

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

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From Abraham to the Destruction of the Temple

Introduction

Today we're going to look at the sweep of the history of the Israelite nation from their beginnings with the call of Abraham to the end of the era of traditional Jewish worship with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 AD. I want to show how this history represents a continuous development of God's plan for the human race following the Fall, culminating in the blessing of all humanity in and through Christ. Of course for reasons of time we're going to be taking a helicopter view of this history – alighting here and there on interesting and important details but largely or entirely flying over other areas. As always, that doesn't mean that the areas we skip over have nothing to teach us or are unimportant, it's just that for reasons of time we inevitably have to make choices.

The Patriarchal Period - Abraham

Our story begins with the birth of Abram as he was then known. Abram and his descendents, the Fathers of Israel, were known as the Patriarchs and this part of our story is called the Patriarchal period. Abram becomes the central figure and his personal and family story saturates the remainder of this section of the Bible and indeed forms a stream that carries on through the whole of the Bible. The call of Abram initiates a radical new development – God acts in history to set in motion a series of events that will eventually heal the breach that sin has caused between God and His creation.

At one time most scholars wanted to relegate the Patriarchal history to a role of myth invented much later by Israelite writers, perhaps in the 5th or 6th centuries BC. However, archaeologists have now discovered from texts originating in Nuzi, Mari, Babylon and elsewhere that the background related in the Patriarchal history in scripture corresponds very closely to the reality of life in the Middle Bronze Age around 1900 – 1700 BC. W F Albright has concluded that there is no reason to doubt the biographical details of the Patriarchal history.

Abram's story begins in Genesis 11 verses 27-31. Here we learn that Abram's father was Terah, named after a moon deity worshipped in Ur, and there is no indication that he ever turned to Yahweh. Abram married Sarai (later to be renamed Sarah) who was barren – which will become an important point later. The whole family set out from Ur for Canaan, but for some reason stopped half-way in Haran.

God didn't really want Abram to be in Haran, but in Canaan – so God called Abraham to leave his people and household and follow God's leading:

“The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.”
(Genesis 12:1-4 NIV)

This sudden new beginning will be characteristic of the story of the Patriarchal Period. Abram commenced a life in which he was generally obedient to God, by fully responding to

God's leading, although he did lapse into sinfulness on a number of occasions, as we shall see. God's command and His accompanying promises were to become the basis of a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants. Abram is to be blessed and is to be a blessing to others. God has not yet made a covenant with him, that will come later, but the shape that covenant will take is already emerging.

Abraham's call is both dramatic and specific, and the sudden new beginning it gives him provides a model for the rest of Patriarchal History. Furthermore, the universal nature of the promised blessing in Genesis 12:3: "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you", gives us preview of the universal salvation that God was to provide. It also makes it clear that although the Israelites were to be special, God's chosen people, God's salvation was always to be universal – for all mankind. God gives each one of us a new beginning when we turn to Christ in faith.

It's evident that Abram's responding to God's call has dramatically increased his intimacy with God, because Abram communicates with God several times on his journey (Genesis 12:7-8). When we respond to God's call it always increases our intimacy with Him. But then comes a fall from grace as a famine causes Abram to enter into Egypt, and Abram, in fear, passes Sarai off as his sister rather than his wife (Genesis 12:13) - in fact she really was his half sister (Genesis 20:12). This results in Pharaoh taking Sarai for his wife, which in turn results in God bringing punishment on Pharaoh in the form of diseases (Genesis 12:17). Pharaoh now somehow learns the truth, rebukes Abram, and gives Sarai back to him along with material gifts.

So Abraham leaves Egypt, along with his brother Lot and his ill-gotten wealth and goes through the Negev to a place between Bethel and Ai (Genesis 13:3). Abram and Lot were unable to stay in the same place because they had too many flocks and herds, so they parted (Genesis 13:6). God then again spoke to Abram – note God is still using Abram in spite of his failures – and shows him the land he had already promised him:

"The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you." (Genesis 13:14-17 NIV)

On their separation, Lot had gone to live in Sodom and when that city was attacked he was captured and carried off – but Abram rescued him (Genesis 14:1-16). As Abram is returning from this mission he meets with a man, a priest of God, who will later become of considerable importance – Melchizedek, a name which means "king of righteousness".

Melchizedek blesses Abram:

"After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything." (Genesis 14:17-20 NIV)

So we see that Melchizedek was king of Salem, a city traditionally identified with Jerusalem and Abram's giving him a tenth of everything is the origin of our tithing. Certainly Melchizedek has the right perspective as he gives God the credit for Abram's victory. Melchizedek now disappears from scripture until he resurfaces in Psalm 110 and in the book

of Hebrews, where we are told that Christ is a high priest in the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:10). Of course, Christ could not be a high priest in the traditional sense, as he was in the line of Judah, whereas priests were in the line of Levi. But the book of Hebrews tells us that Christ was in an even more foundational priestly line, that of Melchizedek. Here we need to remember that Levi was not yet born, he was only in contemplation as a future descendant of Abram. So Melchizedek has precedence over Levi and thus the priesthood of Christ has replaced the Levitical priesthood.

Following this episode God again reveals himself one night to Abram and they have their first dialogue:

“..... the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."” (Genesis 15:1-5 NIV)

In response to these promises Abram put his faith in God:

“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6 NIV) This is the first time the idea of faith appears in scripture. This is supremely important because it leads us towards the doctrine of salvation by faith in God’s promises expressed in the salvific death of Christ on the cross.

God then proceeds to confirm his promises to Abram by making a covenant with him (Genesis 15:18). The idea of God’s dealings with us and His promises to us being expressed as covenants is hugely important, but there is a limit to what we can cover in one Teaching Morning, so I’m not going to focus on the idea of covenant today. Although I do want to point out that all God’s covenants with mankind were made entirely at God’s instigation and at times and on terms that were fully determined by God and were purely an expression of God’s grace towards us. Indeed mankind played no part at all in any of the covenants, other than the Sinai covenant, all the other covenants were promises made entirely and solely by God. In addition to making the covenant with Abram, God also reveals the coming slavery of the Israelite nation in Egypt and his plan to rescue them:

“Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.” (Genesis 15:13-14 NIV)

God also reiterates his earlier promise from Genesis chapter 13 to give Abram’s descendants a land to live in and now tells him the extent of it:

“On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”” (Genesis 15:18-21 NIV)

this was the land of Canaan, the so called Promised Land.

In fact this promise was fully realised, but it only endured for a short time during the height of David’s reign and part of Solomon’s reign before the Israelites unfaithfulness to God started to bring about the collapse of their empire.

Abram had originally expressed faith in God's promise to give him offspring, but Sarai remained childless and Abraham and his wife Sarai both became impatient and Sarai told Abram to conceive a child through her maidservant Hagar (Genesis 16:3) – which duly came to pass (Genesis 16:4). Just as Abraham had presented Sarai to Pharaoh, Sarai now presents Abram to Hagar. But Sarai became jealous and mistreated Hagar (Genesis 16:6). Hagar briefly fled the household until an Angel of the Lord told her to return and submit to Sarai (Genesis 16:9). Even Hagar receives a divine revelation. The Angel also told Hagar that she was pregnant and would have a son who was to be called Ishmael (Genesis 16:11).

Some time later, God confirmed his covenant to give Abraham offspring through Sarai and told Abram that his name was to be changed to Abraham and told Abraham that circumcision was to be a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's descendants:

“You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.” (Genesis 17:11 NIV)

At the same time, God changed Sarai's name to Sarah (Genesis 17:15) which means "princess". God then tells Abraham that Sarah will bear him a son, to be called Isaac, within the year and that Isaac, rather than Ishmael will be the beneficiary of God's covenant:

“But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.” (Genesis 17:21 NIV)

Abraham, his son Ishmael and all the men in his household were duly circumcised (Genesis 17:23) and the vision of a further son was duly confirmed by an Angelic visitation (Genesis 18:1-19).

Next we come to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, because they had become so wicked and here Abraham intercedes and pleads for God's mercy for them – but I'm going to skip over that today.

Abraham moved on again and as he moved again passed his wife off as his sister (Genesis 20:2) – again with bad consequences – do we never learn? But then Sarah became pregnant by Abraham with the promised child, a male child who was to be called Isaac (which means “he laughs”), and she gave birth. Soon afterwards Ishmael mocked them (Genesis 21:9) and Sarah again caused Ishmael and his mother Hagar to be cast out of the household (Genesis 21:10) (even though she and any child she might bear should have been fully accepted in the household under the customs of those times). Hagar and Ishmael duly went on their way and survived as a separate family.

After several years God tested Abraham by calling on him to go and sacrifice his son Isaac: “Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.” (Genesis 22:1-2 NIV)

Later in Levitical tradition the burnt offering would become an offering to be consumed whole by fire on the altar. Moriah, was, of course, the location of Jerusalem, the place where Temple sacrifices were carried out and the place where Christ was crucified. Abraham had already lost one child, was he now to lose another.

but Abraham duly went:

“Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.” (Genesis 22:3 NIV)

The site of the intended sacrifice is often identified as the eventual site of the Israelite Temple in Jerusalem. I don't think we should see this as either Abraham or God promoting child sacrifice, but rather we should see it as Abraham's extreme unquestioning obedience to God's will. We don't know what, if anything, Abraham and Isaac said to each other on the journey, scripture has not given us any record.

God pushed Abraham to the limit and Abraham went forward with the plans for the sacrifice until the 11th hour and the 59th minute:

“Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.” (Genesis 22:6-10 NIV)

Isaac carries the wood for the burnt offering, just as Christ carried his cross to Calvary. His question about the lamb for the burnt offering shows that he knows what is involved in this act of worship. Abraham must by now have had such a great faith in God that he believed God would resurrect Isaac from the dead in order that God's promises to Abraham concerning Abraham's descendants might be fulfilled. Isaac also displays great faith, he displays the faith that co-operates as he must have known that he was to be the offering when he was bound and laid on the altar and if he was old enough to carry the wood – he was probably a teenager by now – he would certainly have been strong enough to resist.

But at the last minute Abraham was released from his predicament:

“But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”” (Genesis 22:11-14 NIV)

God provides an animal as a sacrifice in substitution for Isaac, which prepares us for idea of Israelite substitutionary animal sacrifice, which was to be introduced later, and for the ultimate and final substitutionary sacrifice made on behalf of us all – Christ. The story also gives us a model of the sacrificial faith that God demands from his people and of God's provision for those who have faith in Him.

