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ISRAEL

Why Wrestlers Need Rescuing

The LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household 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.*

*. . . all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.” (Gen. 12:1–3)*

Suppose that someone were to give you the task of fixing *all* the world’s problems. In case you’re wondering, that means *everything* from hunger and greed to long lines at the ladies’ restroom. Where would you begin? Or better yet, who would you choose to help you?

In the Scriptures, we’re surprised to discover that God’s plan to save creation starts in the unlikeliest

of places. In fact, when God is faced with the task of restoring a fractured world, he looks all the obvious helpers in the eye, and calmly answers: none of the above. None of these will do. When God sets out to save the world, only one individual catches his attention. Not a general, or a king, or a rock star, but a shriveled-up old man named Abram.

God comes to Abram late in life with a peculiar message: “Abram . . . I want *you* to take a trip.” And with that, a new chapter in God’s Story opens with just two words: “Abram went.”¹

Abram’s Road Trip

Without a map or GPS to guide him, Abram sets out with his wife to an unknown destination. The couple leaves their home, their heritage, and all that is familiar. They just *go*. And the only guarantee they have to cling to is a rather peculiar promise. “One day,” God said, “the whole world will be blessed because of you.”² Along the way, God changes their names: his to Abraham, hers to Sarah. And through many twists and turns, Abraham shows faith in God’s unlikely promise. In the New Testament, this theme is taken up as he is known as *both* the man of “faith” and the man of “deeds” (see, for example, Romans 4 and James 2). Both titles are fitting because, as we will see, faith expressing itself in obedience has always been God’s desire from his people. Always.

The call of Abraham marks the start of God’s grand rescue operation known as “Israel.” It begins, not with an army or a celebrity or a gifted politician, but with a geriatric

tag team—Abraham and Sarah—wandering through the wilderness. This is God’s big idea to fix a broken world: two card-carrying members of the AARP, with camels.

In the end, however, the strange choice of Abraham tells us something important about God’s Story. It tells us emphatically that the Creator’s way of solving problems is fundamentally different than our own. I’ll rephrase that point because it’s crucial: when God sets out to fix our troubles, he goes through unlikely channels, unlikely people, and unlikely circumstances. Thus, the Creator’s way of solving the problem of sin starts not with military might, human ingenuity, or scientific innovation. It starts with an unlikely family, the family of Abraham and Sarah, the family known as Israel. This is the big idea of this chapter. And it’s one worth pondering.

All of us come from families of one kind or another. Whether your birth parents stuck around or not, we all have a biological heritage. Some families are large and some are small. Some are what we now call “broken homes.” But the truth is that all families are broken in one way or another. We all carry baggage from our roots. And we all carry gifts. Still, the shocking truth of Scripture is this: God’s rescue operation begins with a family that is *at least* as screwed up (and yet, as beautiful) as yours. And for some reason, that ought to give us all some hope.

Many Sons?

Growing up, I used to sing a song about God’s family. We learned it in Sunday school. My mom played the piano

and us kids would jump around and belt out the melody like little rock stars with clip-on ties. I have pictures. The major lyrical emphasis of the song centered around the idea that “the party of the first part” (father Abraham) had many, many sons.

Well, kind of. Come to find out there actually weren’t that many sons to start with. Just two. One named *Yitzhak* (Isaac), he was Abraham’s favorite. And another named Ishmael (who Abraham fathered by his servant).

There’s not time to go into all the drama surrounding the two brothers, but suffice it to say that Yitzhak grew up, got married, and had a son of his own. He named this son Jacob. And that’s how one of the greatest songs in the history of Sunday school-dom got its start.

But for all this father-son talk, Jacob was a momma’s boy. And he was also a deceiver. At a time in human history when muscles and masculinity were important, Jacob learned to survive *not* with his brawn, but with his brain. He was a plotter, a conniver, and he had clawed and cheated his way through life. He had done it from birth, when he was born snatching (ambitiously) at the heel of his twin brother—and he was good at it.

Jacob’s brother Esau was a jock. He was older (barely), and he was stronger too. Esau liked to hunt and grunt and kill. He had hair on his chest, and everywhere else for that matter (picture: Sasquatch in a tunic). Esau was his father’s son. He was meat-and-potatoes; he drove a pickup; he listened to country. Jacob liked to cook; he drove a Prius; he listened to indie-rock.

In other words, Jacob and Esau were siblings, but they were very different. Perhaps you can relate.

