

AN INTRODUCTION TO **BIBLICAL** **THEOLOGY**



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1.1 - Introduction

This is a course to introduce you to a way of reading the bible called 'biblical theology'. The main aim of the course is to learn to read and understand the bible well. It is aimed at those in some kind of leadership in church life, and in particular for those with the responsibility to teach others from the bible. However, we hope it will make sense to any Christian who wants to grow in their faith and learn how to apply what the bible says to their own life.

The course is ideally done in a group context so that you can enjoy the discussion aspects of the course, learning from others as you explore the bible together, and also with someone to mentor you and ensure that you are getting the most from the course.

What are you hoping to achieve in this course?

"We are committed to the faithful preaching and teaching of scripture as our first and final authority."

This is a statement that most churches and denominations would be happy with, and many of them contain similar wording in their statements of faith. The question is, what does this actually mean? This brings you to explore your fundamental view of what the bible is, and how it is meant to be understood and lived out.

'It's the word of God'. This is perhaps the most common view of the bible among Christians, and no one is going to argue with that as a statement. However, it does not really help us when we start to ask questions about its authority and how it should be applied.

'Do what it says'. This is the person who sees the bible as a book of rules given by God that needs to be obeyed. This may lead to confusion though, as much of the bible doesn't have rules, and the parts that do can sometimes seem to contradict each other. For example, we have some very clear rules about what foods we can and can't eat in Leviticus, whereas Jesus seems to contradict this in Mark 7.

How do we determine which rules are meant for us, and which for another generation?

'Just follow the New Testament, the Old Testament doesn't apply anymore'.

This person also thinks the bible is a book of rules, but is happy to concentrate on the parts from Jesus onwards. This can also be confusing, because Jesus himself seemed to take the Old Testament seriously. Do we disregard some of the moral teaching such as the 10 commandments? If we take the 10 commandments seriously, does that mean we need to keep the Sabbath in the way the Jews do?



'We believe what it says'. This person sees the bible as a book of promises given by God, which we can receive for ourselves simply by believing them. Again, confusion exists when you try to identify which promises God was making for specific people at a specific time, and which ones were for anyone to lay hold of. For example, Psalm 91 is a favourite for many Christians to claim as divine protection from any harm. Does this mean that James (who was beheaded) and other great saints who died for their faith did not have sufficient faith to claim this promise?

'It's a revelation of God to the world'. This person sees the bible as a way to know what God is like. By gathering everything the bible says about certain subjects, we can develop a 'doctrine', and we can use all these doctrines to understand God and what he wants us to do in the world. In fact, it would probably be easier to read a book of systematic doctrine rather than having to do all the work needed to gather together all the information in the bible. Do you think that this is what God wanted?

'The bible is an unfolding story, which invites us to play a part'. This in essence is biblical theology. It will take something from all the above viewpoints, but it's different from each of them. It sees the bible as one big story, with each part contributing to the whole. Each part of the bible can only be interpreted correctly when seen in its place in the whole story.

This course is all about understanding the 'big story', and learning to read and interpret scripture in light of this story.

Discussion question:

- 1) What does the bible mean to you?
- 2) How has it impacted your life in the past?

1.2 - The power of a story

Although we may not be conscious of it, the truth is that each of us is living out a story right now. We call it a worldview. It's the story that we have been brought up with that helps us make sense of the world.

Questions such as 'Where do I come from?', 'Why am I here?' form the basis of our worldview.

In the western cultures, the dominant worldview is that we came from a cosmic accident. There is no creator, we are here purely by chance. Therefore there is no ultimate meaning or purpose in life. Each of us becomes our own king, trying to do whatever we can for a glimpse of happiness before we cease to exist. That's why

most of the stories from the west are about individuals finding the perfect love, or becoming a hero and living a thrilling adventure.

African and Eastern cultures see God as the creator, but the role of the ancestors is hugely important. This gives rise to the importance of family and community. I once asked a Xhosa woman where she thought humanity came from, and she told me about the original ancestor for the Xhosa people. She found identity in her tribe, and her purpose in life was far more about serving and helping her wider family and community.

The story we live in is a powerful motivation for what we do, how we feel about life and what we hope for. I recently spoke to a muslim gentleman, who saw all life as completely in the hands of Allah. It meant that he refused to take any precautions over the infectious Covid-19 coronavirus, no mask or social distancing, simply because when it's time for anyone to die, they can do nothing about it. Our stories shape our lives.

This is one of the secrets to the power of the bible. The bible is a story in which you are invited to be a part. The story is going somewhere. In fact it has the most glorious conclusion, and each of us gets a chance to participate.

Our job as preachers and teachers of the bible is to replace someone's worldview with the biblical story. You see, if I call myself a Christian, but I continue living with my western worldview, nothing fundamentally changes in my life. I might go to church, get a new circle of friends, but the basic values of my life are the same. I still live out of my selfishness, my greed, my longing for power. Only when we change our story do our lives change deep down.

The more you understand and align yourself with the biblical story, the more you find yourself living out the vision of true humanity, how God created us to live. When Paul encourages the Ephesians to live lives worthy of the calling they have received, (Ephesians 4:1) he is drawing together the full story of God, and showing them that they have a place in that story.

Discussion questions:

- 1) What is the predominant worldview of your culture?
- 2) How has this affected your life?
- 3) What difference does becoming a Christian make to someone in your culture?

1.3 – The events of the bible

It is important that we get a good grasp of all the events in the bible before we begin to look at the overall story. This session tries to place the key events of biblical history in some kind of order.

We start with 'In the beginning' as we are introduced to the creation. At his command order came from chaos, light from darkness, land from sea, and life from ground. Plants, animals and lastly Adam and Eve. They were given a beautiful garden to tend, which would provide for all their needs as they enjoyed each other and God's presence with them.

God's only restriction was that they should not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, they are confronted by a snake like creature who persuades them to eat its fruit, and so their rebellion against God began. They had to leave the garden and life was never the same. Indeed, as the human race grew and multiplied, so did the hatred and violence.

God was grieved at the state of humanity, and all the violence and bloodshed. When he could stand it no longer, he sent a huge flood to wipe out the human race, sparing only Noah and his family, and preserving the animals in the ark.

However, rebellion, oppression and bloodshed continued until God scattered all the people of the world by giving them different languages and causing confusion between them at Babel.

At this point we meet Abram, who is a traveller, originally from the area of Babel, but called out by God to go to a new land, the land of Canaan. God changes his name to Abraham, 'the father of nations', and makes a promise to him that through his offspring, all the people groups of the world would know the blessing of God. Abraham is the head of a new family that carry the blessing of God.

Eventually Abraham and Sarah have a son, Isaac, who in turn has twins, Jacob and Esau. Jacob produced 12 sons, with the help of two wives and two servant girls, and God changed his name to Israel.

11 sons got tired of Joseph's arrogance and Jacob's favouritism of him, and ended up selling him as a slave and pretending that he had been killed by a wild animal. Joseph arrived in Egypt where he knew both favour and misfortune, achieving great responsibility in Potiphar's household before being unjustly accused and thrown into prison. Eventually God rescues him and places him as prime minister of all of Egypt, where he oversees the collection and distribution of food, having been shown by God that after 7 bumper years, there would be 7 years of famine. This famine drew his family to visit Egypt in order to find food, and led to them reuniting with Joseph and relocating to live permanently in Egypt, where the family grew over many years to become a nation.

400 years later we find the oppression and violence has returned. The Israelites have become slaves and are crying out to God because of their mistreatment. Pharaoh, fearful of the growing Israelite numbers, decrees the slaughter of all the Hebrew baby boys. Moses is born into one of these poor families, but is rescued from the slaughter by Pharaoh's own daughter, who finds Moses in a basket, floating down the river.

Moses grows up in the royal household, but at the age of 40 he kills an Egyptian who is mistreating an Israelite, and has to flee into the desert, where for the next 40 years he lives as a shepherd. Finally God calls him to rescue Israel from their oppression. With the help of Aaron his brother, he confronts Pharaoh and decrees the 10 plagues as judgement, ending with the death of the firstborn in each family. The Israelites are rescued because of the blood of the passover lamb that each family used to protect their household. They escape Egypt, and miraculously pass through the Red Sea, where their oppressors are cut off and drowned.

The Israelites assemble at the Mount Sinai where God makes a covenant with them and they agree to follow him wholeheartedly. However, before the covenant has even been established, the Israelites begin their rebellion, worshipping the golden calf together. This marks a difficult period of 40 years wandering in the desert, where God has decreed that none of that generation will inherit the place that God had promised them, because of their faithlessness. Only Joshua and Caleb trusted God and so were able to lead the following generation into the promised land.

Following Joshua's leadership of Israel to inherit the land, there are dark days where Israel are oppressed by the surrounding nations and cry out to God. God raises up various leaders who bring them freedom for a while, but time and again the Israelites begin to worship other gods and the oppression soon begins again. Finally the people cry out for a king to lead them, so they can be like the other nations around them.

Israel's first king becomes proud and fearful, and so God chooses David who is described as a man after God's own heart. God's promise to David is that his kingdom will last forever. Despite his flaws, David's rule sees peace and prosperity across Israel, which Solomon his son inherits. Solomon is known for his wisdom and good governance until his foreign wives turn his heart away from God.

Solomon's son Rehoboam begins to oppress the people and as a result, the kingdom splits into the 10 northern tribes and the 2 southern tribes, now known as Israel and Judah. This is the time that God raises up prophets to call the people back to the covenant that God had made with them.

However, the northern tribes continue in their idolatry, and are taken into exile and destroyed as a nation by the Assyrian empire. The southern tribes have periods of returning to God, but idolatry and oppression are never far away, and they are also exiled by the Babylonians for 70 years.



At the end of the 70 year exile, some Israelites return, and rebuild the temple and city walls in Jerusalem. However, even during this time, idolatry and oppression of the poor still continues, as they wait for the great vision of the prophets to be fulfilled.

