

Humorist Garrison Keillor recalls the childhood trauma of being the last one chosen for a playground game of baseball. The two popular kids, the captains, are down to their last grudging choices: a slow kid for catcher, someone who can't catch to stick in right field where nobody hits it. They bargain and deal for the last couple of kids, the scrubs. "If I take him, then you gotta take her."

Anyone ever picked last for anything knows deeply the existential pain of which I speak. If you were always one of the first picked, then you have no idea. Some of us go through life dreaming what it would be like to just one time hear someone say, "Him! The scrawny kid with the glasses. I want him. I want her on my team. I called her first."

There's something special about being chosen.

Today's verse is all about being chosen by God. In this case, God chose a nation. Out of all the nations on earth, God chose one nation to be his. He chose them to be special. He chose them for a special purpose.

He didn't choose them because they were better than all the other nations. He didn't choose them because he didn't love any of the other nations. But because He chose them, he calls them to be better than all the other nations.

We are in a series called Core 52 where we are looking at 52 verses of Scripture that will give the highest return on investment. When it comes to understanding the Bible, these 52 verses and the stories and ideas that go with them will take you further faster.

We spent four weeks in Genesis looking at beginnings. We looked at the beginning of the world and the beginning of humanity. We considered the majesty of God present in creation. We saw the image of God that is hardwired into every person, and we also saw how everything got messed up. Last Sunday, Terry shared with you how God took the very first steps to make things right again. God made covenant with Abraham. A covenant is an agreement based on a promise. God made this covenant with Abraham, with one person, so that one day He could bless every person.

This morning, we see God's plan expanded from one person to one nation. God chose one man, so that he could choose one family. He chose one family so that he could choose one nation. He chose that one nation, so that one day, He could choose you. You start with God's covenant with Abraham. Abraham has a son named Isaac, and then Isaac has Jacob. Jacob has twelve sons who then become the patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel.

It is this nation that God chooses. He chooses them to be his people, to have a special relationship with him. He sets them apart for a very special purpose. Over these next four Sundays we will look at what it means to be set apart. Why did God go to all this trouble to have a chosen people? What was the point in all this and what does it have to do with you?

## Chosen

What does it mean to be set apart? To answer that question we begin in a book that has the reputation of being one of the most boring books in the Bible. When you have a new year's resolution to read through the Bible in a year, you begin January 1 with great gusto. Genesis and Exodus are both filled with lots of interesting characters and cool stories. But then late January, early February you hit Leviticus and everything...slows...to...a...crawl. Lots of rules and regulations, and so much of it doesn't seem to make sense or have any relevance to our lives.

But before your eyes glaze over, right in the middle of all that stuff, is a very important verse. Leviticus 11:45 says,

*I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.*

Holiness begins with God's choice. It began with God's choice of Abraham, then God's choice of Isaac, and then Jacob. It then expanded to include all of Jacob's sons, and then the twelve tribes of Israel.

*"I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God."* This is God's way of saying, "I chose you. I picked you. You're the first one I picked to be on my team."

He didn't pick Israel because she was the largest nation. He didn't pick Israel because she was the wealthiest nation, or the most powerful. He picked her out of Egypt. He chose her out of slavery. Israel was the last kid anyone wanted on their team. There was nothing special about Israel, other than God chose her.

Deuteronomy 7:6-7 says,

*For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the people who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples.*

Israel was not chosen because she was special. She was special because she was chosen.

Back to Leviticus 11:45. One of the most important words in this verse is this one: *"therefore."* Whenever you're reading the Bible and you see this word, you need to figure out what the *therefore* is there for. It connects two ideas together. It tells us one thing happens because of another. This is what is true; therefore, this is what should happen. *"I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God; you shall therefore be holy."*

Did you notice the order here? God didn't say, "Because you were holy, I, therefore, brought you out of Egypt." No, he says I brought you out of Egypt, therefore you should be holy. I chose you therefore be holy. What was it that made Israel holy? It wasn't that she was so good, or so

godly or so moral, or so devout. Israel was none of those things. Israel became holy when God chose her. So what does it mean to be holy?

### **Set Apart**

The Hebrew word for *holy* means “to be set apart for a specific purpose.” To be holy is to be set apart. God takes an ordinary people and sets them apart for an extraordinary purpose.

Something isn’t set apart because it is holy. It is holy because it is set apart.