Labels

Because Esau was older, he was supposed to get his father's inheritance. He was *supposed* to get it. It never happened. In an act of Jacob-like deception (involving some fake body hair and a recipe for Mommy's bestest soup), the younger brother stole his sibling's birthright. In his conniving way, Jacob took his father's blessing, his brother's inheritance, and with that, the chance to be included in the line of men and women through whom God would work to save the world. Let me say it another way: *Jacob lied his way into God's family tree!* He cheated his way in, and as a result, Yahweh (the one true God of all creation) would forever be known as the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and . . . of Jacob.³

If we bristle at this, it is probably because we would like to think of God's family as sort of the Moral Majority of the ancient world (that is, if the Moral Majority had actually been moral). We would like to think of them as Boy Scouts who never lied or cheated or slept around: Billy Grahams in bathrobes and Birkenstocks.

Newsflash: they weren't.

Some were more like this, of course. But most were not. Jacob wasn't even close. Even his name bore testimony to this reality. He was *Jacob* (the heel-grasping deceiver). And the reputation was fitting.⁴

In other words, Jacob was a name, but it was also a *label*.

One doesn't need to read the Bible very long to discover that in the ancient world, like today, being labeled was a tough thing to overcome. From a young

age, the taglines given to us have a way of cementing into our subconscious and defining who we are. Labels become a part of our identity. Words like slut, jock, freak—*Jacob*.

Anyone who's been through junior high school knows how badly names can hurt. They can wound us. And they can stick. Yet one thing we discover about God's plot-line is that the Creator has a peculiar habit of changing the labels associated with his children. Throughout the Scriptures, Israel's God has a way of changing names. He did this for Jacob. In the pages that follow, we come to know the deceptive heel-grasper by another name, a better name, and a name that will be used to describe God's family for thousands of years. The name is Israel. It means *wrestler*. And Jacob earned the title.

What's in a Name?

It happened by a brook.

On a starry Middle Eastern night, Jacob the deceiver lay awake beside a babbling stream in the wilderness. He was worried. At the moment, he was once more attempting to connive a way to keep his brother Esau from killing him. He wasn't finding one. After years apart, there was to be a meeting between the brothers. The two grandsons of Abraham were about to come face-to-face, and Jacob was at wit's end. He had spent his whole life running—from his home, from Esau, from the truth. Now it was time to stop.

And so it was that something very strange took place. While Jacob lay awake, the writer says “a man wrestled with him till daybreak” (Gen. 32:24). A *man* struggled with Jacob. The sentence sounds straightforward enough. But beneath the surface, it is one of the oddest stories in the Scriptures. It’s strange, because as we read on, we come to see that it is not with just any flesh-and-blood *human* that Jacob struggled. Many scholars argue that Jacob was wrestling with God himself.

The scene defies attempts to picture it. Here is God in human form: the Sovereign One, allowing a lying momma’s boy named *Jacob* to claw and bite and snarl at him, while hanging on for dear life. And hang on Jacob does.

After a lifetime of leaving and deceiving, the Scriptures say that Jacob “clung to the Man,” and would not let him go. Then the mysterious Visitor asks a fascinating question: “What is your name?” This is the very thing he had lied about to steal his way into the blessing.

But this time, the liar’s response is short and true.

“I am *Jacob*” (Gen. 32:27, translation mine).

At face value Jacob’s answer may not seem that significant. It’s just a name. It may as well have been Ross or Bill or Gertrude. But for Jacob it is more than a name. This time it sounds like a confession. “I am Jacob,” he says. I am the deceptive heel-grasper. It’s like the statement given by the fugitive after the car chase is over and the evidence is staring him in the face. The cuffs are on and the conniver is finally finished lying. “I am Jacob,” he says.

The Wrestler

Jacob confesses his identity and again the unexpected happens. Instead of snapping the deceiver's scrawny neck, God does something else. He changes Jacob's name.

"Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel because you have wrestled with God and with men and have overcome" (Gen. 32:28). Your name will be Israel, the *wrestler*.

From this day forward, the children of Jacob possess a singular calling. They possess a role in God's Story unlike any other people. From this day forward, they *are* Israel. They are the Wrestlers. They are to be the family that wrestles with the Creator's unique calling upon their lives to be a light to the nations. They have been chosen to be the bringers of God's rescue. The God of the universe has *selected them* from all the people on the planet to be a part of an operation to restore creation. This was the meaning of God's covenant promise made to Abraham: "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3).