400 years later, after so much hope, expectation, defeat and disappointment, a new voice is heard. 'The kingdom of God is here', declared Jesus, as he healed the sick, delivered the oppressed and outraged the religious establishment by forgiving sin and mixing with the foreigners, the sinners and the traitors. Although he came in the style of a Rabbi, his message was delightful and subversive, loving and dangerous, and the authorities felt it was better to get rid of him.

After 3 years of public ministry, Jesus was arrested, tried and found guilty of blasphemy, and given over to the Roman authorities for crucifixion. His closest friends abandoned him and he was left to the most brutal of deaths. On the third day, Jesus rose from the grave and appeared to his disciples on a number of occasions, preparing them for Pentecost, the time when the Holy Spirit was poured out on all of them and they would start a brand new movement of Jesus followers.

Their remit was to reproduce followers of Jesus in every nation of the world until he returns to finally make right everything that has been damaged and destroyed by sin, and so create a new place where heaven and earth are joined together, and everyone is fully and gladly submitted to his rule.

This is a quick overview of bible history. Of course there is more to the bible than this. There are the first 5 books called the Pentateuch, which contain God's instructions for Israel as well as the story up to entrance into the promised land.

Alongside the history books, we have poetry and wisdom literature, and numerous prophetic books, which all belong at different places on the timeline of events.

Assignment:

Your assignment this week is to write out the events as outlined above, in a line, and place each of the biblical books where you think they belong on this timeline. This will really help you get a grasp of why each book in the bible was written, who they are addressing, and why their message is important.

(Tip - although this assignment sounds daunting, there are numerous charts already done by others that can easily be found on the internet).

1.4 - The 5-Act play

So far we've put together some of the most significant events of the bible, and considered where each book belongs on that time line. Once we have grasped this, it's possible to think that we know the bible and its message. There is a danger here. We can know the events of the bible but never understand the overarching storyline. We can understand what happened without really grasping the message.

What did Jesus do after his resurrection, but before his ascension?

Luke 24 tells us about two appearances that Jesus made to his disciples after his resurrection.

Verses 25-27 and 44-45 give the impression that Jesus had a definite purpose straight away. These were Jewish men who had been raised on the scriptures, and knew the stories off by heart, and yet Jesus is giving them a fresh understanding of them. *'Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures'*

In his sequel, Luke records that Jesus appeared to them over the period of 40 days, and spoke about the kingdom of God.

Jesus was retelling the story of Israel, but with himself at the centre of it. He was reshaping their thinking about their scriptures over a 40 day bible school. When Peter stood up to preach on the day of Pentecost, his sermon came from what he had been learning from Jesus.

Jesus was the focus of the story all along, even though it was hidden to most people. The disciples came to understand that Jesus was in fact the fulfilment of everything that the old testament (their scriptures) had been promising. These scriptures were 'a shadow' of the realities that had now come in Christ (Col 2:17). Therefore, to understand the old testament properly, we must read it looking forward to Jesus, and understand the reality that it is pointing to is only fully seen through the work that Jesus did.

When we consider the bible as a whole, we can summarise its different parts, understanding that each part is an important part of the story, but is only interpreted properly when it is placed correctly in the right part of the overall story.

To quote new testament scholar NT Wright, it's like a 5 act play. A play is story intended to be acted out in front of an audience. It is broken down into different sections or 'acts'. Each act is linked to all the others in that it's part of the overall story, but each part has a particular setting and purpose. If someone in act 5 were to start acting as though they were in act 2, it would make the story very confusing. Each act must be seen and understood in light of the place it has in the story.

NT Wright summarises the different acts as follows;



So we find ourselves in act 5. We can read everything in the bible from the book of Acts onwards as being directly relevant to us now. However, what we read in the previous acts must shape the way we see the story unfolding, but only as we interpret it through Jesus. In this way we will reshape how we read and understand much of the bible.

Let's take, for example, the story of David and Goliath. Many preachers love to tell the story of the underdog, standing against the giant and ultimately overcoming against all odds. It stirs something in most of us to want to rise up and overcome. But how would Jesus tell this story? What if Jesus was the centre and hero of the story? We now understand that Jesus, stripped and vulnerable, taking on the terrifying powers of God's enemies. No one else could stand against them, but against all the odds, Jesus took on the power of sin, death and the devil, and completely overcame them, leaving his brothers to enforce that victory throughout the land.

Some further examples

Story	Interpreting as a stand-alone story	Interpreting with Jesus as the hero
Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22)	Abraham trusts God and heroically offers his son. We should be more like Abraham and live sacrificially by faith.	We understand God the Father, offering his only son on Mt Moriah, the place which became Jerusalem. He provided the sacrificial sheep in the place of Isaac, so that Isaac could live.
Moses and the exodus (Ex 11)	Moses calls on God to deliver his people, and God answers him with judgements on the wicked. God will help us to battle people that are against us.	Jesus, the passover lamb of God, is slain and his blood sets his people free from their oppression of sin, death and the Devil.
Jonah and the big fish (Jonah 2)	Jonah is judged for his disobedience, but God also shows him mercy by saving his life with the fish. From this we know that God will judge us for our sin, but we also hope for mercy from him.	Jesus sacrifice was on behalf of many from different nations. He suffered and was hidden away in death, but God raised him from the grave on the third day, demonstrating his ultimate power and authority.
David and Mephibosheth (2Sam 9)	David shows mercy to a disabled man, and we should likewise show mercy to people in need.	?

Have a go at interpreting the final box yourself. Where is Jesus in this story?

What we have been doing here is seeking to interpret the bible in the way that Jesus would have explained it to his disciples. It's what became known in the early church as the 'apostles' doctrine'.

This is a crucial part of interpreting the bible well. We are going to spend a week looking at each of the parts of the bible, to see how we can read them and understand them in light of the big story, with Jesus at the centre of everything.

Discussion question: Read about the life of Joseph in Genesis 37-50.

1) Where do you see Jesus in this story?

2.1 - Creation

Since the days of Charles Darwin (a 19th century biologist who proposed the theory of evolution), the church and the world have increasingly fought over Genesis chapter 1. Believers have often been caught up in this argument, fighting the materialistic worldview of macro evolution. It can be as if we are fighting for the truth of the evidence of God or the authenticity of the bible. It has become such a focus among some Christians that we stop reading it any other way. We so easily lose the beauty, the glory and the theology that this passage can teach us. When the writer came to describe creation, he had no thought of writing something for modern scientific minds. Actually he wrote us a song or a poem to introduce us to God, the creator of everything, and to understand the world around us, and our place as humans in his creation. This forms the basis of our story, where we came from and why we are here. It gives us the answers to some of life's most basic questions.

Let's take a look at what the first chapter can teach us.

1) God's good creation

The rhythm is set - evening and morning, evening and morning. Then the chorus 'and God saw that it was good. Repeat 'It was good', and one final time 'It was very good'. For God, the perfect, all powerful, creator of everything to look over his creation in its entirety and give his verdict 'very good' is amazing. He delights in his creation. He loves it, it is precious to him. And it tells us so much about him. God's invisible qualities can be clearly seen. The heavens declare the glory of God. The night sky, the forest, the waterfall, the desert plain, all give us a glimpse of his beauty, his harmony, his order, his power, his detail, his wisdom. The whole created order in its essence is good.

Some have been taught that the created order is evil, so that our goal as Christians is to escape this physical body and the physical world, and to be taken away as

a disembodied spirit to a spiritual realm, while this world destroys itself and is ultimately obliterated by God's judgement. Whole groups have withdrawn from the world, emphasising the corruption of the world and waiting for the rapture to take us all away. Some have made the good news of God about escaping the physical realm and going to spend eternity in heaven when we die. This understanding that the spiritual world is good while the physical world is bad has more to do with a Greek philosopher called Plato than it does with the bible.

We must let this understanding of God's good creation become one of our foundation stones in the story of the bible. He loves his world, his cosmos. He loves what he has made, he enjoys it. That includes us. We are his workmanship, his masterpiece. That includes the world around us. We can and should enjoy what God has made, let everything teach us more about him, so that we are part of his creation that brings him praise.

This understanding fills the whole story, as God's love and delight for what he has made is a clear motivation for his redeeming acts. He doesn't want to just rescue a select group of humanity, but his plan is to reconcile the whole of creation back to himself, including humanity.

2) Order from chaos

We start off with the scene of darkness and chaotic waters. The Hebrew phrase is 'Tohu wa bohu', which means 'formless and empty'. This is the ancient view before creation, darkness and chaos.

Then God speaks. His words have power. He spends 3 days forming by his powerful word, separating light from darkness, sky above from water below, and land from sea. This is God bringing order from chaos, so that life can flourish. He then spends 3 days filling his world. Sun, moon and stars, fish and birds, land creatures and humans. Day after day he is undoing 'tohu wa bohu', formless and empty, and he forms and fills his world until he looks over all that he has sorted out, and sees it being filled and flourishing, and declares it 'very good'.

Whenever God is active in the world, we see order from chaos, so that life can flourish. Whenever God withdraws himself, we see chaos begin to reign, and the world begins to resemble some of its pre-created state, for example with Noah and the flood, or with Moses and the 10 plagues.

3) The final rest

After 6 days of ordering and filling the world, God enters his creation to rest and rule like a King, entering his throne room. This is the only day that there is no evening and morning, as if the 7th day was meant to last forever. This is a picture of God's ultimate intention for his creation, with humanity enjoying everything that God had made, and with God himself at the centre of his creation, enjoying it too.

The apostle John, many years later, saw a vision of a city without a temple, for God and Jesus are its temple, and there is no sun or moon, no day or night, no morning or evening, and the kings of earth bring their splendour to it (Rev 21 & 22). That is, creation will be enjoyed fully, with Jesus at the centre and this will never end.

Discussion question: What do you learn about God as you read the creation narrative of Genesis 1?

2.2 - The creation of mankind in his image

We have seen how Genesis 1 teaches us about God, about his creation and about our place as humanity in his creation. After everything has been made, his final act of creation is to make mankind 'in his image'. This sets mankind apart from the rest of creation. We are the only created beings to be made in his image. It's worth exploring what this means.

