

He will be our God

One story, three promises, and the idolatry that starts without idols

SPEAKER	Steve Hawthorne
DATE	Sunday, March 27, 2022
PASSAGES	Exodus 6:6-7; Exodus 19:4-6; Leviticus 26:11-12; Revelation 21:2-3; 1 Kings 11:1-8; 2 Chronicles 20:33; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Ezekiel 37:24-28; Revelation 1:5-6
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:58:29 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The Bible is not an assortment of stories to mine for life tips; it is one story, driven by what God desires: *I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell in your midst*. Israel's kings lost the thread to an idolatry that started without idols. God kept his word anyway – in Jesus, the shepherd king who changes hearts and gathers a people.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ The Bible is not an assortment of stories but one coherent story, held together by one living God acting through all of it.
- ◆ We miss that story mostly because we insist it be about us. Steve's diagnosis: if it is all about you, no wonder you are bored.
- ◆ God wants a relationship not only with persons but with a people, and Scripture repeats it in three parts: *I will be your God, you will be my people, I will dwell in your midst*.
- ◆ The kings' evil was not mainly a set of morality lessons. It was worshiping other gods, and it usually began small: a diplomatic courtesy, a high place left standing.
- ◆ Idolatry starts without idols – when we try to make the living God a controllable “godling” who must come through if we pray the right formula.

- ◆ In exile God promised a new heart and his own Spirit. Jesus, the risen son of David, releases us from our sins and makes us a kingdom of priests – together, as one people.

► 0:58:29

Hope has spent recent weeks on people of the Old Testament – Abraham and Joseph, kings, prophets and some “oddball characters.” Steve Hawthorne stepped back to ask what holds them together. His title came from the song just sung, Deb Dorman’s “He Will Be Our God,” drawn from the very passages he was about to preach. Nobody coordinated it.

Stories, or a story?

► 0:59:43

“If there’s not a point or a goal that unifies all these characters and pulls these events to actually be moving somewhere, then we just have stories – we don’t have a story,” Steve said. Read that way, the Bible yields only tips for living.

► 1:01:00

We miss the story, he argued, because we insist it be about us – a story that saves me, takes me to heaven and helps me live a nice life. “If it’s about you, no wonder you’re bored.” And unlike a narrative built to dominate, this one speaks negatively of its own leaders: “wretched people ... horrific people – which encourages me greatly. I’m not in the wrong room.”

► 1:03:03

The story is coherent because a living God runs through it. He promises and then does it, “but he does it in a way that’s different and better and takes longer than everybody expected. Like your prayers: God fulfills prayers, but usually later and different than you asked.” And he relates not only to persons but to a whole people – hard for our individualistic culture to imagine.

What God desires

► 1:08:00

The living God has yearnings, which is why he can be grieved. At the Exodus, which made twelve tribes one people, he says what he wants:

“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples ... and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

EXODUS 19:4-6 ↗

“Own possession” is treasure language. And notice *to Myself*: God did not bring Israel out mainly for a nice farm in the promised land. He brought them to himself.

► 1:10:33

Priests here are not go-betweens, as in most religions, but worship servants who stand before the seated Mighty One. God meant a whole nation of them.

► 1:11:16

“I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage ... Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God.”

EXODUS 6:6-7 ↗

English cannot tell whether “your” is singular or plural. “Well, we fix that in Texas,” Steve said. “I will be y’all’s God.”

Three parts of one relationship

► 1:12:03

Steve keeps a spreadsheet of dozens of places where Scripture states some or all of three things: **I will be your God; you will be my people; I will dwell in your midst.** God does dwell in the individual believer, but “even more marvelous is God inhabiting in the midst of his people – and so that’s where this whole story is going.”

► 1:12:46

So the first thing God asks after the Exodus is a voluntary offering to build a sanctuary, “that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:2-8). The tabernacle was a royal reception hall, a likeness of God’s throne. It was not a synagogue – those were invented in exile, with seats. The tabernacle had none but

the mercy seat, God's throne. "You don't just sit around and hear a lecture. You stand." Its point was that he could dwell among them.

► 1:15:31

"Moreover, I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people."

LEVITICUS 26:11-12 ↗

► 1:16:13

Nor is this only an Old Testament theme. Steve turned to the end of the story, hoping to get through it without crying:

"And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.'"

