

The God Who Makes Us Holy

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[0 : 00] Well, it would be great if you open your Bibles back to Ezekiel 37 on page 725. We are, our house is currently listening to Christmas music, most of which is just awful.

But our sons have introduced us to a guy called Sufjan Stevens, who's an indie rock singer and songwriter. And he, a couple of years ago, he produced a Christmas compilation, five CDs, and it's kind of nice, actually.

And at the end of the CD box, he writes a long essay on how and why he came to put the Christmas box together. And the essay is called Christmas Tube Socks.

And he explains his loathing for Christmas and how each year his mother would coerce the family into a pretense of happy unity and force what he calls to spend time together.

And it's a lovely and tender description of a normal and dysfunctional family, trying to make the best of it, with the sisters bickering and he and his brother brawling.

[1 : 10] And his father's annual response was to volunteer at every organization outside the house so he wouldn't be home for most of it. He says this, Each year our mother carried the impossible burden of making Christmas spectacular.

This often threw her into a psychological state of mind one could describe in medical terms as temporary insanity. He says she spent money she didn't have and that created massive fights between her and her husband.

I read on, In the most heated of arguments, our mother would run to the tree, grab an inconsequential gift and throw it into the wood stove. An impulsive, spiteful and most likely cathartic gesture.

She would stand over the flames like a high priest making a sacrifice, counting down backward from ten to one, breathing deeply between each number, ruminating on the incineration of an unopened present.

Except one year, she took the revenge present that he had bought for his younger brother, which was acrylic synthetic tube socks, wrapped in plastic.

[2 : 21] And instantly it produced a toxic haze, smoke, and it drove the family outdoors into the snow for an hour, with the entire family blaming him.

And he said, I grew to despise the holidays with a kind of deep antipathy one usually reserves for things like racism and terrorism. And so he abandoned Christmas for a number of years, and the Christmas album is his therapy.

And it's a lovely album. And the reason I'm telling you this is not to discourage those of you who are trying to celebrate a spectacular Christmas, or to make you into Christmas curmudgeons.

It's just to point out what we all know, and that is that all our best attempts at unity and harmony are somehow undermined and torpedoed by our own selves.

And even in the season of peace, when we're on our best behaviour, we doom ourselves to failure at the most profound level. It's true in the finest of families, in the best organisations, governments, unions, committees, councils.

[3 : 36] We are constitutionally unable to create true peace, even to hold things together. And when we finally do manage to wonderfully create some sort of peace and harmony, it's temporary and it doesn't last.

And I think many of us grow cynical and perhaps even, we're certainly sceptical of all the utopian dreams and schemes. Because we long for peace.

We long for true peace, but despair of it ever happening. And as today we come to the second last passage in Ezekiel, and I'm aware there are only a certain number of shopping days till Christmas, we hear the promise of God to bring peace.

Not by compromise, not by commissions, not by posture or politics, but by another way. It's by the way of covenant.

Covenant. Just look down at verse 26. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them.

[4 : 49] This is the headline of our passage today, and it's the centre of gravity around which everything gathers. And God scoops up all our hopes, our deepest hopes for this sort of unity and harmony, as well as all the promises of the scripture, and all the hope of healing for the nations.

And he says to the exiles in Babylon, I will make a covenant of peace. It'll be an everlasting covenant. And I just want to ask three questions this morning for us. One, what is a covenant? Two, what does it mean for us? And three, how does it come to us? Firstly, then, what is a covenant? covenant. And I know, for most of you, when you hear the word covenant, your eyes glaze over.

You begin to think about what's for lunch, the Christmas presents you haven't bought. I think we find this word covenant about as interesting as the small print on software updates.

You just hope that there's a better word. But the problem is, there isn't. You can't replace this word. It's absolutely unique. The Bible's word covenant has no modern equivalent.

[5 : 59] In fact, our current society has no category to fit covenant into. I want to explain. The Bible view of covenant combines two different ideas. One comes from the language of law.

And it means shackle, bind, hold down. And it's a legal arrangement like an oath or a bequest where you make obligation and you're tied to that obligation by law to give something to someone through death.

The language of law. On the other side, it also comes from the language of love and intimacy. The word also means to eat with, to have special favor with, to have intimacy with.

And when the two come together on a human level between equals, sometimes it's used of marriage. And human marriage has both these sides to it, structure as well as our own love.

And these two things are bound together and they're a pale reflection of God's covenant with us. That's why the personal pronouns here are so important.

[7 : 08] Just look down at verse 23. And the last phrase, God says, they shall be my people. I will be their God.

And in 27, he reverses it. The end of 27, I will be their God and they will be my people. So in Bible terms, a covenant creates a whole new reality.

It combines the elements of promise and structure and law with intimacy and love. And it creates a new reality which is stronger than just a legal bond and stronger than just love and affection.

But the unique combination of those two things make it a mutual, voluntary, secure, and permanent relationship. It's not based on performance.