1) The garden as a temple

Images and idols

In the ancient world, where numerous temples were built for different deities, the last thing to be done when finishing the building was to set in place the image of that particular deity. The 'image' is actually the same word translated 'idol' in our bibles. It's meant to be a representation of that god. When we look at the image, we get something of a grasp of what that god is like. For example, in Hinduism, one of their gods is called Ganesh. He's the one depicted with the elephant head. One of his attributes is to clear away obstacles, hence his image contains the elephant.

The ban on making anything like God

Now the God of the bible actually forbids any 'graven images', which are carvings that are meant to depict him. Why? Because he has made his image already, not from wood or stone, but when he made mankind in his image. We are his image, made to represent God in his temple. God's desire was that mankind would multiply and fill the earth, and as we do, we extend the temple and represent God to the whole of creation.

The river from the temple

Did you see that a river runs out from Eden and splits into 4 rivers. It's like an invitation to go out from Eden, to explore, and to bring life to the world around. Many years later, the prophet Ezekiel is mourning the loss of the temple in Jerusalem, and he sees a vision of a new temple with a river flowing from it. A gentle trickle at first, but as it goes out further, it gets deeper and stronger, and wherever it flows, it brings life. Even to the dead places, the salty Dead Sea, it brings the life and beauty of creation, with trees growing on its banks. Eden is developing and expanding.



The later temples all reflect Eden

This is the story of the temple seen in scripture. The temple is at the place where heaven meets earth, where the spiritual and the physical realms coincide, where God and man can meet each other. The garden was the first temple. God and humans lived together in joyful friendship. The tabernacle and temple both have furnishing which evoke memories of Eden. The lamp stand, with its 7 branches, adorned with petals and blossom, the pillars of the temple, decorated with pomegranates and topped with a lily design. They continually point back to a time when God and man could live together in harmony.

Eden as used by the prophets

Scripture uses this 'Eden' imagery as the prophets point to a time of restoration of God's people. So Isaiah 35:1

'The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.'

The idea of peace with wild animals is also used. Remember Daniel in the lions' den (Dan 6) and Jesus in the wilderness (Mk 1:13).

The ultimate temple

The temple image is seen again in the new Jerusalem that comes down from heaven in Revelation 21. It's distinct because of its shape, a perfect cube - as long as it wide as it is high. This reminds us of the holy of holies, the place in the tabernacle and the temple, which were the most holy place where God and man could meet. It was a perfect cube, just 5m x 5m x 5m in the tabernacle, 10m x 10m x 10m in the temple, and over 2,000,000m x 2,000,000m x 2,000,000m in the new creation. Imagine driving from Cape Town to the furthest border of South Africa and Mozambique. That's the length and breadth and height of the new creation! The temple is growing. Ultimately God's presence will fill the whole earth, the skies, the universe. It will be his true temple.

2) Mandate to rule

Managing in God's family business

So as those made in the image of God, we represent God to the rest of creation. God's plan is that creation looks to humanity to see God. There are a number of things that set us apart from the rest of the created order - our creativity, our self consciousness, our ability to learn and grow, but the primary meaning of being God's image bearers is given in the text; to rule over the fish, the birds, the livestock and all the creatures. To rule here means to care for, to steward, on God's behalf. We have been invited into God's family business, as part of the management team. The emphasis is on doing it the way God does it. He's the owner. He set up the business, and we have been invited

into it, and invited to run things the way he does. We are to be like God, bringing order from chaos so that life may flourish.

Stewarding - developing while caring

The resources of the earth have been placed in our hands. Did you see the invitation that outside the garden there is gold and aromatic resin and precious stones. They've been given to us. We can use the resources of the world. Our great advances - the wheel, the engine, electricity, semi conductors, quantum computers, are all a result of us using the resources of the world and bringing order to them. However, our role is to care for as well as use the resources. We are to ensure that the planet we have been given will flourish and enhance life. This means all life, not just a small section of humanity in our generation, but more widely, so our animals and plants will flourish, so every person in every part of the world will flourish, and so future generations will flourish. This is part of our call.

Israel's calling

Jumping ahead in the story, God called Israel to be a kingdom of priests (Ex19:6), a whole nation who would represent God to the world, rather than just one family.

The true image of God

Ultimately he sent the man Christ Jesus, who was the true image of God, to be his representative to the whole of creation. 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). Paul says 'The son is the image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15). We can now see what God is really like, because we have seen Jesus. Also, we can see what humanity really looks like, without the curse of sin. We see compassion and justice, faithfulness, joy, sorrow, fun, anger, gentleness. This is perfect humanity, as God has made us. When we think about becoming more like Christ we are actually becoming more fully human, as God intended.

The new kingdom of priests

Those who are now believers in Jesus, who are 'in Christ', are called to be part of the work of representing God to the rest of creation. We are actively caring for the world and bringing his rule to bear. We are now called his royal priests (1Pet 2:9). As such we have two roles. We go to God on behalf of his creation (that is, we are called to pray), and we go to his creation on behalf of God (that is, as communities, we show the world what God is like and proclaim the good news that Jesus is the true king).

Discussion questions:

1) Why is an understanding of the image of God so important in the study of the bible?

2) What are the implications of God's image in us as we face social issues such as racism, disabilities, poverty and abortion?

2.3 - Creation principles

So far we've read together Genesis 1 and 2, and sought to understand what these chapters tell us about God, about his creation, and about our role as mankind. Today we look at some other important principles from these chapters.

1) The dignity of work

Let's see where work comes in the story. We see that God is the first one to be at work. Not only in his work of creation, but in his hands-on planting of a garden. He caused all kinds of trees to grow which were both good for food and pleasing to the eye.

Adam is taken from the dust and placed in the garden. His task is to care for it. To tend it the way that God had done. He was carrying on God's work. This is important. Work is not a result of the fall as some people think. It's there in the created order, before any curse on the ground. It's how God designed humanity to live. Work has an intrinsic value to humanity. It's part of what makes us feel fully human. To have a task, to produce, to enjoy the fruit of your labour. There is a great dignity in that. We are like God in that respect.

It's also the way that God provides for us. His provision is built into creation. It comes as we use the resources that God has given to us, trusting that he will multiply it. For Adam, God gave him numerous resources. He had seed for planting, good soil and nutrients, sunlight and water. He also had the capacity to learn skills and wisdom to benefit his crops, and the physical strength to make it happen. Now he commits the seed to the ground, trusting that in God's time, he will make it grow and multiply, so he will have food to eat and further seed that he can sow.

This process is similar, whatever type of work we do, using the resources we have access to along with our skills and knowledge, and we help to produce something that has multiplied its worth, and will allow us to receive more resources to live and to work with.

There's so much erroneous teaching on 'living by faith' as a way of provision. We are called to a trusting dependence on our Father God in the same way as Adam. That is, we are to be productive, and for what we produce to be worthwhile, enabling others to flourish. Paul is a great example of this, declaring to the church leaders in Ephesus that he had given them an example to follow. By working hard they would provide for themselves, their fellow workers and the disadvantaged

among them. He also warned the Thessalonian church that if someone refused to work, they should not eat. This all comes from his view of the world and the importance of work.

This is much easier to talk about than to put into practise of course. We will look at the effects of the fall on work in our third section of this course. However, let's not miss the God-ordained priority of working hard, of being productive, of trusting God with the process, and the satisfaction of enjoying the fruit of what you've worked for.

Our work is all part of the role God has given us as rulers and stewards of creation. It isn't just to provide for us, but has a greater purpose of bringing order from chaos, so that life can flourish. Think of Dubai. Really it's just a desert. There's nothing there, but mankind is so ingenious that over 50 years it's gone from nothing to a world class city. Think about the animals that have lived in the same environments for thousands of years, and never considered upgrading. Even the most intelligent animals would never be found advancing their surroundings in the way humanity has. This is uniquely something God has put within us.

2) Equality and complementarity

We can learn so much from the relationship between Adam and Eve. We learn about marriage, teamwork, and ultimately we learn about God himself. During the creation, God separates a number of complimentary pairs. Light from darkness, water from sky, land from sea, and then finally female from male.

They are made in his image, male and female, completely equal in worth and in authority as they rule over creation. The same and yet different. Adam wasn't OK. 'It's not good for the man to be alone'. Why? Because he couldn't fulfil his God given mandate on his own. He needed help. Not in the ways an animal could help, like the strong ox to pull the plough. None of the animals could help with what Adam was lacking. He had been called to carry on God's work of bringing order to the chaos, the 'tohu wa bohu', the formless and empty. He knew how to form things, but not how to fill. So God created Eve. Like Adam, but so different. Eve was able to nurture and bring forth life. Together they could form and fill. Together they could fulfil their God given task to spread out and fill the earth with God's rule.

So they were equal in worth, but different in role. We need each other to fulfil what God has given us to do. There is interdependence between male and female. This gives us an insight into God himself, who is three in one. Complete equality and yet diversity in roles.



The bible likens the relationship between Jesus and God to that of wife to husband. The husband is the head of the wife as God is the head of Jesus (1Cor11:3). There are different roles, which has nothing to do with more or less importance.

Paul uses the relationship of Jesus to the Church to show us what headship in marriage means. Just as Jesus loved the church and laid his life down to care for and protect the church, so husbands show that same life-giving care and sacrifice for their wives (Eph5:28). This is Jesus' way of leadership, and gives a blueprint for the way he wants all marriages to function.

Discussion questions:

- 1) What do you understand by 'living by faith'?
- 2) What pastoral wisdom do you see from these principles in creation?

2.4 - Creation theology in the bible

Over the last 3 sessions, we've looked at how the story of creation, recorded for us in chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis tells us about this God, about the world we live in, and about our place in the world. I want to use this session to show you a little of how this theology is used as we go through the bible. Understanding these foundations means that we can build a strong theological framework that will stand and not get blown around by the various 'winds of doctrine' that come and go.

1) The one true God

Although the bible goes on to recognise many different 'spiritual beings', some even called 'gods' that were worshipped, there is only one true God, the one who by his word created the world and everything we see around us. Paul the apostle uses this thought as he engaged with the pagans in Athens, recognising the many gods that they honoured, but bringing their attention to the 'God who made the world and everything in it, the Lord of heaven and earth'. This is the foundation of his message to people of all religions. This one God is above all the others. He has all power, all wisdom and knowledge, all authority. He is the only one truly worthy of our worship.

