The Centre Of The Story

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[0:00] I'd like us to turn together tonight back to Ephesians chapter 1, and we'll read again verse 7 to 10.! I'm going to do what I sometimes do from time to time tonight, which is basically attempt far more than is possible, and I'm going to try and cram the whole Bible into one sermon.

I've got half an hour. Let's go. Our title is The Center of the Story. And that title captures two things. It captures two crucial things about the Bible and about the message of Christianity. First of all, it's telling us that the revelation that God is giving in the Bible is unfolding across the ages of history. So what that means is that God's work of salvation is woven into the story of human history. And it's really important to recognize that when we say story in that title, we don't mean fiction.
We're not talking about the work of human imagination. Instead, we are talking about the story, the history of humanity itself.
[1:45] And so the first big point that that captures titles is that God's saving purposes unfold across the story of human history.

The second key thing that our title tells us is that there's one person at the very center of it all. And so we're going to look at that together.
To help us, we're going to build a diagram. I'm going to see. I just turned this off again and turned it on again. Let's see if it reconnects. You can try it again. Is it going now? Is it following me? Let me see.
You can change it back. I want to have control of it here. I want control. If you flick it off and flick it on again, we'll see if we get it. If not, it's fine. They can follow me.
But I'll just turn this off for two seconds. From beginning. Let's see if it will come up again. Is it coming through? Are you following me? It's just it's not.
[2:39] I'm not on your side. Slide. You're on a different one from me on the screen. There we go. Let's see now. Oh, there we go.

I've got my power back. Excellent. Right? Now I've got 28 minutes. Just wasted two minutes of precious time. I'm faffing. Okay. Right. As I said, we're going to see how God's purposes unfold over history.
We're going to see that they all center on one person. We're going to build a big diagram to help us. It starts with creation. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. We know that. It's the first thing that the Bible tells us in Genesis 1. From that point, though, as the Bible unfolds throughout the Old Testament and into the New, there are several key themes that get introduced in the Old Testament and that run through into the New Testament.
We're going to just highlight nine of them just now in three groups of three. This isn't all of them. There's many more in the Bible that we could highlight, but I've selected these nine because they're helping us to see how the story all fits together.
[3:44] The first group of three is humanity, community, and family. All these get established from the very beginning. In terms of family, in terms of humanity, that's where creation culminates.

At the end of Genesis 1, verses 26 to 27, God said, Let us make man in our image after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, etc., etc.
So God created man in his own image, in the image of God. He created him male and female. He created him. Humanity is central to God's purposes. But within that establishment of humanity comes community, and that's captured in the very next version, Genesis, the idea of being fruitful and multiplying, filling the earth.
And so humanity is to grow. We're to relate to one another in a beautiful community, a collective human race together. And at the heart of that, of course, is family.

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That gets established in Genesis 2, both in terms of marriage. A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife. And, of course, it's within that marriage union that God purposes for the human race to expand.
[4:54] It's through that that children are to be born. And so all of these things are crucial in the unfolding of God's purposes. And so humanity is established and occupies a unique place in creation, different to everything else that God makes.

Part of that is the collective community that humanity enjoys. And so from a biblical point of view, it's so important to recognize that not only is humanity unique, but humanity is also united.
And so there's this beautiful common unity, equal value and preciousness to all people as we relate together. And that ties in with family, which becomes a key figure, key theme running through the Old Testament.
In particular, Abraham becomes a very important person in relation to family. But many, many more are part of that story. Our next group of three are law, temple and conflict.
And again, these are actually all present at the beginning of the Bible in terms of God's dealings with Adam. And he gives him a law. He commands him, saying, You may surely eat of any tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.
[6:07] For on the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die. And that's a theme that continues in the Old Testament. You see that laws are given to the key figures in the Old Testament, particularly culminating in the Ten Commandments given to Moses and the people of Israel.

