Session 2: Israel and the Nations in the Old Testament

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Most believers assume that the Old Testament is primarily about Israel and the New Testament is a shift in emphasis in the nations. The Great Commission is assumed to be a part of that shift in emphasis.

B. There is no question that the Old Testament primarily tells Israel’s story and the New Testament does spend quite a bit of time dealing with God’s gracious offer of mercy to the gentiles and all that is entailed in that.

C. However, we must see the Old and New Testament as a single, unified story and the Great Commission as an instruction deeply rooted in both the Old and New Testaments. This is a shift in understanding for most believers, but it is a shift that must take place in order to understand and fulfill the Great Commission.

D. To shift our understanding, the first thing we must recognize is how the Old Testament introduces the basic elements of the Great Commission.

II. THE CRISIS OF THE NATIONS

A. The book of Genesis introduces the story of God’s work in the nations. It introduces the beauty of God’s intention for creation as well as the tragedy of man’s current condition. Genesis tells us how God created a beautiful world with incredible potential, and how the fall of man threatens everything God intended for creation.

B. By the time you get to Genesis 11, the earth has come to a point of crisis. Wickedness had engulfed the earth so dramatically that God had to send a cataclysmic flood that destroyed the vast majority of humanity. Just a few chapters after the description of that flood, we end up in Genesis 11 and people are again conspiring together to reject God and His leadership.

1. As the people join together to build the Tower of Babel, God judges humanity by dividing them by language. This division begins the separation of mankind into different nations, cultures, languages, and people groups.
2. The nations begin in a context of judgment, but God’s judgments include powerful elements of redemption. Though the nations begin as a judgment on mankind, God already has a glorious plan for the nations. He is going to create an incredible diversity in the nations and then bring individuals out of those diverse nations and form them into one glorious family.

3. God’s judgment at the Tower of Babel results in profound division among the people of the earth, but His plan of redemption is going to result in profound unity among the people of the earth.

C. The beauty of God’s redemption is that His judgments result in something beautiful and redemptive. Judgment becomes redemption. Division becomes unity.

1. When God judges the nations in Genesis 11, He already has Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 in His heart.

   9 And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, (Revelation 5:9 ESV)

   9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, (Revelation 7:9 ESV)

2. God’s judgment at Babel was severe, but redemption was in His heart. He was setting into motion a process that would become glorious.

3. If we understand the nature of God and His judgments, when we read Genesis 11 we should be left with burning questions:

   a. How is God going to redeem the nations?

   b. How is God going to resolve this division of humanity and how is it going to end up being a glorious part of God’s redemptive plan?

III. GOD ANSWERS THE CRISIS THROUGH ELECTION

A. Genesis 12 begins God’s answer to the crisis of Genesis 11. In Genesis 12, God begins to answer the question of how He is going to redeem the nations by giving Abraham tremendous promises that will shape the rest of redemptive history.

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1. Those promises contain specific promises for Abraham’s descendants, but the promises God makes to Abraham in Genesis 12 are not a statement that God will only save one people group out of the nations and abandon the rest of mankind.

2. Instead, the covenant of Genesis 12 must be understood as God’s answer of how He is going to save the nations. He is going to choose Abraham and his family and set a plan in motion in order to resolve the crisis of the fall and redeem the judgment of Genesis 11.

B. It seems odd to us that God would choose one person and His family for the sake of the world, but this is God’s way.

1. When God needs to advance His redemptive plan, He chooses someone and anoints him or her for a specific purpose. This is what is meant by the biblical idea of election. Election is when God chooses a specific individual, or a specific people, and uses them in a unique way in order to bring blessing to everyone.

2. God’s choice is according to His sovereign will, and not based on our own personal achievements.

a. The first part of election is that God chooses. He chooses according to His own sovereign will and this means He frequently chooses people we would not choose. He chooses according to His own will and purposes because there is nothing “better” in any of us that causes us to deserve to be chosen by God. Jacob, Moses, David, Paul, Peter, and many others were unexpected and shocking choices. Even when someone has great natural ability that natural ability is ultimately a gift of God because we are born with it; we do not receive it as a reward.

b. The second part of God’s election is that He chooses an individual for the benefit of the whole. When we think of someone being chosen for special honor we typically think of the privilege that it brings to that person. Biblically being chosen is ultimately for the sake of the body not the person who was chosen.
3. This is what God did with the priests of Israel. They were not more special than the rest of Israel; they were simply anointed to perform a special function in the nation that was for everyone’s benefit. God emphasized this point by forming the priesthood from a family line. The fact that priests were born into the priesthood rather than selected was a statement that they were not more gifted or more special than the rest of the nation. They were not selected according to a process to determine who the most powerful or gifted people were, they were simply chosen by God for a work that would bless the entire nation.

