

Israel: A People for God
1 Peter 2:9
Tim Becker – June 30, 2019

1. Introduction

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This morning we're continuing our summer sermon series on OT essentials. Our aim for each of these messages is that we will see God interacting in OT times and make a connection to the NT and to our faith today. The first message was on Adam & Eve, the second was on Abraham. And this third message is on Israel.

We will look at 3 questions this morning. Who is Israel? What was their God-given purpose? And what do they and their purpose mean for us today?

2. Who is Israel?

First, who is Israel? Recall that last week we looked at Abraham. Remember that when God talked with him in Genesis 12, there were no Jewish people, no Ten Commandments, no temple, and no land of Israel. He and his wife were past child bearing age and had never had any children. God spoke with him, promising to bless him with offspring and land, promising to make a great nation of him. God had a purpose for this blessing and it extended beyond making Abraham great. God was blessing Abraham so that he and his offspring would be a blessing to all nations.

We saw last week that God's covenant with Abraham is a covenant of love for a sinful mankind, to rescue sinners from all nations, through the cross of Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham. The blessing of Abraham is the rescue. It's God's justifying the ungodly. And it comes only to those sinners who have the faith of Abraham.

Twenty-five years after God's initial promise, God gave Abraham and Sarah one child. Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90. Amazing, having a first child at their age. They named him Isaac, which means "he laughs." Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me."

You might know from your own Bible reading that Abraham had another son born before Isaac. But his mother was not Sarah. Since Sarah was not getting pregnant, she gave Abraham her servant, hoping to have a child by her. A child was born, named Ishmael. But this wasn't the miracle child promised by God, but only the child that Abraham and Sarah made on their own. God's covenant with Abraham was not passed to Ishmael, but only to Isaac. Rom 9:7-8 comments on this when it says, "and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God,

but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.” God’s promise of blessing to be a blessing does not extend to all the biological descendants of Abraham. God sovereignly chose which son to pass the promise to.

Isaac grows up. He marries Rebekah and she too is barren, like Sarah. Isaac prays to God for her and God answers his prayer. Rebekah conceives and gives birth to twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Just as with Ishmael and Isaac, God gives the promise to Jacob, but not Esau.

In Gen 26 God speaks a promise and call to Isaac that is virtually the same as what God promised and called to Abraham his father. We would expect this, right? God told his father Abraham that the blessing and call would extend to Abraham’s offspring. And God did that.

In time, Jacob grows up and marries. God appears to him and in Gen 35 God gives Jacob the same promise that he gave to his fathers, Abraham and Isaac. This is God making clear to Jacob that he is a son of the promise to Abraham. From this, Jacob was to see that he was in the line of offspring through which God would bless all the nations.

At that same time, God changed Jacob’s name to Israel. Now we see the answer to our first question, who is Israel. Israel is Jacob, the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham.

God gives Jacob 12 sons. Each of these sons have families of their own, who in turn have their families. God is fulfilling his promise to Abraham to give him offspring as numerous as the stars. By the time they leave Egypt, about 400 years later, they are a nation of peoples. They are called the children of Israel or just Israel.

* Summary

So, who is Israel? Israel is the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham. And also the name Israel refers to all the offspring of the man Israel.

3. What was Israel’s God-given purpose?

A moment ago, I mentioned Egypt. When the 12 sons of Israel had families of their own, they went to Egypt. They were 70 persons when they went. After 400 years in Egypt, the Israelite population was about 2 million.

As they leave Egypt, the people are now many generations removed from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. How does God view them? Turn in your Bibles to Exodus 19:1-6 and follow along as I read.

Ex 19:1–6 : ¹ On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ² They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³ while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to

the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ 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; ⁶ 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.”

All the earth belongs to God. He could have anything he wanted as his treasured possession. He chose the house of Jacob, that is, the people of Israel. God chose Abraham out of all men to be the father of a great nation and now God has set his affection upon Abraham’s offspring, just as he promised.