God repeats some of his covenant promises to Abraham, including the promise of universal blessing through his descendants:

“..... "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”” (Genesis 22:16-18 NIV)

Some time later Sarah died and was buried in land Abraham purchased from the Hittites (Genesis 23). Even though Abraham has been promised this land in due course, he doesn't have it yet, and so he buys a plot from the current owners the Hittites. It's the only piece of land which Abraham comes to possess during his lifetime. It will be many years before his descendants gain the Promised Land.

So obedience to God's call and leading were key for Abraham and they are key for us today too. Look at what great and amazing things were emerging from Abraham's one initial small act of obedience to God's call. Note too how God can use us in spite of our flaws and failures. Abraham twice prostituted his wife to keep him out of danger, doubted God's provision to the extent that he made his own plan of having a child by a maidservant when God's plan took longer than he expected and then threw his mistress and child out of his house.

The Patriarchal Period - Isaac

Later still Abraham was old and made his chief servant swear to get a wife for Isaac from amongst Abraham's own people (Genesis 24:3-4) – even though Abraham had had no compunctions about his own wife co-habiting with an Egyptian or making his Egyptian maid pregnant. The servant went back to that country and brought back a wife for Isaac – Rebekah (Genesis 24). In due course Rebekah became pregnant, note that Isaac prayed for her (Genesis 25:21) (unlike Abraham with Sarah) and also note his different handling of the situation – no attempts to conceive through surrogate mothers here. When she was pregnant Rebekah received a message for the Lord concerning her children:

"The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to enquire of the LORD. The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them." (Genesis 25:22-26 NIV)

Jostled is actually a very weak translation of the Hebrew here – abuse or crush would carry the sense better – so Jacob and Esau were at loggerheads from the beginning. God's explanation must have been surprising to Rebekah and perhaps we can see this as colouring her later actions in favouring Jacob over Esau. Scripture has already given two instances of fraternal rivalry – Cain and Abel and Ishmael and Isaac – and on both occasions the older brother emerges in an unfavourable light. The pattern is repeated as Esau sells – in fact virtually gives away – his birthright:

"Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.) Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?" But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright." (Genesis 25:29-34 NIV)

Usually when this story is mentioned it's Jacob and Rebekah who are condemned, but as you can see the text puts Esau in an unfavourable light. The writer to the Hebrews does the same thing (Hebrews 12:16).

There was then a famine in the land and Isaac sought refuge with the Philistines, having been told by God not to go to Egypt (Genesis 26:1-2). He repeats his father Abraham's sinful and deceitful behaviour by passing off his wife Rebekah as his sister (Genesis 26:7) to Abimelech king of the Philistines – although in this case Abimelech did not take Rebekah as a concubine, because he finds out that she is Isaac's wife (Genesis 26:9). Isaac became so rich and powerful that Abimelech sent him away (Genesis 26:16). At this time the Lord appears to Isaac, revealing himself as the God of Abraham, but does not give Isaac a new name as he did with Abraham (Genesis 26:24). Isaac's response is to build an altar (Genesis 26:25), following the example of Abraham and anticipating the response of his son Jacob. The idea of the god of my/your/his father is prevalent up to the time of Moses, but disappears after the Sinai covenant between God and the whole Israelite nation.

Abimelech then has second thoughts about making an enemy of Isaac and concludes a binding peace treaty with him (Genesis 26:26-29). Esau then shows his unfitness to be heir to Isaac by marrying not one but two Hittite women without his father's permission to the grief of both Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 26:34-35).

The Patriarchal Period – Jacob

Isaac is now near death and sends Esau hunting to make a last meal for him (Genesis 27:1-4). Jacob then acts in a most underhand way to pass himself off as his brother Esau – with the connivance of his mother Rebekah – in order to steal his father's blessing while Esau is absent. Jacob is afraid that this will bring a curse on him rather than a blessing, but Rebekah offers to take on herself any blame that may arise – the first scriptural example of someone offering themselves as the recipient of a curse on behalf of another. In due course Isaac duly blesses Jacob and unwittingly, but prophetically, states: "May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed." (Genesis 27:29 NIV)

Esau then returns and tries to claim his blessing, but it's too late – the blessing has already been given and cannot be revoked (Genesis 27:30-40). Esau then thinks of killing his brother Jacob and Rebekah urges Jacob to flee to their kinsman Laban in Haran – far to the North and East as we've already seen (Genesis 27:41-44). It's worth noting that in the OT movement to the East is generally bad and movement to the West is good – in any event Jacob never finds peace until he eventually returns to Canaan. Surprisingly, Isaac apparently approves the emigration plan, and blesses Jacob before he goes on his way (Genesis 28:1-5). Although Jacob has stolen the material inheritance that was rightfully Esau's by deception, it seems that he did not need to steal the inheritance of the Patriarchal blessing, as this is voluntarily bestowed on Jacob by Isaac, even after Isaac has become aware of Jacob's deception (Genesis 28:4). All the scheming and deception were unnecessary as regards the *real* blessing. I believe this is why Paul says that neither Ishmael nor Esau were part of the chosen people of Israel (Romans 9:6-9).

Yahweh had not yet revealed himself to Jacob, but on his way to Haran he settles down for the night and has a vision of angels ascending and descending a stairway (rather than a ladder) to heaven and the Lord speaks to him:

“There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (Genesis 28:13-15 NIV)

So God reveals himself as the God of Jacob’s grandfather and of his father. God confirms Isaac's blessing, Jacob is indeed the inheritor of the Patriarchal blessing. God has chosen Jacob and his descendants as the means whereby God will mediate his blessings to the world. Note the shift in terms from “getting” the blessing to “being” the blessing. In the morning Jacob built a pillar as a memorial to the Lord and decided to call the place Bethel. This is the fifth text in Genesis (cf. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4) to refer to a patriarch (and/or his offspring) as the means of worldwide blessing. As with Abraham and Melchizedek (Gen. 14:20), Jacob commits himself to give a tithe, *a tenth*, as a token of his relationship with God (Genesis 28:22).

Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of Laban. Jacob first meets with Laban’s daughter Rachel and falls in love with her (Genesis 29:1-18). Jacob is received into Laban’s home and after some time negotiates an agreement with Laban that he will work for Laban for seven years in return for Rachel’s hand in marriage – although Laban’s agreement “it is better that I give her to you” (Genesis 29:19) was perhaps deliberately ambiguous and preparing his way for his later deception. Just as he had deceived his father Isaac about identity, Jacob is now deceived in his turn by Laban. When the seven years are up, Laban passes off his elder daughter Leah on Jacob on their wedding night with the excuse that amongst his people the younger daughter cannot be married before the elder (Genesis 29:20-26). Jacob was not at all pleased with the substitution but Laban proposes that he finish his bridal week with Leah and then he will receive Rachel as a second wife in return for a further seven years of service and Jacob agrees (Genesis 29:27-28).

Leah was fertile and bore Jacob four sons Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah (Genesis 29:32-35) – it’s interesting that two of the major institutions of the OT, the priesthood through Levi and kingship through Judah, have their origins in an unwanted and loveless marriage. But, all this time, Rachel was infertile and unhappy (Genesis 30:1). Rachel now resorted to the same stratagem that Abraham’s wife Sarah had used – she got Jacob to make her maid Bilhah pregnant, to produce adoptive children, and Bilhah bore two sons who were named Dan and Naphtali (Genesis 30:3-8). By this time Leah had stopped having children and she also got Jacob to sleep with her maid Zilpah who bore him two sons Gad and Asher (Genesis 30:9-13). Later Leah bore Jacob two further sons Issachar and Zebulun and a daughter Dinah (Genesis 30:17-21). Rachel now became pregnant herself and bore a son Joseph (Genesis 30:22-24). The names of these various children are full of meaning, but we don’t really have time to look at that today.

After the birth of Joseph, Jacob wanted to leave Laban, but Laban knew that he had been enriched by Jacob because God was with Jacob. Consequently Laban asked Joseph to stay and they agreed that Jacob would continue working for Laban in return for taking every

spotted, speckled or dark coloured sheep and every spotted or speckled goat from Laban's herds (Genesis 30:25-34). In the Mediterranean world the sheep are normally white and the goats black, so Jacob is requesting the irregular, abnormal parts of Laban's flock.

Jacob profited greatly from this arrangement and Laban's sons became unhappy and God told Jacob to return to Canaan (Genesis 31:1-13). Jacob left without telling Laban, taking only his own possessions, but Rachel stole her father's household gods (Genesis 31:14-19) – this is a new crime godnapping! Rachel may have stolen them to ensure that Jacob would be Laban's heir, but we can't be sure.

Laban pursued Jacob and caught up with him and accused him of carrying off his daughters as captives and also of stealing his gods, although he adds that the Lord has told him not to harm Jacob (Genesis 31:22-25). Jacob told Laban that he was afraid Laban wouldn't let him go with his wives and possessions, but that he doesn't have his gods and that if any of his party have them they should be killed (Genesis 31:31-32). Laban can't find his gods which are hidden by Rachel (who sits on them) and after dispute between Jacob and Laban they make a peace agreement (Genesis 31:33-45).

Jacob was afraid of a meeting with Esau on his return to Canaan and he sent messengers ahead of him who returned and told Jacob that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. Jacob divided his party, prayed to the Lord – the God of Abraham and Isaac – to be rescued and sent herds ahead of him as gifts to Esau (Genesis 32:1-20). He sent his family ahead, then spent the night alone by the Jabbok river (Genesis 32:21-22). This hardly puts Jacob in a good light; he kept as far away from Esau as possible. That night he wrestled with an angel of God, and God told him that his name was to be changed to Israel, or let El [God] rule (Genesis 32:24-30). The deceptive, unreliable Jacob is about to become a much more upright figure – Israel. Jacob was injured in the tendon of his hip and limped, perhaps to remind him that God could overpower him – Genesis 32:32 says that for that reason the Jews didn't eat this part of an animal, although we find no further mention of this in scripture.

