

What is Jesus doing now?

Part 4 – Jesus turns fear and doubt into trust and love

Is Jesus alive and active, and doing things right now? Yes, and he's proving it by doing exactly what he predicted he would do in these Old Testament prophecies:

- 1) **Isaiah 59:21** - "As for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord. My Spirit, who is on you, and **my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth**, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever."
- 2) **Jeremiah 31:31, 33** - "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah (and) This is the covenant I will make **I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts**. I will be their God and they will be my people."
- 3) **Ezekiel 36:26-27** - "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and **move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws**."
- 4) **Ezekiel 11:19-20** - "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. **Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws**. They will be my people, and I will be their God."

What Jesus predicted in these prophecies was a heart transplant for Israel. He's going to remove their old "heart of stone" and "give them a heart of flesh" instead. And what this new heart of flesh would do for them is make them "careful." It's a good choice of word in the NIV translation because the problem Israel had was NOT being careful, **Hebrews 3:10**: "Their hearts are always going astray and they have not known my ways." The Israelites could never wholeheartedly tune their minds to God, or stay eager to understand and support what God was up to. But we know the reason why. Their hearts had been "**hardened by sin's deceitfulness**," **verse 13**.

And that's the reason for their "heart of stone." But what makes all this relevant to us is explained in **1 Corinthians 10:6**, because what happened to Israel "occurred as examples, to **keep US from setting our hearts on evil things as they did**." Our hearts can be seduced by sin's deceitfulness just as easily as theirs were, and with the same result too - our hearts drift away from God. Maybe we get bored by it all, or turned off and even angry, and our interests turn elsewhere. Whatever the cause, it affects the heart. It becomes "**unbelieving**" (verse 12) and cold as stone.

It's a huge problem for us humans, no matter who we are or when we live. But we learn from the story of Israel what Christ did to solve it, not only in what he himself did with Israel, but also in the rituals and sacrifices he got them to do. And what we see is Christ being intimately involved every step of the way in a relentless pursuit to bend the human heart to God so that sin's deceitfulness will never affect humanity again.

For Israel, the bending of their hearts to God began in **Exodus 2:24**, when "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham." This was what got the heart transplant operation started for them. It was the promise Christ had made to Abraham back in **Genesis 12:3** that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" - a covenant he promised never to break too, **Genesis 17:7** - "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you."

And who are Abraham's descendants? The Israelites. So whatever Christ does with Israel from this point on is based totally on his covenant with Abraham. It all goes back to that, which means there's some sort of blessing for **all humanity** in what happens next. That's how important this operation is - for ALL of us.

We enter the operating theatre in Exodus 2, with Christ and his scalpel poised for the first cut. His timing is exquisite, because Abraham's descendants are just about to be killed off forever and the covenant is in danger of being scuttled. But it's not just standing by his covenant that stirs Christ to get involved, it's the Israelites themselves, because in **Exodus 2:25** it says he "was concerned about them." So whatever Christ does from this point on, it's out of deep concern for Israel too.

And he speaks of his concern to Moses in **Exodus 3:7-8** - "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians." Notice how Christ "comes down"? So he's not just concerned about their suffering, he's going to get involved HIMSELF in **doing** something about it. When it comes to sin's deceitfulness threatening his people - so brilliantly pictured by this deceitful Pharaoh bent on genocide - Christ is in the thick of it with us. Not only does he hear us and feel for us, he comes down into our world and gets involved right where we're at.

"So now go," he tells Moses in **verse 10**, "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." Moses, however, *isn't* so keen on getting involved (verse 11), so God reassures him in **verse 12**, "I will be with you. And this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain" - the "you" here being plural, meaning all Israel, not just Moses. And what's on offer to all Israel is a "sign."

To reassure Moses that he, Christ, is truly behind what's happening, a clear and obvious sign will confirm it. And what is this sign? The Israelites will "**worship**" God. It's a remarkable sign because the desire to worship God wasn't what the Israelites felt like doing at all in Egypt. Their focus was entirely on the endless and worsening misery of slavery and threatening genocide. They were, as Paul phrased it in **Romans 8:15**, in "slavery to fear." They thought their time was up. And what really scared them was - they had no assurance that God was even aware of them, let alone cared enough to get involved. And if he did care, he had a strange way of showing it, because they'd been suffering for years and God hadn't done a thing about it.