God’s plan for the Israelites is that they would be to him a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This means that this nation, Israel, is to represent God to all the nations of the earth. He is calling the entire nation to be priests to him. He’s not talking about who will serve him in the tabernacle, taking care of sacrifices. A little later, that job is given to the sons of Aaron and the Levites. The kind of priesthood here is not to be a gatekeeper between the nations and God, but a visible display of God and proclamation of him. The nations are to see God as they see his people, the nation of Israel.

God’s plan is to use the Israelites to bless the nations. This will require the Israelites to obey God’s commands and worship him alone. They will not spread a true message of God’s greatness and glories if they themselves are not glorying in him. And they will not spread the message of righteousness by faith in God if they themselves are placing their faith in earthly things rather than the God of Heaven.

* Summary

What was Israel’s God-given purpose? To be God’s treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This means that they were to be a visible display of God’s greatness and glories as they obeyed and worshiped him.

4. Who are the sons of Abraham, then and now?

Now let’s see how God’s plan for his people Israel applies to us today. Remember that we read that it is not the children of the flesh who are the sons of Abraham. And so, we saw that Ishmael and Esau are not included in the offspring of the promise, even though they are biological offspring of Abraham.

Romans 9:6 says it this way, “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” The term Israel is used here in two ways. The first refers to ethnicity, biological ancestry. The second refers to the people of God who have received the blessing through Abraham, people who have been counted righteous by God. Not all who are descended from ethnic Israel belong to children-of-promise Israel. Gal 6:16 uses the term Israel of God to refer to the children-of-promise Israel.

So then, what distinguishes these members of the children-of-promise Israel? Faith does. Galatians 3:7 says, “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.” By sons here, the Bible means sons of the promise. Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of God’s promise to Abraham. Only those who personally have faith in God belong to the Israel of promise. This applies to ethnic Israelites and to Gentiles. This applies to the Israelites who lived during the OT times and to Israelites today. This applies to Gentiles then and now.

Friends, if you have saving faith in God, you are part of the Israel of God, even if your ethnicity isn’t Jewish. And if you are an ethnic Jew, please understand that your ethnicity does not save you, but only the faith in you of your forefather Abraham. Only faith in God will save any of us from our sins and his judgment.

First Peter 2:9 is a beautiful confirmation of this. Please turn there in your Bibles, 1 Peter 2:9. Peter has written this letter to followers of Jesus, to those who have repented of their sins and put their faith in Christ. Look with me at the first half of verse of 1 Pet 2:9. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, ...” The Bible is telling the church, these followers of Jesus, that they are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.

Let me remind you of some words we looked at earlier. In Exodus 19:5-6, we saw God telling the people of Israel, “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.” Notice some similar words between this Exodus passage and 1 Peter 2:9. In Exodus God calls Israel a kingdom of priests and in 1 Peter God calls his church a royal priesthood. In Exodus God calls Israel a treasured possession and in 1 Peter God calls his church a people for his own possession. God calls both of them a holy nation. Notice that God is referring to the church with the same language he referred to Israel.

This is good news. In Christ Jesus, God has united the people of faith in the OT with the people of faith in the NT. Ephesians 2:15-16 says it this way, that in Christ Jesus, God created “one new man in place of the two” and reconciled “us both to God in one body through the cross.”

Is there still a distinction between Jew and Gentile? Galatians 3:28 answers, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” And Gal 5:6 answers, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” The ethnic distinction between Jew and Gentile remains, but the spiritual distinction is gone. What counts for righteousness with God is not whether you are circumcised as a Jew or not. What counts is faith in God that shows itself in works of love.

* Summary

Israel's God-given purpose was to be God's treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, so that they would be a visible display of God's greatness and glories, as they obeyed and worshiped him. In the NT era, all those with faith in God are united with Israel to this same blessing and purpose.

5. What does the call to Abraham mean for us today?

When God told Israel that they would be to him a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, he was giving them a responsibility. Does the Israel of God, that is, the church, have this same responsibility, to represent God to the nations? Look back in your Bible at 1 Peter 2:9. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." God's blessing comes with a responsibility. It did for Israel of old and it does for the Israel of God today. The responsibility God calls his people to is to proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Darkness here means sin and death and judgment. Apart from Christ all men are as good as dead with respect to God and his judgment to come. They follow Satan, even if they don't know it. Unless God intervenes, they are destined to receive God's wrath as the just punishment for their sins. This is darkness.