But then these are also supplemented by other laws, both ceremonial and what we call ceremonial laws and civil laws. Lots of laws are unfolded and revealed throughout the Old Testament.
Temple is also a crucial theme. And again, it's not immediately obvious, but when you look a bit more closely at Genesis 1-3, you see that part of the purpose of the Garden of Eden is to function as a temple.
And part of the way that we see that is because a temple doesn't necessarily mean a fancy building. A temple just means a place where God and humanity meet.
That's really what a temple is all about. And that's exactly what the Garden of Eden was. And you hear that captured in this phrase of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.
[7:18] And that word for walking is actually used later on in the Old Testament in reference to the temple. And there's that and several other kind of key connections are made between the temple and the Garden of Eden to help us to see that this is a key part of what the Garden was meant to be.

And it's definitely a key theme that unfolds across the Old Testament. Because you have the tabernacle is built when the people come out of Egypt and when they travel around in the wilderness, culminates in the actual temple itself being built in Jerusalem.
And the temple served two key purposes. It was a sanctuary, which meant it's the place where we meet with God. But also, as we move into the rest of the Old Testament, beyond the Garden of Eden, it becomes the place of sacrifice where atonement is made for sin.
It's also a massive theme in the Old Testament. And then thirdly, in this little line, we have conflict.
And that's immediately what you see in the aftermath of sin coming into the world in Genesis 3.
This is God's response in Genesis 3.15. Speaking to the serpent, That's the language of conflict.
[8:40] And that sets the whole Bible in what we could call in the context of a conflict narrative.
And you see that unfolding in Genesis 3.

You see it between Cain and Abel. So you see that family then is affected by conflict, and everything is starting to fit together a little bit more. And further on, Genesis 4 to 11, there's aggression and disintegration.
Abraham again becomes important in this theme because he wins important victories. And that continues on with many, many more figures. Joshua, in particular, is very, very prominent in terms of winning military victories.
The same applies to David. The key point is that as you go right through the Old Testament, law is big. Temple is big. Conflict is big. And that takes us to our third line of three.
Prophecy, priesthood, and kingdom. Adam, in his original creation, functions in all three of these roles. He is to serve as God's spokesperson, the one who receives God's word, and who is to pass that on to the rest of the human race.

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[9:52] That's a theme that continues right through the Old Testament. Moses is a massively important figure here, but from him you get Elijah and Elisha and all the writing prophets as well. It's a key Old Testament theme.

Priesthood, again, Adam functioned in that role of Eden's a temple. Adam's a priest, and he's there able to enter the presence of God. As you go further on in the Old Testament, Moses' brother Aaron becomes a key figure in this area, and the line of priests that descends from him is crucial in the life of Old Testament Israel.

And then lastly, kingdom. Again, when we spoke about humanity being created, there's what we call that dominion mandate. Humanity is given dominion. Adam is to function as a king, and that theme of leadership runs through the Old Testament and culminates again, a key moment again in the Old Testament, is David who becomes the king and the model king in Old Testament Israel.

Now, all of that is just super quick. There's a bazillion more things we could say about all 10 of those themes that are highlighted on the diagram.

I want to notice a couple of things. First, all of these are crucial in the unfolding history of the Old Testament. So as you read the Old Testament, you're reading about humanity, community, family, law, temple, conflict, prophecy, priesthood, kingdom.

[11:22] They're all there all the way through. But what I want you to also recognize is that as these unfold in the Old Testament, they narrow. And so you've got a kind of narrowing pattern in all of these areas as you go through the Old Testament.

So for humanity, you start with all of humanity, the first humans and the intention for humanity to fill the earth. But as we move on, the focus moves on to particular people and particular places.

So in Genesis, the idea is for humanity to fill the earth. But as we move towards the end of the Old Testament, we're actually just in a tiny part of the earth and we're focusing on a small group of people.

In terms of community, the pattern is the same. It narrows. And in particular, the focus narrows to the nation of Israel. And even within that nation, as the Old Testament unfolds, it splits and gets smaller as well.

There's division and shrinking and this narrowing theme continues. The same is true for family. And so, again, at the very beginning, the whole of humanity is to function as a family together.

[12:40] As we move to Abraham, there's a focus on him and on his offspring. But even within that, there's a narrowing because it's not all his offspring. It's particularly the offspring that comes through Esau and then through Jacob.