2) Worship and idolatry

This theme of worship is one that runs throughout the bible, with the temptation for humanity to worship things other than the true God constantly there. All other worship is idolatry. Mankind was made to love, honour and worship the one true God. This is

where we find order for our lives. Paul begins his epistle to the Romans with the same ideas. He says that the creation has revealed what the true God is like, but mankind has failed to worship him and so have become blind, leading to all sorts of degradation and chaos.

3) The goodness of God

The creation story introduces us to the one true God, who is caring and loving, as well as powerful and wise. This characteristic of love can be seen more and more clearly, until John writes, in one of the last letters in our bible, that 'God is love'. It's what every other action and motivation comes from. It's trust in the unchanging nature of God's kindness and love that allows us to put our hope in him. It's God's love that leads us to his justice, his compassion for those who are oppressed, downtrodden or vulnerable, and his mercy and grace, to make a way for his wayward creation to come back into a relationship with him.

4) The trinity

Here, embedded in the story is also the way God comes to be known as community, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We have seen the Spirit hovering over the chaos waters, we have the word of God speaking creation into being, and the Father watching over and directing his work. 'Let us make man in our image' he says.

5) The land

We see that the land is given to humanity to steward well. Hence we read in the covenant God gave to Israel to look after the land, to allow it to rest at times, to ensure that it produced well. The land is closely linked to mankind's relationship with God. Ultimately the land is waiting, says Paul, for the sons of God to be revealed. Once we are resurrected, glorified and given new bodies that will last forever, so the earth will be renewed, it will have its own resurrection.

6) The ultimate human

Mankind is given such a vital role in the stewarding and ruling of the world. Hebrews 2:6-8 quotes Psalm 8, which marvels at the role given to humanity to rule, but notes that we don't currently see this fully worked out in practise. The writer then points us to Jesus, the one man who truly fulfilled his role as a human, the one who will bring his many brothers through to share in his glory. Who helps us is our temptations because he has also suffered temptation. He shows us what the ultimate human looks like. Therefore we keep fixing our eyes on him.

Jesus himself liked to use the title 'the human' (most versions say 'the son of man'). He took this title from a prophesy in Daniel 7, who saw a vision of a great enemy of

God, devouring God's people. Then God comes to take his place on his throne, and Daniel sees one like 'the human' approaching God and being given authority, glory and power, and all the nations of the earth worshipping him. Jesus saw himself in this role, coming under the suffering from the enemy of God, but ultimately destined for glory. Interestingly, later in the chapter, as the angel interprets the vision, it's not a single human, but all of God's people that are given authority and rule over all the kingdoms of the world, just like God had declared to Adam right back in the beginning.

Written assignment: What kind of world did God intend for us to inherit?

3.1 - The fall - Adam and Eve

So we've looked at the first act in our play, the creation of everything, and the God who made it all happen and who has designed everything to work perfectly together. We now move onto our second act, the 'Fall'.

1) The choice

In the centre of the garden was 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. This seems at first sight to be a good thing to take from and eat, and yet God said 'Don't eat its fruit'. Why is this?

Perhaps looking further along into the biblical story will help us understand. In 1Kings 3 we find a new ruler has taken the stage. Solomon is a young man, with the world at his feet. He has inherited a kingdom from his father, and we are catching a glimpse of what God had wanted, a people to represent him to the rest of the world. It's as if we have the creation story replayed, but this time Solomon is in the place of Adam. God gives him the choice, 'Ask whatever you want me to give you'. Solomon responds that he is young and does not know how to rule. He asks God to give him wisdom to discern 'good and evil'. This is exactly the same phrase in the Hebrew as is used of the tree in Genesis 3. Solomon passes the test, the choice of pursuing his own wisdom, of deciding what is right and wrong for himself, or choosing God's wisdom and walking in obedience to him. God is delighted with his choice, and gives him great riches and honour also.

Adam and Eve were like infants, unable to discern for themselves what was right and wrong. God wanted them to learn obedience to him, step by step. Instead they took it on themselves to decide what was right and wrong, independent from God.

Let's see how it played out.

2) The temptation

The overriding question is 'Can we trust God?' The strange creature in the garden, described as a serpent, had already decided to rebel against the rule of God. He uses a mixture of lies and subtle questions which undermine Eve's trust in the goodness of God. Essentially he tells her that God is trying to keep her from fulfilling all that she could be. If she made decisions for herself rather than following what God told her, she could become like God himself.

After listening to the lies, she then begins to look at the object of temptation. She studies it, considering how good it looked and how desirable the outcome would be.

3) The sin

As Eve considered all this, she believed the lies and the desire for independence grew in her, and she gave birth to sin, and took and ate the fruit. Adam, the scriptures say, was with her, apparently a silent onlooker as Eve was deceived. Suddenly for the first time in human experience, they felt shame.

Covering up - they saw themselves differently, no longer confident in who God had made them, they became self-conscious and wanted to cover themselves, hiding themselves from each other.

Hiding themselves from God - they became fearful and hid from God. The sense of shame made them withdraw from God, scared of what God would see if they were to come face to face with him.

Death entered the world - God told them that if they ate the fruit they would die. Yet Adam and Eve were still alive. Yet the power of death has been unleashed, both in their personal lives and in the world that they had been given to steward. Death is the power that undoes creation. It brings chaos where there was order. It brings division where there was harmony. 'Sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death' (James 1:15). The consequences of Adam and Eve's sin is the entrance of death into the world. This is seen in all its horror in the chapters to come, with violence, oppression, hatred, and physical death all quickly occurring into this perfect world that God had declared 'very good'.

4) The judgement

This is a vital theme throughout the biblical story. Judgement is not an angry God, taking out his punishment on helpless humanity. It is rather God the righteous judge, acting to make things right. It's his response to destructive behaviour that brings chaos into the order of creation. His judgments almost always come in order to bring redemption.

In the case of Eve, her judgement seemed to impact most on her God-given role in nurturing life and partnering with Adam. This had a huge impact on women throughout history in terms of the dangers and pain associated with childbirth. This is an area that demonstrates our weakness and dependence on God. His judgement has actually caused mankind to seek God and recognise their need of his mercy.

Likewise with Adam, the judgement associated with him had an impact on his work. No longer could he be confident that whatever he planted would grow successfully. Again, it brought him to a place of dependence on God for his provision and for life itself.

For the serpent, the judgement contained no redemption. It is the case that some of God's judgements are final. There is a sense that no more damage can be done, that enough is enough. His pronouncement is that the serpent shall crawl on his belly, a humiliation for the creature that intended to become like God. There is also the promise that one day the offspring of the woman would crush the serpent's head, an obvious reference to the coming victory that Jesus would have over the devil.

5) Exile

Adam and Eve are banished from the garden, and from the presence of God. This is the first of many such exile stories in the scriptures, each with the sense that they have lost something so precious, and constantly longing to return. Many people today have experienced the same sense of displacement, of believing things should be better, of not finding the fulfilment they know is there somewhere. These are echoes of Eden in every heart, made for something that they can never truly find outside of Christ.

Discussion question: How are faith and obedience linked?

3.2 - The fall - Cain and Abel

The story of the fall is not just found in chapter 3 of Genesis. In fact as the story progresses, we find the themes are repeated time and again. As if to prove the point, the writer uses many of the same ideas in the story of Cain and Abel.

1) The choice

We aren't told in the story why Cain's sacrifice was rejected, while Abel's was accepted. That is something which we might give some thought to later on in the biblical story. For now, all we know is that Cain became very angry. This is the moment of choice again, to do what's right, or not do what's right. He is standing before the tree again, deciding whether to go the way God has intended for him, or to go the way that he sees as right.

2) The temptation

Anger is often the fruit of idolatry, that is, loving something more than you love God. When that idol is threatened, the natural response is anger, and sin is not far behind. In this case, God describes another animal like creature called 'sin' that is couching at Cain's door, desiring him. Like the serpent, deceiving Adam and Eve, this creature is actively trying to entice Cain away from God's ways. Cain is told he must rule or master this creature.

3) The sin

Cain is unable to master the creature, and in his anger, he leads his brother out to a field, where he kills him. Here we see in graphic detail how sin and death are connected. Here we see the first of a pattern of how mankind would begin to treat each other when giving in to the desires of the beast. How violence would be used in order to establish a hierarchy of power. This is what it looks like when humanity reject the ways of God, and live independently from him.

As in the previous story, sin leads to shame and covering up. God is searching for Abel, but Cain covers up the story and lies to God.

4) The judgement

Again the ground is cursed, just as with Adam, although it may be that the curse is particularly against Cain's use of the land rather than against the land in general.

5) Exile

Cain is driven away from the presence of God, and is destined to be a 'restless wanderer'. However, there is mercy too, as Cain receives a mark to protect him from those who would kill him.

So we see many parts of the story of the fall of Adam and Eve are repeated in the story of Cain and Abel. We find that the early parts of the bible are helping us to understand the human condition, and why we find ourselves in the state that we are in.

We continually face a choice between living in trust and dependence on God, and making our choices based on what he says and what he wants, or living independently, and making our choices around what is good in our own eyes, and what we think is best.

These choices are crucial for the way we and those around us will live. Living in obedience to God means that our lives take on the order that he brings, whereas living in disobedience brings the chaos that characterised the cosmos before creation.

Discussion question: What other temptation stories are there in the bible? Can you see a similar pattern with any of them?



3.3 – The fall – Rebellion and the flood

So far we have seen the results of individual temptation, rebellion and sin. We also see God acting to limit sin. However, after Cain, we find one of his descendants, Lamech, boasting about taking unpitying revenge on anyone who wronged him. In effect he warns his family that he would emulate and go beyond Cain in his self protection. Mankind is heading into dark times.

What unfolds in our story now is what God's good world becomes as a result of mankind's slide into violence and oppression.

Rebellion in the physical and spiritual realms

Chapter 6 outlines the world in rebellion against God. This is shown in both the physical and spiritual realms.

