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## THREE GREAT THEMES OF THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

This morning here at PBC Cupertino marks a special event for me: this marks the tenth calendar year that I have had the great privilege of preaching at least once a year to this body at PBCC. The first time was in December 1998, and here we are in February 2007. I am thankful beyond words for the opportunity afforded me to come and speak here over these years. So today I want to take you on one of the greatest spiritual journeys of my life, a journey that actually began in 1993.

Etched in my memory is a specific day and an arresting moment that marked the beginning of this journey. The day was in 1993, and I was meeting with a group of five young men at the student union at Stanford. We were meeting in a room upstairs, but first we gathered in an open area where students hung out. I was the first one there, but I was soon joined by one of the best young men I have ever had the privilege of working with. He was one of the men who were with me in that ministry from day one, and today he is an up-and-coming young leader at PBC in Palo Alto. Soon some of the other men arrived, and we chatted.

Then everything went into slow motion in my mind's eye. The first young man picked up my Bible and began leafing through it. I knew what he was looking for: notes in the margins, areas on the pages soiled with fingerprints and marked by dog-ears. He was charting where I had studied in the Scriptures. As I watched, he found a lot of notes in Genesis, and all was well. Then he turned to Exodus, and he entered a vast acreage of Biblical material in which there were no notes, no marks – many pages that had never been turned. Some of the pages even stuck together.

The Hebrew Scriptures comprise roughly 75% of our Bible, and much of that terrain was unexplored territory for me. As that young man kept turning fresh pages, it was as if the Spirit of God had slowed things down to make sure I would mark the moment. A clear thought shot through my mind from the mind of God himself: **you cannot lead these men where you have not gone yourself.** That has been the guiding principle of the journey through the Bible that I embarked upon with the college students at PBC Palo Alto in 1994-1996. It was a magnificent time, during which I taught through the Bible book-by-book in order from Genesis to Revelation. Never have I had a more satisfying experience with Jesus Christ than during that journey.

Over the past year, I had the great joy of returning to that same road while serving as the interim teaching pastor at Hope Evangelical Free Church in San Francisco. At that church, on January 1, 2006, we studied the book of Genesis. From there, we studied every single book of the Hebrew Scriptures, 39 books in succession, landing on Malachi just before Christmas. On December 31, 2006, I wanted us to step back and consider the forest, not the trees, and review the over arching themes of the Hebrew Scrip-

tures. We had studied each part in some detail, so it was time to consider the whole, to ask our God what great truths emerged from these months of intensive study. So today we will consider together three great themes of the Hebrew Scriptures: the primacy of God, the promise of God, and the presence of God.

The first subject of the first verse of the first book establishes the primacy of God as the supreme subject of the entire Hebrew Scriptures: "In the beginning, GOD created the heavens and the earth." God introduced himself on the first page of the Bible as the prime mover of Creation, the intelligent designer of all that is in the universe, on the land down here and in the universe up there. He was the only One who existed before time began, and he set time in motion as the artist whose medium is history. As Creator, he transformed darkness into light, chaos into order, and emptiness into fullness of life. He initiated the first relationship with the man and the woman, and his first word to them was a word of blessing. On the first page of the Bible, he has first place in all things. That never changes.

God held first place in the paradise of Genesis chapters one and two, and he was not defeated when Satan introduced sin into the world through the deception of Eve and the disobedience of Adam. At that moment of seeming defeat, he reigned supreme, pronouncing an eternal judgment on Satan that doomed him to an eternity of failure whenever he was on the verge of victory. No one can defeat this God who reigns supreme in all things, not even Satan, as we saw both in Genesis chapter three and in the entire cosmic battle between God and Satan played out in the book of Job.

This primacy of God is demonstrated in Exodus through the ten plagues, each one of which was designed to prove that the pantheon of Egyptian gods was a sham, each and every one, and that there was only one God in heaven. I love the final line of Pharaoh in the movie "The Ten Commandments," in which Yul Brynner sits upon his throne in Egypt and states the only conclusion one can reach at the end of the ten plagues about the God of Moses: "His God *is* God." The primacy of God is seen in Leviticus as he himself sets the standard of holiness. He also reigns supreme in the wilderness, in the book of Numbers, providing food and water in a trackless wasteland for a nation of over a million people for a time period of forty years. The impossible is easy for him, even when a generation perished because they did not believe God could do it. And he wrote the book of Deuteronomy from the vantage point of the conquering sovereign king entering into a suzerainty covenant with a vassal nation, complete with the blessings if the nation kept their side of the covenant and the curses if they did not.