In Christian teaching, God's covenantal choosing is sometimes called "election." But what Israel's calling reveals about God's choice is crucial. Divine election is not primarily about God choosing one person *instead* of the others; rather, it is about God choosing one *for the sake* of the others. The point here is redemptive. The idea is that through God's choice of Israel, all nations, races, tribes, and tongues will have access to salvation. Indeed, even the creation itself will be restored. This is the end-goal of election: God chooses a part for the good

of the whole. Again: “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”⁵

This was the calling with which every son and daughter of Israel would have to struggle. It was the realization to be passed from every Hebrew mother to her child: God chose us, he spoke to us, and he expects something from us. Like Jacob by the brook, the children of *Israel* would wrestle with God’s call upon their lives to be a different kind of family, a different kind of community, and a different kind of nation: a holy people. Some would wrestle well. Some would wrestle poorly. But none would escape the struggle.

To Christians today, the call to “grapple” or “struggle” with God’s call may seem irreverent or disrespectful. Not so. Apparently, the God of the Bible wants a people who will come to him with their deepest questions, fears, and anxieties. After all, he knows them anyway. One place in which we see this honest wrestling match most vividly is in the poetic literature: books like Psalms and Lamentations. In such places, people like David cry out to God with frightfully uncensored prayers: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?” (see Psalm 22). In spite of such hopeless-sounding cries, however, it often seems that God brings hope to his wrestlers precisely through the act of crying out in honest prayer. Perhaps you can relate.

After Jacob’s struggle by the brook, God’s family had a name, but they did not have a home. A few hundred years later and not much had changed. Far from being on top of the world, the great-great grandkids of Abraham,

Isaac, and Israel were now *stuck* as slaves in Egypt. And as you may have guessed, there's a story behind that too.

Leaving Boston

Many years ago, I loaded up most of my belongings—including my life-size cardboard cutout of a young Bob Dylan—and I set off on a two-day road trip from Boston, Massachusetts, to the hinterlands of Middle America. I could try to romanticize the trip as a kind of second installment of Jack Kerouac's American odyssey, but mostly it was just two days spent dodging semis, road kill, and text-messaging teenagers who make Britney Spears look like a driver's education instructor.

It was pretty boring. But between intervals of talking to myself and listening to an old Counting Crows box set (I am old), I happened to pop in an old cassette tape (told you) that I found lying inside the console. It was a lecture given by an aging professor of theology.

In a high-pitched, almost cracking voice, the elderly professor was talking about reading the Bible from the perspective of a people who have been systematically enslaved—bought, bred, sold, and exploited—by supposedly Christian oppressors. He was talking about reading the Bible from *below*, from his own perspective as a black man growing up in segregation-era America.⁶

And as he spoke, I could hear his cracking voice grow more and more irate with the questions being posed by the mostly white audience. *They weren't getting it!* he

thought. *They weren't asking the right questions!* and it was angering him. He was yelling now and going on about how most of us just couldn't understand where he was coming from.

And I thought maybe he was right. I couldn't understand what it was like to be kicked out of a restaurant because of my skin color. I couldn't understand the implications of being told by a parent *not* to talk to a policeman if ever I should get lost. I couldn't understand because try as I might, as a middle-class white kid growing up in the heartland, I tended to think about slavery and segregation in much the same way that I think about the Great Depression, the great potato famine, or the bubonic plague. "Sure, those were terrible," I'd say, "but didn't they happen a pretty long time ago?" I can't change the past. I can't rewrite history. I'm not a racist. So why did it feel like this old man was yelling at *me* through the tape deck?

Leaving Egypt

I kept these questions in my mind through the state of New York. But the longer cardboard Bob Dylan glowered at me from the backseat—through the mountains of Pennsylvania and the cornfields of Ohio—the more I got to thinking about how God's people had been *slaves* too. They were slaves in Egypt. And the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that *they* would have understood where this African American professor was coming from. They would have related to him.

Because there is something about slavery that sears itself into your memory. I imagine there is something about it that burns its way into your collective consciousness. It transcends generations. You remember it. It stays with you. And many of us can relate to this only partially.

But we can relate *partially* because, regardless of our backgrounds, we do know what it is like to be treated somewhat like a product. We experience it in subtle ways. The young woman who walks down high school hallways made to feel like fashion runways. The old man who, after a lifetime of independence, is shipped off to die in an ammonia-smelling nursing home. The single mom who, while trying to send her kids to college, finds that her pension has been liquidated by a corporate millionaire who cooked the books. We know what it's like to feel like a *product*, and in a small sense, that's what slavery is about. Slavery is about treating people as products. It's not just about denying rights; it's about denying full humanity.

This is what happened in Egypt. In a bitter twist, God allows his family to be enslaved by a Pharaoh and delivered by a man named Moses.

