

The Bible: Our True Story
Act Three—
Israel, a New and Growing People

Passages: Genesis 15:1–6
Matthew 1:1–17

I want to introduce today's sermon by talking about the Kingdom of God. After all, the Kingdom of God could be considered **the central idea** of the entire Bible—it's what holds the whole story together! This means, of course, that if you don't know what the Kingdom of God is and how it works throughout the Bible, you will never be able to understand how the Bible holds together as one, big Story!

Let's pray!

There are heaps of stories, legends and movies that all revolve around the central idea of a **Kingdom**.

- Take, for example, the story of Camelot. Even though this Kingdom is pure fantasy, the story of its King, King Arthur, and of the loyalty of his people is the stuff of legends! It is because of Arthur's benevolent rule and the willingness of his people to follow him which makes Camelot such an idyllic kingdom.
- If you've read JRR Tolkien's trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, you will have also landed yourself in an amazing story about a **Kingdom**—this time, however, the Kingdom (called Middle Earth) is ruled by the Dark Lord, Sauron. It is only when we get to part three of the Trilogy that the power of Sauron is finally destroyed through the destruction of the ring, and Middle Earth is restored to its original beauty and goodness under the rule of King Aragorn and Queen Arwen.
- And let's not forget the story of Robin Hood! Here's another legend based around a **kingdom** that has been overtaken by an evil king-- King John. Robin Hood, of royal stock, leads the people in rebellion against this king! Eventually, King

John is overthrown, Robin Hood discovers his true calling as monarch, and the land is restored to its former peace and prosperity! **(Take a look!)**

Now, I draw your attention to these stories and movies because, in each one, **three basic truths about Kingdoms** are being told. In every Kingdom, there is:

1. **A monarch** who claims the authority to rule.
2. **A people** who, by common consent, submit to the rule of that monarch.
3. **A place** (a distinct geographical area) over which that rule extends.

Unsurprisingly, these same three features can be found in the Biblical Story of the Kingdom of God! Indeed, in his little book entitled, Gospel and Kingdom, Graeme Goldsworthy defines God's Kingdom in this simple way: "The Kingdom of God = God's **people** in God's **place** under God's **rule**".

Think back to **Genesis 1**. Genesis 1 tells the story of the original Kingdom of God. There was a **people** (Adam and Eve) who were given a **place** (this earth) in which they would willingly live under **the rule** of the most benevolent Monarch the earth has ever seen; the Triune God! Hence, "God's **people** in God's **place** under God's **rule**".

Interestingly, **Genesis 2** tells pretty much this same story, but with one important change! As we saw last week, in response to the looming crisis of Satan's rebellion, God reduced the geographical boundaries of His Kingdom to a well-defined Garden. Yes, it was still God's Kingdom for, despite the reduction of its geographical area, "God's **people** (Adam and Eve) were still living in God's **place** (the Garden of Eden) and under God's loving **rule**."

Now, it's important to remember that the one major variable in any Kingdom is **the people**-- whether or not **the people** will

submit to their Monarch! I call it a variable because, even if you have the best king or queen in the world and his/her empire consists of the world's finest piece of land, it's not much of a Kingdom if **the people** decide to rebel against their monarch! Nor is it not much of a Kingdom if **the people** are simply unhappy and want to leave!

But, this is exactly what happened in Genesis 3! As you remember, God had established His Kingdom in Eden...a kingdom of great beauty, with a king of incredible benevolence and grace... but, when Adam and Eve were tempted by Satan into rebellion, it shook the very foundations of the Kingdom of God. As they began to directly challenge the Monarch's rule and eventually ate from the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Kingdom of God could no longer stand!

Essentially, the actions of Adam and Eve were far more than mere disobedience; Satan was promoting an overthrow, and he had placed in their minds the thought that they were no different to God and that they had the right to rule independently of Him! Indeed, even before they had eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, their fallen minds were already believing that they were on equal footing with the One who created them!

As I said, their rebellious choices shook the very foundations of the Kingdom of God. After all, what happens to a Kingdom when **the people** no longer want to submit to their Monarch? What happens to a Kingdom when **the people** choose to follow a rebel and a usurper? (As Jesus would later say in reference to Satan's Kingdom, "No kingdom that is divided against itself can stand!") It's no wonder why God was so quick to send Adam and Eve out of the Garden and to block the entrance with angelic guards!

But, of course, all this leaves us with a very important question: **Was this the end of the Kingdom of God?** Let's listen to the

reflections of one of the greatest theologians of the early church, Athanasius.

As His noble works were on the road to ruin, what was God to do? Was He to let corruption and death have their way with them? In that case, what was the use of having made them in the beginning? Surely it would have been better never to have been created at all then, having been created, to be neglected and perish; and, besides that, such indifference to the ruin of His own work before His very eyes would argue not goodness in God but limitation, and that far more than if He had never created men at all. It was impossible, therefore, that God should leave man to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of Himself.