This encounter seems to have brought about a change of attitude in Jacob as he now goes ahead of his parties to meet Esau (Genesis 33:1-3). They duly met and Esau is not angry, he embraces Jacob, and Jacob introduces his wives and children (Genesis 33:4-7). Jacob is now reconciled with both God and his brother. Jacob doesn't continue with Esau (Genesis 33:12-16), indeed as far as we know, they only meet again briefly at the funeral of their father. Instead Jacob goes to Succoth where he buys land from Hamor the Hivite and establishes himself (Genesis 33:17-19). Soon after one of Hamor's sons rapes Jacob's daughter Dinah. Hamor asks for Dinah as his son's wife and Jacob's sons respond deceitfully that this will be agreed if all Hamor's menfolk are all circumcised (Genesis 34:1-15). They did indeed circumcise themselves and before they could recover, two of Jacob's sons killed all the men (Genesis 34:24-26). They then looted Hamor's city and carried off all the women and plunder (Genesis 34:27-29). Jacob was then afraid that the other people in the area would attack them in turn, and they moved off to Bethel (as God directed Jacob) after burying all the foreign gods they had in their possession (presumably Laban's household gods stolen by Rachel and any gods taken from Hamor's city) (Genesis 34:30-35:4).

At Bethel God again appeared to Jacob and re-iterated Jacob's change of name and God's promises to him:

“God said to him, "Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel." So he named him Israel. And God said to him, "I am God Almighty; be

fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you.” (Genesis 35:10-12 NIV)

Israel moved on from Bethel to Ephrath and on the way Rachel gave birth to Benjamin, but she died in childbirth (Genesis 35:19). So Jacob now had twelve sons, but he failed to control them, apparently taking no action when the eldest, Reuben, slept with his concubine (Genesis 35:22).

Esau lived apart from Israel and also had a number of sons who later became the Edomites (Genesis 36), who were much later subjected by King David.

The Patriarchal Period – Joseph

Israel’s mishandling of his children continued as he made Joseph his favourite (Genesis 37:3) – even though he should have been aware from his own youth of the problems this would cause. Joseph dreamed that the other children bowed down to him and had another dream where his parents also bowed down to him (Genesis 37:5-11). These are the first dreams in scripture where the voice of God doesn’t speak directly. The dreams were prophetic as we shall see, but from a young favourite, they inevitably led to the other children hating him even more. Not only is he the favourite son, but a megalomaniac as well! When they eventually got him alone in the desert, as a result of his father sending him on a 65 mile journey to visit his brothers, they threw him into an empty water cistern and sold him for 20 shekels of silver as a slave to a party of Ishmaelites on their way to Egypt (Genesis 37:22-28). Later Biblical Law would prohibit such action, deeming it a capital crime.

Joseph’s brothers take his robe, tear it and dip it in blood, planning to tell their father Jacob that Joseph must have been eaten by a wild animal (Genesis 37:31-33). Jacob was taken in by their deception and mourned for Joseph (Genesis 37:34-35). It’s ironic that Joseph deceived his father with the skin of a young goat, now he’s deceived by a garment dipped into the blood of a goat. Meanwhile Joseph entered into slavery:

“Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.” (Genesis 37:36 NIV)

The scriptural account then switches to cover the sexual sins of Joseph’s brother Judah, but I’m going to skip over that, except to just mention that one of the women that Judah illicitly had sex with, Tamar, is one of the few women to feature in the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

The Lord was with Joseph in Egypt and Potiphar put him in charge of his household (Genesis 39:4). Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph, but he refused her advances, so she told Potiphar that he had tried to rape her (Genesis 39:16-19). Joseph apparently didn’t have much opportunity to defend himself and was thrown into prison (Genesis 39:20). Again the Lord was with Joseph and he was placed in charge of the prison (Genesis 39:22). Pharaoh’s cupbearer and chief baker were also sent to the same prison – it was the place for the king’s prisoners (Genesis 39:20) – a prison for important persons rather than slaves, so Potiphar may not have entirely believed his wife’s accusations.

The cupbearer and baker both had dreams (Genesis 40:5), which Joseph was able to interpret for them, and his interpretations – that the baker would be executed and the cupbearer released (Genesis 40:8-19) – soon came to pass (Genesis 40:20-22). Joseph asked the cupbearer to mention him to Pharaoh and try and secure his release, but once he was free the

cupbearer forgot Joseph who remained in prison (Genesis 40:23). A couple of years later Pharaoh also had a dream which no one could interpret and the cupbearer remembered Joseph's skills with dreams and Joseph was duly called before Pharaoh (Genesis 41:1-14). He told Pharaoh that his dream meant that God was showing Pharaoh that Egypt would have seven years of record harvests and that there would then be seven years of famine in the whole region (Genesis 41:25-32). Joseph suggested that Pharaoh should put a wise man in charge of Egypt to store up grain in the seven record years so that there would be food in the famine years (Genesis 41:33-36).

Pharaoh told Joseph that since God had made all this known to him, he would be placed in charge, and in a few short moments Joseph's status was elevated from prisoner to prime minister, second in authority only to Pharaoh (Genesis 41:38-41). Joseph was given a robe, a signet ring of authority a new name and a wife and sent out to carry out his plan (Genesis 41:42-45).

Everything went as Joseph, with God's leading, had foreseen, and when the famine years arrived people came from all the surrounding countries to buy grain (Genesis 41:47-57), including Joseph's family (Genesis 42:1-3). All Joseph's brothers, other than Benjamin, the youngest, were sent to Egypt by Israel (Genesis 42:3-4). Joseph recognised his brothers, but they didn't recognise him (Genesis 42:7-8). He accused them of being spies and said that they would not be allowed to leave unless their youngest brother came also. He kept Simeon as a hostage and sent the others back home to bring Benjamin (Genesis 42:9-34). Israel didn't want to let Benjamin go, Reuben offered to protect him giving his own sons as surety, but Israel still wouldn't let Benjamin go (Genesis 42:36-38).

Some time later they were so short of food that Israel relented and sent Benjamin off with his brothers along with presents for Joseph (Genesis 43:1-13). When they arrived, Joseph invited them all to eat with him (Genesis 43:16-17), and sent them off with grain, but put his silver cup in Benjamin's sack (Genesis 44:1-3). Joseph then sent his servants after them, who duly found the silver cup and brought the brothers back to Joseph (Genesis 44:4-13). Joseph said he would keep Benjamin as a slave for his theft, but the other brothers protested that their father would die (Genesis 44:16-34). Then Joseph could contain himself no longer and revealed himself to his brothers and told them that he believed that God had sent him to Egypt to preserve the people of the whole region in the famine (Genesis 45:1-8). Then he sent the brothers back to their father with instructions to bring him to Egypt where he, Joseph, would look after them all (Genesis 45:9-11).

Israel was convinced and this conviction was reinforced as God spoke to him in a vision: "And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, "Jacob! Jacob!" "Here I am," he replied. "I am God, the God of your father," he said. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes."" (Genesis 46:2-4 NIV)

Pharaoh received Israel and all Joseph's brothers into Egypt and allowed them to settle in Goshen (Genesis 46:34; 47:5-11). In the remaining years of the famine Joseph took all the inhabitants money, livestock and land in exchange for food and Pharaoh came to own everything. After the famine they were allowed to continue to farm, but they had to give one-fifth of their crops to Pharaoh (Genesis 47:4-26).

Joseph's brothers increased in numbers over the years and Israel's family – the Israelites – became prosperous and very numerous (Genesis 47:27). When Israel was near death he made Joseph swear that he would carry him back to his own land and not bury him in Egypt. Then he gave the final pronouncements he had received from God to Joseph: "Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there he blessed me and said to me, 'I am going to make you fruitful and will increase your numbers. I will make you a community of peoples, and I will give this land as an everlasting possession to your descendants after you.' "Now then, your two sons born to you in Egypt before I came to you here will be reckoned as mine; Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are mine. Any children born to you after them will be yours; in the territory they inherit they will be reckoned under the names of their brothers." (Genesis 48:3-6 NIV)

Israel then blessed Joseph's sons, and gives them a status almost equal to his own sons (Genesis 48:1-5) – that's why later on the descendants of Joseph held two half-tribal allotments, one for each of the two sons. Both Joseph and Israel are now ancestral fathers of the Israelites. Interestingly, Israel gives the principal blessing to the youngest son Ephraim rather than the first born Manasseh, so repeating what had happened between him and Esau in his own youth – except that no element of deception was involved here (Genesis 48:11-20). This sort of preference was later forbidden by Israelite law (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Israel followed this by blessing all the twelve brothers from his own loins – Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph and Benjamin – the twelve tribes of Israel to be (Joseph becoming the two half tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh) (Genesis 49:1-28). After all this Israel died and was buried in Canaan by Joseph as he had requested (Genesis 48:29-49:13). Joseph lived on in Egypt until his own death (Genesis 50:22-26). So the Patriarchal era came to an end as the Israelites started to form a nation.

In many ways Joseph was the least flawed of all the Patriarchs, but as we've seen, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were flawed and sinful people. If God could use them to fulfil his plans and purposes he can use us too – we just need to be willing to hear His voice and respond to his call on our lives.

Slavery in Egypt and God's Deliverance

The Israelites grew greatly in numbers in Egypt and after some time there was a new Pharaoh who didn't know or remember Joseph and what he had done (Exodus 1:8-10). He was afraid of the Israelites because they were becoming so numerous and so he enslaved them (Exodus 1:11), the beginning of the fulfilment of the prophecy of 400 years of slavery given to Abraham (Genesis 15:13). The Israelites were enslaved for 400 years as had been prophesied, but God delivered them out of that slavery in Egypt in the Exodus and brought them to their new home, the Promised Land, in the most significant redemptive event in the OT.

As part of the oppression of the Israelite slaves Pharaoh ordered that all male babies be thrown into the Nile whilst female babies were allowed to live (Exodus 1:22). One male baby was not literally thrown into the Nile, but carefully floated in a basket in a kind of subversive obedience to Pharaoh's decree (Exodus 2:1-3). He was retrieved by a princess from Pharaoh's household who gave him the name Moses (Exodus 2:5-10). He was raised by this princess as a member of the royal household, but as he attained adulthood he was moved by the plight of his own ethnic people. He clearly felt a call to help them, but he got ahead of

God's plan and killed an Egyptian overseer who was oppressing an Israelite (Exodus 2:11-12).