It's a painful story because no matter how we rationalize it, there is never a good reason for oppression. We get the sense, however, that God allows his children to endure it in Egypt because he wants to teach them early how it feels to be exploited. He wants to teach them, so that as they grow and become more powerful, they will always remember what it was like to be on the bottom. And in remembering this, they will (perhaps) avoid treating others in this manner.

“Remember!” God says over and over. “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt” (see, for example, Deuteronomy 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18). Remember what it was like for your forefathers there. Remember, so that when the tables turn, and you find yourselves on top, you will know not to treat your brothers and sisters in the ways that you’ve been treated. Years later, a Jewish Rabbi (Jesus) would even go so far as to say that this way of thinking *sums up* the whole Old Testament. The entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures, boiled down into a single sentence: “Do to others, as you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12).

Egypt’s lesson is blunt and painful. The rescue operation can begin only when God’s family recognizes a reality forgotten by nearly every civilization on the face of the earth: people are more than products. It is a reality forgotten by both the corporate machine and the consumer culture alike. Individuals are more than goods and services! We are (all of us) more than commodities to be used and thrown away. And, ironically, it is a reality that only former slaves can fully grasp. So God allows Israel’s children to be enslaved in Egypt. And he allows them to be led out by his grace alone.

Into the Wild

After walking out of oppression without raising so much as a spear, the children of Israel are ushered next into a binding relationship with their Liberator-God. It is a marriage of sorts. It is a *covenant*. The meaning is simple. Based on his faithfulness in the past, God reaffirms his

relationship with the children of Israel for the future. Both parties in this marriage are sworn to faithfulness. And just like in a marriage, there are consequences for breaking one's vows. The result is that Israel will be God's people and he will be their God. Other nations will have governmental systems designed to dominate and to destroy, but God's family is to be different. They are to have no King but God himself.

They are to honor God by loving and obeying him. It's a simple concept. But it's not easy. The covenant requires people to remain honest in their dealings, faithful in their marriages, and content with their possessions. They must respect the lives of others, the authority of parents, the property of neighbors, and the name of the one true God who brought them out of slavery. These simple practices form what we call the Ten Commandments.

But even these clear-cut rules are based on something bigger. They are based on a *narrative* of liberation. So before God hands down a single "thou shall not," he reminds them of their story: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of *slavery*" (Deut. 5:6, emphasis mine).

Based on that act of saving grace, God says he wants us to live a different kind of life. He wants us to live a life of love and goodness and worship—a life of honesty, not exploitation. That's the lesson of the Ten Commandments. It's not about rules for the sake of rules. It's about rules for the sake of right relationships. And like everything God does throughout the Bible, it's about communion coming back to the creation.

The Bride and the Bellboy

It's a nice thought. There's something almost quaint about the notion of authentic community making a comeback. But for the children of Israel it seems that trouble starts brewing from almost the first day of their road trip out of Egypt. They have been called to be different, but as most of us discover, being *different* is difficult.

It's a line most of us have heard in the mouth of a child. "But, Mom! Sally's parents say it's okay! Sally's parents let her do it! Sally's parents let her have a pony . . . put on makeup . . . drive at nighttime . . . wear a bikini . . . tattoo the lyrics to Nickelback in Chinese on her lower back . . ." (you get the drift). They used to call it peer pressure, and it stems from the fact that we feel most comfortable when we're doing things pretty much like everybody else. We may say we value independence, but that's mostly because everybody else values it too. In America especially, many "rebels" are just doing what the culture says is cool.

For Israel, the peer pressure shows up in a specific way: the other nations worship idol-kings that they can see and touch. Their gods are visible and their rules are more elastic. The other nations can fight and fornicate whenever it suits them. They can even hedge their religious bets, praying to multiple gods, and thereby increasing the odds that at least one deity will grant their wish. The other nations have kings they can see and hear and put on pedestals. The list goes on and on.

Israel has none of this: no human king, no palace, no temple. And the people grow jealous. What happens next

begins a pattern of behavior that crescendos throughout the Old Testament. Just beyond the border of Egypt, the Israelites reject their marriage vows, they reject their covenant, and they begin to behave just like the neighbors. It starts while Moses is still on the mountain with God getting the ten rock rules. In his absence, the people construct an idol—a gaudy golden cow that must have looked like it was designed by the same people who decorate the sets of Christian cable shows.