In the story of Moses, Moses sees an angel and a bush that is on fire but it doesn’t burn up. God tells Moses, “Take off your shoes for you are standing on holy Ground.” It was just an ordinary patch of ground. It was just an ordinary bush. What made it holy is that God was there. God chose that ground. God chose that bush. He set it apart for an extraordinary purpose, therefore, it is holy.

The tabernacle was filled with various items used in the daily routine of tabernacle worship. There were lamps, and vessels, and loaves of bread. Outside of the tabernacle, they were just ordinary lamps and vessels and loaves of bread. But since they were set apart, since they were devoted to an extraordinary purpose, since they were claimed by God, they were therefore, holy. An ordinary animal, set apart for sacrifice suddenly becomes holy.

A person chosen by God becomes holy, not because their nature is different or better, but because they were set apart for a special purpose. One moment they are ordinary people. The next moment they are holy, because they are chosen by God.

I love what Mark Moore writes in the Core 52 book, “Holiness happens when God proclaims, not when a person performs. Our holiness is God’s gift to us, not our gift to him. Holiness is received, not achieved.” That’s 180 degrees different from how many of us think of holiness.

Mark offers an example of this from our everyday lives. We take every day, ordinary objects and make them holy. We set them apart for a special purpose. Take a toothbrush for example. It’s an ordinary brush with dozens of potential uses. You can use it to clean your grout. You can use it to apply hair dye. You can clean all sorts of hard to reach spots. I regularly use toothbrushes in my gun cleaning kit. Lots of cyclists use them to clean their bike chains.

But once you decide to use this brush to clean your teeth, it becomes holy. It is a sacred object set apart for a special purpose. You don’t let that brush touch anything else, right? That brush serves no other purpose other than to clean your teeth. You don’t use it to clean the hinges of your toilet seat then brush your teeth? And if you do, we don’t want to know. You don’t let your husband clean under his toenails with it, then brush your teeth. No. Why? Because it’s sacred. It’s holy. It’s been set apart for a very special purpose.

You have other holy, set apart things in your house– you have the good towels. You have the good plates you only use for company. You have a coffee pot for coffee. You don't make hot chocolate or melt your Scentsy wax in there.

In this verse, God is telling Israel I am setting you apart for a special purpose. Since I have set you apart, you need to be devoted to that purpose. Don't waste your life on the ordinary when I have made you extraordinary.

### **What's With All the Rules?**

Because God chose Israel. Because he set Israel apart for a special purpose. Israel is then called to be devoted to that purpose. This is what Leviticus and so much of this part of the Bible is about. Parts of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy are all about Israel living lives that are set apart.

All the laws and rules, the do's and don'ts that God has for Israel are all about God setting Israel apart. It is God saying, "I have chosen you. I have set you apart, and I don't want you to be like all the other nations. I don't want you to be just an ordinary people. I want you to be different. I want you to be more.

When you look at all the different religious and ceremonial laws in the Old Testament in this light, it makes much more sense. Almost every rule God gives Israel is about setting Israel apart and making them different from everyone else. Take circumcision. No one else was circumcised, and so God calls them to be different in this most intimate and personal of ways. One of the main points of circumcision was to remind them that they were different. They were special. They're not like everyone else.

The dietary laws, all the things they weren't supposed to eat, likewise set the people apart from the customs and habits of the other peoples that surrounded them. We also know now that many of these rules protected them from certain diseases that ran rampant in the surrounding nations. It was God saying, "I want you to be different. I want you to be special."

Many of the other laws were specifically targeted at the religious practices used in pagan idol worship. For instance there was a law in Leviticus 19:28 which God forbid the Israelites from getting tattoos. Some Christians today have made the mistake of concluding that tattoos are somehow sinful. But ancient pagan people weren't just getting tattoos for decoration, or to honor their spouse or their children. It was a part of their idol worship. It was religious ritual. They were marking themselves with things meant to honor false gods. And so God says, "I've set you apart from all that. I've chosen you. I've called you to be different. Don't do that."

### **God Chose Israel To Be An Example**

When we realize this, God's rules suddenly make more sense. God chose Israel and set her apart for a very special purpose. One of the reasons God chose Israel to be his flagship nation is

he wanted to set an example for the rest of the world, not of what Israel is like, but of what God is like.