Moses quickly realised that his crime had been discovered and fled to Midian (Exodus 2:14-15) where he became a shepherd for 40 years, training in God's school of the desert. In Egypt he learned about worldly matters, in the desert he learned about spiritual issues. He probably felt totally useless and completely abandoned by God, but then one day when he was miles from home God called him – the first time he had spoken to the Israelites for over 400 years:

“So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight— why the bush does not burn up." When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:3-10 NIV)

God's timing is not our timing and He calls us in the most unexpected places at the most unexpected times and in the most unexpected ways. Moses made a small response to God by turning aside and as he did so God drew him further into his purposes. God told him that he was aware of the Israelites plight and that he was now going to act and fulfil his promises to Abraham by leading the Israelites into the Promised Land. Moses protests a bit, but God assures him that, although initially Pharaoh won't initially let the Israelites go, he will be with him and will perform mighty wonders to compel Pharaoh to accept (Exodus 3:11-20). Moses further protests that he isn't eloquent of speech, and God agrees to give him Aaron the Levite to speak for him (Exodus 4:10-16). So, eventually Moses accepts God's call, meets up with Aaron and goes off to meet Pharaoh. First though, he meets with the Israelite leaders and performs signs and wonders which God had enabled him to do, and the Israelites believe and worship the Lord (Exodus 4:29-31).

When Moses meets with Pharaoh, Pharaoh is indeed resistant and God inflicts nine plagues of increasing severity on the Egyptians – but Pharaoh still won't let the Israelites go (Exodus 5-10). These plagues were all designed to be against particular Egyptian gods, that's an interesting topic, but I'm afraid we don't have time to cover it today. Finally God announces that He will send a tenth plague in which all the firstborn in Egypt will die:

“So Moses said, "This is what the LORD says: ‘About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any man or animal.’ Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.” (Exodus 11:4-7 NIV)

the Israelites were to be saved from this tenth plague by a Passover sacrifice:

“The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, “This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbour, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the door-frames of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. Do not eat the meat raw or cooked in water, but roast it over the fire—head, legs and inner parts. Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD’s Passover. “On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance.” (Exodus 12:1-14 NIV)

This plague on the firstborn led to the ordinance of the consecration of every firstborn male to the Lord:

“you are to give over to the LORD the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the LORD. Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons. “In days to come when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.’” (Exodus 13:12-14 NIV)

Clearly, we can see in the Passover sacrifice, God’s preparation for the beginning of the idea of substitutionary sacrifice – the death of a sacrificial animal in place of and in substitution for a sinful human which was soon to be inaugurated as an integral part of Jewish worship. More importantly we can also see it as a pointer to the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God, on the cross so that God’s judgement on our sins will “pass-over” us.

Following this tenth plague Pharaoh and all the Egyptians were so shocked that they let the Israelites go as God had predicted (Exodus 12:31-33; 40-41). Indeed the Egyptians gave the Israelites gold and silver and other valuable articles so that they were enriched as they parted – just as had been prophesied to Abraham (Exodus 12:35-36). But Pharaoh soon changed his mind again and sent his army in pursuit of the Israelites (Exodus 14:5-9). This led to another major miracle, the temporary parting of the sea so that the Israelites were enabled to cross on dry ground but the Egyptian army was engulfed when they followed:

“Then the LORD said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.” (Exodus 14:15-17 NIV)

Clearly, these miracles were a series of powerful graphic events, which had an enormous influence in cementing the faith of the people of Israel in their God. Remembrance of the miracle of the tenth plague was perpetuated by the annual “Feast of the Passover” an important feast which would serve to perpetuate the memory of the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt by their God (Exodus 13:7-10) as did the annual “feast of the unleavened bread” to celebrate the Exodus generally (Exodus 23:15) and also the ordinance of the consecration of the firstborn (Exodus 13:12-14).

I deliberately haven’t given much chronological information so far, because the dating is so doubtful. Indeed the date of the Exodus is also far from certain, but I believe the most likely period is the first half of the 13th century BC because (i) the Israel stele of Pharaoh Merneptah claims that he subdued Israel in Canaan in around 1209 BC, thus the Exodus must have taken place at least some fifty or sixty years before that, and (ii) the store city of Raamses referred to in Exodus 1:11 is most likely Pi-Rameses built by Rameses II just after 1300 BC and the Exodus must have taken place after that. Having said all that, many scholars opt for an earlier date for the Exodus, around 1440 BC.

Later during the Exodus, God performed many further miracles. He fed the people with manna from heaven when they were hungry:

“Then the LORD said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions.” (Exodus 16:4 NIV)

“The people of Israel called the bread manna. It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.” (Exodus 16:31 NIV)

God even sent the Israelites meat in the form of quails when they tired of manna:

““I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, ‘At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.’” That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.” (Exodus 16:12-13 NIV)

God purified water for them:

“When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.) So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What are we to drink?” Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the LORD made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them.” (Exodus 15:23-25 NIV)

and even produced water from the rocks of the desert:

“I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel.” (Exodus 17:6 NIV)

The number, power and extent of these miracles alone would surely be sufficient to make the events of the Exodus central to Israel’s faith, but God also used this time to enter into a new covenant with his people:

“Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be

for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the LORD had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, “We will do everything the LORD has said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.” (Exodus 19:3-8 NIV)

giving them the ten commandments:

[“So Moses went down to the people and told them. And God spoke all these words: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. “You shall have no other gods before me. “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand *generations* of those who love me and keep my commandments. “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. “Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. “You shall not murder. “You shall not commit adultery. “You shall not steal. “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.”” (Exodus 19:25-20:17 NIV)]

God also gave the Law (Exodus 21-23), instructed them how to make a place of worship, the Tent of Meeting and also the Ark of the Covenant.

But the Israelite were already displaying their rebellious nature, whilst Moses was away speaking to God and receiving his commandments, they made a golden idol:

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered round Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”” (Exodus 32:1 NIV)

and were punished:

“And the LORD struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.” (Exodus 32:35 NIV)

They also refused to go up and take possession of the Promised Land, because the spies Moses had sent brought back unfavourable reports:

“They gave Moses this account: “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there.” (Numbers 13:27-28 NIV)

all apart from Joshua and Caleb:

“Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.”” (Numbers 13:30 NIV)

Indeed the Israelites even wanted to go back into slavery:

“That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."” (Numbers 14:1-4 NIV)

So God was extremely angry:

“The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?" (Numbers 14:11 NIV)

Moses prayed for the Israelites and in his mercy God forgave them, but he decreed that those who had seen all his miracles, but had still refused to trust him would not enter the Promised Land:

“The LORD replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times— not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No-one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.” (Numbers 14:20-23 NIV)

only Joshua and Caleb would enter the Promised Land:

“Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.” (Numbers 14:30 NIV)

so the journey to the Promised Land which should have taken a couple of weeks actually lasted 38 years.

Following this and other rebellions the Levites under Aaron were appointed as an official priesthood:

“The LORD said to Aaron, "You, your sons and your father's family are to bear the responsibility for offences against the sanctuary, and you and your sons alone are to bear the responsibility for offences against the priesthood. Bring your fellow Levites from your ancestral tribe to join you and assist you when you and your sons minister before the Tent of the Testimony. They are to be responsible to you and are to perform all the duties of the Tent, but they must not go near the furnishings of the sanctuary or the altar, or both they and you will die.” (Numbers 18:1-3 NIV)

But the people continued to rebel and even Moses was guilty of disobedience to the Lord and was disqualified from leading the people into the Promised Land:

“"Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so that they and their livestock can drink." So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."” (Numbers 20:8-12 NIV)

So when the time of Moses' death came near Joshua was to be appointed leader in his stead and Moses addressed the Israelites, exhorting them to trust the Lord and obey his commandments. After Moses' death God told Joshua to make ready to cross the Jordan river and enter into and possess the Promised Land.

The Conquest of the Promised Land

After the death of Moses the Lord spoke to Joshua and commanded him to lead the Israelites across the Jordan and into the Promised Land in fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham (Joshua 1:1-6). The Lord told Joshua to be strong and courageous, to obey the Law and promised that He would be with him. Joshua sent spies ahead of them, who were helped by a prostitute, Rahab (Joshua 2:1), who would later become part of the ancestry of Jesus – yet another example of how God can use anyone despite their faults.

The Israelites then crossed the Jordan in a manner paralleling the crossing of the sea at the Exodus, except that this time it was the Ark of the Covenant rather than Moses' staff which held back the waters and enabled them to cross on dry ground (Joshua 3:1-17).

God was with the Israelites and delivered the fortified city of Jericho into their hands by miraculously bringing down its walls (Joshua 6:1-21). But one of the Israelites, Achan, fell into sin by taking from Jericho plunder which had been dedicated to God and the Israelites suffered military defeat until this sin was rooted out (Joshua 7). The Israelites had been commanded by God to take complete possession of the Promised Land and eliminate all the former residents, but they soon began to fail in this endeavour as they allowed themselves to be tricked into making a treaty with one of the resident people groups – the Gibeonites – making the treaty without first consulting the Lord (Joshua 9:14).

With God's help, the Israelites were able to take possession of the Promised Land – but not completely, certainly not by the time of Joshua's death. Nevertheless the various tribes were allotted portions of the Land, except for the Reubenites, the Gadites who were given land East of the Jordan but the Levites were given no inheritance in the Land as the offerings allotted to them were their inheritance. In his last words before his death Joshua exhorted the Israelites to be strong and obey the Law and love the Lord. He made them renew their vows of allegiance to the Lord:

“But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods!” (Joshua 24:15-16 NIV)

and Joshua warned them of the consequences of disobedience to God:

“Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.” But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”” (Joshua 24:19-21 NIV)

Then Joshua died and the bones of Joseph, brought out of Egypt, were buried at Shechem. Joshua's life spanned the history of the Exodus, the wilderness wanderings and the conquest of Canaan. He was born into slavery in Egypt, took part in the Exodus as a young man and

was one of the brave spies who went ahead into the Promised Land. After the death of Moses, Joshua led the military campaigns which captured the heart of Canaan. When the push for complete occupation faltered and the people began to compromise with paganism, Joshua continued to stand by his faith in the living God.