They make a calf-god. And they worship it. This act of worshipping creation, rather than the Creator, is called idolatry—and it is the great sin of humanity, both then and now. We have been wired to worship at our very core. We will worship. The problem, however, is that we also have a knack for choosing terrible gods. Every sin is just idolatry in one form or another. Yet with the golden calf, the reality is almost too much to grasp. The chosen people have betrayed their marriage vows! And the timing is what's most appalling. Having just left the honeymoon suite, the bride has now committed the spiritual equivalent of bedding the hotel bellboy. It's disgusting. And it leaves us with questions: What will become of Israel now? Will God simply wipe the people out? He did that once with a flood. Will he do it again? Perhaps he wants to.

And yet, he doesn't. This time, the Creator takes an even more daring approach. His people have denied him, yet he refuses to give them up. At the last moment, God remembers his covenant promise to a wrinkled old man named Abraham. And like a jilted lover who can't let go, Yahweh remembers *his* wedding vows. He will stay with

his people, and he will keep his promise, even if they have shattered theirs.

Yet there will be consequences. The relationship has changed. And it is at this moment that the Creator takes creative action. If Israel will not stand out *morally* then she will stand out in another way. She will stand out physically and culturally. In other words, if the old covenant did not change the people's hearts, then it must at least change their appearance. Israel must be *set apart* in order to survive among the neighbors.⁷

In this way, the Creator will preserve his people until the day when an Israel (or an Israelite) can come along and embody the life that will show the world what God is really like. And with this creative twist, we begin to understand one reason for some of the strangest passages in the entire Bible.

What's "Cud" Got to Do with It?

After the incident with the golden calf, the biblical text is littered with what modern folks might see as some of the most peculiar rules imaginable. In books like Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the loving Creator we meet in the beginning appears to morph into what might seem like a legalistic schoolmaster with a touch of OCD.

There are meticulous rules on almost everything. Strange rules! And it's for this reason that most Christians simply ignore these sections of the Bible. The commands seem foreign and legalistic. "Don't touch this! Don't eat this! Don't put these two kinds of fabric together!" The list goes on and on.

There are even rules on what foods to eat. Cud chewers are good. Animals with split hooves are good. But then it gets complicated. Take the rabbit. Apparently, he chews his cud. But he's got no hooves. So he's off-limits. Thou shalt not eat rabbit! Or take the pig: she's got split hooves, but she doesn't chew her cud. So she's out too. Take one bite of pork tenderloin, and you might as well have clubbed a cocker spaniel (see Leviticus 11:1–9).

All these rules eventually raise the question that Tina Turner never got around to. That is, when it comes to religion, What's *cud* got to do with it? What's cud have to do with anything?! Why should God care if someone has a pork chop or some rabbit stew? What do these strange rules have to do with spirituality?

Christians have given all kinds of creative answers to this question. Some claim that Yahweh is protecting his people from health risks associated with such foods. Perhaps some of them were. Ironically, however, almost none of these people seem to find such risks reason enough to adopt a similar diet themselves!

Others claim that these laws were given in an effort to keep Israel away from pagan rituals that were associated with such practices. Ironically though, God seems to have no problem with other practices—say, eating the meat of bulls or drinking wine—which were much more commonly used in pagan rites. So in the end, this theory seems incomplete as well.

So we are back where we started. What's cud have to do with anything? What do these peculiar rules have to do with spirituality? Perhaps the most important explanation is the one that we've already mentioned. It

seems that many of these strange rules have to do with *preserving* a distinct people—a people who are set apart from the surrounding nations—and not with *propagating* a bizarre religious legalism. I'll try to explain.

Culture Matters

The Christian God was never the legalistic father that some have made him out to be. He was never an angry schoolmaster who imposed meaningless legalisms just because it suited him. In fact, these rules were never God's chief desire at all. His ultimate desire was for Israel to stand out because of her mercy, fidelity, and love. He wanted her to love him, and in doing so, to love people in ways that led to flourishing and shalom. He wanted her to remember the fatherless and the widow, and to value every human life because she had seen the effects of treating people like products.

But because his family refused to stand out in this way, the Creator chose to graciously preserve his people by other methods. As any anthropologist can tell you, a culture *must* possess elements unique to itself if it is to have any hope of survival. (Those reading this who are immigrants will know exactly what I'm talking about.) If a minority group simply adopts the lifestyle of its majority neighbors, then it ceases to exist as a unique culture. For God's family to survive, they must be set apart in noticeable ways.

If Israel would be no different from her neighbors spiritually and morally, then she must be different outwardly and culturally. In this way, the God of Abraham would

sustain his family until a point when Someone could come along to live out the *heart* of the commandments.