Listen to this from Deuteronomy 28:9-10

*The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your god and walk in his ways. Then all the people of the earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord and they will fear you.*

### **God Chose Israel To Bring the Messiah**

The other reason God chose Israel and set her apart was so that he could bring the Messiah into the world. Israel was a key step in God's plan to fix what went wrong in the Garden of Eden. His eternal purpose was to undo what sin and death had done to his creation, to undo how sin and death had scarred the image of God in people. That eternal purpose was realized through Jesus. Jesus was a Jewish messiah for whom God had been preparing the way for thousands of years.

God began working this plan all the way back with the covenant he made with Abraham that you saw last week. God promised that he would make Abraham into a great nation which was Israel and that one day all nations would be blessed because of him. God chose Israel to bless the whole world. God chose Israel to bless you and me.

### **God Chose You**

God chose Israel so that one day, he could choose you. You are part of the promise God made to Abraham. You are one of the reasons God chose Israel. Because he wanted to choose you.

Paul writes in Ephesians 1:3-4, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him."*

The apostle Peter compares us to Israel. He says this about the church in 1 Peter 1:9:

*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

There's a lot of this that is hard to wrap our heads around. It can be hard to understand, and there's a lot of mystery here. God's mind and God's plan is so much bigger than we can grasp. Theologians and scholars can debate this stuff endlessly. But what does this mean for you right now, right here, this morning.

Peter goes on to right this later on in 1 Peter 1:

*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."*

Does any of that sound familiar? Peter here is quoting from Leviticus 11:45 and applying it to my life and yours. God has called you. God has set you apart. He has made you holy, and now he wants you to live a life that is set apart.

### **Personal Holiness**

We tend to think of holiness along the lines of personal morality and ethics. Holy is what you do and don't do. **But personal and spiritual purity is not the cause of holiness. It is the result.** When God sets you apart, you then want to live up to that.

We do this in life. Have you have been chosen for a special honor? Maybe you were selected for the homecoming court. Maybe you received a very important assignment at work. If you served in the military, maybe you were chosen for an important mission.

When you were chosen for that special purpose, you understand that you need to make changes according to that purpose. If you're going to be homecoming queen, you get your hair done, you get a gorgeous dress, you get your picture taken for the paper, you ride in the parade and wave, you go through the ceremony at half-time.

If you got a special assignment at work, you do research. You put in overtime, you go to special meetings, maybe go on a business trip. If you were assigned a special military mission, you go through special training, you get assigned to a new unit, you're issued the extra weapons and equipment you need, you attend special briefings. You do this because when you are set apart for a special purpose, you are expected to live according to that purpose.

God wants you to live an extraordinary life according to the extraordinary purpose for which he has set you apart. He wants you to be special. He wants you to be different. He doesn't want us to be like everyone else. He wants us to be more. Not because we're better than anyone else. We're not. But so that they can see God working in our lives and they can hear his calling too.

Jesus calls us to be like salt that spreads its flavor throughout the whole dish. He calls us to be like a lamp that's set on a table and lights up a whole room. The problem is that so often there's too little difference between our lives and the lives of those who don't know Jesus. We've been set apart but we don't live like it. We're like a toothbrush that gets used to clean the grout in the shower. No one wants to brush their teeth with that.

Did you know that in most surveys of morality and behavior that Christians in the United States are only 3 to 5% different from those who aren't Christian? Lying, cheating on your taxes, premarital sex, pornography, losing our temper, drunkenness, take your pick, when it comes to these personal standards, there's barely a difference between our lives and others. I fear that if there was a reliable way to measure things like patience, kindness, gentleness, peacefulness, that many Christians would measure worse than the average non-Christian. Jesus didn't die on the cross, God didn't choose you and set you apart to make a 3% difference in your life.

This isn't about earning God's acceptance and God's approval. It's about being who he's already chosen us to be. Remember when I said earlier that we all have items in our home that are ordinary items, and other items that are special and set apart. Listen to what Paul writes the young minister, Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:20-21. I really like how Eugene Peterson puts in the Message.

*In a well-furnished kitchen there are not only crystal goblets and silver platters, but waste cans and compost buckets—some containers used to serve fine meals, others to take out the garbage. Become the kind of container God can use to present any and every kind of gift to his guests for their blessing.*

This is what it means to be chosen, to be set apart. It doesn't matter who in this world treats you like garbage, because the almighty Creator of the universe has chosen you as his treasured possession.

God looks at you and points at you and say, "I want you on my team. I pick him. I choose her." Before you were ever born, God chose you.