Firstly there seems to be a rebellion among 'the sons of God', finding wives from 'the daughters of men'. The traditional Jewish understanding here is that angels in rebellion to God wrecked havoc on the world through inter-marrying with human women, which was one of the main causes of evil in the world.

More modern interpretations translate 'the sons of God' to mean kings, marrying beneath themselves, or even humans who had received the divine image intermarrying with other humans, who although evolved, were like animals, without the 'breath of God'.

Whichever interpretation you favour, there is doubtless a rebellion against God, both in the spiritual and the physical realms.

Judgement and de-creation

This rebellion caused great violence and bloodshed in the world, so as to bring pain and regret to the heart of God. There came a time when God said 'enough'. It seems that Noah was the only one that found favour in God's eyes. So we see the process of God rescuing his creation from the effects of sin and rebellion, while taking his sustaining hand away from the parts of creation that refused his rule. With that, we see 'de-creation' in process, and a return to the chaos waters that we found right at the beginning of the story, before God began to bring order.

Noah as the new Adam

We find that Noah is seen as the new Adam, rescued by God to become the 'new' creation. He is able to exert authority over the animals. He is blessed and instructed to fill the earth. This is not the only 'new Adam' we will discover as we go through the story, each carrying the hopes and expectations of the readers that God's people are finally bringing his rule to the world.

Salvation means to rescue

This is perhaps our first of many salvation stories we read in the scriptures. The violent oppressors are given over to the fruit of their rebellious ways, but God extends mercy by rescuing his creation from their oppression, and setting them free in a new land, where they can learn to follow his ways fully.

A familiar end

Unfortunately, as with many of the 'new Adam' stories, there is a familiar end, with Noah found naked, and a curse being placed on Ham and his son Canaan.

God's first covenant

We find here our first explicit covenant made by God, to every living creature, that he will never destroy his creation again. This will have a great impact on the story to come, and how God will address the problem of evil in the world.

Discussion question: What does this story tell us about the new creation that God will one day bring to the world?

3.4 – The fall – Babylon the great

We have viewed the development from one couple's rebellion against God to a world that rejects God's ways, with violence and bloodshed as the result. This rebellion seems ingrained into humanity, as the new creation project with Noah and his family takes a similar turn.

The table of nations

Chapter 10 of Genesis introduces us to the table of nations that came from the children of Noah, each assigned with a territory and a language, filling the earth as God has originally commanded Adam and Eve, a mandate subsequently given to Noah.

In this list of nations, we find one individual highlighted, by the name of Nimrod. He was known as a mighty warrior, and set up his own kingdom, which included Babylon and Assyria, two of the great enemies of God's people we will encounter later in the story.

The tower of Babel

Chapter 11 gives us an insight into the origins of Babylon, or Babel as most translations use. In Babylon we see the creation of the kingdom of man, in direct rebellion to the kingdom of God. We see the first empire, which had one language, one city and one temple, and crucially, it was built on violence and oppression, through its founder Nimrod the great warrior. This was not a city where everyone chose to

live together in harmony, but where people were used in forced labour. The vision for Nimrod was to make a great name for himself and to gather as many people as possible together, directly resisting the call of God for humanity to fill the earth.

The first great kingdom

This is the first 'empire', or 'kingdom of man' which is spoken of in the bible, a theme which runs consistently throughout the story. Some would even characterise the book of Revelation as the story of two great cities, Babylon and Jerusalem, the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. This first empire introduces the themes common with all the biblical kingdoms, gathering in rebellion to God, to make their own names great, and using force and oppression to exert their power.

Liberation of the oppressed

We also see God acting to scatter the people. Many commentators would see this as God's response in judgement to the rebellion of the people, causing a 'mixing' of languages, as though chapter 11 actually comes before chapter 10 in terms of time. It explains all the different languages as a result of God's judgment on mankind. However, a growing number of commentators would prefer to see chapter 10 interpreted as before chapter 11, in the way the original author intended. They would see the different languages and cultures expressed in chapter 10 as the way God intended the world, with all the richness this diversity brings. Chapter 11 is then seen as God's liberation of the oppressed, who have been forced to live in the system of Babylon, required to speak one language and worship God in a certain way. This may well be a better interpretation as we consider biblical theology, as we see the theme of God acting to release the oppressed as one of the central messages of the story. Indeed, we find a great similarity at the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, where Judaism has become an empire which emphasises one city (Jerusalem), one language (Hebrew) and one temple. The impact of the outpouring of the Spirit meant that those from outside Jerusalem heard the wonders of God in their own languages, they could meet with God outside the temple, and the whole earth was to become holy rather than just Jerusalem. This ultimately had the effect of allowing the people to 'scatter' and go in to all the world with the good news of Jesus.

We will see later in the story that a huge crowd is gathered before God's throne in Revelation 7, where every language, culture and people group is represented, as though this was a cause for celebration rather than as a sign of God's judgement on humanity.

So we can see that man's kingdom will be about uniformity, about conformity to the system, and about the oppression of those who do not conform.

Alternatively, God's kingdom is about unity expressed in diversity, brought about through grace and generosity.

Assignment: What do you see as the implications of the fall today?

4.1 - Israel - The covenant with Abraham

From the good world that God created, we have seen how man's independence from God has caused chaos on an individual level, in relationships with others and with the land, but also in society and on a wider global level. We know that God will not just wipe out the world and start again, so how will God rescue his creation? This is the next part of the story.

Abraham

Abraham is introduced in chapter 12, directly after meeting Nimrod and seeing the way his kingdom operated. No doubt the writer wanted to contrast the two characters to see two different ways of living to emerge.

Nimrod	Abraão
Come	Go
One language	Plurality of languages
Gather to one temple	Build alters as you go
Build a city	Leave a city
Settled	Lived in tents
Powerful	Vulnerable
Making a name for himself	Entrusts his honour to God
Rebellion	Obedience
Judged	Blessed

So God chooses a family in order to rescue his creation, in keeping with his plans to work through mankind to govern the world.

The blessing

In order to address the effects of the curse that had come into the world, God pronounces a blessing over Abraham, over those who bless him, and ultimately over the whole world through his offspring. This is God's promise to redeem the world from the curse of sin, and he promises to do it through Abraham's offspring.

The covenant

Later in Abraham's life in chapter 15 of Genesis, God speaks to him again, this time in terms of a covenant, or binding contract. In most contracts written at this time, both



parties would commit to doing their part by means of a solemn oath. God, for his part, promises Abraham that he will have a son, that his offspring will be more than anyone can count, and that his descendants would inherit the land that he was traveling in.

God enacts the tradition of walking in between animals that have been cut in half (this would signify that the party would keep their promise or invite the same treatment that those animals had received). So God makes his binding promise, which will be outworked for the rest of the bible.

1) The blessing

Paul is keen for the Galatians to understand that the blessing promised to the world through Abraham was in fact the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:14) who would finally bring all the riches of God to humanity.

2) The son

Paul saw this promise of a 'seed' or 'offspring' to mean one person, Jesus (Gal 3:16). He was the fulfilment of all of God's promises to the world which he made to Abraham.

3) The nation

If the offspring is Jesus, rather than Isaac, then Paul's view is that it is not ethnic Israel that are the recipients of these promises, but the Christ-followers who were brought together from all ethnic backgrounds and social standings.

4) The land

This has become a contentious issue in modern times. Abraham was promised a section of land as an inheritance for his descendants. Paul again reinterprets this promise to be that he would inherit the world (Rom 4:13), the natural conclusion from his view on the fulfilment of the other parts of the covenant God made with him.

The whole world belongs to Jesus the King (Rev 11:15), this is where the whole story is going.

The response of faith

Abraham simply heard God's promises to him, and believed God. Gen 15:6 describes this as the moment it was counted as righteousness for Abraham. The term 'righteousness' could easily be translated as 'faithful to the covenant'. When the contract was drawn up and God made his promises, walking through the animals as a sign of his solemn oath, Abraham did not make any promises. Neither did he walk through the animals as God had done. Instead, he believed God. That was the fulfilment of Abraham's part of the covenant. It was purely his faith that meant he was counted as faithful to the covenant. Paul takes this theme in his letter to the Romans, declaring to them a way to be considered part of God's faithful people was open to all through believing God (Rom 3:22).

Discussion question: In what way do Christians live under the blessing of God's covenant with Abraham?

4.2 – Israel – Moses and the law

We have seen that in order to deal with the problems in his good creation, God chooses a family in order to bless the world. We see this illustrated in the life of Joseph, a fore-runner of Jesus, as he goes from rejection and suffering to a place of exaltation and ruling for the benefit and salvation of all the surrounding nations. This brings Jacob and his family to live with Joseph in Egypt, where they become a nation, but are enslaved by the powerful Pharaoh.

The story of judgement

The miraculous story of Moses, rescued from the tyranny of the Egyptian threat and taken to live in the palace as a royal son is well known, even to some who haven't read the bible. His personal story of deliverance from Pharaoh is later replayed on a national scale, with God bringing judgement on his enemies and deliverance to his people. Pharaoh the great king and object of worship for the Egyptian, is responsible for the death and oppression of God's people. God therefore brings plagues to confront all the Egyptian gods, ultimately visiting upon Pharaoh the death of the firstborn throughout his land and his people.

The story of deliverance

Only those who have believed God and come under the blood of the innocent lamb are spared from God's judgement, and are liberated from their oppression. This story of national deliverance becomes a huge part of the national identity of Israel. It's referred to in many of their songs, it's a major theme for the prophets as they consider God's salvation, and celebrated every year through the feast of Passover. Indeed, it's this meal that Jesus chose to explain to his disciples the new covenant that he was bringing to them, the night before he died.

The covenant with Israel

50 days after their 'Passover' deliverance, the newly formed nation of Israel meet with God on the mountain. Here we see a marriage between God and the people of Israel. They have been engaged since the days of Abraham, but here is the moment that they will be joined to God by a covenant. They make binding promises to each other. God promises that if they will be fully obedient to him, then he will be their God, and they will be his treasured possession, and kingdom of priests, representing him to the world around. The people respond 'We will do everything the Lord has said'. This is a holy moment, a 'new creation' moment, when God joins himself with a family, in order to bless the world. Unfortunately, Moses does not even make it down the mountain before the Israelites are making gods as images that they can bow down to, a practice that God would consider adultery, and for which he would one day declare his intention to divorce Israel. This highlights the great difficulty that would constantly undermine Israel, as God partners with humanity to bring his blessing to the world, and yet these humans are actually part of the problem.