It's not based on preference. It's not based on consumerism. It doesn't arise from one's desire to fulfill oneself. But this perfect blend creates something durable.

[8 : 18] It's where the two parties say to each other, you and your needs are more important to me than mine, my needs. And it opens the door for the two to say, I'm going to be committed to you and your needs before mine.

In fact, I'm going to be committed to this relationship even if my needs are not met at the moment. I give myself to you freely because of the covenant. It opens the door for a kind of mutual sacrifice which is both more profound and more fulfilling because it brings these two commitment and communion sides together.

And from the beginning of the Bible to the end of the Bible, this is the only way in which God relates to his people. God puts himself forward as a lover and desires that we give ourselves to him.

The reason Israel is in exile is because they've ruptured the covenant like a spouse who's been unfaithful. They've put themselves outside the covenant. And so what's amazing, I think, the first thing that's amazing about this passage is that God goes to these very people and he says, I'm going to make a new covenant with you.

And there is two things that are new about it that have never been there before. It's going to be a covenant of peace, shalom peace, and it's going to be a covenant that's eternal. That's the first point.

[9 : 41] What is a covenant? The second point, what does it mean? Very simply, it means peace and permanence. Firstly, peace. I've said this many times, the shalom peace in the Bible is not

conflict avoidance.

It's not the smooth waters of compromise. It's not passive. It's the active satisfaction of plenty and harmony and flourishing.

And the illustration that God gives of this in this passage has to do with the thing that we really want at Christmas and that is human unity. So did you notice when we open the passage in verse 15, God tells Ezekiel to do one more kind of acted parable.

This is the last one in the book. All the others have been parables of judgment. This is a parable of salvation. That's pretty important. And in the first paragraph of this passage, the word one, O-N-E, comes ten times as God says to Ezekiel, I want you to take two blocks of wood.

They're not sticks. They're pieces of wood like an ancient Near Eastern iPad. And I want you to write on each one of them. On one, you ought to put Judah and the Southern Kingdom.

[10:59] On the other, Joseph and the Northern Kingdom. And I want you to make them into one. I don't know, glued together or something like that. And what God is telling Ezekiel to do is utterly humanly impossible because the two kingdoms split apart 500 years before this.

And the Northern Kingdom was taken off by the Assyrians and utterly decimated over a century before these guys are in exile. This is a terrible and shameful history in God's people.

You remember when they were in the land, God's people demanded kings. So God gave them kings. He gave them Saul who was a miserable failure. Then he gave them David who was, he failed in the end.

Then he gave them Solomon who had a very good start but then failed badly. He had a thousand wives and concubines. And to pay for that lifestyle, he had to tax God's people brutally.

And when Solomon dies, the resentments and disillusionment and disappointments overflow and the Kingdom of Israel splits in two. And the North goes off and the South has its own thing.

[12:07] This is 500 years before this. And the Northern Kingdom chooses its own kings and they're a completely rum lot. They're all corrupt. Not one of them has, not one of them does anything half positive.

They turn away from God. They exploit God's people. They go after other idols. And God sends prophet after prophet after prophet to warn them. And they refuse to listen.

And so finally in 722 BC, God sends the Kingdom of Assyria who utterly subjugate the Northern Kingdom. And the Syrian policy was to take the entire population, remove them from their home country and scatter them around the place.

So in 721 BC, there is no North. There are no people left in the land in the Northern Kingdom.

They're scattered to the four winds. And that makes the Southern Kingdom very glad and very proud.

And 150 years, they turn their back on God. They continue in the same way and now they've been conquered by the Babylonians and they're taken into exile. So you see, the promise of God here is not just impossible.

[13:19] He promises to overturn 500 years of bitterness, hostility and battles and killing but also he's going to bring back a generation that's been completely wiped out.

It ceased to exist over a century ago. You see how impossible it is? Look at verse 21. He says, I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they've gone.

I will gather them from all round and bring them into their own land. Then at the end of the next verse, and they shall no longer be two kingdoms, no not two kingdoms, sorry, two nations and no longer divide into two kingdoms.

Because you see, when God makes covenant, he does something that's completely impossible. He makes something completely new. And, you know, I don't think the southerners who are in exile wanted God to do this.

I mean, they were really glad that the north had been lost. And this is what happens, you see, because God, when God makes covenant with us, he gives us things that we hope for as well as the things that are uncomfortable for us.

[14:32] You know, every picture of the bride of Christ in the Bible is a corporate picture. It's not just for you alone. It's for God's people, all those he's going to save. And it's always the people of God who are going along and will one day come to the wedding feast.

And so God is doing something bigger than just undoing historic wrongdoings. He's creating a new people with a new basis of unity, bound together, not by ethnicity or race or history or grievance,

bound together by this supernatural unity that only the covenant can create.