Until that time, however, the unique laws of the Old Testament preserved the calling and identity of Israel in the same way that other cultures have been sustained for thousands of years.⁸ Later on, in the New Testament, we will be given an indication of which commands still apply, and which ones have run their course. But, for now, it is time to leave the wilderness. It's on to the promised land!

The Bible and Marie Antoinette

Several years ago, my wife and I made our sacred pilgrimage to a shrine called Movie Gallery. For younger readers, this is a long-forgotten place of commerce where old people used to rent movies and TV shows before Netflix, Amazon, and the internet. We rode there in our covered wagon.

Unfortunately, on this occasion, I walked out holding a bright pink DVD case for a movie dubiously titled *Marie Antoinette*. Hilarity did not ensue.

In case you're not a History Channel junkie, Marie Antoinette was the last queen of France before the great Revolution (about the same time as America's) in which starving French citizens decided to take liberty into their own hands. Eventually, in a period called The Terror, they built a giant sausage slicer called the guillotine. They used the device to lop off royal craniums like the leafy ends of carrots. It was a bloody business and

needless to say, things didn't end well for Marie. But the movie wasn't about her death. The movie was primarily about the way Marie and her royal entourage *lived* before the revolution.

Here's a synopsis: they lived well.

While French peasants starved, Marie (or at least the movie version) partied like a Hollywood celebrity. Every night was a red-carpet affair, and every day was filled with weighty decisions like which shade of pink fabric should adorn the royal poodles.

You know, important stuff.

In the film, she was the Paris Hilton of Paris, and almost as well-spoken. History remembers her primarily for her supposed response to the news that French citizens were starving without bread. Marie's humanitarian solution would thus become as famous as she: "No bread?" she asked. "Let them eat cake!" It seemed simple enough. (Spoiler alert: the real Marie Antionette may not have ever said that.)

The ironic thing about the movie was the way in which the director went to great pains to show that Marie wasn't *really* a bad person. She wasn't *really* malicious. She hadn't asked to be queen. She didn't even want the job. She was pushed into it.

The director's point was simple. Marie wasn't evil per se. Marie was just living out the part of a queen within that decadent and tone-deaf chapter of French history. She was living like a *royal*. But as it often does, the unrestricted freedom given to the powerful only served to cut her off from the concerns of the common

people starving in the streets of Paris. Marie's position distanced her from the realities of regular Joes (or Pierres), and it led to her demise.

There's a name for this phenomenon. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman sees the scenario as a natural result of what he calls "the royal consciousness." And he sees it in Israel's history too.⁹

A Royal Mess

After exiting the wilderness for the promised land, an unsettling reality becomes apparent for God's people. Despite their best efforts, not even lengthy law codes are enough to protect them from the constant desire to be more like the pagan neighbors. They are commanded to *drive out* their enemies, but this is difficult when one envies them.¹⁰ The Israelites want more than a covenant to define them; they want a king. So God gives them what they want. But this concession comes with a dire warning.

This is what will happen. God says: While your precious king grows rich, your babies will grow hungry. While your queen picks pricey fabric, you'll pick which mouth to feed. Your sons will be drafted to fight wars; your daughters will be taken as perfumers; your fields and flocks will be ravaged by taxation. And then, after a long list of woes, there comes the kicker: "you yourselves will become his slaves" (see 1 Samuel 8:11–17).

With the royal consciousness comes a return to Egypt-like existence. And it will be this way, God says, because no matter how noble its beginning, every earthly

kingdom ends with the same agenda. It is what the royal consciousness is all about. It's about *maintaining power at any price*. "You want a king," God says. "Alright, but it's going to cost you." And it does.

For the remainder of their stay in the land of Canaan, the children of Israel struggle under the guidance of kings either too greedy, too proud, or too stupid to shepherd a people. There are bright spots, of course. There is a Cinderella story of a shepherd-king named David, a Renaissance man who expands Israel's borders, strengthens her faith, and pens a songbook for the ages. But even with David, seeds of destruction are being sown. Taxes are raised, integrity is bartered, and blood is spilled in bucket loads.

Behind the scenes, things continue to decline under David's son. Though bright beyond measure, Solomon is born with a silver spoon in hand. While beginning with more wisdom than the world ever knew, he ends his reign as Israel's brilliant fool. And his extravagance has consequences. A subversive commentary on Solomon's indulgence (sexual, economic, and otherwise) is recorded by the writer of a book called 2 Chronicles. When given the task of recording the king's annual salary, the scribe writes down this very specific number (I feel like I've heard of it somewhere before . . .): "The weight of the gold that Solomon received yearly was 666 talents" (2 Chron. 9:13).