50 days after another great Passover, as people gathered to celebrate Pentecost and the giving of the law, we find another 'new creation' moment, as God the Holy Spirit comes to his people to join himself with them, to instruct them how to live, and this time to empower them to be obedient.

The tabernacle

The highlight of the book of Exodus (although it may not be the most interesting part to read) is the reestablishment of God's presence with his people. At last God and man can come together, although we find the book of Leviticus contains regulations that will enable sinful humanity to approach a holy God. These of course all point us to the fact that the new creation where God and man can live together in harmony is still far away, but in these regulations, we begin to understand the work of Jesus to bring us into the presence of God.

Discussion question: What was the purpose of the law in the big story of God?

4.3 – Israel – David and the kingdom

After God's covenant with Israel through Moses, we see the struggle in the wilderness for the people of Israel, the great victories with Joshua, and a long season of decline under leadership of the Judges, as Israel struggles with idolatry, disobedience to God and the strength of their enemies in the surrounding nations.

The longing for a king

So far in the story, Israel had always been led by individuals raised up by God, to call them to be faithful to God and fulfil their destiny as God's representatives. There came a time when the people of Israel wanted to be just like the nations they saw around them, and in particular, to be led by a king. The other nations around them considered their kings to be 'god-like' creatures, born above others, and destined to reign. For Israel, that is who they were already, made in the image of God, called to rule in partnership with God. Their call for a king was another step of rebellion against the plan of God for them, and a rejection of their God given role in the world.

Saul, the choice of man

Their initial choice is a man who seems god-like in their eyes, tall and muscular, a natural warrior, one that would lead them out of their struggles. God gives them over to their choice, even anointing Saul with his Spirit for a while, and yet the frailties of humanity are never far away, and lead to God's rejection of Saul as king.

David, the choice of God

It seems that God is always able to bring good from the rebellion of his people. God's choice of king is not the god-like superior, but a humble shepherd boy who at heart is a worshipper of God. Through David's life, we see the king that God had foreseen all along. A humble, servant king, who loved and served God first and honoured him in his ruling and reigning. This was a model of Adam, a ruler who served like God himself. Indeed, God promised David that one from his own family would reign forever on his throne (1Chr 17). This is why many of the prophets looked forward to the king like David, who would reign with justice and righteousness. So through David we find a promise of God's true human, Jesus. We see in David the joy and peace that comes to a people who gladly submit themselves to God's true ruler.

Solomon, the new Adam

With David's son, Solomon, everything seemed to be set for the emergence of the true Israel, led by a humble king who would put God first and lead the people to their destiny as lights to the world. Instead of relying on his own wisdom, he humbly asks God to show him right and wrong, and honours God in his rule. The visit from the Queen of Sheba underlines the hopes that seemed to be coming to pass, as the nations came to learn and see what God was like.

Same old story

Despite the promise of a new day for God's people, with a new purpose of truly displaying God to the rest of the world, we find both David and Solomon have fundamental flaws. David gives in to the temptation to 'see' and 'take' what he desired, leading to adultery, murder and family problems that would constantly hurt David. Solomon finds the lure of idolatry too strong to resist, and with that came the rebellion against God and the oppression of people. This resulted in a split kingdom and ultimately the exile and disappearance of Israel's northern tribes. The hopes of a nation, even the world, now lies in ruins.

Songs, wisdom and prophecy

In spite of their failures, both David and Solomon leave a rich treasure of songs and wisdom which have shaped generations after them. Still today, David's poetry inspires our own songs of devotion to God, Solomon's wisdom shapes the way we understand how life is best lived, and their writings have helped us recognise the one that God promised would come as the climax to the whole story of God, Jesus the true King.

Discussion question: How should we use the wisdom literature as we pastor people?

4.4 - Israel - The prophets and hope

The people God called to be a kingdom of priests have struggled to be any different from the world, living in idolatry, oppression and under a curse. It is during these times that God raises up men and women to call Israel back to their original calling.

The role of a prophet

Rather than simply telling the future (we often get this confused) the prophets God raised up were more like contract lawyers, pointing the people of Israel to the covenant that they had committed themselves to, and underlining the problems that would come if they continued in their rebellion. So Elijah warns that there will be no rain. Isaiah warns of Assyria's powerful army. Jeremiah warns of Babylon's impending attack. Each of them are just reading the law of Moses and quoting the relevant parts which God was highlighting to them as Israel carried on in idolatry and oppression of the weak among them. However, within their declarations, God weaved in his ultimate plans for the world, and in particular, the one who would come to bring his rule and his blessing to every people group.

Exile

This theme has never been far away from us in this story, and here we see the full implications. Israel is unfaithful to the covenant, and firstly Assyria, and subsequently Babylon invade and take the inhabitants away from the land that had been promised to them. Even the temple, the place of the presence of God, is destroyed. Ezekiel sees the presence of God leaving the temple, and Jeremiah sees the exile in Babylon lasting 70 years. Daniel then demonstrates how to live faithfully in exile, both in his submission to the authorities and his subversion of their values.

Restoration

Another theme alongside warnings of doom and destruction was the prophets' vision of restoration, and a time of renewal, where Israel would again take its place in the purposes of God and rule the nations. Isaiah prophesied of king Cyrus arising to rebuild Jerusalem, and after Jeremiah's 70 years, this is exactly what happens. Haggai and Zechariah join with Ezra and Nehemiah to encourage those who return from exile to rebuild the city and restore the temple. However, the restoration they all expect never materialises, and we find the end of the old testament finishes with Malachi lamenting the same old problems of idolatry and oppression.

Hope

Despite the difficulties facing Israel, there was a strand of hope that they continued to cling to. The prophet Daniel saw 4 kingdoms arising that would oppress Israel, and only during that 4th reign would God's kingdom truly come and rule. He saw that instead of 70 years of exile, there would actually be 70 x 7 years to 'atone for wickedness'.

Some 490 years later, during the reign of the 4th kingdom, an expectation is growing that God is on the move again, and that his kingdom is soon to be established. God would do what he has done before and liberate his people from their captivity, and restore them as a nation that would be a blessing to all the world.

The scene is set.

Written assignment: What were the Jews hoping for around the time of Jesus and why?

5.1 - Jesus - The coming King

God's plan to reconcile his creation back to him through his human family seems to have run aground, as Israel struggles to fulfil its calling to be a light to the world. However, as we noted at the end of the last session, expectations were rising that God was about to do something new.

There were 3 strands of expectation among the Jews of the first century:

The Messiah - one who would bring in God's kingdom and conquer all their enemies

The Servant - one who would deal finally with the sin that had caused their exile and foreign occupation

God himself - their expectation that God would return to the temple and restore their place as the chief among the nations.

Their reading of Daniel led them to believe that God was about to act to bring his kingdom to earth and overthrow all other earthly kingdoms.

The gospels are all written with this expectation in mind, each declaring in their own way that Jesus is the true fulfilment of everything that they were hoping for. Let's look at the start of each of the gospels to see how the writers declare this in their different ways.

Matthew

Genealogy - Matthew starts his proclamation with a history of Jesus' ancestry, highlighting Abraham and David as the two key figures from his family line. These are the two patriarchs who carry promises from God about their descendants, and form crucial parts in the story of Israel.



5.2 - Jesus - The reforming of Israel

Names - Matthew highlights the names of Jesus, which were important in the Jewish world. Firstly the name Jesus, highlighting his mission to rescue people from sin, which reflects both the Messiah and Servant themes. Secondly, Immanuel, from the prophetic words of Isaiah, recognising that this was indeed 'God with us'.

The nations - Matthew's first story is about the royal wise men coming from the east to recognise the birth of Israel's new king, calling to mind the promise of the Messiah being recognised as king over all the nations of the world.

Mark

Introduction - Mark wastes no time in declaring who this Jesus is, that he is the Messiah, the son of God.

The messenger - He also highlights the role that John the Baptist played in preparing the way for Jesus, drawing on passages from Isaiah and Malachi that both promise one who would come to prepare the way before God himself returned to Jerusalem.

The Father's testimony - Mark is quick to bring in the story of God's voice of affirmation over Jesus as 'My son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased', recognising the place Jesus took of the true Israel, the one who pleased God.

The gospel - Mark is keen to draw the readers' attention to the 'gospel', the 'good news' which had something of a technical usage in that day to mean 'The good news of a new king'.

Luke

Heir to David's throne - Luke records the angelic proclamation to Mary that her son would be the eternal ruler over the throne of David, and her song declares how this kingdom will raise up the poor and needy.

Angels' testimony - The angels declared to the shepherds that the 'Saviour' and 'Messiah the Lord' had been born in Bethlehem.

Today - Luke records Jesus' first sermon, as he quotes from Isaiah 61 about the year of God's great jubilee, where freedom and restoration are experienced by all, and declares that it has started from that day.

John

The Word - John's Greek readers would have understood immediately when he used the term 'The Word', the life giving energy of the universe, creator of everything, that became flesh and lived among them. God himself had come to his people.

God the son - He was demonstrating God, showing everyone what he is truly like.

Lamb of God - John makes the connection of the passover lamb with Jesus very early on, the one who would rescue the people from the power of sin.

Discussion question: What is the content of the 'good news' or 'gospel' referred to by Jesus in Mark 1:14-15?

Jesus came onto the scene in a powerful way, announcing news that God's rule had arrived, and demonstrating what it looked like, as he healed the sick, delivered the demonised and taught the people about the coming kingdom. This obviously caused lots of questions among the people; What would this kingdom be like? How should people act? Who could be part of it? The gospel writers help to answer these questions by showing us how Jesus came as a continuation and fulfilment of the story so far.