So that's the first thing the covenant means. It means peace for us. And secondly, it means permanence. It's very important because every unity and every harmony that we have as humans is temporary, doesn't last.

every marriage will end with one partner seeing the other partner die. Even the most spontaneous and happy outbreaks of peace are fleeting.

Remember the famous Christmas 1914 on the Western Front of World War I when the Germans and the British soldiers came out of their trenches and stopped shooting at each other and played soccer and exchanged gifts.

[15:52] It only lasted a couple of days and by 1916 there was no break in the fighting for Christmas. You see, we were made for peace. We long for this sort of restoration, don't we?

We long for a unity that's not only real but can't be broken which is secure and life-giving. We long for a love that's going to last.

And in the last four verses of the passage, five times God says that what he's going to do in this covenant is to give a peace which is eternal, everlasting, forever, ongoing.

And the word is not just you know, duration of time. The word means something that's unbreakable, inviolable, secure.

So God makes covenant, he creates this new existence and he's going to do it through one final act where he guarantees the effects of shalom, peace forever and ever.

[16:57] Like bequeathing to us his gift. And that means that something has to happen to you and me before we can enter this life of commitment and intimacy, doesn't it?

And that's the point of verse 23. they shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things or with any of their transgressions. And I will save them from all their backslidings in which they've sinned and I will cleanse them and they shall be my people and I will be their God. See, God undertakes to do for us a spiritual restoration. He is our covenant lover and partner and he can see that it's sin that separates.

Sin always separates. It separates us from each other. It separates us from God. You know C.S. Lewis' harrowing little analogy book, *The Great Divorce*.

He pictures hell as this awful place where people just stop getting on and so they move and they just individually they just move further and further away from each other. I think it's a bit hard for us to imagine this.

[18:09] That God promises to change me and to change you in such a way where we'll not only be freed from the penalty of sin and the guilt of the past and not only freed from the presence of sin in the present but we'll be free from the possibility of sin in the future.

No more sliding. No more sin. Free to love each other in the way that God would have us. Free to love God as he loves us. It would be a wonderful thing wouldn't it?

It's going to take a massive work of God and I think if there's any doubt that God can do this, did you notice this is in the same chapter as the dry bones where God takes skeletons and puts flesh and breathes life into them and raises them from the dead?

God's love. Because when God enters covenant with us, he raises us from a spiritual death and he creates people who begin to experience that covenant love that he gives us.

And I know our lives are marked by sin but we've begun to experience that peace of God which passes all understanding, peace with him and peace with each other, peace with creation begins now and it continues into the next life.

[19:28] So that's secondly, covenant what it means. What's a covenant? What it means and thirdly, how does this covenant come to us? Very simple answer, it's the prince of peace. Three times in the passage, God speaks about a new David.

Look at verse 25, the second half of the verse. They and their children's children shall dwell there forever and David my servant shall be their prince forever.

David, the first David was a pretty good king but he failed ultimately, he went off the rails, he didn't bring eternal peace, he died as all men do.

But God promises this new king and he promises there are two things, there are two features of this new king. God says he'll be my servant which means he belongs to God and comes from God and represents God and he says he'll be their prince.

The word prince means he arises from the people. He's going to be a human and represent humanity, he's going to be somehow representing God from the other side, he's going to be a servant because he's not going to rule by power and insecurity and doing what's best for himself but he's going to do what's best for God and his people and he's going to be a prince forever, he's going to belong to us in a special way so that it goes on and on and on and I think that's what's behind the angels words at the birth of Jesus when they say glory to God in the highest and peace on earth amongst those on whom God's favour rests.

[21 : 05] I think this is very good news, don't you? It's and particularly this time of the year when we're you know we long to see peace so much and we're struck I think as we look around as we look inside at the absence of peace.

Then we remember this domestic scene where this second David, a child, is born into a normal family bearing the hopes and aspirations of generations.

Born to be God's servant, born to be our prince forever and we hear the echo of these covenant words from God 600 years earlier, I'm going to make a covenant of peace with them, eternal covenant.

And we recognise in that child the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promises. In that child God says I will be your God and you'll be my people. And we see him grow and we see him live and we see him in his death.

We see the death as a way of God bequeathing all this blessing to us. And I think like marriage the obvious response for us is to enter into and to strengthen that relationship with God.

[22 : 20] I mean we don't do many marriages we aren't able to use the church on Saturdays. We do them in other churches. We've actually done some marriages in some quite unusual places.

But in the marriage service you say to both people, you say, will you give, will you take, will you give, will you take.

And it's got to be a two-sided thing or else there's no marriage. And it's the same with God. God is saying here and he says in Christ, I give and I will take.

And we have to say the same thing to him. And when we do he plants this new peace in our hearts. As we day by day learn to trust him, we grow in the hope that we will hear the voice from the throne on the day when heaven descends, saying the dwelling of God is with his people.

He will be with them himself and they will be with him. Amen.