4. We even see this pattern in Jesus. Jesus was the man God choose.

   a. God’s choice of Jesus was unexpected and not based on human ability.

   > ... he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.  
   > He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:2–3 ESV)

   b. God choose Jesus for the blessing of all mankind. In other words, He chose one in order to bring blessing to everyone. This is the pattern of election.

C. God is the God who elects. He is the God who chooses. He continues to lead the church this way by anointing individuals in specific ways for the good of the entire body. We have to understand God’s election so that we do not resist it or become offended by it.

1. The first challenge relating to election is that the one who is chosen can assume they are more important and use their election for their own benefit or their own privilege.

   a. Philippians 2 addresses this issue by calling us to have the same thinking as Jesus who used His privilege for the benefit of others.

   > Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5–8 ESV)
b. Jesus is the one man whose election was on His own merit. If Jesus postured Himself this way, how much more should we respond to any anointing God gives by humbling ourselves to serve the people.

2. The second challenge is that when God elects someone, other people can become offended because they interpret God’s election as a statement that God values that person more than He does the rest. This can also lead to intense envy towards a person who is chosen or uniquely anointed by God. This offense usually manifests in finding fault with those God has chosen to “prove” that they should not have been chosen and are insufficient for the task. In reality they often are insufficient because they were not chosen on their strength.

D. Understanding God’s plan of election is the key to understanding Genesis 12. In Genesis 12, God elects a specific man and a specific people for a unique redemptive purpose, and that election is for the good of all.

E. This is why we can say that Genesis 12 is the beginning of a plan to not just save Israel, but to save the nations. It is also why God’s promise to Abraham ends with the promise that it is going to bring blessing to all the “families” or people groups of the nations.

1Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1–3 ESV)

1. In His covenant with Abraham, God gives Abraham three specific promises:

a. He promises a specific land to Abraham.

b. He promises that Abraham’s descendants will become a great nation that will make His name great in the earth.

c. God ends the covenant with the promise that what happens with Abraham in His family will bring great blessing to all the families of the earth.

2. All three of these promises are tightly bound together. God cannot fulfill just one of these promises; He has to fulfill all three. As the redemptive story unfolds we will see just how tightly connected all these promises are.
F. In Galatians, Paul notes that God’s promise to Abraham was a prediction that the nations would be included in God’s family. According to Paul, when God gave Abraham His promises He was preaching the gospel to him. In a sense Abraham was the first one to be given what would become the Great Commission.

8And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” (Galatians 3:8 ESV)

G. The promises made to Abraham were ultimately made to Jesus. This means that God has chosen Jesus to fulfill Abraham’s promises because He alone is capable of fulfilling them.

16Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. (Galatians 3:16 ESV)

1. Many assume that because Abraham’s promises were really given to Jesus that they are somehow radically changed in the New Testament but Paul never says this. This is a radical theological leap that gets added into Galatians.

2. Paul is simply saying that God is fully committed to fulfilling His promises to Israel and the nations through His Son Jesus.

H. As the Old Testament unfolds, it builds on these promises. For example, when God first calls Jacob, he gives him exactly the same promise He gave Abraham.

13And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. 14Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. (Genesis 28:13-14 ESV)

I. These promises were never fulfilled to Abraham or Jacob. Both lived like strangers in the land and never saw their descendants become a great and mighty people. God still has to fulfill these promises.

J. As another example, the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis is also a prophecy of God’s plan to bring together Israel and the nations.
1. Joseph is the favorite son of his father Israel. As the favorite son he is given divine dreams that his brothers, father, and mother will all bow down to him one day.

2. Because of extreme envy, Joseph’s brothers end up selling him in slavery to the gentiles. Joseph stays faithful and labors in Egypt. At the right time he is exalted and given tremendous power and authority in Egypt. Suddenly he is given great position among the gentiles. In the process He married an Egyptian woman and labored to help save Egypt.

3. After some time, the land of Canaan came under pressure from a 7-year famine and Joseph’s family was forced to go down to Egypt to get grain to survive. Joseph was the one who had preserved Egypt’s food supply and his family’s need to get food eventually reunited the family. By the end of the story, Joseph recognizes that his work in Egypt was ultimately designed by God not just to save Egypt but also to save the descendants of Israel.

4. Joseph’s life illustrates how God uses His unique plan of election to fulfill His promises. Joseph was chosen from among His brothers for special honor. That choice caused his brothers to respond in envy, but it was ultimately for the good of the entire family. Because God choose Joseph the entire family was saved.

K. The life of Joseph is intended to parallel the story of the gospel for us.

1. Jesus was born as Israel’s greatest son and one day all Israel will bow down to Him. Even the great fathers of Israel like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will all bow down to Him.