So fear, doubts about God, and the feeling they were facing their fate alone, consumed their minds, just as fear, doubts about God and the feeling God is distant and uninvolved consumes the minds of so many people today. Israel in Egypt, therefore, is an exact picture of all of us. Their view of God was negative, just like most people's view of God today is negative, because it seemed like God didn't care. Here they were stuck in the grip of evil, and God was just letting them suffer.

And here **we** are stuck in the grip of evil too. Our world is insane, awful things are happening to people, including helpless children, and God doesn't seem to be doing anything about it today either. It's hard, therefore, answering people who ask, "How can a loving God let people suffer?" when they're groaning under the weight of endless calamities and unsolvable problems, and why doesn't God intervene and stop them? He's got the power. He's supposed to be love. So why doesn't he do something? No wonder people's hearts turn to stone when thinking about God. And perhaps ours do too, especially when we've got serious problems that go on and on without relief. It can harden even the stoutest of hearts when God doesn't intervene.

But there in the Old Testament is the story of Israel, picturing perfectly how we ourselves may feel, because the Israelites are just like us. They're groaning under the weight of a grim world with no relief in sight. They're scared where life might be taking them. They're frustrated at their helplessness. And where's God? Well, he's off somewhere else, it seems, unaware or totally disinterested in what's going on.

But God **isn't** off somewhere else, because he hears Israel's groaning, he remembers his promise, and he tells Moses he's coming down himself to rescue them. And he promises them all a sign as well, to **prove** he's concerned and involved. And what a sign, because they're going to experience **a taste** of the blessing God promised to all humanity through Jesus Christ. Their hearts of stone will be turned to hearts of flesh. And how will they know it's happened? Well, instead of their hearts being filled with fear and doubts about God, their hearts will turn to "worship."

Worship means respect, love and honour, so the difference in their attitude toward God will be remarkable. And notice **where** the difference happens: it's in their **hearts**.

In hearts that have grown cold and hard toward God by many years of suffering and fear comes a heart softened into respect, love and honour for him. But that's the proof, Christ tells Moses, that he, the living Christ, is the one behind what's happening. And it's the clear and obvious sign that Christ is alive and active **today** as well, because the great goal God has for **all humanity**, guaranteed in his covenant with Abraham, is the turning of hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, the evidence of which would be a completely different view of God.

So, do **we** get a taste of that same softening of heart, the same change of attitude toward God, and the same sign Christ gave to prove he's alive, involved and concerned for us as well? Paul certainly thought so in **Romans 8:15** - "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"

"Abba, Father" is a term of respect, love and honour. It's a perfect definition of the word "worship." The same thing happens to us, then, that happened to Israel. It's the same Jesus Christ at work producing exactly the same result. He's even offering the same sign to confirm he's the one behind what's happening to us. Because when Christ gets involved, out goes fear and in comes worship. We receive a completely different "spirit," or frame of mind, where "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that **we are God's children,**" **verse 16.**

Well, that's a totally different view of God, isn't it? But what a blessing, because with God as our Father what is there to be afraid of ever again? Out go all the things that make us slaves to fear, like the fear of death and the usual fears of ageing, loss of health, house, job and not having enough money to retire on, fear of what might happen to our children and grandchildren in the future, fear that life is passing us by without much to show for it, and fear that this entire life and world of ours has no purpose whatsoever beyond survival of the fittest, especially as the dangers facing us are getting worse. We live in a world ruled by fear.

But think of all the things that make **Christians** slaves to fear as well. How many Christians live in fear of hell, fear of not being good enough for God, fear of not doing enough for God, fear of messing up so badly God won't forgive them, fear that God will hold them responsible for not saving the world now, and fear he'll just let them suffer when crisis hits? How tragic, that even Christianity nowadays is mostly a fear religion, blatantly using fear on millions of people to get them to behave, making it awfully difficult for those people to worship God or feel any sense of "sonship" with him.

But it's hearing the groaning of the Israelites "in their slavery," **Exodus 2:25**, that made Christ come down to rescue them. He came to **free** them from their world of fear and helplessness, to "testify" to what kind of God he is, so that their hearts would mend and soften toward him, and fear would be replaced by sonship.