In the book of Joshua, God showed his primacy over all the pagan nations of the Canaanites, routing them one by one, by the agency of the Captain of the Host of the LORD, to whom the human general Joshua bowed down at the end of Joshua chapter five. With the Lord in the lead, the nation was victorious; without the Lord, when every man did what was right in his own eyes, the nation wallowed in defeat, as was seen in the days of the Judges.

During the days of the Kings, the primacy of God was nowhere better illustrated than on Mount Carmel, in 1 Kings 18, when Elijah called out the prophets of Baal to have a head-to-head contest to show whether Baal or the God of Elijah reigned supreme. We know how that ended: Baal did nothing, being nothing, while God not only consumed the offering with fire, but his fire lapped up all the waters that flooded the altar. On that day Elijah slew the entire cadre of 450 prophets of Baal.

In the Wisdom literature, the primacy of God was seen in the theme verse of the Wisdom books, Proverbs 1:7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...” The Lord is thus the bedrock of wisdom on which the wise man builds his house, as opposed to the shifting sands upon which so many construct so much for so little gain.

In the Prophets, the primacy of God is a consistently sounded note, as when we hear Isaiah quoting the LORD time and again saying, “For I am the LORD, and there is no other” (Isa 45:5,6,18).

And yet, one of the most touching aspects of this great and sovereign God, this God who alone owns the primacy over all things seen and unseen, over all the created order in heaven and on earth, is that this great God cares so passionately about the individual. The supreme authority of God, coupled with his great care for the single person, is nowhere stated so beautifully as it is in Isaiah 66:1,2: “Thus says the LORD, ‘Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being,’ declares the LORD. ‘But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.’”

In this tenth year of visiting PBC Cupertino, it is my most fervent hope that in this place you will cling to the primacy of the sovereign God of the Bible, and that we all humbly learn to stand before him and tremble at his most magnificent word. For He is the LORD, and there is no other.

So what does this mean on a Monday morning? I am always most interested in how all this truth we talk about on Sunday translates into our Monday morning routine, or what we think about at lunch on Tuesday, or how we spend our otherwise boring Thursdays. What the primacy of God means on Monday morning is fairly simple: beginning our day with that basic prayer that sets the dial of our minds on the right frequency and unleashes the power of God in our lives: *Thank You Lord* that You are alive, that You hold all things together, that You are the bedrock of our lives that does not shift or erode away, that You are in sovereign control of this world and all the nations, and that You will never leave us or forsake us.

Jesus stood before a sealed tomb with a dead Lazarus inside, and Jesus said, “Father, I thank You...” and death itself was reversed. Paul reviewed his days on the edge of the abyss, when in 2 Corinthians he despaired even of life, but by 2 Corinthians 2:14 he said, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ...” If God indeed holds first place in all things and is sovereign over all things, the best response is simply, Thank You Lord! – and then jettison all the worries that clog our minds and muddle our days endlessly.

In sum, the question for each of us today, having heard this, is simple: Is he the LORD of our hearts today, or is there another who occupies that internal throne, keeping God from his rightful place in our hearts and in our lives?

So, we have considered the primacy of God throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Now let us turn to that great theme that is the backbone of the Hebrew Scriptures, the promise of God.

The promise of God was spoken in history in the first prophecy found in the Bible, the first word of promise foretelling a coming reality. This promise was uttered by God himself in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had just eaten the forbidden fruit, in seven awful verses, Genesis 3:1-7, that drove the trajectory of human history into a free fall, as sin entered the race through Adam. After confronting Adam and clearly holding him responsible for the disobedience, then hearing Eve finger the serpent as the teller of the great lie, God turns to Satan, who appears in the form of the serpent, and speaks a word of power, in Genesis 3:15: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall crush you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.” God’s first word of promise was about a coming man of power, a man who would be king upon the earth, crushing the head of the serpent and thus standing over him like a conquering potentate. The language of this passage in Genesis 3:14-15 is classic ancient near eastern language of the conquering king crushing and vanquishing his chief opponent, making him grovel in the dust with the conqueror’s boot on his neck. It is a great word of victory, spoken against a context of utter defeat, a diamond of prophecy against the black velvet of the fall of man.