But God has called some of us out of this darkness and into his marvelous light. Light here means humility before God and repentance and mercy and forgiveness and life eternal. They follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, and they know it. Because of Christ's redemption, they are destined to receive God's love and mercy and eternal pleasure with him. This is marvelous light.

Do you deserve this, being called out of darkness and into his marvelous light? Did you earn it? Does God set his affection on you because you are so holy and pure? No. God sets his affection on you because he is so precious, because his mercy is so rich, because his love is so lavish. Our God is excellent in every way: Creator, Sustainer, Savior, Lover, and Judge. His glories are above all.

And when he calls a people out of darkness and into his marvelous light, he does so with the purpose that they will proclaim his excellencies to people of all nations. This is missions work, near and far. Worship of God is the reason the universe exists. John Piper has written that "missions exists because worship doesn't." At the end of this age, all will be put right. All people and creation will worship God with all the joy that is in them. Then missions will be no more. But worship will go on forever. Missions is a call to see God rightly and prize him in heart and life.

* Summary

So, all those blessed by God with salvation are called by God to proclaim his glories to others, just as Abraham and his offspring were. This is missions, near and far.

6. Proclamation's aim

When 1 Peter 2:9 tells those who are redeemed to proclaim God's excellencies, this is not merely a call to give information about God's glories. Information must be given, but the aim is not merely that our hearers understand God's glories. Our aim is that our hearers worship the God of these glories. This will affect both what we tell about God and how we tell it.

Penn State is my undergraduate alma mater and I enjoy Penn State football. If I wanted to proclaim the excellencies of their football program, I could stick to the facts. I could tell you that the team is #8 in all-time total wins, one game behind Oklahoma and Alabama. I could tell you that Penn State is one of 11 schools with five or more inductees in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. I could tell that Beaver Stadium has an official seating capacity of just over 106,000, the second largest stadium in the country. These are good facts. But if my aim was for you to worship the excellencies of my team, I would play you a video clip of a white-out game with 106,000 fans roaring, "We are ... Penn State" over and over after a close win. Or I would show you a clip of Saquon Barkley carrying the ball while literally jumping over the heads of defenders as he runs for a touchdown.

7. God's excellencies

What are God's people to proclaim about him? Facts. But not just the facts.

If you are student of nature or the sciences, God has given you much to admire about him. I recently read a news article about a university lab creating a tiny and extremely light weight robot that flies with little wings modeled after insects. This engineering marvel only confirms for me the wondrous creative engineering mind of our God. These new robots are tethered to a thin cable for power and smarts. But our God built all this, plus the power and smarts, into a tiny dragon fly body and brain. Tiny dragon flies don't just spring into existence on their own. God's creative and engineering mind is so excellent.

If you are student of humanity, God has given you much to admire about him. When I think of a granddaughter delightedly feeding her now feeble and non-verbal grandmother, this only confirms for me how God works in the hearts of people to make them kind and caring, to show his kindness and love. God's kindness and love and his works to purify the hearts of people are so excellent.

And when I hear of terrible injustice, like a black man in Jasper, TX in 1998, beaten by 3 white supremacists and dragged behind a pickup truck for 2 miles until his body was

literally dismembered, this only confirms for me the necessity and goodness of God's justice to come. This world has many deeply sinful wrongs and it will be so wonderful to see God punish and right all of them. God's justice is so excellent.

If you are student of your own soul, God has given you much to admire about him. As I live longer with the Spirit of God in me, I see sins in my heart more deeply and more numerous than I did as a younger man. I'm more readily ashamed of some of my thoughts and actions. I'm more sure than ever that I deserve not God's favor. I deserve not his forgiveness. But this only confirms for me the height and glory of his mercy to me. Seeing my sins only confirms for me the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God on display when the Holy Son of God hung on a cross for my sins. God's love and mercy are so excellent.

And I see ways God is changing me. I've been married to Renee for 41 years and I haven't always loved her well. But God is changing me. He's softening my heart so I'm less selfish and more inclined to treat Renee as I treat my own body. This only confirms for me that the Spirit of God is powerfully able and active, changing the hearts of men. God's Spirit's working holiness inside people is so excellent.