As we said a few moments ago, the Israelites didn't take complete possession of the Promised Land as they had been commanded to do. The book of Joshua tells us that as well as the Gibeonites the people of Geshur and Maacah continued to live among the Israelites. Further, it's clear from the period of the Judges – which we shall be coming to in a moment – that the Canaanites, Perizzites and other people groups also retained a substantial presence in the Promised Land, especially in the plains where their chariots gave them a military advantage. Fighting against them continued after Joshua's death. Conquest was to take many years and would not be completed until the time of David and Solomon.

The Time of the Judges

After the death of Joshua the Israelites didn't really have a formal leader and Israel's faith and unity broke down. They hadn't obeyed God's command to completely cast out the original inhabitants. The Israelite tribes merged with their Canaanite neighbours and accepted the local forms of Baal-worship. They no longer lived by faith in God, and suffered defeat at the hands of their enemies. But, God does not abandon his people, instead he gave them 'Judges' — leaders who were gifted with faith, strength and wisdom. The Book of Judges tells us about twelve of these figures. These judges rescued the Israelites from a series of desperate situations, so that they continued to experience God's power to save them. However, they repeatedly lapsed back into their old ways. Once a crisis was passed, they forgot God again. They returned to the attractions of paganism until another defeat brought them to their senses. This pattern was repeated throughout the era of the Judges.

Each of the judges was associated with a particular enemy. Ehud fought for Israel against the Moabites. Deborah and Barak fought the Canaanites. Gideon delivered Israel from the Midianites. Jephthah rescued Israel from the oppression of Ammon. Samson was the Israelites' champion against the Philistines. It is clear that main purpose of the narrative of the Book of Judges is theological rather than historic – it seeks to set out the pattern of the rebellion of God's people, God's judgement upon them and his eventual grace. It is also quite significant in that it prefigures some of the Acts of the Apostles and additionally has much to say to us about the involvement of the Holy Spirit with individuals and what the gift of the Spirit will bring to a person's life. We don't have time to deal with this issue today, so I'll just cite a few examples – Othniel (Judges 3:10), Gideon (Judges 6:34), Jephthah (Judges 11:29) and Samson (Judges 13:25; 14:6).

The Monarchy in Israel

At the end of the era of the Judges, God raised up Samuel as the last of the Judges and as a great and powerful prophet in Israel. He heard the word of God so clearly that he thought his earthly master was speaking to him rather than God. Later, the Lord was with Samuel and He again spoke to Samuel and empowered him:

“The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognised that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.” (1 Samuel 3:19-21 NIV)

and Samuel moved the Israelites to fight against the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:1). Initially this led to heavy Israelite defeat and the capture of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:2-11). But, God inflicted ill-fortune on the Philistines because of their capture of the Ark and they soon gave it back (1 Samuel 5:1 – 6:16).

Samuel now urged the Israelites to abandon foreign gods and serve the Lord only. They did this, at least to a great extent, and defeated the Philistines and Samuel continued as a judge over the Israelites.

As Samuel grew old the people told him that they didn't trust his sons to take over his role and asked Samuel to give them a king. Of course, this had theological as well as political implications, because God was, or certainly should have been, their king. This was a rejection of the Lord as their king and God told Samuel to warn the people that the appointment of a king would have adverse consequences:

“He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plough his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day.” (1 Samuel 8:11-18 NIV)

But the people insisted they wanted a king and God eventually told Samuel to give them what they were asking for and told him to anoint Saul as King:

“When Samuel caught sight of Saul, the LORD said to him, "This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people.” (1 Samuel 9:17 NIV)

and so Samuel duly anointed Saul:

“Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, "Has not the LORD anointed you leader over his inheritance?” (1 Samuel 10:1 NIV)

This was the beginning of the monarchy in Israel, but it was destined to quite quickly become both a spiritual and political disaster. Of course the phrase ‘Israel's monarchy’ is somewhat ambiguous, since apart from a relatively short time in the early phases of the monarchy during which the Israelite people were more or less united in a single kingdom (the reign of Saul, part of the reign of David, the reign of Solomon and the commencement of Rehoboam's reign) there were two Israelite kingdoms, the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah.

The exact chronology of the period of the Israelite monarchy is a matter of some doubt and contention as the dates which can be deduced from scriptural statements are somewhat in conflict, both internally and in comparison with external evidence. I don't propose to deal with that complex issue today and have adopted a traditional view of the chronology. This places the beginning of the monarchy in 1020 BC with the accession of Saul, the end of the united kingdom with the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam in around 922 BC, the end of the monarchy in the kingdom of Israel with the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians in 722 BC

and the end of the monarchy in the kingdom of Judah with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BC. Thus, Israel's Monarchy spanned a period of some 433 years.

The anointing of Saul we just spoke of, was later ceremonially confirmed to the Israelite people at Gilgal:

“So all the people went to Gilgal and confirmed Saul as king in the presence of the LORD. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the LORD, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration.” (1 Samuel 11:15 NIV)

Here Samuel again warned the people that if they allowed this appointment of a human king to cause them to forget God and his laws they would suffer:

“Now here is the king you have chosen, the one you asked for; see, the LORD has set a king over you. If you fear the LORD and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the LORD your God—good! But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your fathers.” (1 Samuel 12:13-15 NIV)

Of course, as we shall see, this is precisely what happened and God's hand did indeed turn against the Israelites as was prophesied.

I don't see a great difference in attitude towards the monarchy in different sections of Samuel Chapters 8-10, rather I consider that these should be read as a consistent account of Samuel acquiescing in God's instruction to appoint a human king over the Israelites, even though he knew (and God had confirmed) that it was not the right thing for the Israelites. I believe that this is a good example to illustrate the difference between the perfect will of God and God's permissive will towards mankind.

Saul ruled over Israel for 42 years, although he seems to have been more of a military leader and tribal chief than a true king. For example, there is little evidence that he played a significant administrative or judicial role. More importantly, he was not obedient to God's commands. His disobedience commenced a short time after his appointment and he was told that his kingdom would not endure:

““You acted foolishly,” Samuel said. “You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command.”” (1 Samuel 13:13-14 NIV)

after a period of military success his disobedience continued:

“Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned. I violated the LORD's command and your instructions. I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them.” (1 Samuel 15:24 NIV)

so that he was rejected by the Lord:

“But Samuel said to him, “I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!”” (1 Samuel 15:26 NIV)

Samuel was then instructed to anoint one of the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem king over Israel. Samuel wanted to choose one of the older sons of Jesse but God told him that He did not consider the things that man paid regard to, but rather looked at the heart. Eventually God told Samuel to choose David the youngest son of Jesse and Samuel duly anointed David as king, even though Saul was still alive:

“So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power. Samuel then went to Ramah.” (1 Samuel 16:13 NIV)

it's interesting that this anointing with the Holy Spirit gave David the power to defeat the Philistine champion Goliath in one of the Bible's best known stories. After this, Saul's decline continued, as he became depressed and insanely jealous of David and tried to kill him. Saul pursued David and again tried to kill him on several occasions, but David refused to raise his hand against Saul, although he had opportunity to do so:

"He said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the LORD." With these words David rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul. And Saul left the cave and went his way." (1 Samuel 24:6-7 NIV)

Indeed David had other opportunities to kill Saul but would not do so. Saul eventually committed suicide when wounded in battle:

"Saul said to his armour-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me." But the armour-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it." (1 Samuel 31:4 NIV)

Following the death of Saul, David became king of Judah, the Southern part of Israel:

"Then the men of Judah came to Hebron and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. When David was told that it was the men of Jabesh Gilead who had buried Saul," (2 Samuel 2:4 NIV)

but he was not accepted in the Northern regions where Ish-Bosheth, one of Saul's sons, was eventually appointed king:

"Ish-Bosheth son of Saul was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he reigned two years. The house of Judah, however, followed David." (2 Samuel 2:10 NIV)

This continued for about 7 years until David's men defeated those of Ish-Bosheth (2 Samuel 4:8) and David became king over the re-united kingdom of all Israel which he ruled for around a further 33 years. David was the first 'real' king over Israel. He not only displayed great military prowess adding security and territory to the kingdom (defeating the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites and Syrians), but he also displayed great administrative skill and united the nation around the strategically chosen (because it was near to border between the Northern and Southern kingdoms) capital of Jerusalem. This together with his establishment of a 'personal' army cemented his power over Israel independently of any popular acclaim.

The Lord renewed the promises made to the Israelite people with King David, because God's relationship with the Israelites was changed by the establishment of the kingship and God also extended these promises:

"..... "The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.'"" (2 Samuel 7:11-16 NIV)

This promise found its ultimate fulfilment in the incarnation of Christ, a king forever in the line of David. Saul had been of the tribe of Benjamin, but David was of the tribe of Judah as were Christ's parents – direct descendants of King David.

However, later in his reign, David fell into sinful ways – for example by taking many wives in conflict with God’s clear edicts (Deuteronomy 17:17) and even worse his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:3-4) and the later murder of her husband (2 Samuel 11:15). Because of all this, the kingdom also fell into some disarray. On the one hand the people became discontented with newly instituted taxation to support David’s court and on the other hand there were revolts from within the court against his rule, principally that led by his son Absalom (2 Samuel 13-19). Yet, in spite of all his sins, the Lord had declared David a man after his own heart.

Given the atmosphere of court intrigue it is no surprise that at the time of David’s death there was a struggle for succession to the throne between his sons Adonijah and Solomon. Solomon had the more influential connections, indeed he had the backing of King David himself and Nathan the prophet, and Solomon prevailed, eliminating Adonijah and almost all his supporters. Solomon was an administrative and judicial ruler rather than a military leader and thus his reign was largely a time of consolidation.

Whilst Solomon may have lost some territory to the Edomites and the Syrians, his reign marked Israel’s time of greatest material prosperity with an ambitious building programme in Jerusalem (including the famous temple) and a vast expansion of his personal army (1 Kings 4:26). He made alliances with surrounding kingdoms, including an unusual and important marriage to a daughter of Pharaoh king of Egypt (1 Kings 3:1). Yet he sinned against the Lord by taking many wives, including forbidden foreign wives.

The cost of this was enormous discontent amongst the Israelites, particularly the Northern tribes. The modest system of taxation started by David was vastly increased and expanded to fund the ambitious building and military programmes, including the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and this was supplemented by the introduction of ‘forced’ or slave labour amongst the people of the land (1 Kings 4:6, 1 Kings 5:13) – although apparently Israelites were not enslaved (1 Kings 9:22).