It was at this point, though, that Moses had a good question, in **Exodus 3:13**. Right after Christ gives Moses the sign that he, Christ, has heard their groaning and he's now directly and personally involved in doing something about it, Moses replies with "Yes, but" - "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

A name was important, because a name would tell them what kind of being they were dealing with. The name of a person back then was a great identifier. It told of their character, their intent, what angle they were coming from and what you could expect from them. Up to this point, however, all Moses had for a name was "God," **verse 6**: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham," and Moses knew that wouldn't be enough for the Israelites. They'd want to know who and what, exactly, they were dealing with, which they'd know by his name.

So Jesus gave them a name, **verse 14**: "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me (Moses) to you.'" And in **verse 15**, "This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation," and in **Exodus 6:2-3**, "God also said to Moses, 'I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name THE LORD I did not make myself known to them.'" So this was a brand new name, never used before, revealed for the first time to the Israelites, because it was of huge importance and significance to them.

It's of huge importance and significance to us today too, because we can look back and see the circumstances in which Jesus revealed this name, and why he revealed it at exactly that time. It was at the time, **verse 5**, when "I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant." The revealing of the name "I AM," therefore, had everything to do with Christ proving he would stand by his covenant, proving he was absolutely aware of those who were threatening its destruction, and proving beyond doubt that he was deeply concerned.

It's through **Israel**, therefore, that we ALL learn what kind of God we're dealing with. The story of Israel is the key to understanding God - the goal of which is that we see what kind of God he is, so that both we and the Israelites come to worship him. Our hearts of stone become hearts of flesh, because that was God's purpose for Israel and God's ultimate purpose for all humanity.

And how is that purpose being fulfilled? By the same great "I AM," still doing today what he did as the great "I AM" in Israel. We know that from **John 8:53**, when the Jews in Jesus' day yelled at Jesus, "Who do you think you are?" and "Jesus answered," **verse 58**, "before Abraham was born, I am!" Well, that made them really angry and "they picked up stones to stone him," **verse 59**. Why? Because Jesus had dared to equate himself with "I AM," the great Lord of Israel, the great God himself. But at least we know the "I AM" was definitely Christ, and he's still being the "I AM" in John 8.

Do we know what Christ is doing, then? Yes, he's doing what he was doing "before Abraham" and he's still doing it in John 8. But where we see it revealed at its best and most detailed is in his dealings with Israel under the name of "I AM."

So, what did that name mean exactly? Well, we can look back on centuries of Christ's dealings with Israel to realize what it means, as many New Testament writers did, and up popped verses like **Hebrews 13:5**, quoting one of Christ's own statements in Deuteronomy 31:6: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." It was a perfect summary of all Christ's dealings with Israel, from the opening scene in Exodus 2 when Christ "remembered his covenant," all the way through to Christ coming down in person to die for all humanity. Never has he forgotten us. No wonder he gave himself the name "I AM," because at every moment in our history he's saying, "I AM forever with you."

And the sign that he's forever with us is the same sign he gave to Israel. It's the softening of our heart of stone into a heart of flesh, where "we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'" **verse 6**. Out goes fear and in comes trust. Out goes worry and in comes confidence. Out goes that awful feeling of powerlessness and in comes optimism and hope. The scalpel of the great "I AM" has done its magic.

It did its magic on David too, because verse 6 above is a quote of his in **Psalms 118:6**. David, at the time, is in the same agonized state of mind as the Israelites were in Egypt, but when he did what they did, **verse 5**, and "In my anguish I cried to the Lord," look what happened next: "and he answered by setting me free. The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid."

The confidence that gave David was immense, **verses 10-11** - "All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off." The world could throw whatever it liked at him, but "I AM," that name, crushed every anxious thought.

Never again would he be a "slave to fear." Why not? Because he's experienced the great "I AM" in action. And what does the great "I AM" do? He rescues people from whatever is causing them anguish, or whatever's causing them to groan. He's an expert, a specialist, at freeing people from the grip of evil, in whatever guise it's in. Evil may be ever-present (as Paul said in Romans 7:21) but so is "I AM." At any moment he is "I AM." "The Lord **IS** with me," present tense. But "I AM" is always present tense to whoever needs him, as a helper more powerful than anything this world can throw at us, as we see in what he did to Pharaoh.

And this is where it all began for Israel, stuck in the worst state possible, totally in the grip of evil with all the fear, anguish and groaning that went with it. But now they'd see what this "I AM" was made of and the difference his involvement would create, just as we can when we realize we're up against the same evil they were.