To even the casual reader, or the casual watcher of *The Exorcist*, the message in the numbers now seems clear: 666 is what happens when earthly rulers go too far. Their reign becomes demonic and oppressive. They

become part of what the New Testament calls “the principalities and powers” (see Ephesians 6).

For God’s people, the reality was clear. The kings Yahweh never wanted were leading Israel down a path of no return. And Solomon was just the beginning. After him, the kingdom was split by civil war, and things went from bad to worse.

Through a royal parade of bumbling monarchs, the Jewish nation descended into idolatry and exploitation. Instead of caring for the widow, the orphan and the foreigner, they exploited common people for common profit. Like modern televangelists, they turned true religion (a phrase from the New Testament book of James)¹¹ into yet another means to take advantage. They exacted exorbitant taxes, distorted the Scriptures, and ran rackets in God’s name.¹²

The result was sad and sickening. The family that was supposed to show the world what God was like had become a part of the problem. Eventually God’s patience wore thin, and it was time for yet another road trip. Israel would be driven from their promised land by foreign armies. They would go into exile, and it would be there that they would learn a painful lesson. Idolatry and oppression have horrific consequences.

Prophets: God’s Megaphones

Yet as the exilic road trip lurched ever closer, there were also signs that God was not finished with his family. Amid the commotion of the royal mess, there were other sounds emerging—sounds of *voices* crying out, as

it were, in the wilderness. The voices belonged to God's prophets. The prophets were megaphones of truth in a culture that was hard of hearing. We'll close Israel's chapter by listening to them.

As we come to the end of the Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter these ragged wild-eyed figures. Prophets. For some of us, the very word brings to mind a kind of fortune teller. But in the Old Testament, the prophets are not so much the seers of the distant future, as the tellers of the painful truth. They are thorns in the side of the royal consciousness. And they are the means by which God chooses to speak to his dysfunctional family. The prophets are the slightly crazy ones who dare to stare a pip-squeak ruler in the face and remind him that there is a greater King to be obeyed.

They have eccentric Hebrew names befitting of their character—names like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Obadiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Unbowed by idols and unimpressed with royal opulence, these men and women emerge at various times to remind God's wayward rescuers of their true calling. "We were called to be the light of the world!" they say. "We were called to bless the nations and restore community to creation!" Some weep, some shout, and some wear strange clothes. But in all their imaginative eccentricity, the overriding prophetic message is a simple one: repent!

Admittedly, it is a message that most of us do not like hearing. It is a message associated with wild-eyed street preachers, or Bible-thumping fundamentalists. It has an edge and it carries an accusation. Yet with the prophets, the accusation is well-founded. God was coming to judge

his family. In the year 722 BC, the Assyrian military swept into Canaan and wiped the northern tribes of Israel off the map. They would scarcely be heard from again.

Then, in 586 BC, the remaining southern tribe of Judah—the tribe of the shepherd-king—would face a similar fate, this time at the hands of Babylon. The foreigners swooped in like vultures, killing many, and carrying the best and brightest off to exile.

The prophets' warnings had come true. For more than a generation God's family would languish in a foreign land. They would weep and mourn. But more importantly, they would repent. They would come clean of their idolatry and many would commit themselves to the laws that God had given them. Then, after more than a generation away, some would be allowed to trickle back into their burned-out homeland. Books like Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were written during this slow return.

When All Seemed Hopeless

But despite returning *physically* to the land, in many ways, exile continued. A third-rate temple was erected on the site of Solomon's monstrosity. But God's presence often seemed strangely absent. While some rejoiced at the moral victory, others wept because the new building was an embarrassment compared to the old. For the Israelites, their World Trade Center had been demolished, only to be replaced by a two-story duplex. It was disheartening, and for most, the sad reality was obvious: the pagans had won.

The great prophecies of renewal remained unfulfilled.¹³ In most cases, the idol-worshipping foreigners

were still in charge. And the people of God had been humiliated. From the time of their return to the land, until the end of the Old Testament, the Jewish people would subsist mostly under the boot of foreign kings and foreign armies. Never again would they command their land in the manner of the shepherd-king. They had been embarrassed, and this embarrassment raised questions.

How would God's original promise to a wrinkled old man named Abram be fulfilled? How would the nations of the earth be blessed through this beaten band of nobodies? Had Yahweh forgotten his people? Had he finally had enough? Was it ridiculous to think that rescue could come through a dysfunctional family like that of Israel? For years the questions went unanswered.