What Athanasius was saying back in the 4th century is that, because God is God, **He will never allow His Kingdom to fail!** Despite the devil's interference, God's people will dwell in God's place under God's loving rule! In fact, even as the world was unravelling in the early chapters of Genesis under the corrupting influences of sin, God was already putting in place His master plan for the renewal of His Kingdom! Already, God was at work making sure that all three features of His Kingdom were being put back in place! Essentially, God was raising-up a renewed **People**, who would live in a renewed **Place**, and be collectively revitalised in their commitment to **God's rule!**

Indeed, here is where **Act Three** of the Biblical Story begins, as God calls a **new** (yet barren) **couple** named Abram and Sarai to follow Him into a **new land**, that they might live together under **His rule!**

Turn with me to **Genesis 12**, and let me read **verses 1-3**.

12 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. ² "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. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and

whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

At this point, let me say that **it will take us three sermons to fully un-pack what we read in these 3 verses.** (One sermon needs to deal with God’s people, one with God’s land, and one with God’s rule.)

And so, the only thing that we are going to focus on today is the way that Abram and Sarai became **God’s new people**. For the fact is that God basically had two options: Either He could have started all over again and created two new people from scratch... from the dust of the earth,... or He could raise up a new couple from the people already populating the earth! Of course, God chose the latter option! That is, He looked over all the existing offspring of Adam and Eve which, although narrowed down through Noah’s three sons, was still a vast number of possibilities, and He chose one couple to become the new Adam and Eve... one couple from which He would re-establish His Kingdom!

So tell me; What were God’s criteria for choosing Abram and Sarai? Some might think that one of the key criteria for becoming the “new Adam and Eve” would be their fertility! After all, procreation would surely play a huge part in creating God’s new **people**! Well, the fact is that Abram and Sarai were old and barren shows that this wasn’t high on God’s list of priorities!

Others might think that this couple needed to be **true believers in God**; that God would only choose people who had a clear doctrinal understanding of His character! Wrong again! The fact is that Abram and Sarai knew absolutely nothing about God. Indeed, they were idolaters, living in complete spiritual darkness (see Joshua 24:2).

So, why did God chose them? The only clue we have from this text is that, despite their pagan background, God had been working on their hearts! They were, in a sense, already leaning towards

God's eternal circle of Trinitarian love and fellowship. (To use Jesus' words, Abram and Sarai "**were not far from the Kingdom of God**".) As a result, this couple was unusually **open to God** and **willing to obey His voice!** And so, when God said, "Leave your family behind", they didn't even seem to question Him. And when God said, "Go to the land I will show you", they went out into the desert without a clue as to where God would lead them. Every step was by faith! Even though they didn't have any concise knowledge of the invisible God, they were eager to trust Him when He they heard His voice! And that's all that God needed!

In fact, because of their simple, God-induced faith, this barren couple was empowered to be the recipients of such grandiose and audacious promises:

- God promised to make them into a great nation!
- God promised to use the vast lineage of Abram and Sarai to touch the nations of the world and steer the world back to the Lord!

Now, turn to **Genesis 15**. In this chapter, Abram is in a discussion with God over Sarai's barrenness. Abram asks God how it will be possible for them to begin a new **people** unless Sarai gets pregnant. "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless?" God's answer is instructional. In verse 5, it says that God took Abram outside into the night and told him to look up. "**Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can indeed count them.**" Then God said, "**So shall your offspring be!**"

In other words, God will create **His new people** "ex nihilo"—out of nothing...out of barrenness! Just like the creation of Adam and Eve, when the earth was without form and void, God will now speak into the dust of Sarai's barren womb and bring forth a son!

Verse 6 declares Abram's renewed response of faith: "**Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness!**"

But, of course, the story is not so straight-forward as we might like! Just because Abram and Sarai have had an encounter with God and a direct revelation from His own mouth doesn't mean that the devil will not find a way to bring doubts into their hearts and minds. Remember, Satan is still alive and well on planet earth; he is still out to undermine God's good intentions for this world; he is still the chief enemy of God and His Kingdom. And you can be sure that, just at this moment when God is about to begin again...to establish His Kingdom on earth by raising up a new **people** in a new **place** under His renewed **rule**..., Satan will show up with some sort of temptation!

This temptation is found in **Genesis 16**. As Abram and Sarai discuss the ongoing fact of Sarai's barrenness, she says to her husband, "Obviously, we misunderstood! God must have meant something else. **The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.**"

Notice that this is practically the same temptation that Satan used back in the Garden of Eden when he said to Eve, "Did God really say?" Here, Satan prompts doubt in Sarai's heart, as if to ask; "Did God really say? Are you sure that you were to have this child? Surely, you misunderstood God's words!" Isn't it funny how things repeat? Moreover, just as Adam accepted Eve's doubt and went along with her plan, so Abram is easily convinced by Sarai that he must take a mistress in order to realise God's promises! In this one moment of doubt, their exemplary faith in God has been challenged and found wanting!

Thankfully, however, God's Kingdom does not even depend on human faith or ingenuity! In fact, for his failure to trust God, Abraham was immediately commanded by God to circumcise, not only his own foreskin, but the foreskin of every one of his male offspring—just to remind him that God, not Abraham, would fulfil this promise of children!