REVELATION 21:2-3 ↗

God brings a fullness, Steve said, then a greater fullness, then greater still. The story gets better as it rolls.

A confusion of kings

► 1:17:28

Israel wanted a king like the other nations, and the story gets complicated: kings with two names, different kings sharing one, Chronicles retelling events in another order, sixty-some kings once the kingdom divides. If anyone can rattle them all off, "I'm going to scold you for wasting your time."

► 1:19:52

What matters is the formula. Some "did evil in the sight of the LORD and walked in the way of his father and in his sin which he made Israel sin" (1 Kings 15:26), or "according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD dispossessed" (2 Kings 21:2). Others "did right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done" (2 Kings 18:3). David is the pattern because he never had a hint of worshiping another god.

► 1:22:25

Steve warned against reducing this to morality lessons – be a good boy, be a good little girl. “There’s something better than morality lessons.” The deal in the land was simple: walk in my ways, and above all worship only me. They could not keep it going.

What the evil actually was

► 1:23:43

“Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, and followed other gods ... So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroath.”

JUDGES 2:11-13 ↗

► 1:26:09

Baal and Ashtaroath, male and female Canaanite gods, had cousins in every pantheon. Each had a specialty and a technique to placate or please it. A farmer needed rain; a businessman needed a deal; if you are sick, “there’s a god for that.” The rain rite reenacted procreation. Bizarre to us, but the point is the technique.

► 1:27:26

The first king to pervert Israel’s worship was Solomon, who built the lavish temple and knew the nations were meant to come to it – which is what the Queen of Sheba represents ([1 Kings 10:1-9](#)), amazed mostly by the worship.

How Solomon’s heart turned

► 1:28:46

Steve read [1 Kings 11:1-2](#): Solomon loved many foreign women from the nations God had warned about, “for they will turn your heart away after their gods.”

► 1:30:07

But Solomon had an empire to steward, and marrying a ruler’s daughter was standard diplomacy. Nobody sold him on Molech. Steve acted it out: it is the moon goddess’s birthday and I must light incense – outside – and tradition says my husband has to light it. “It wasn’t a religion, it was just a diplomacy thing. And he just struck a match and lit the incense – and then it seemed like everything slid along.”

► 1:31:17

“For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.”

1 KINGS 11:4-5 ↗

He went on to build high places for Chemosh and Molech (1 Kings 11:6-8). “He was not a farmer, he was a politician.”

Idolatry starts without idols

► 1:32:26

As a boy, Steve thought the first two commandments were easy – “two down, eight to go.” Many preachers answer by calling anything that preoccupies us an idol: money, fame, football on Sunday morning. Steve is convinced a lot of that is not idolatry.

► 1:34:38

Instead he pointed to the high places – hilltops believed to be lucky spots where the procedure worked best. Even good kings who cleared out the idols left them. Asa’s heart was wholly devoted, yet the high places stayed (1 Kings 15:14); Jehoshaphat “took great pride in the ways of the LORD” and removed them (2 Chronicles 17:6). Then the verse Steve said has to be important:

“The high places, however, were not removed; the people had not yet directed their hearts to the God of their fathers.”

2 CHRONICLES 20:33 ↗

► 1:36:29

“Your heart will go wherever you aim it,” Steve said. “Wherever you direct your heart, that’s where you’re driving.”

► 1:37:12

Idolatry does not start with attraction to a goddess, he argued. It starts with *I need something – who can help me?* “Idolatry is basically trying to design a guardian godling, a deity that you can control”. It begins with praying to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as a performance, or giving a little extra, so that now God has to come through. “Your heart is actually going away from the living God. He wants you to celebrate with him, be his people, but instead we want a god for ourselves to fix me.”

“I’m not calling us all idolaters, but I want you to know you’re susceptible. Consider yourself vulnerable.”

► 1:40:11

Being modern makes us no better. Steve showed Batman, Spider-Man and Superman – specialists who come when the bat signal goes up. “I think we belittle God to be a superpower for us.” Idolatry is always many gods with specialties, never one almighty, presiding power. Keep the one God, the great God.