This discontent was undoubtedly increased in the Northern part of Israel by the fact that taxation appears to have been levied unevenly across the nation, more lightly (if at all) in the South, where Judah was not included in the list of areas to be taxed (1 Kings 4:7-19). The latter period of his rule was also marked by personal discontent, a significant turning away from the morality of the covenant relationship with God, perhaps commencing with marrying foreign women from forbidden races:

“King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter— Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, “You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.” Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.” (1 Kings 11:1-3 NIV)

Solomon even returned to the worship of foreign gods, and no doubt led Israel astray in this also:

“As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites.” (1 Kings 11:4-5 NIV)

The Lord was angry with Solomon because of these sins and told him the kingdom would be taken away from his son:

“The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD’s command. So the LORD said to Solomon, “Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son.” (1 Kings 11:9-12 NIV)

The Divided Kingdom

Solomon’s grip on the kingdom was too strong for open revolt during his lifetime (he generally killed or exiled potential opposition figures such as Jeroboam who fled to Egypt (1 Kings 11:40)) and on his death he was succeeded by his son Rehoboam. Rehoboam went to Shechem to secure the support of the Northern tribes, but, against the counsel of his advisers, he refused to accept the terms on which they would acknowledge him as their king (1 Kings 12:1-7). Indeed, he threatened to increase the severity of their burdens (1 Kings 12:14). This was a great error as Jeroboam now returned from Egypt and was acclaimed king of the ten Northern tribes.

This splitting of the kingdom in approximately 922 BC was in fact irreversible and separate kings ruled over the ten Northern tribes of Israel and the two Southern tribes of Judah until the respective ends of these states. From the time of the splitting of the kingdom the decline in religious and moral standards amongst the kings and their subjects which had already commenced (and indeed led to the split) also proved irreversible.

The two kingdoms were unable to maintain the empire, which had been established under David and consolidated by Solomon. However, the Northern kingdom of Israel was materially prosperous for a time, as it was larger than the Southern kingdom, more fertile and more favourably situated with respect to trade routes between the adjacent super-powers. However, this also made it an attractive target for conquest. The Northern kingdom was ruled by a succession of morally evil and relatively ineffective kings until it was conquered by the Assyrians under Tiglath-pileser III in 722 BC as had been prophesied by many of the prophets such as Amos and Hosea. The period leading up to the exile of the Northern Kingdom was characterised by great social injustice and evil as well as abandonment of the Lord and worship of foreign gods. This abandonment of God’s commandments and values are of course precisely what led to the exile. God warned the people time and time again through his prophets, but they would not listen and eventually God’s judgement fell upon them. Many of the inhabitants were exiled to Halah in Northern Mesopotamia and peoples from various races were brought into Samaria to replace the Israelites. This is, of course why the Jews of Jesus’s day despised the Samaritans as not being of pure Jewish racial origin.

The Southern kingdom was smaller and less materially prosperous than the Northern kingdom. Although the kings of the Southern kingdom were generally evil, there were one or two good kings (e.g. Asa (1 Kings 15:9-11) and Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 17:3)). However, once the Northern kingdom fell the military position of the Southern Kingdom was extremely insecure as the capital, Jerusalem, was very close to enemy territory. The Southern kingdom did manage to survive for some 135 years after the fall of the Northern kingdom before it was

conquered by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. Again the period prior to the exile of the Southern Kingdom was characterised by great social injustice and inequality and widespread abandonment of worship of Yahweh. Again the demise of the Southern Kingdom was prophesied by many prophets including Isaiah and Micah. As with the Northern Kingdom, the people were warned time and time again of the peril in which they stood, but they refused to listen and eventually God's judgement arrived.

It is quite clear that the monarchy only achieved its 'worldly' objectives of uniting the Israelites as a single nation and ensuring their security and prosperity for the relatively brief period of 89 years – even ignoring the 7 year division of the kingdom on David's accession to the throne and the general discontent with taxation and oppression under Solomon. In spiritual terms, the monarchy proved to be a disaster from the beginning, as it amounted to a rejection of the covenant relationship with God which the Israelites had entered into. Not surprisingly, none of the kings were able to uphold the standards of that covenant relationship, not even King David – the man who was perhaps closest to God's heart. This is not surprising because the Law had one major weakness: there was no provision in it to change the human heart. That would have to wait until sin was done away with when Jesus Christ was slain as the sacrificial Lamb of God and the people of God became empowered through the Holy Spirit. Thus, Israel's Monarchy was not a great idea that went sadly wrong, but rather a bad idea that went wrong just as was originally anticipated by Samuel under God's guidance. However, God can always bring good out from bad, and God took King David, a man after his own heart in spite of his sin and failure, and, according to His promise, from this man's offspring raised up a saviour for Israel (and indeed all mankind) – Jesus Christ our Lord.

As we've already mentioned, prophetic oracles are also interwoven with the history of the monarchy, notably the long stories of Elijah and Elisha. Again this is a subject which merits a more detailed treatment as Elijah in particular is a most significant figure in scripture. He is one of only two people in scripture who did not die, but were translated directly into heaven. He appeared in Jesus' days at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:3) and has significant lessons for prophetic ministry in the church today. Unfortunately, that's all I have time to say about him today.

Return from Exile

Following the Babylonian conquest, the royal family was deported to Babylon, along with most of the leading citizens, after which a palace official called Gedaliah was made governor of Judah, with his capital at Mizpah (2 Kings 25:18–24; Jeremiah 40:7–12). He provoked opposition and there was a revolt against him and many fled fearing Babylonian reprisals. But, the prophet Jeremiah stayed in the land as he felt God was calling him to do. Jerusalem was the place where the people of Judah had lost their true faith, and it was where they must try to regain it. In spite of this firm conviction, however, Jeremiah was forced against his will to join the exiles in Egypt, and he spent the rest of his life there. We know little of what happened in Judah during the next 40 years.

Far more is known about the life of the exiles who were taken off to Babylon than about those who were left behind in Judah. The exiles seem to have been settled mostly in the border regions between Babylonia and Assyria, perhaps as part of some official policy to reclaim derelict sites that had been devastated during the many wars between these two

powers. Unlike the Assyrians, who forced the exiles from Samaria to mingle with other races, the Babylonians generally allowed exiles to maintain their own ethnic identity, and organize their own communal life together. The Judean deportees therefore enjoyed considerable freedom to continue their traditional customs, both social and religious.

On the whole, life in Babylon was probably quite comfortable—even prosperous—for the exiles from Judah. Jeremiah's advice to some who were clamouring to get back to Judah captures it well:

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (Jeremiah 29:5-7 NIV)

By the standards of international justice of their day, the Babylonians had been relatively benevolent. But the exiles still hated them, and Psalm 137 which contains such a moving expression of Jewish anguish ends on a note of hatred that is, I think, unparalleled anywhere else in the Bible:

“O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.” (Psalm 137:8-9 NIV)

When Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC he was succeeded by a number of very weak and inept rulers. This was a time of persecution for the exiles as the Book of Daniel tells us. But by now, the power of the Babylonian empire was spent, and when a little-known king from southern Persia emerged as a new leader, it was only a matter of time before he was able to take over the whole of the country. His name was Cyrus, and in 539 BC the people of Babylon actually welcomed him as their king, and he took control of the city without the use of force. Cyrus set about the restoration of Babylonian society and gave the people of Judah permission to return to their land, although many did not want to leave their comfortable life in exile and did not return.

Sheshbazzar was appointed governor of Judah. His name was thoroughly Babylonian, though that does not mean he was not a Jew. Apart from the fact that he made a start on rebuilding the foundations of the Temple, nothing is known of him (Ezra 5:16). We are better informed about a further group of exiles who returned a little later under the leadership of Zerubbabel (another Babylonian name, this time certainly a Jew) and Joshua. Joshua was a priest, but Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiachin, the last truly legitimate king of the royal family of David. He also held an official Persian appointment, and he could have been Sheshbazzar's successor as governor. The appointment of a member of the old Judahite royal family may have been a conscious effort by the Persians to persuade more Jews to return. Now the Temple in Jerusalem could be rebuilt, and its repair and renovation were to be Zerubbabel's main tasks. The rebuilding was completed about 515 BC, although it was not restored to its former glory. We have no certain knowledge of life between 515 BC and 440 BC, although the books of Obadiah and Joel probably relate to this period and we can say with fair certainty that the book of Malachi covers this era.

Malachi shows that, though the Temple was standing again, the spiritual realities that it was supposed to represent were still not being taken seriously. The priests themselves were neglecting their proper duties, and the true covenant religion of Yahweh had become mixed

up with magical practices (Malachi 3:5). The prophet regarded popular religion as little more than a form of practical atheism:

““You have said harsh things against me,” says the LORD. “Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’ ”You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?’” (Malachi 3:13-14 NIV)

It’s arguable that Yahweh never really returned to the rebuilt Temple to be with his people and never truly endorsed Israelite worship there – even up to Jesus’ time.

As in the past, this neglect of Israel’s covenant faith was leading to great social evils, and Malachi declared that God would step in to judge this rotten community:

““So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.” (Malachi 3:5 NIV)

In addition to all that, the community of returned exiles was losing its true identity as some of the men were leaving their Jewish wives for more attractive younger women who belonged to the racially mixed population that had tried to stop the rebuilding of the Temple. This was regarded as a very serious matter, for it threatened the very existence of the fragile Jewish settlement as a distinctive ethnic entity, and for that reason Malachi was convinced that it would only be a matter of time before God would have to deal with these evils (Malachi 4).

Nehemiah attempted to address the political and social evils here and Ezra attempted to address the lack of spirituality. Though he had risen to a position of some eminence in the Persian royal court, Nehemiah was himself a Jew, and when he learned about the deprivation of his people in Judah and Jerusalem, he asked the Persian king by now Artaxerxes I, to let him go there and help to rebuild the community. So he was appointed governor of Judah in 445 BC (Nehemiah 1–2). Nehemiah had a specific commission from the Persian emperor to rebuild the city of Jerusalem itself. But when he got there, he found that most of the Jews were satisfied with things as they were and had become integrated with the people groups brought into Samaria. The Jews from Babylon regarded themselves as ethnically pure, but those who stayed behind had intermarried and the two men from Samaria who turned out to be Nehemiah’s most vociferous opponents—Sanballat and Tobiah—both felt that they had the same religious faith as their Jewish neighbours.