Then, just when all seemed hopeless, something unexpected happened in a forgotten corner of the Roman Empire. Just when all seemed lost, finally there was reason to be optimistic. In a nothing-town called Nazareth, an unmarried teenage girl got pregnant. And the world would never be the same.

Engage the Story

Having read about the Israel chapter in God's Story, it's time now to engage with it yourself. Read the following passages this week, reflect upon their meaning, and be prepared to discuss them with others:

- Genesis 12:1–9 (The call of Abraham)
- Exodus 3 (The call of Moses)
- Exodus 19–20 (The giving of the Law at Sinai)

- 2 Samuel 7 (The Lord's covenant with David)
- Isaiah 6 (The call of Isaiah)
- Psalm 137 (The lament of the exiles)

Discuss the Story

1. The third chapter in the biblical storyline is about a rescue operation begun by God to restore shalom to his fallen creation. Yet God doesn't go about fixing our world in the way we might expect. He doesn't send a superhero, or a politician, or a celebrity. Instead he uses a beautiful and dysfunctional family—kind of like yours.
 - Why do you think God chooses unlikely people to do his work? What benefit might this have?
 - Read Genesis 12:1–2 aloud together and use it to discuss the following questions:
 - What does God say that Abram's descendants will do *for* the nations?
 - How might this passage have implications for how we are called to serve those outside the church?
2. Israel is the most commonly used name for God's family. The name itself refers to those who wrestle with God.
 - How is the name Israel a fitting title for God's family? How does it describe their calling as a people? How does it apply to *our* calling?

- The chapter argues that “Jacob” was more than just a name; it was also a label. Have you ever had to deal with a negative label that was attached to you—either by others or by yourself? How so?
 - Throughout the Scriptures God has a way of changing the hurtful labels associated with his children. Have you experienced this in your own life? How has God changed a hurtful label attached to you?
3. Years after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God’s family ends up stuck as slaves in Egypt. It is here that they become a nation.
- What should the years spent in slavery have taught God’s family about how they were to treat others? Why does God constantly call them to “remember” this time (see Deuteronomy 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18)?
 - The chapter argues that one move toward slavery is any behavior that treats people like products. Have you experienced this in your own life? Have you ever been made to feel like a product? Have you ever treated others this way? How so?
 - Take a moment to discuss the statement below:

Egypt’s lesson is blunt and painful. From the very beginning, God makes clear that the rescue operation can begin only when his children recognize a reality forgotten by nearly every civilization on the face of the planet: people are more than products. It is a reality forgotten by both the corporate machine

and the consumer culture alike: individuals are more than goods and services! We are (all of us) more than products. And ironically, perhaps it is a reality that only former slaves can fully grasp.

4. Perhaps the most important event in the Old Testament occurs when God leads his family *out* of Egypt, *through* the wilderness, and *toward* the promised land. It is at the beginning of this journey that God's people receive some commands (the Ten Commandments) to guide their behavior. Unfortunately, Moses hardly has time to deliver these commands before the people knowingly break God's covenant. Read Exodus 32:1–4 to refresh your memory of this story.

- In what ways did Israel give in to the pressure to be like the neighbors?
- In what ways do you give in to this same pressure?
- Israel's archetypal sin was idolatry; what person or thing in your life can most easily become an idol?

5. Shortly after the Israelites reject God in the wilderness, we begin to be confronted with page after page of very specific laws. Read the statement below and reflect on the questions to follow:

There are meticulous rules on almost everything! Some seem very strange, and it is for this reason that many Christians simply ignore these sections of the Bible. The commands seem foreign and legalistic. "Don't touch this! Don't eat this! Don't put these two kinds of fabric together!" The list goes on and on.

- What is one of God's purposes in handing down *some* of the most meticulous and obscure rules in the Old Testament?
 - Have you ever thought of the God of the Old Testament as a kind of legalistic schoolmaster? What is wrong with this perspective?
 - What does it mean to say that God used many of these commands to preserve (set apart) a culture, *not* to propound legalism?
6. Even after settling in the promised land, it becomes clear that God's family is far from perfect. Through a succession of wicked leaders and wayward followers, the wrestlers still need rescuing. The family that was to be the bringer of God's solution has instead become a part of the problem.
- How does this same thing happen in our own lives? How do we become a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution to sin and suffering in our world?

The prophets were God's megaphones to his wayward family. Read Micah 6:6–8 together and spend some time in closing this week asking God how you can become a part of the solution to the brokenness of the world around you.