That Jacob's descendants become the nation of Israel, that family nation. Even with that, there's more narrowing. There's 12 tribes. But by the time you reach the end of the Old Testament, the focus is primarily on the tribe of Judah.

It's narrowing all the time. In terms of the law, again, the Old Testament begins with rules for all of humanity as the story unfolds. It shifts to focus on laws specific to Israel.

And indeed, one of the big reasons for these laws for Israel, particularly the civil and ceremonial laws, is to distinguish Israel from all the other nations. So their laws are to actually, many of the laws are specific to them to show that they're different in the unfolding of God's purposes in the Old Testament.

It's narrowing. Temple, the same. Eden, and the whole earth is to become God's temple. That narrows. You've got Sinai, where God meets with Moses. He then instructs him to build a tabernacle, much smaller building.

[13:51] At least that can still move, though, as they travel through the wilderness. When you get to the promised land in Jerusalem, a fixed temple is built on one hill, in one tiny location.

And even then, that gets destroyed, and its restoration is not the same as it once was. Conflict. You know what I'm going to say. The same thing happens.

It narrows. And so you've got conflict across all humanity in Genesis 4 to 1, but the Bible's focus narrows. You see conflict between Abraham and others as you read through the teens, the chapters 12 to 20 in Genesis.

You see Israel's conflict with Egypt, then the conflict with the promised land. Then you have conflict with the surrounding neighbors, but then it narrows even further. Towards the end of the Old Testament, the bigger problem is conflict within Israel.

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And the tribes are at war with each other. that conflict narrows. Prophecy narrows. Eventually, it fades away. Priesthood narrows to a particular tribe.
[14:53] Within that, the tribes, the Levites, within that, it's the descendants of Abraham. But at the destruction of the temple, the office of priesthood is not the same at the end of the Old Testament as it was when it was established.

And kingdom narrows. Dominion for humanity across the whole earth in Eden narrows eventually to the line of David. and so you end up with, rather than the descendants of Adam, that's expanding, you have the son of David and his son and his son and his son and it's all narrowing down and eventually that dynasty is only ruling over the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and eventually that too comes to an end.
As the story unfolds across the Old Testament, everything narrows. Everything narrows. The key point I want us to notice just now is that this is utterly deliberate and it's deliberate for two reasons. It's deliberate to show that the Old Testament is a temporary shadow and we've said this several times before but it's really good to remember that the shadow of the Old Testament is doing two things.
It's pointing to a reality, it's highlighting an inadequacy and so it's pointing to something more that's going to come but also highlighting that the example that you have in the Old Testament is inadequate.
[16:14] So the temple pointing to a reality but in and of itself it's inadequate. Kingdom's the same. Everything's the same in the Old Testament. It's a shadow pointing to a reality highlighting an inadequacy.

The second key point is that all of this is narrowing because it's converging onto one key focal point and that key focal point is Jesus.
And this takes us all the way back to the passage that we read in Ephesians 1. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us in all wisdom and insight and in particular now verses 9 and 10 making known to us the mystery of his will according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him things in earth things in heaven and things on earth.
Now I want to just highlight some of the key terms and concepts that are being set before us in verses 9 and 10. Paul speaks about the mystery of God's will.
Now mystery is a word that's very easy to misunderstand. We often use the word mystery today as something that we don't have answers for. The biblical term mystery that's used by Paul isn't so much referring to something that we don't know like who's the taterish on taterish or whatever else it might be.
[17:45] Rather mystery here is a word that refers to something that was previously unknown but has now been revealed. Something that we didn't once know but now we know. In other words it's the language of revelation and the thing that's being revealed is God's will.

Everything is now what was once concealed is now being revealed all according to what God wants. Everything is according to His purpose and that's literally according to His good pleasure. Everything that's happening, everything that's been unfolded is pleasing to God. It's what He wants. It's what He has set forth in Christ and that word for set forth means to plan, to propose.
it's like a deliberate future intentionality, a presentation of what one intends to do and that's done as a plan. Literally that's the word economy.
Now in the Greek word behind economy oikonomia basically means the management of a household. It's a management term and so this is the plan, the management plan of God to fulfill His purposes in the fullness of time.
[19:08] In other words, everything has been unfolded across the ages of history. Everything is moving towards a specific objective. In other words, in everything that is happening across the ages of history, God is doing something.