Revival, collapse and exile

► 1:42:30

There were four or five revival cycles. Joash “did what was right in the sight of the LORD all the days of Jehoiada the priest” (2 Chronicles 24:2); after Jehoiada died, the officials bowed to the king, he listened to them, and they abandoned the house of the Lord for the Asherim (2 Chronicles 24:17–18). Clean up, fall again.

► 1:44:33

“The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they continually mocked the messengers of God.”

2 CHRONICLES 36:15–16 ↗

Steve stopped on the two objects of God’s compassion: his people and his dwelling place. God yearns; he is emotional about this. Then Nebuchadnezzar burned the house of God and carried the survivors to Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:18–20). “The land is gone, the people are scattered, and we can’t clean up the house because it’s burned down.”

A new heart, and a shepherd king

► 1:47:05

But Jeremiah and the prophets had said God would fulfill his purpose, differently than expected, with something like another exodus. To exiles with no temple and no standing, Ezekiel prophesied:

“I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes ... so you will be My people, and I will be your God.”

EZEKIEL 36:24-28 ↗

Their dirt was on the inside; God promised a heart transplant and his own Spirit. “We can’t do this without God somehow filling us.” And the refrain again – *my people, your God*. “Oh – that again. Yeah, that again.”

► 1:49:21

The next chapter promises a king. Americans fought a revolution and do not much like kings, “but we know what a shepherd might be like, and that’s what David was all about.”

“My servant David will be king over them ... David My servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them ... and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people.”

EZEKIEL 37:24-28 ↗

► 1:50:37

“In their midst – we’ve heard that before.” God brings it forth even through his people’s unfaithfulness.

Jesus, the risen David

► 1:51:20

“To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood – and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father – to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

REVELATION 1:5-6 ↗

► 1:52:04

The kingdom of priests promised at Sinai is what Jesus makes us; his God becomes our God because he gathers us in himself. Following Jesus is not just imitating a man who was nice and inclusive – “you

can't even pull that off. You've been trying for years; you can't keep it going." The living God releases us from sin's power, changes us from the inside, and fills his people with his Spirit to actually be faithful.

► 1:53:21

So he called people home: give up the sin, because he can free you; receive and celebrate the Spirit; follow him as shepherd. "You'll be his daughter, you'll be his son – but we will be his people, and he'll be our God." Then the room said it back: *He is our God. We are his people. He dwells in our midst.*

► 1:54:13

We relate to God as individuals, he said, but also as one people drawn from all peoples, "losing none of their particularities and beauties of their cultures." You are in the big story.

■ *"The main thing is this: Jesus, the shepherd king, risen David. Follow him."*

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Exodus 19:4–6
- Exodus 6:6–7
- Exodus 25:2–8
- Leviticus 26:11–12
- Revelation 21:2–3
- 1 Kings 15:26
- 2 Kings 21:2
- 2 Kings 18:3
- Judges 2:11–13
- 1 Kings 10:1–9
- 1 Kings 11:1–2
- 1 Kings 11:4–5
- 1 Kings 11:6–8
- 1 Kings 15:14
- 2 Chronicles 17:6
- 2 Chronicles 20:33
- 2 Chronicles 24:2
- 2 Chronicles 24:17–18
- 2 Chronicles 36:15–16
- 2 Chronicles 36:18–20
- Ezekiel 36:24–28
- Ezekiel 37:24–28
- Revelation 1:5–6

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Steve said we miss the Bible's one story because we insist it be about us. Where do you notice yourself reading Scripture mainly for what it does for you?
2. God's promise is to a people – “y'all's God” – and not only to individuals. What would it look like for our group to take that seriously together?
3. Solomon's drift began with a diplomatic favor: just strike a match. What small accommodations have you watched turn a heart, in Scripture or in your own life?
4. Steve described idolatry as trying to make God a controllable “godling” who has to come through. Where are you tempted to treat prayer or giving as a formula?
5. “Your heart will go wherever you aim it.” What is one practical way you will direct your heart toward God, alongside his people, this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Steve Hawthorne is a teaching elder at Hope Chapel and has been one since at least 2004, when Senior Pastor Matt Ryniker joined the church as a college student and sat under his teaching; Matt calls him a mentor to him as a preacher. In this message Steve described growing up in church and keeping a spreadsheet of the places where Scripture repeats “I will be your God.” His granddaughter Lily was in the room.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xatmLIH5hxE&t=3509s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.