The true Israel

Jesus is seen to re-enact the story of Israel. From the moment of his baptism, where God identifies him as his son (a term only used of Israel before), he came up through the waters and was taken into the wilderness for 40 days, where he faced temptation. From the wilderness, he went up a mountain, and teaches his own version of the blessings and curses. He then chooses 12 disciples that would be his closest followers. Each of these actions are recognisable from the story of Israel. Jesus was embodying Israel. He succeeded where Israel failed. He was faithful to the covenant where Israel had been disobedient.

Jesus shocks the people by whom he calls to be part of this new Israel, choosing the outcasts, the known sinners, the uneducated and the political fringe while rejecting the religious authorities.

The true temple

The gospel writer, John, in particular, focuses on Jesus as the place where heaven and earth came together, the true temple. The Word became flesh and 'tabernacled' among us (Jn1:14). He was the way, the truth, the life. No one came to the Father except through him (Jn14:6). What the temple had done for years, now Jesus was doing. He even pronounced forgiveness of sins, which was only possible through the temple sacrificial system. When Jesus declared in a loud voice 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink' (Jn 7:37) he was referring to the picture of the temple in Ezekiel 47 that had living water flowing from it.

The true Sabbath

So many of Jesus' healings and deliverances were done on the Sabbath, provoking such anger among the religious authorities. Yet for those with eyes to see, he was declaring something profound. The Sabbath had come in a person. All that the Sabbath was intended to speak of, rest from hard labour (Sabbath day), freedom for slaves (Sabbath year), cancellation of all debts and a restoration of lost land (Year of Jubilee) pointed to the work of Jesus. 'If anyone is weary', said Jesus, 'let him come to me, and I will give him rest'. The Sabbath was the signpost to the work of Jesus all along.

5.3 - Jesus - Teachings and warnings

The true law

Many Christians are confused by the law, and in particular when they hear Jesus say that not one word of the law would disappear until 'everything is accomplished' (Matt 5:18). Whole Christian sects have been established with the emphasis on keeping the law as summarised by the 10 commandments because of these verses. Jesus' warning that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees 'you will certainly not enter the kingdom of Heaven' have caused many of these Christians to be even more stringent than the Pharisees on matters of the law, effectively returning to Judaism. This should cause us to step back and ask what Jesus really meant in this passage.

'Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them.' (Matt 5:17). This is the crucial verse. Let's first take the Prophets, as this helps us to appreciate Jesus' meaning. The old testament scriptures are full of the Prophets' words which have their fulfilment in Jesus. Most of these prophecies can only be interpreted correctly once we have seen the fulfilment in the life of Jesus. Before then, we would have been wondering what exactly the words meant, or even if the words were truly prophetic. It is only when we see it fulfilled in Jesus that we really appreciate what these words meant.

Now let's take the subject of the Law. The same approach will help us. The Law gives various moral and cultural commands, but it is only when we see them in Jesus do we really understand what they meant. This is why Jesus is able to redefine their understanding of the Law. 'You have heard it said but I tell you'. Jesus reshapes our understanding of the Law around himself. He embodied what it truly meant. That is why Jesus himself could summarise the Law so easily as 'to love God and to love others'. This was his highest ethic, which governed everything he taught his followers, and everything he did. Jesus was the true Law. His call was not to discard the law, but to see what it was pointing towards, and to live it out fully, through love, generosity, prayer and service.

Amazingly, the impact of Jesus' life was conflict. Some loved what he said and did, and embraced his teaching. Others found him threatening to their long held beliefs and positions of power.

Discussion question: Why did Jesus stir up so much hatred from the religious rulers?

This is a vital moment in the history of Israel, a turning point. All the promises that they had lived with for so long were coming to their fulfilment. Something was happening in their generation that would redefine the people that God had chosen to bring his blessing to the world, and yet the people, and in particular, the authorities, were refusing to accept Jesus or his message.

Jesus taught them in parables

Often we imagine that Jesus was using parables or stories that would illustrate the point that he was teaching, or help the crowds to remember his words. The truth is the exact opposite. His disciples asked him once why he spoke in parables, to which he quoted Isaiah's commission, 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding' (Matt 13:14). Jesus' teaching was explosive and revolutionary. He could easily stir up trouble wherever he went, speaking as he did about a new kingdom and a new king coming to his people. He used parables to disguise what he was saying so that in his public teaching, only those who had an ear to hear could really understand him, or else he would have been arrested much sooner.

This is one of the keys to understanding Jesus' teaching; it was primarily meant for the people he spoke to, in their context. Once you have understood what it meant to them, you can start to imagine the application for your own life or for those you are teaching.

Let's take the famous story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 for example. Most of us have been inspired by the father's amazing welcome for his rebellious younger son. Some have pondered the older brother's role in the story. What we may miss is the immediate context that Jesus was addressing. He has drawn a large crowd (Lk 14:25), and has been challenging them first with the cost of following him (Lk 14:26-33), but also with the danger of ignoring or rejecting him (Lk 14:24-25). With a mixture of 'sinners' listening intently, and Pharisees criticising him, he tells them three stories about something that was lost being found again, to the owner's delight. No doubt this is aimed at those who were lost in Israel, who had wandered away or rejected the Father's plan for them as a nation. Jesus is clear that their owner is seeking to find them, at great personal cost. His final story contains a twist, where the older son, who had stayed with the father is angry about the return of his younger brother and refuses to join the party. This is a direct challenge to the Pharisees who hated the inclusion of the 'sinners' that Jesus was gathering. They are also 'lost' and on the outside of the party, but the father was inviting them to join in. Jesus leaves the story hanging without a conclusion. Once we have understood the immediate context of the story, we are able to see what Jesus is teaching and why. Now we can start to explore what this means for us and the people that God is now drawing together, and the dangers of looking down on others.



Jesus warned the Israelites

Now that we've understood the importance of looking at the immediate context, we can consider some of Jesus' warnings to the Jews. These are passages such as Matt 24, Mk 13 and Lk 21. These passages often have titles such as 'Signs of the end of the age', which automatically make us think Jesus is talking about the end of the world. However, let's look again at the immediate context.

Read Mark 13

- 1) What is the question that Jesus is answering? (See v.4)
- 2) What 'end' is he referring to in v.7?
- 3) What time frame does Jesus give for these things he is describing? (See v.30)
- 4) Where is Jesus quoting from in v.24-25? What is the context there?
- 5) Where is Jesus quoting from in v.26? What is the context there?
- 6) What do you think that Jesus is talking about?

Discussion question: What does it mean that Jesus will baptise people with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt 3:11)?

5.4 - Jesus - The crucifixion

So this is the moment that Jesus has had in mind all along. It's the fulfilment of the story that he's been re-enacting. His role as Servant, Messiah and God all come together in this one act of surrender. Although the Jews had expected all of these, they never dreamt that they would come in the same person.

The Servant

Isaiah saw Israel as the servant of God, bringing his light to the nations. However, he seems to ultimately see this servant as one person, one that suffered unjustly, and took on himself the wrong doing of the world. Like on the day of atonement, the goat would take away the sin, carrying it away from the people, so the servant would take away the sin, the suffering, the sickness and the grief of the people. Even with all the years of suffering, Israel had not been able to take away the sin. They needed a servant who would take it away on their behalf. Isaiah prophesied that ultimately the servant would see the result of his suffering and be satisfied. The end of sin, shame, sickness, grief and suffering.

The Messiah

Jesus chose the Passover to speak of what his death would mean. The salvation he was bringing would mean a great deliverance for his people, as he took on and defeated the greatest tyrants that were holding the world captive. 'Now the prince of this world will be driven out' (Jn 12:31). He clearly identified himself with the lamb, whose blood was shed so that the judgement due to the world in rebellion would

pass over those who placed their trust in him. He redefined the centuries old traditions around the passover meal, instead placing his body and blood as central to it. His followers would use this meal to remind each other of the way Jesus had destroyed the power of sin, death and the devil, and of the new covenant that God had made with his people to forgive their sin and to write his laws on their hearts (Jer 31:32-34).

The coronation

Jesus saw this moment as his exaltation. 'The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified' (Jn 12:23). 'But I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself' (Jn 12:32). The word Jesus used for 'lifted up' is the term often used of royal enthronement. This is how Jesus viewed his crucifixion, the process through which he would actually be given the name above every name. The gospel writers make much of this. They give a large proportion of their attention to the build up and the crucifixion itself. They outline the way the Roman world made a parody of Jesus as king, dressing him in purple, being led through the streets in triumph. The irony is not lost on them, as they see what no earthly ruler of the time saw, that this was indeed Jesus' coronation to glory. Jesus himself knew it, he submitted himself to it, even though the manner of the death was humanly speaking terrifying. This was Jesus coming to rule. This was Jesus demonstrating what his rule looked like. Jesus even called his followers to do likewise, and take up their crosses, following his example, and therefore to reign in a similar way.

The years to come in the life of the church saw great suffering and loss, but alongside that, great courage, great character and great advance of God's kingdom as the disciples emulated Jesus, laying down their lives, understanding the paradox that through their suffering, wonderful glory was achieved.

Assignment: Why did Jesus have to die?

6.1 - New Creation - The resurrection of Jesus

We finally come to our last chapter. The expectations around a Jewish Messiah have all had a surprising fulfilment in Jesus. Another expectation among the Jews was that at the end of time, God would act to put the world to right. At this moment, all the righteous would rise from the dead, and God would bring about a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth.

Jesus' resurrection

Jesus himself had been clear about what was going to happen. The scriptures were full of shadows of suffering and exaltation. The disciples themselves would have expected a general resurrection at the final judgement. However, to their amazement, Jesus was

raised to life in the middle of history. New creation had started right in the midst of the old.

The resurrection body

We are privileged to have a glimpse of what the new creation will look like as we consider the body of the resurrected Jesus. Here we see a glimpse of the end of the story. The physical and the spiritual realms at last are fully joined together. There is no doubt that Jesus body was physical. His disciples held him, they ate with him, they saw the scars from his crucifixion. However, he was also spiritual. He seemed to appear and disappear at will, visiting his disciples in a locked room, disappearing while in full view of some other disciples. Sometimes he seemed to hide himself so as not to be recognised, and then allow others to see who he was. In the body of Jesus, we see a foretaste of what our bodies will be like (1Jn 3:2), and in fact what the whole of creation will be (Rom 8:21). We do not have a future in some disembodied state, but in a physical body, in a physical world. Our bodies will resemble those we have now. We will be recognisable, we may well even carry some of the scars from the life that we lived. However, those scars will be transformed, and will ultimately be glorious, and another reason for praise. In fact, everything will be transformed. Every part that has been ruined through sin and rebellion will have been set right, redeemed, and transformed into its original purpose.