In the amazingly short time of fifty-two days, the wall was built (Nehemiah 6). It was not as extensive as the wall that had surrounded the city before 586 BC, but its completion gave a great boost to the morale of the inhabitants. For the first time since Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed their city, Jerusalem and its people had their own self-contained society, and a new opportunity to establish their distinctive national and religious identity. But Nehemiah was not at all satisfied with the spiritual life in Jerusalem as many Jews were marrying foreigners.

Nehemiah was determined to change all this. But it was a Jewish priest by the name of Ezra who issued the most far-reaching challenge to the people of Jerusalem. He too was a Persian state official, who came to Jerusalem with royal authority to reorganize religious affairs. He was accompanied by a further group of returning exiles from Babylon, who also brought with them a considerable financial endowment for the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 7:1–26). But they brought more than that, for Ezra was a ‘scholar in the Law of the God of Heaven’ (Ezra 7:12), and his interpretation of this law was to have a profound and lasting influence on the

whole way of life and national identity of the community. It is not absolutely clear from the Old Testament just what this law was, but it is reasonable to suppose that it would be substantially identical to the Torah as we know it today. He read this out to the people as the Law itself was written in Hebrew, whereas the people now spoke Aramaic, which was the official language of the Persian empire. As Ezra read it aloud to them, a group of priests (Levites) then 'gave an oral translation of God's Law and explained it so that the people could understand it' (Nehemiah 8:8).

When they heard it for themselves, the people were deeply moved and decided they must do something to reinstate the religious festivals which the readings mentioned (Nehemiah 8:9-18). Ezra, however, was determined to tackle other matters which he regarded as problematical, especially the question of Jews who were married to people of different ethnic origins. He was more diplomatic than Nehemiah, but also more ruthless, and he forced the Jews to agree to divorce all such partners. This seems totally unreasonable to us today, but it's probably true that the community in Judah would not have survived as a distinctive entity without his efforts. But it is equally certain that the people paid a high price for their survival. For this new emphasis on ethnic purity and the accompanying insistence that a detailed observance of rules and regulations was somehow central to true spirituality was easily transformed into the kind of self-righteous legalism and hypocrisy that was roundly condemned by Jesus (Matthew 23:1-36).

Though we have very little specific knowledge regarding what life was really like in Judah in the seventy or eighty years following the work of Ezra, the community that he founded on the twin principles of religious and racial exclusivity probably continued along much the same lines. Judah was still a Persian province, but it was allowed to mint its own coins, and enjoyed other privileges that the community based in Samaria never had. During this period the differences between Jerusalem and Samaria eventually forced the two populations of Palestine to go their own separate ways.

The people of Samaria got their chance to establish their own national identity in 333 BC. This was the year when the Persian king Darius III Codomannus was defeated in battle at Issus in north-west Syria. The victor was a young, enthusiastic warrior from Macedonia, Alexander the Great. Having overcome the main Persian army, he moved south towards Egypt, and the Samaritans saw this as an opportunity to enhance their own national security by cooperating with the Greeks. As a result, they were given permission to build a temple for themselves on Mount Gerizim, though their emerging independence soon disappeared when, for some unknown reason, they revolted against Greek rule and their city of Samaria was then made into a Greek military colony.

Under the Ptolemies and Seleucids

Though Alexander himself died young as a result of some kind of disease in 323 BC, by then his empire stretched from Greece in the west to the borders of India in the east. But it did not survive intact, and after much feuding among Alexander's generals, Judah—or Judea as it was now to be called—came under the control of Ptolemy, who established himself and his successors as a new ruling dynasty in Egypt. From about 320 BC until 198 BC, the Jews came under the jurisdiction of these Greek rulers of Egypt (collectively known as the Ptolemies). Their policy with regard to conquered peoples was not much different from that of the Persians before them, and was based on an essentially pragmatic approach that sought

to promote anything that would be mutually advantageous to both the rulers and their subjects.

The Greek language, was now the essential medium for both commerce and diplomacy, and was widely adopted within Palestine itself, as well as by Jewish people living elsewhere. Though Aramaic continued to be spoken in Judea in particular, this was not to the exclusion of Greek, though the use of Hebrew as a living language disappeared for good. Of course, Hebrew was the language in which the Jewish scriptures were written (with just one or two very short passages in the later books in Aramaic). It was this significant change that led to a demand that the books of the Hebrew Bible be translated into Greek, and it was during this period that the Septuagint was produced.

The Seleucids who ruled from Antioch in Northern Syria had never been too happy about the Ptolemies having control of Judea and in 198 BC the Seleucid Antiochus III defeated Scopos, the general of Ptolemy V, at the battle of Paneon. Antiochus was welcomed by the leaders in Jerusalem, some of whom (most notably the high priest Simon and members of the Tobiad family) had given him active support in his opposition to the Ptolemies. In return, the Seleucids adopted a tolerant policy towards the Jews, and Antiochus not only reduced their taxes, but also made a generous grant for the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem, and formally affirmed their right to live according to their traditional laws and customs.

Unfortunately, Antiochus did not show the same wisdom in dealing with the rising power of Rome. Having extended his influence from Syria into the territory to the south, he tried to expand his empire westwards, something which the Romans took far more seriously. In 190 BC he was defeated in a land and sea battle at Magnesia, near Ephesus, and the peace treaty that he was subsequently forced to sign represented a considerable loss of face, for it required him to abandon completely his territory in Asia Minor. The humiliation of this was bad enough, but it also had financial repercussions, for this territory had always been the wealthiest part of the Seleucid empire and its loss pushed him to the brink of bankruptcy. He was soon desperate for money and just a year after signing the treaty with the Romans, Antiochus himself was killed in Elam while in the act of robbing a temple. Temples in the ancient world often served as banks where people could leave cash or jewellery in safe keeping, as well as storing the Temple's own treasure, and the Temple in Jerusalem was no exception. Antiochus himself never sought access to its wealth, and in the early part of the reign of his son and successor Seleucus IV nothing changed.

There were tensions in the Seleucid Empire between two leading families, the Tobiads and the Oniads, with the Tobiads eventually gaining the ascendancy after a period of Oniad domination. Meanwhile, Antiochus had set his sights on Egypt. The ruler of Egypt, Ptolemy VI, was only a boy, and Antiochus defeated his army without difficulty (1 Maccabees 1:16–19). Desperate for money, he went to Jerusalem and robbed the Temple before returning home to Syria.

But he was soon travelling south again, and in the spring of 168 BC he returned to Egypt. This time, he found the Romans had already arrived there, and they soon sent him packing. In the meantime, a rumour had spread in Jerusalem that Antiochus was dead, whereupon Jason seized the opportunity to try to get rid of his rival the Hellenist extremist Menelaus who was supported by Antiochus. Antiochus was in no mood for compromise. He had already been humiliated by the Romans, and he was determined to keep his grip on Judea. So he moved to Jerusalem again, and took what treasure was left in the Temple, assisted this time by

Menelaus himself (2 Maccabees 5:1–20). Antiochus’s visit to Jerusalem on this occasion was accompanied by great slaughter and destruction, and some of the inhabitants were forcibly removed and taken into slavery (2 Maccabees 5:11–14). But things went much further than that, and Antiochus also introduced stringent measures to restrict and control traditional expressions of Jewish spirituality. Circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and the reading of the Law were all banned, and in a very short time Antiochus was insisting that worship of the Greek god Zeus should be included in the rituals of the Temple. To add insult to injury, he opened the Temple to the whole population of the land, including those who were not ethnically Jews (1 Maccabees 1:41–50; 2 Maccabees 6:1–6). With this, Antiochus embarked on a comprehensive policy of enforced Hellenisation, insisting that all elements of the population must be united by their acceptance of the Greek religion and Greek way of life.

The reasons for Antiochus’s determination to stamp out all things distinctively Jewish are not altogether clear. The nearest comparable effort was 1,000 years earlier, in Pharaoh Akhenaten’s attempt to eliminate from Egypt the worship of every god except Aten and himself. But this kind of attempt to annihilate an entire religion was not at all typical of ancient empires. People who believed in many deities did not usually think it was either worthwhile or necessary to try to get rid of any particular ones. Antiochus may to some extent have been motivated by an elevated sense of his own importance, perhaps regarding himself as an incarnation of Zeus. His epithet ‘Epiphanes’ literally means ‘a manifestation of God’, though some writers deliberately corrupted it to ‘Epimanes’, meaning ‘madman’.

The way in which Antiochus went about things in Palestine stirred up more resistance than anyone could possibly have bargained for. Jewish resistance was fanatical, and was only strengthened when Antiochus insisted that pigs (unclean animals to the Jews) should be offered in honour of Zeus. On 25 Kislev 167 BC, Antiochus inflicted the greatest indignity possible by having the altar of daily sacrifice in the Temple itself replaced by an altar to Zeus, on which pigs were sacrificed. At the same time, he issued orders that throughout the land people should be forced to offer similar sacrifices in their own communities. Though there was some support for this, the majority of the people were completely unprepared to take part in such ceremonies (2 Maccabees 6:7–31). The strength of their resolution was matched only by the cruelty of Antiochus’s soldiers, who on one occasion skinned and fried alive an entire family who refused to submit to this compulsory Hellenisation (2 Maccabees 7).

Such passive resistance may have been morally worthy, but it was hardly effective, and an armed resistance movement soon sprang to life. It began at the village of Modein, near Lydda, when a priest by the name of Mattathias was ordered to offer a sacrifice on a Greek altar. As he refused to do so, another man stepped forward in his place, whereupon Mattathias killed both him and the Seleucid officer who had given the order (1 Maccabees 2:1–26). That action marked the beginning of one of the most remarkable resistance movements in Jewish history. Mattathias and his family fled to the hills and began a sustained guerrilla war under the leadership of Judas, one of his five sons. Judas was nicknamed ‘The Hammer’ (*Maccabi*), and from that the whole movement came to be called ‘the Maccabean revolt’.

Judas gathered popular support, helped by oppressive Seleucid policies, such as butchering Jews on the Sabbath, and under the daring leadership of Judas, the rebels enjoyed some amazing successes. It was not long before the weary Antiochus was forced to reverse his policies (2 Maccabees 11:27–33). The Jewish Law was reinstated as the foundation of Jewish society, and the Temple itself was cleansed and rededicated on 25 Kislev 164 BC, exactly three years to the day from its first violation (1 Maccabees 4:36–59; 2 Maccabees 10:5–8).