* Summary

Friends, God is excellent every way.

8. Proclamation and words or deeds

Just how does God want us to proclaim his excellencies, in words or deeds? I hope you see that this answer is that both is required. A man who talks lots about God, but who snarls at his neighbor and is lazy at work is not proclaiming God's excellencies, even though he thinks he is. Deeds authenticate words. Our deeds prove that our words are genuine.

On the other hand, a woman who is often helping others and fruitful in her employment, but who has only the fewest of things to say about God is not proclaiming God's excellencies, even though she thinks she is. Words clarify our deeds. Our words make clear that the aim of our deeds is the glory of God, not the glory of me.

9. Proclamation and weakness and sin

We might hesitate to proclaim the excellencies of God because of our weakness and sins. We think that we shouldn't speak up about how great God is when we have so much sin in our lives.

There is a right intuition here. When we sin, we don't show others an accurate view of God, but we profane his name. But let's remember, that God's glory is not that he makes

us sinless in this life, but that he makes us repentant and forgives our sins because of Christ.

Friends, an important part of your proclaiming God's excellencies is to be more transparent about your humility and repentance before God. Let others around you see that you admit you are a sinner and how you prize God's forgiveness of you.

10. Proclamation and personal worship

So, what most holds you and I back from more courageously and more passionately proclaiming God's excellencies? The aim of our proclaiming is that our hearers worship the God of glory. But unless our worship of him is full inside of us, we will only weakly call others to worship him.

Imagine that every new citizen of Wisconsin received a letter from the governor ordering them to proclaim the excellencies of the Packers. So, you watch and cheer out of duty. And you watch just enough games to keep the police from citing you for disobeying the governor's order. And you wear a tiny Packer's pin on your shirt, hoping to avoid the fanatical jersey. With a weak monotone voice, you say, "Go Pack go."

This is how many of us proclaim God's excellencies to the people God has put around us. If you really love the Packers, no one pays you to wear your green and gold on game day. If you really love the Packers, no one is twisting your arm to tell those Vikings fans on Monday morning about the great win. So, if your proclamation of God's excellencies doesn't flow abundantly from you to others, this is not right. It's not what God chose us for. We're not carrying out the purpose for which he saved us. I want to help you. Here are 4 steps.

First, admit where you are in your weak proclaiming of God's excellencies. God knows already. It's for your own sake that you admit it to him.

Second, admit that the problem is that your own worship of God is too weak. We all talk about our praise of what we worship: big fish, adorable grandchildren, newest clothes, coolest video game, chocolate cake, sunny vacations, pretty gals, and handsome guys. If you don't talk about your praise of God, it's probable that your heart's worship of him is too weak. Admit this to God right now.

Third, ask for God's help. Remember, his Spirit is powerfully able and active to change hearts. Plead with him to change yours, such that your loves zero in on his excellencies.

Fourth, become a student of God. I'm not much of a Packers fan. But imagine that I came to you and told you I've tried, but I just can't get excited about them. I want to be a bigger Packers fan, but I can't seem to change. Imagine I asked for your advice. So, you asked me how many games I've been to at Lambeau Field. I told you I've never been to one. You asked me then how often I watch on TV. I told you almost never. You asked me

how often I follow the sports news about them on the internet or radio. And I told you that I only skim the headlines. Wouldn't you think to yourself, "No wonder he has trouble getting excited about the Packers. He's hardly trying."

Friends, if you have a weak joy in God, a weak worship of God, could it be that you aren't doing many of the things that would help you? Come more regularly to worship, to Sunday School, to Bible study. Most Christians in America have never in their entire lives read all of the Bible once. You won't see the excellencies of God without reading much more of God's word. You can do it. It'll be worth it. For your joy and fruitfulness in proclaiming God's excellencies.

11. Conclusion

God made us, just like Israel, to proclaim his excellencies to the world around us. Let's do it with our words and our deeds. Let's do it with humility and repentance. Let's seek to raise our own worship of God, so that we more readily proclaim him to others.