And so, the main lesson to be learned from all this is simple: Although our doubts, sins and failures may delay the fulfilment of God's promises, they can never stop what God has promised to fulfil! (As Jesus would later say to a crowd, **“Out of these stones, God can raise up children for Abraham.”** Luke 3:8) For the truth is that, out of the hard, barren ground of Sarai's womb, God did bring forth a son. His name was Isaac, who would later have a son named Jacob. Jacob (later to be called Israel) would then have twelve sons who would become fathers to the twelve tribes of Israel. God was determined to bring forth a new **people**...and this new people would serve to bring the entire human race back into His arms!

This idea is the only way to make sense of Genesis 17:4–5. Just before God breaks the painful news of circumcision to Abraham, He reiterates His promise but with a subtle twist: ⁴**“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations.** ⁵**No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.”** As God changes Abram's name to Abraham (meaning “the father of many”), so He extends the nature of Abraham's family to one that is multi-national and multi-ethnic!

But, of course, this story of **God's new people** continues well beyond the Book of Genesis, into the Book of Exodus. As **God's people** (who now number around 70 adults) are forced by famine to go down to Egypt, God goes before them (this time, in the person of Joseph) to guarantee their prosperity. And even when there's a change in Egypt's leadership and Israel is forced into slavery, God so actively blesses His people, multiplying their numbers, that this new Pharaoh sees them as a threat to his own kingdom. That's why he increases their hardships! Indeed, by the time Moses leads God's people out of Egypt (after 400 years in that country), that little family of **70** has increased in number to over **2 million** people! Clearly, God is raising-up a **new people**,

who will (eventually) live in a new land, under His renewed rule!

But, of course, it would be foolish for us to stop the story here! Even as they live in the desert for 40 years, God's **people** flourish! Even without a home, and despite their diet of manna and quail, God still increases their number! And when they finally do come into the Promised Land ("a land flowing with milk and honey"-- more on this next week), God's intention has never changed! He is still focused on raising-up **a new people**, in a new **place**, who will collectively live under His benevolent **rule**.

Of course, at this point it's important to remember that sexual reproduction will not be the only means by which God will fulfil His promise to Abraham! Indeed, the more you read the OT, the more it becomes obvious that God's intention is to draw the world to Himself! How? By making Israel into such a holy people (...**a people** who are **so** godly and **so** righteous, a people **so** filled with peace, justice and truth, and living in **so** humble a faith...) that the nations cannot help but join their ranks! (You know, for example, the stories of Rahab the Canaanite, and Ruth the Moabite, and Naaman the Syrian, and the Queen of Sheba from North Africa...all of whom made the choice to join God's new people.)

In fact, this would increasingly become God's chief way to multiply His people, by drawing the whole world through spiritual birth, into the circle of His glorious, Triune Life! This idea takes us back to what God said to Abraham in Genesis 17— "**You will be the father of many nations.**"

With all this in mind, can you see why genealogies are so important in the Bible? And can you see why so many of them (like the one in Matthew 1) go back to Abraham?! In fact, even today, most Jews keep their genealogical records up to date and are very deliberate in calling themselves the children of Abraham! They know and understand the key role that Abraham was given

by God in the creation of a **new people**; and they take pride in the fact that God was re-establishing His Kingdom on earth through them.

There's only one problem! It seems that, for a very long time now, Satan has caused most Jews to forget God's invitation to the Gentile nations to join the ranks of Abraham's children. For the last few centuries of the Old Testament era, instead of opening their doors to Gentiles and drawing them in through godly behaviour, the tendency was to demonise them, exclude them and forbid them access into the physical symbols of God's kingdom on earth (like the Temple, the priesthood and even marriage).

You can see, therefore, **one of the key reasons why Jesus had to come!** As Matthew clearly wants to show us, Jesus was the ultimate descendant of Abraham—**14 generations** from Abraham to David, **14 generations** from David to the exile, and **14 generations** from the exile to Jesus! Not only does Matthew's poetry acclaim God's hand upon Jesus as Messiah, but it points to Him as the One who has completed the genealogy of Abraham with such perfect, mathematical precision that, from now on, **the doors of God's Kingdom are forever opened to the Gentiles.** In fact, Matthew is quick to point out that it was Gentile kings (or magi) who were the first to come and worship at Jesus' feet, declaring His universal Kingship! (More of that in 2 weeks time!)

This 'Abraham– Jesus connection' is also highlighted by the Apostle Paul in Romans 4. Paul says to Jews and Gentiles alike, **“Abraham is the father of us all.”** He then restates God's promise from Genesis 15 that Abraham would be the **“father of many nations.”** According to Paul, Jesus has now made this promise a reality... for Jesus is the faithful Jew who takes the promise made to Abraham and fulfils it by reaching out to all people, from all walks of life, and welcoming them into ever-expanding Kingdom of God.

Of course, there are many, many more things I would like to add to this picture, but for now, please hold onto Goldworthy's definition of The Kingdom of God-- **God's people, in God's place, under God's rule!** With that in your mind, I'm sure you'll be better equipped to read the Bible and make much more sense of the Big Story.

Let's pray.