And Paul reinforces all of this again in chapter 3. He speaks about the message he's got to proclaim. He says, To me, though I am the least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places.

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This was according to the eternal purpose that he realized in Christ Jesus our Lord in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.
That word plan is that word economy again, that management of what God wants to accomplish, that eternal purpose is the same language appearing again. That plan, that action of God, all centers on Jesus Christ.
He is the center of the story. As verse 9 of chapter 1 says it's set forth in Christ and as Ephesians 3.11 the plan has been realized in Christ.
[20:36] It's been made and done in Christ. And you see this even more magnificently in the wider language of chapter 1 verses 1 to 10. And you see, I won't go through it all, but you have this emphasis on Jesus at almost every statement.

Paul is an apostle of Jesus to those who are faithful in Jesus. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus who has blessed us in Christ, chose us in him, adopted as sons through Jesus Christ, redemption through his blood, the riches of his grace, the mystery of his will according to his purpose that he set forth in Christ to unite all things in him.
It's all focused again and again and again on Jesus. And this is where we see that all these Old Testament themes are finding their culmination in him.
So when we think about humanity created in Genesis, the perfect, complete, sinless human is not seen until Jesus comes.
When we think about community, all of that actually finds its roots in the eternal, perfect relationship of divine fellowship that you have with God, Father, Son, and Spirit and in human connection as the Son becomes one of us and stands alongside us.
[21:54] Alongside that, the New Testament also makes it absolutely clear that Jesus has come as the new Israel, the fulfillment of what everything that community of Israel was supposed to be.

And you'll see that, especially in Matthew's Gospel, you'll see Jesus, that there's this deliberate echoing of the story of Israel in the story of Jesus. In terms of family, Jesus is the eternal Son. Jesus is the true bridegroom who's come for the bride. In terms of the law, he is both the writer of the law and the keeper of the law. In terms of the temple, he is God with us.
He's the fulfillment of everything at the temple. That's why he said, destroy this temple, I'll build it again in three days. He was talking about himself. In terms of conflict, in the Old Testament you see many, many great warriors fighting battles.
All of those are a shadow of the true warrior, Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of Genesis 3.15, the one who's going to crush the head of the serpent. In terms of prophecy, he is the true ultimate prophet, the very word of God.
[22:57] He doesn't receive the word from God, he is the word of God and his word, when he speaks, God is speaking. Priesthood, he's the great high priest, both in terms of the mediator who represents us and the sacrifice that dies for us.

And in terms of kingdom, he absolutely is the king. And in Jesus, what does he say? The kingdom of God has come. He is the focal point of it all.
And whether we realize it or not, all of this is everything that we long for. Because we long to be taught truth, that's the longing for prophecy.
We long for something to deal with our mistakes, that's the longing for priesthood. We long for somebody who's going to stand up for us and defend us, that's the longing for a kingdom.
We know that right and wrong and justice and injustice is a thing, that's the longing for law. We long for space and moment and relationships that are special and sacred, that's the longing for temple.
[24:03] We know that there are things that are wrong that need to be put right, that's the longing for true and proper conflict. we long for a better humanity where things are different.

We long for closer community and all of us know that love matters more than anything else. Everything that the Bible is unfolding is everything that we long for. The problem is that we're settling for counterfeits, for false prophets and inadequate priests and kings who will never actually be able to defend us.
And instead we need to recognize that everything that we long for is found in Jesus. He's at the center of everything. But the amazing thing is that the unfolding of God's purposes, even though they're focused on Jesus, these purposes do not stop with Jesus.
Instead, what you see in the Bible is that in and through Jesus all of these are fulfilled, they are renewed, and they are expanded. And so Jesus comes as the prophet and then he sends his

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church to communicate his message.
So we now participate in that work as well as we communicate his message of good news to everybody who needs to hear it. Jesus comes as the priest and he opens up the way to God.
[25:22] The curtain of the temple is torn in two. He makes atonement, but now we too have access to God. We can also come into God's presence. We can also pray to him and we can also intercede for others and come to pray to God on their behalf as Jesus gives us access.