The annual feast of Hanukkah (still observed today) was inaugurated to celebrate the occasion.

But Judas's family (the Hasmoneans) wanted more than that. This limited victory had given them the taste for power, and it was not long before they had more or less thrown off Seleucid rule and established themselves as a ruling dynasty in Judea. Under their leadership, Judea enjoyed a period of relative political independence until the Roman general Pompey took the city of Jerusalem in 63 BC. This period saw a continuation of the many complex internal struggles among different factions within the Jewish leadership. From the time of the Maccabees through to the Christian era, Jewish history was dominated by the issues that emerged in the course of these early struggles with Hellenism. The twin issues of politics and religion were to become inextricably interwoven as the Jewish people tried to reconcile their aspirations for a society in which God would be all-important with the plain fact that their world was dominated by rulers with a different world-view and spirituality.

During the whole period of more than 400 years from the exile of Judah to the Christian era traditional Jewish worship was never really firmly re-established and it is arguable that God's presence never really returned to the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem – certainly not in the way that he had been present with his chosen people prior to the exile. In any event there were certainly no prophets amongst the Jews during this whole period until John the Baptist arrived on the scene.

Roman Occupation

After Pompey's conquest, the Romans appointed Hyrcanus II High Priest and Antipater as unofficial ruler. The Greek cities of the Decapolis in the North were removed from Jewish control. There were numerous rebellions against Roman rule in which thousand of Jews died and Antipater was eventually appointed Procurator. He appointed his sons Phasael and Herod the Great as governors of Jerusalem and Galilee respectively. After Antipater's assassination in 43 BC Phasael and Herod were appointed tetrarchs. After the Parthian invasion of Israel in 40 BC Herod was appointed as king of the Jews. With Roman support, Herod finally came to control Judea, Samaria, Idumea, Galilee, and Perea.

Herod the Great ranks as one of the greatest builders of the ancient world, second only to Tiberius. He decided to replace the temple of Zerubbabel in Jerusalem because it was not of the same glory as that of Solomon's (Haggai 2:3). Work on Herod's temple began in 20 or 19 BC. Herod transformed Jerusalem during his reign. He built a palace on the Western side, the Antonia fortress, a theatre, a hippodrome and a stadium. But his crowning achievement was the Temple which was not completed until AD 64 – just in time for its destruction by the Roman army in 70 AD.

Christ was born towards the end of Herod's reign in 5 or 6 BC, just before Herod's death in 4 BC. This was the Messiah who had been promised to the Jewish people through prophets such as Isaiah and the ultimate fulfilment of God's covenant promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him and also God's covenant promise to King David that he would establish his kingdom forever. But sadly his own people did not recognise him or accept him as Messiah. I've spoken in some detail about Christ in another Teaching Morning "Jesus: His Life and Work", so I'm not going to say too much today, except that Christ probably commenced his ministry around 28 or 29 AD and was probably crucified in 33 AD

and that he was the ultimate expression of God's grace towards mankind and the ultimate step in God's salvation plan effected through His chosen people.

As I just said, Jesus was the fulfilment not only of the OT promises of the Messiah and God's covenant promise to King David, but also of God's covenant promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his descendants (Genesis 12:1-3) – God's chosen people. By the new covenant made with all mankind through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, all people of all nations are indeed incomparably blessed. Everyone who turns to Christ in faith and acknowledges him as Lord receives the incomparable blessing of being reconciled to God and being allowed to enter into the ultimate Promised Land of God's kingdom.

Following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, the early church spread widely and rapidly, first among the Jews in Judea, but soon to Samaria and to the ends of the Roman Empire and beyond. Many of you will remember that I covered that in my "The Development of the Early Church - Christianity after Christ's Ascension" Teaching Morning.

War had long been on the horizon when in AD 66 a number of events led to revolt. In conflicts between the Jews and the Greeks of Caesarea, the Roman government sided with the Greeks. While hostilities were breaking out in Caesarea, Gessius Florus, the procurator of Judea - accustomed to enriching himself at the expense of Jews - took seventeen talents from the temple treasury. When two men mocked Florus' "poverty," he opened a part of Jerusalem to a rampage by Roman soldiers in which scores of Jews were killed. The next day the people were to show their acceptance of Florus' authority by giving their customary salutation to two Roman cohorts coming in from Caesarea; but Florus arranged that the soldiers not return the salutation. As a result, revolutionary elements among the people gained the upper hand over those who wished to avoid confrontation with Rome, and war was under way.

Within a few months all Roman soldiers and those Jewish forces opposing the revolt—including the soldiers of Herod Agrippa II—were driven from Jerusalem or killed. In every Palestinian town containing both Jews and Gentiles war broke out. The effects were felt in some places in the Diaspora as well. The army of Cestius, the legate of Syria, attacked Jerusalem but was forced to withdraw and was attacked near Beth-horon while returning to Syria. In 67 Roman armies under Vespasian and Titus captured all of Galilee and Gaulanitis from the rebel forces. The more radical leaders of the revolt gained control in Jerusalem and instituted a reign of terror during the winter of AD 67–68. The Roman armies continued to subjugate significant parts of Palestine. But with Nero's death in June 68 and the three ensuing short imperial reigns, Vespasian was forced to halt military operations for a year. Yet by the time of Vespasian's acclamation as emperor in July 69 the Jewish rebel forces held only Jerusalem and the fortresses of Machaerus, Herodium, and Masada. Those in control of Jerusalem were fighting among themselves.

Jerusalem fell to the siege of Vespasian's son Titus in Spring-Summer 70. The Temple was destroyed by fire, as was most of the rest of the city. Not only was the Temple—the central focus of Jewish worship—gone, but the Sanhedrin, the central authority among the Jews, was destroyed. The era of traditional Jewish sacrificial Temple worship was at an end never to be revived, just as Jesus had prophesied (Luke 21:5-6).

Conclusion

Today I concentrated on the beginning of the history of the Patriarchal period, the Exodus and the period after the return of the Israelites from exile, in the first two cases because I think they are highly important and in the last case because I thought you wouldn't be very familiar with it, because it's not dealt with in scripture.

I hope what's been shining through our morning together has been God's wonderful grace in reaching out to mankind through his chosen people and God's utter trustworthiness and reliability in keeping His promises – this in contrast with the behaviour of mankind in totally failing to keep God's commandments and the covenant promises made to Him. We also saw how, time and again God used men like Abraham and David in spite of their failures – what an encouragement to us.

So we see the history of God's relationship with the Israelites as His chosen people is characterised by God reaching out and calling to them entirely in His grace and mercy with no prompting or setting of the terms on the human side. We've looked at God's unbidden call to Abraham in Haran, and his promise to bless not only Abraham and his descendants, but to bless all nations through him. We've looked at God keeping up this promise to Abraham by revealing himself to the other Patriarchs, Abraham's descendants, as their God and saviour. We've looked at God also keeping his promise to Abraham to rescue his descendants from slavery by bringing the Israelites up out of Egypt in the Exodus and fulfilling his promise to Abraham to give his descendants the land of Canaan.

God again reached out in grace after the Exodus and agreed to make the Israelites his chosen people and to bless and protect them if they obeyed his commandments – the Law – which they freely agreed to do, although he also promised to punish them if they were disobedient. As we've seen the Israelites manifestly failed to obey these commandments almost from the moment they had accepted them. But God in his grace and mercy did not immediately punish them, but reached out to them time and time again and sent his prophets to warn them time and time again. Nevertheless the Israelites refused to listen and God eventually disciplined his chosen people by sending them into exile.

Still, in his grace and mercy, God restored the Israelites to their homeland after a time of exile, although the relationship was never to be quite the same again and they were only again an independent nation for short periods of time after their return. After the return from exile God didn't send any more prophets to the Israelites for more than 400 years and did not reveal himself directly to them during that time, although his revelation continued to be available to them through God's word – the Hebrew scriptures. This long time must have seemed like the end to the majority of the Jews. It must have seemed like God had forgotten his promises to them. But God never forgets his promises and he hadn't given up on his chosen people. Often, just before he turns things around and blesses us, God seems to put things into reverse, seems to make things worse. That was the situation for the Jews in this time of waiting for Christ.

Then the time came for God's promises to see their ultimate fulfilment and the advent of the first prophet for more than 400 years, John the Baptist, heralded the start of Jesus' ministry.

By Jesus' time God's word was generally being misinterpreted in an overly legalistic fashion by the Jews. God gave the commands of the Law to be kept with joy and Yahweh was much more concerned with honesty, truth and justice and wholehearted worship of Him as the one God than with legalistic interpretations which converted the basic commandments into

hundreds of detailed rules, many of which had little or no scriptural basis. Jesus denounced such practices and brought the Law as Law to an end with the New Covenant in His blood.

This sacrifice of Christ on the cross was the ultimate fulfilment of God's gracious promises to bless the whole of humanity through his chosen people – the Jewish race. God's plan for the redemption of mankind following the Fall had reached its fulfilment. God has redeemed us and reconciled us to himself through Christ's blood and all we need to do to receive that promise is to turn to Christ in faith and acknowledge him as Lord – echoing the faith of Abraham, the first of the chosen people whose faith was credited to him as righteousness. Immediately we do that all – absolutely all – our sins are forgiven – no matter how great they may be – and we are reconciled to God and fully accepted as his adopted children.

Well that's pretty wonderful, but let me tell you another wonderful thing. Today all those of us who have turned to Christ in faith are the chosen people. Listen to what the apostle Peter writes:

“As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:4-10 NIV)

The theme of chosen-ness resonates throughout the OT and the NT. The Israelites were the chosen people. Jesus was God's chosen (Luke 9:35). The disciples were chosen by Christ (John 6:70). Paul was God's chosen instrument (Acts 9:15) and as we've seen already and as Paul also writes (Galatians 3:29; Romans 11) we Christians are now God's chosen people.

So all of us here today, all Christians, are now God's chosen people – isn't that amazing. Let's all bow the knee to our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ who is our great high priest in the ancient order of Melchizidek – the great high priest of all of us here, the body of Christ, God's chosen people.