2. Like Joseph, Jesus was rejected by His brothers. Though many in Israel did follow Him (the first apostles were all Jewish), the nation as a whole rejected Jesus and Paul tells us that this rejection resulted in the gospel being spread among the gentiles (Romans 11:11). In the same way that Joseph’s brothers ended up saving Egypt by selling their brother into slavery, Israel’s rejection of Jesus has been used by God to release salvation in the nations.

3. While Jesus has never abandoned the Jewish people and there has always been a saved remnant, there is a sense in which the gospel has expanded in “Egypt” among the gentiles for 2,000 years. Just as Joseph joined himself to an Egyptian wife, Jesus has also taken a gentile bride from the nations and joined Himself to her.

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4. However, just as Joseph’s labor in Egypt ultimately served to save His family, we also find in the Scripture that Jesus’ labor among the nations to draw a people to Himself is going to ultimately serve His purpose of restoring Israel to relationship with Him. Just as Joseph’s time in Egypt served to rescue his brothers and restore his relationship with them, so also Jesus labor among the nations is going to ultimately serve to restore Israel to right relationship with Him and preserve Israel when it faces another 7-year trial in the future.

5. Joseph’s story illustrates how the story of Israel and the gentiles is deeply intertwined. Joseph’s life serves to save both Egypt and Israel. In the same way, the Great Commission will ultimately serve to save the nations and Israel. It is all deeply connected.

L. This is why God speaks through Moses in Deuteronomy 32:21 and predicts that the nations will be used to bring Israel back to jealousy.

21 They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are no people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation. (Deuteronomy 32:21 ESV)

1. Just as Joseph’s labor in Egypt ultimately saved Israel, so also the expansion of the gospel among the nations will ultimately play a key role in God’s plan to save Israel.

2. We will look at this passage more in a future session, but for now it is key to recognize that God connects the salvation of Israel and the nations from the very beginning of the story.

M. Throughout Israel’s early history, there were individuals like Rahab and Ruth who were gentiles but became a key part of Israel’s story and even played a role in the Messiah’s family line. These individuals were a prophetic statement that God is going to join together the gentiles and the Jewish people into one family. Their destinies are deeply intertwined.

1. Israel’s election is permanent and the nations must recognize it to be in agreement with the plan of god.

2. At the same time, Israel must recognize that her election is not for her own privilege but so that she can serve the nations and see them come to salvation.
N. Throughout most of Israel’s history, the nation did not have the revelation of God’s plan and Israel mostly lived in conflict with other nations. This conflict was a result of both the sin of the nations and Israel’s inability to walk in her calling. However, throughout the Old Testament the prophets continued to promise a future day when God would resolve this. Israel tended to be ignorant of the calling of the nations and the nations tend to be ignorant of Israel’s calling, but God is going to release revelation to both to bring them together in mutual love to fulfill His purposes.

IV. THE PROPHETS AND THE NATIONS

A. As the story of God begins to unfold in the Old Testament, the Scriptures consistently highlight God’s plan for Israel and the nations. The Old Testament is the story of Israel, but it is also the story of Israel and the nations because Israel’s story is ultimately not just for her own sake, but also for the sake of the nations.

B. Here are a few key Old Testament passages that show the emphasis of the Old Testament prophets on God’s plan to save both Israel and the nations.

> “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”
> I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. (Psalm 2:6-8 ESV)

> All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations. (Psalm 22:27-28 ESV)

> They lift up their voices, they sing for joy; over the majesty of the LORD they shout from the west. Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One. But I say, “I waste away, I waste away. Woe is me! For the traitors have betrayed, with betrayal the traitors have betrayed.” (Isaiah 24:14-16 ESV)

> Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants. Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the habitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the top of the mountains. Let them give glory to the LORD, and declare his praise in the coastlands. (Isaiah 42:10-12 ESV)
And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him— for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength— he says: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:5–6 ESV)

Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the LORD. And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. (Zechariah 2:10–11 ESV)

Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths. (Zechariah 14:16 ESV)

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 1:11 ESV)

V. THE GREAT COMMISSION IS ROOTED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A. Part of understanding the Great Commission is understanding its roots in the Old Testament. The Great Commission began in Genesis 12 and it is ultimately for the purpose of Israel and the nations walking in their promises. It is the means by which God will fulfill Israel’s election and also fulfilling His promises to the nations.

B. Once we understand that the Great commission is not exclusively a New Testament idea, we can see that Israel and the nations were always part of God’s divine plan. Israel was always called so that the nations would be blessed, and the nations receive the fullness of their blessing when Israel comes into the fullness of her calling. The destinies of Israel and the nations are deeply intertwined and the Great Commission is our part in God’s great plan to fulfill these promises.