One can hardly exaggerate the importance of this prophecy. First, the one who uttered this word was God himself, the Father of all, speaking in direct discourse to the father of lies. Second, this is the first forward-looking statement about the unfolding of history by the God of history. Other artists work in various media: watercolors, oils, acrylics, the written word, the celluloid of film, or the digital media of the modern era. What sets God apart as the artist above all artists is that his medium is history. His art doesn’t need to have life breathed into it like a dramatic reading of a Shakespearean sonnet, nor do any of his characters come to life in film. His characters are alive, living in history. When he speaks, history reveals in living color and multiple dimensions exactly what he says will happen. So, when the God of history spoke the prophecy about a coming king who would have victory over Satan, it was a certain promise, a perfect prophecy, and it would come true.

Moving forward in history, we find another scene in the wilderness, in Numbers 21, that Jesus Christ himself said was one of the great prophetic signs of his death on the cross. In Numbers

21:5-9, a tragedy and a triumph unfolded in a few short verses: “And the people spoke against God and Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.’ And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. So the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us.’ And Moses interceded for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he shall live.’ And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.”

Consider how similar this entire scene is to Genesis 3: man in sin, serpents among them, and the creative genius of a God who made a way of salvation. Jesus Christ himself dignified this little story in that famous chapter of the New Testament, John 3, in his late-night interview with Nicodemus, in John 3:14,15: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.”

Moving forward in history, David the prophet king saw the promised Savior in his moment of suffering, when Jesus was lifted up on the cross, in Psalm 22. Writing a thousand years before the event, yet with heart-stopping accuracy, David described in painful detail the entire scene of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, starting with that heart-breaking cry, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” David then described the event in verses 6-8 and 14-18: “But I am a worm, and not a man, a reproach of men, and despised by the people. All who see me sneer at me; they separate with the lip, they wag the head, saying, ‘He committed Himself to the Lord; let Him deliver him; let Him rescue him, because He delights in him.’” ... “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws; and Thou dost lay me in the dust of death. For dogs have surrounded me; a band of evildoers has encompassed me; they pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones. They look, they stare at me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.”

We read those quotes and it is like reading the Gospels. Then David ends the psalm with these words: “it is finished.” So, when Jesus hung on the cross, and cried out, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” he was clearly declaring that he was the fulfillment of the promise found in the Hebrew Scriptures. And he punctuated that fulfillment by quoting from David in Psalm 22 once again as some of the last words he spoke before his death: “It is finished!” That was a cry of victory against a context of utter defeat, the fulfillment of the word of promise spoken in the Garden.

The great underlying point behind this chief theme of the Hebrew Scriptures, the theme of the promise of God, is that **God keeps his promises**. As the supreme artist who alone employs the medium of history for his great works, he made this promise

come true in history in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God’s way of salvation for all who simply glance up to him on the cross and believe. If we simply glance at him in faith, the One who became sin for us that we might be saved from sin, **WE SHALL LIVE**, just as the Israelites in the wilderness looked upon a bronze serpent lifted up to be saved from the bite of the fiery serpents.

The question for us today, in light of the fulfilled promise of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is this: Have we glanced up at him in faith to save us from our sin? Have you?

So, we have spoken about the primacy of God, and the promise of God. Now let’s turn to talk about the theme that appears everywhere, but is so often missed: the presence of God. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures is a God who loves to be with his people. This is seen in the name of God, YHWH in Hebrew, which can best be translated “I AM HERE.” His Name reveals both his timeless being and his ever-presence.

