, restored him to life. After that, the widow confessed (v. 24): "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth." Her declaration was a sign that she—an outside-the-covenant foreigner from Sidon—had come to true faith. And her declaration would also be a continuing testimony to Israel, both that God is no respecter of persons, and that it is senseless to worship anyone but him.

A number of years later, the prophet Elisha, was being generally ignored in Israel when a Syrian General—Naaman—sought him out for healing from his leprosy (cf. 2 Kings 5). When, via messenger rather than in person, Elisha told him to bathe in the Jordan River, Naaman was offended. But he heeded wise advice from his servants and did as instructed, and, afterwards, was overjoyed at his healing. Naaman expected to have to pay for his healing, and was, in fact, disappointed when Elisha refused all payment. He wasn't the only one disappointed; so was Elisha's greedy servant Gehazi, who sneaked off to catch up with Naaman and take the payment for himself. However, after he had returned and hidden the loot, Elisha confronted him and told Gehazi that he and his family would from that time be cursed with leprosy.

This story reveals some important things about God's heart for the world.

- Grace is not just for those related to Abraham by blood; it is for outsiders too. God showed Naaman the same sort of grace God's chosen people were used to receiving.
- Although you can always respond to grace, you can't earn, buy, or pay for it. Elisha's refusal of payment was meant to drive that point home to Naaman.
- God gets angry when people misrepresent his grace—when they act as though it's just for certain people or they treat his gifts as something to profit from.

Another story of God's extravagant grace to outsiders is seen in his call for Jonah to preach the gospel to the Assyrians in Ninevah. Jonah recoiled at the thought; he considered the people there beyond repentance and unworthy of God's mercy. So he ran the other way. As you know, however, God had a way of changing Jonah's plans; he ended up going to Ninevah. And miracle of miracles, the wicked Assyrians responded to Jonah's preaching by repenting.

But, Jonah offered God a reproach rather than a praise: "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, and a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2). Jonah had learned that it was useless to try to go against the Lord. But he had not yet learned to love what God loved—the reconciliation of sinners and their inclusion in the circle of his grace. We don't know if Jonah eventually learned to share God's heart for the world. But too many of his fellow Israelites did not. Even today, some Christians who have themselves been rescued from sin and death can get upset by the prospect of God being gracious to their (and God's) biggest enemies. But such an attitude both misunderstands grace and refuses to share God's heart for the world.

Now let's move on to look at God's design for how to share his heart for the world. Since the subject of most OT stories involves Israel, we can assume that design involves them. God started by telling them (Deut. 14:2): "Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession."

Of course, this was not because of any special qualities in those so chosen, but simply because of God's grace. That said, there was a condition attached to continuing in that blessed status. Ex. 19:5 puts it like this: "Now IF you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession." God had in mind more than a blessed life for his treasured people; he also wanted them to mediate his blessings to other nations by obeying him fully.

Ex. 19:6 speaks of Israel's mediatorial role in these words: "Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." In other words, Israel's life with God was to testify to the glory of God and the greatness of life in fellowship with him and also to encourage the rest of the world to give God the honor he deserved—and thereby also experience his blessings.

This is well demonstrated in the life of Joseph. Although betrayed and sold into slavery by his brothers, he consistently behaved in such a way that the foreigners he served, came to appreciate the Lord and share in his blessings to Joseph.

- As to Joseph's first master: Potiphar, Gen 39:5 tells us, "From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph."
- It was similar in the prison Joseph was sent to following the unjust accusations of Potiphar's wife. The prison warden eventually gave Joseph significant responsibilities there and no longer worried himself about day to day operations. Why? Because he saw that the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.
- Finally, and most importantly, Pharaoh came to the same conclusion about Joseph and his God and put Joseph in charge of preparing for the famine and food distribution. Joseph saw the hand of God in all this, telling his brothers (Gen 50:20), "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." —the lives of his family, but also of those of the Egyptians and others from around the world whose lives were spared by the stored food in Egypt. Whether or not Joseph was a missionary in the sense in which we use the word today, he certainly saw that God had used him to bless his foreign masters and help them understand something of the greatness of the God he served.

Years later, Moses was called by God to challenge Pharaoh over his claim to the service and loyalty of God's people. Because Pharaoh was so hardhearted, he and Egypt saw a lot of God's greatness without experiencing his blessings. But in the end, all of Egypt, save perhaps Pharaoh himself, highly regarded Moses and the people of Israel (Ex. 11:3). So much so that when Israel finally received permission to leave, the Egyptians showered them with gifts of silver and gold and clothing (12:35-36). And some of the Egyptians even joined the Israelites in their exodus—symbolic of changes in both political and religious commitments.