Jesus is our king. We are citizens of his kingdom. We live under his rule and we are heading in a new direction. Jesus gives us a new law. He gives us his commands.
We are to live by them. We are to teach them to others. Jesus is building a new temple and we are part of it. And so his spirit has come to dwell in us so that the church is now the temple.
It's no longer a building. It's a people. God himself has come to dwell in our hearts. Jesus engages in a new conflict, not a conflict with flesh and blood, with armies and nations, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.
In other words, against everything that's really wrong with the world. That is our energy. enemy.
And with Jesus, we take up our battle against the power of sin and darkness.
[26:41] Jesus is building a new humanity, repentance, and faith turns us in a new direction. We're living in a new way. We have new desires, new priorities, which means that we live in a way that's different from everything that's around us.

We are building a new community where we have fellowship with one another, where everybody else is welcome and invited to come in. And together, we are part of a new family, adopted as children of God, united as brothers and sisters, where more than anything else, we love God and love one another.
In Jesus, all of that's fulfilled. In Jesus, all of these things are renewed. And in Jesus, all of this expands.
and what that means is that God's ultimate purposes that center on Jesus, all of them include you.
And that's why the thing that lies at the center of the gospel and at the center of the story is what we call union with Christ. That's what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 1 when he keeps talking about in Christ, in him, in Jesus, in him.
[27:59] The fact that the whole way that the gospel works is that Jesus is at the center of the story and we are saved by being united to him. That's the amazing thing about the gospel.

Everything has been fulfilled in Jesus and then the whole message of the gospel is you can be part of this too. And in fact, the whole point of it is so that you can be part of this too.
And the great goal of it all is new creation where Jesus returns and the universe is renewed.
There is a new heaven and a new earth and all of God's purposes are fulfilled. And this is exactly what Revelation 21 describes. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.
And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.
[29:04] He will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more for the former things have passed away.

And he who was seated on the throne said, Behold, I'm making all things new. Also he said, Write this down for these words are trustworthy and true. And he said to me, It's done. I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, to the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.
The one who conquers will have this heritage. I will be his God and he will be my son. What I want you to see is that everything in our diagram is in that passage. And so we talk about prophecy. This is the loud voice crying out. This is the instruction to write down these words. We talk about priesthood. That's the language of access.
You're entering into the throne room of God and there's dealing, our sins are dealt with, former things have passed away, all things are being made new.
[30:13] We talk about kingdom. This is the voice that comes from the throne. This is the one who's seated on the throne who is speaking.

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We talk about the law. These are the words that are trustworthy and true. You go on to the rest of the chapter. I didn't have room to have it but it goes on immediately to speak about the moral categories that the law sets out before us.
We talk about temple. This is saying the dwelling place of God is with man. That's temple language.
We talk about conflict. This is the one who conquers the whole of revelation up to this point is so often using that conflict language.
We're talking about humanity. This is all about his people. We talk about community. This is a holy city, a place of togetherness.
And we talk about family. This is the image of a bride. This is the language of a son. Everything is coming together in Jesus.
[31:18] Everything finds its fulfillment in him. And what I want you to notice most of all is the tiny words in verse 6.

It is done. All of that is done in Jesus.
And that's where you see everything come together. God's purpose is at the start in creation. They narrow to focus on Jesus. And from him they expand to find their fulfillment in the new creation.
And all of it is telling us two crucial things to remember as we finish. one is that Jesus absolutely is at the center of the story.
Everything focuses on him and he is utterly amazing. But that expansion aspect that you have narrowing to Jesus, expanding from him is telling us that everything that we imagine, everything that we look forward to, everything that we hope for in the new creation, that expansion is telling you, it is way bigger and way better and way more amazing than your mind will ever take in.
[32:50] And so when Jesus says, follow me, he means a whole lot more than we realize because that's what he's taking us.

Amen.

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