Consider how often he is present with his people throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Garden, he walked in the cool of the day with Adam. In the Garden, he clothed the man and the woman with the skins of animals that had to be sacrificed to hide the nakedness of their shame, showing his closeness and his active engagement on their behalf at their moment of sin, shame and need. In the wilderness, God tabernacled with the nation, being with them by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. What this means in modern day terms is that he went camping with his people. In fact, he asked them to make a tent for him to live right in the middle of their camp. It was to be a 40-year family camping trip. The fact that God camped with them in the wilderness was celebrated every year in the seventh month during the Feast of Tabernacles. Furthermore, he was with the nation by the ark of the covenant, which was the power and presence of God in the tabernacle first, and then, from the days of Solomon, in the great temple of Jerusalem. And he made his presence known among the nation by the prophets, for through the prophets “the word of the Lord” came among them.

But there is one phrase more than any other that grips my heart when I think of this great theme. It is God’s continual promise to the nation, and specifically to the leaders of the nation, those four comforting words, “I am with you.” This theme was introduced with the sterling character Joseph, who was described this way in Genesis 39:2: “And the LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man.” When Moses doubted his ability to deliver the nation from the hand of Pharaoh, God emboldened him with these words in Exodus 3:12, “And He said, ‘Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be a sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.’” When it came time for Joshua to fill the large shoes of Moses and lead the nation into the promised land, God affirmed to Joshua twice that he would be with Joshua, in Joshua 1:5, “Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you...” and again in Joshua 1:9, “... for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” Powerful words of comfort to strengthen the man who led the nation into the abundant life in the Promised Land. Likewise, God was with Gideon to give



him victory over the Midianites. God was also with David to defeat Goliath, to slay tens of thousands of the Philistines, and to write some of the greatest poetry in the history of the world. When Jehoshaphat was surrounded by enemies and all he could do about it was to pray, God assured him of victory through the words of Jahaziel, in 2 Chronicles 20:17: “You need not fight in this battle; station yourselves, stand and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out to face them, for the LORD is with you.” And Isaiah told us in Isaiah 7:14 that the Messiah would be born of a virgin, who would call his name Immanuel, which is God with us. Through many different passages, with a host of creative images, through dramatic events, special names, and the oft-repeated promise “I will be with you...”, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is a God who is present with his people through it all.

But one prophet saw God with us not as an external presence with a person or with a nation, but as an internal presence living within the believer. Ezekiel saw this great truth in an embryonic form in the promise of the coming indwelling presence of God through the Holy Spirit. Ezekiel saw this coming reality of the day in which we live today, and wrote about it in Ezekiel 36:26-27: “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. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.”

This is the truth above all truths: God’s plan throughout all time was to make his home in our hearts. But he is not just some sage old grandfather taking up a rocking chair on the porch of our heart, to smoke a pipe, tell old fishing stories and reminisce. No, he lives within us as the Spirit, as the great adventurer, as the One who came that we might live life super abundantly and seize every day as a day of oneness with a God who lives within us to live his resurrection life through us. I have had the privilege of walking with Jesus Christ for 24 years as of January 30th, and this core truth – that Jesus Christ is alive within me 24/7 and is the winsome, optimistic adventurer within me – has never failed to light my heart with fire and fill me with love for him. He is so good, so alive, and the best part is that he is most strongly alive in me and working through me just when I need him the most. This is the greatest truth we will ever hear.

Given that this is indeed the greatest truth, the question for each of us to consider for ourselves in light of this great theme of the presence of God is this: Do I have the Holy Spirit living inside me, the living presence of God in my life right now? And for those of us who do, there is a corollary question: Have I forgotten how true this really is, has “Christ in you, the hope of glory” been shoved aside by the distractions of my world?

So, at this point in the great journey of studying through the Bible book-by-book through the Hebrew Scriptures, these three great themes are what I pray will anchor themselves within our hearts: the primacy of God, the promise of God, and the presence of God. Think about those three themes, because there is something more here, something deeper, something a little mysterious: the primacy of God ... the promise of God ... the presence of God. Do you see what God was trying to tell us through the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures?

It is this: these three themes perfectly portray the three divine Persons of the Trinity: the primacy of God is all about God the Father; the promise of God is all about God the Son, Jesus Christ; and the presence of God is all about the Spirit of God. Thus, the Hebrew Scriptures were written to fully explain God to us, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So, my final benediction today is this: May God the Father reign supreme in our hearts; may we receive the salvation of God through faith in the promised Messiah Jesus Christ, and may we receive the Holy Spirit as the indwelling presence of God, bringing God home to live in our hearts forever! Amen and amen!

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