Later, on their way to the Promised Land, Moses reiterated to the people their responsibility to live in such a way as to showcase the greatness of God and the value of living in communion with him. He told them (Deut. 4:6-8): "Observe them [God's decrees and laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?"

It was probably not until the reign of Solomon, however, that Old Testament Israel came close to fulfilling this ideal. This was the Golden Age of Israel. The one widely regarded as Israel's greatest king—David—had conquered Jerusalem and made it his headquarters, and given the tribes of Israel a national identity. And his son, Solomon, built upon this legacy using the gift of wisdom he had been wise enough to request of the Lord.

The rest of the world was astonished by the results. “King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart.” (1 Ki. 10:23-24). One of the most famous of his admirers was the queen of Sheba, who expressed what others thought (1 Kings 10:9): “Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.”

It seemed that Israel was indeed the envy of the world for the greatness of the God they served and the value of living in communion with him. And, at least at this point in his life, Solomon was fully aware that he and all of Israel depended on the Lord's help so they might keep fulfilling the purposes God had for them. So he asked for that in his prayer at the dedication of the temple.

But he asked as well for God to listen to the prayers of foreigners who had been drawn to Jerusalem and the temple because of their confidence that such a blessed nation must have a surpassingly great God. Solomon prayed (1 Ki 8:43): “Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.” Afterwards, God appeared to Solomon to tell him that he had heard his prayers.

Israel had the Psalms and prophets to reinforce God's expectations of them. Psalm 67:1, for example, starts this way: “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us.” This is formatted after the Aaronic benediction from Numbers 6:24-26 and asks simply for God's grace to be shown to his people. But the Psalm continues by expressing the hoped for results to come from such a blessing—results that involve God's worldwide mission.

In summary, verse 1 asks, May God bless us? And the next verses give reasons for the request: Verse 2 continues: “so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.” And, the verses that follow say something like: so that the nations of the earth will be glad and sing for joy and praise you.

Notice, the prayer for God to bless us is not so WE will be glad and sing for joy and praise you. (That's a frequent request in Scripture, and a good one. But it's not the request of this Psalm.) This Psalm asks, “May God bless us so that the nations, seeing our blessings, may themselves be drawn to you God and praise you. The last verse of the Psalm summarizes the prayer: “May God bless us still, so that all the ends of the earth will fear him.” This Psalm focuses on mission.

Other Psalms express these sentiments as well. The end that God and his people have in mind, according to Ps. 72:19, is that the “whole earth be filled with his glory.”

And the understanding that accompanies this is that God's people have something to contribute to this reality. Psalm 96 begins, "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples."

Isaiah says something similar in speaking of Israel's task to be a Light to the Nations, light being a symbol and testimony to God's presence and righteous activity. We see this particularly in the so-called servant passages of Isaiah, dealt with in a previous lecture: "The Messianic Hope." We saw there that Isaiah's "servant of the Lord" refers ultimately to Jesus Christ. But, it also refers, in a provisional sense, to the covenant people—to Israel—and especially to the faithful remnant of Israel. So what Isaiah says in the following passages, although fulfilled in Christ, was a mandate for God's chosen people.

- Isaiah 42:6-7. "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."
- How could Israel do that? Isaiah 58 lists a number of things such as feeding the hungry, freeing the oppressed, engaging in true and humble fasting, etc. which will contribute to "your light breaking forth like the dawn."
- Isaiah 49:6 [The Lord] says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."
- Isaiah 60:1,3 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

In sum, although the Old Testament Scriptures don't say nearly as much as the NT about God's heart for the world—think, for example of John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that everyone who believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." And Jesus' Great Commission (Matt. 28:19): "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."

Although the OT doesn't say nearly as much as the NT about God's heart for the world, it is clear there too

- In the way he persistently reaches out in mercy to strangers and aliens
- In the way he incorporates believers among them into the covenant community, even going so far as to include them in Jesus' family tree.

And it is equally clear that God wanted his people to manifest his priorities by living as the community he had gone to such lengths to save, and discipline, and install in a homeland—by living according to his laws, by loving him above all and their neighbors as themselves, by being a light full of grace in a dark world.