Jesus' ascension

Luke records that after his final words to his disciples, a cloud came and hid him from their view. This, it seems, was the moment of Daniel 7, where the son of man was taken on the clouds to approach the throne of the ancient of days. It is this moment that Jesus finally takes his rule alongside the throne of God the Father, with all nations giving him their worship and allegiance.

Now and not yet

This is an important concept to understand in the new testament, which tries to make sense of the fact that Jesus had been exalted to the highest place in the universe, and given ultimate rule, and yet, at that moment there was just a handful of Jews who truly believed this and acted as though a new king had been installed. For everyone else on planet earth, the world carried on as though nothing had happened. Paul goes some way to explaining this in 1Cor 15:25 'For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet'. The truth is that Jesus really does reign now, even though many people and powers do not acknowledge or submit to his rule. However, even in the midst of rebellion against him, he is still able to 'make all things work together for the good of those who love him' (Rom 8:28). His rule is always increasing, as more and more people gladly submit to him. We as his people have the privilege of praying and acting to bring an increase to his rule throughout the earth, until he finally returns and transforms everything, and 'everything sad will become untrue' (JRR Tolkien).

Discussion question: In what way does the resurrection and ascension of Jesus fulfil the biblical story?

6.2 - New Creation - The sending of the Spirit

Israel failed in their calling to be God's representatives because they were part of the problem as much as they were part of the solution. They had the law, the covenant, the temple, the prophets, but even with all their zeal, there was something missing in order for them to truly bring God's blessing to the world.

Jesus' crucifixion meant that wickedness was finally atoned for, exile was over, and sin, death and the devil were no longer in charge.

Jesus' resurrection was vindication from God that all he said was true, that he had truly triumphed over death, and that new creation had started.

Jesus' ascension meant that he had taken up his reign. His first act is to send his Holy Spirit to his followers. This study looks at why this is such an important moment in the story.

The blessing of Abraham

Remember God's rescue plan, that he announced to Abraham, when he promised that through him, every nation on earth would be blessed. Paul announces to the Galatian church, that was being led to abandon the gospel in favour of following the Mosaic law again, that this promise was fulfilled by the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is a powerful statement. 'He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.' (Gal 3:14).

The fruitful vineyard

The Spirit is the key to everything in fulfilling God's purposes. The whole story shows that even the best of mankind cannot fulfil what God had destined them for. Israel was a vineyard that only produced bad fruit (Isa 5), Jesus looked for fruit but found nothing (Matt 21:43). The law was not the answer - 'The law was powerless in that it was weakened by the flesh' (Rom 8:3). The flesh was always too powerful for us, however hard we try, however good our intentions are (Rom 7:18-19). However, the Spirit brings us new power, so that we can live differently and produce the fruit that God is looking for (Gal 5:22-23).

God's return to the temple

We have seen that there was an expectation of God's return to the temple that he left just before the Babylonian exile. The gospel writers show that Jesus himself is that new temple, and this is how God was returning. Furthermore, the apostles came to realise that the temple was now made up of followers of Jesus, those who had been filled with the Holy Spirit, and that as a community, God's presence could be experienced on earth (Eph 2:21-22).

The mandate to rule over creation

Adam and Eve had been given the role of looking after the creation and bearing witness to it of what God was like. In their rebellion, they had lost something of that role, and only in Jesus was that rule restored. Jesus' teaching of his disciples after his resurrection had led them to ask if the final restoration of that rule would happen immediately (Acts 1:6), to which Jesus replies that the timings were not for them to know, but that soon the Spirit would fill them with power, and they would again be his witnesses, demonstrating to the world what God was like (Acts 1:8).

The kingdom of God

Acts 2:42-47 gives a picture of what the church community in Jerusalem was like. Here we see so much of what the law and the prophets had pointed to, what they saw in a fulfilled Israel, but never experienced. This is the community of God's people, living with the power of the Holy Spirit. What had been impossible before was now possible. The rule of God was seen, as generosity overflowed to the needy, true community was experienced, miracles were taking place and more and more people were being 'rescued'.

The mission of Jesus is extended

It is clear from the book of Acts that the works Jesus began to do (Acts 1:1) were now being done through his followers. Jesus had told them 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you' (Jn 20:21), as he breathed on them, signifying the power of the Spirit who was to come. So we see the good news in its fulfilment. What God had promised to Abraham, which he had demonstrated through Jesus, he was now sending out to fill the earth through Jesus' followers, filled with the Holy Spirit, bringing his love, his message of reconciliation and his power to set people free from their captivity.

Discussion question: Read Acts 19 - Why was Paul so keen to find out about their experience of the Holy Spirit?

6.3 - New Creation - The message of good news

Jesus gave his disciples a mandate which again reflects the mandate given to Adam and Eve, to Noah, to Abraham, to David and numerous prophets. He told them to go into all the world, to make disciples from every people group, baptising and teaching them to obey everything that they had been taught by him. The message of new creation was to fill the earth.

The good news in action

The book of Acts shows us what this looked like to the early apostles as they went round the known world, preaching the message they had been given, and establishing

communities that were centred on Jesus, and filled with the Holy Spirit. These communities developed practices around Jesus' teachings. Acts 2:42 tells us they were devoted to:

- **The apostles' teaching** - this no doubt was based in the Jewish scriptures, but found fresh understanding and relevance from the fulfilment that they saw in Jesus.
- **Fellowship** - never before had communities sprung up which so obviously loved and cared for each other, and yet came from such diverse backgrounds, both culturally and socially.
- **Breaking bread** - they often ate together and celebrated the victory of Jesus, reminding each other of how this impacted every area of their lives.
- **Prayer** - they would sing and pray through the Psalms, but now with a new sense of wonder at the God that they were worshipping.

The good news proclaimed

It is in this context that the apostles took responsibility for spreading the 'euangelion', the good news. This is the word that the Romans used at the time to proclaim the enthronement of Augustus as Caesar and ruler of the empire. They sent out their heralds to proclaim the good news that Augustus, 'the son of god' had become 'the king of the world'. It's no wonder that the message of the apostles caused such a stir. A brief overview of the preaches recorded in the book of Acts show similar threads to their speeches, despite the different audiences and contexts.

- Jesus is the fulfilment of promises made in the scriptures
- Jesus' life was full of good works and healings
- Jesus was crucified according to God's purposes
- Jesus was raised to life and exalted as the true king
- Jesus sent his Holy Spirit
- Jesus will return as judge to bring restoration to the world
- Therefore repent, believe and be baptised, align yourself with the true king
- Receive forgiveness and the promise of the Spirit

Suffering and ruling

Along with the call to proclaim a new and true king, of living in a different kingdom now, in the midst of the old kingdom of man, there was a realisation of the reality of opposition and suffering. Jesus had prepared them, teaching them about what would happen to them, and what their response should be. They were to love their enemies, forgive those who sin against them, do good to everyone. The apostles understood that part of their call was to suffer rejection, hardships and persecution. To them this was sharing in the suffering of Jesus. Indeed, this was all part of the coming to rule which Jesus had promised them. John puts it well in his introduction to Revelation. 'I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus' (Rev 1:9). Coming into ruling and reigning would mean taking the wickedness of the world in the same way that Jesus had done, of suffering and refusing to retaliate.



This is what we see in the apostle Paul in the book of Acts, as he proclaims the new king throughout the Roman empire until he testifies right in the heart of the empire, in Rome itself.

The letters written by the apostles to the various churches contain many further encouragements to recognise what God has done in joining them together from such different backgrounds, and to live out the calling they have received in a worthy manner.

Ultimately we find the book of Revelation the numerous struggles that the church has to go through in its conflict with spiritual and earthly powers, but also the certain hope that God will bring us all through to experience the joyful reunion of heaven and earth.

Discussion question: How does the modern 'gospel' message compare with the proclamation of the early apostles?

6.4 - New Creation - The restoration of everything

We are living in so much of the fulfilment of the story. God's promised blessing to the world, announced through Abraham, has finally come. The true king of God's everlasting kingdom has been revealed. We can belong to this new creation simply through believing in the true king, Jesus, that God has raised him from death, and given him the name above every name. We can receive his Spirit, as the initial payment and guarantee of all God will do in creation. He has now called us together, as communities filled with the Spirit, to demonstrate the rule of God to the whole of creation, and to take the message of his rule to every people group on earth. So how does the story finish?

Here is where we get so many different storylines. The rapture, the millennium, the great tribulation, Daniel's final week, Armageddon. It's impossible to comment on all the different ideas that make up various 'end times' theology, but there are some important principles to bear in mind when deciding what the bible has to say about the end of the story.

1) Keep in mind the big story

We have spent a number of weeks now seeing how the storyline fits together and is reinforced by each part. When something comes as a major change in the story, that doesn't fully fit with the rest of the story, be careful! Especially if it only comes from one source. The doctrine of the rapture would be one such example. This is the teaching that on Jesus' return, he will come and take all the believers away from the world to live with him forever in heaven. Somehow this doctrine has missed the bigger storyline that God will redeem his good creation, not abandon it, and that he is using his people for this role, not removing them.

Similarly, if some end time doctrine seems to take us 'backwards' in the story, it again should be viewed with suspicion. An example of this is the understanding that the Jewish temple will once again be established in the end times according to Eze 40-48. However, if that is still to come, what is the use of a physical temple? What are the sacrifices for? Surely this doesn't advance the story but takes us back to a previous part of the story, and so we should seek a different interpretation for Ezekiel's vision.

2) Keep in mind the resurrection of Jesus

The most clear understanding of the ultimate reality of new creation is found in the resurrected body of Jesus. This is the kind of body we will have, and the kind of world we will live in. Even our works will somehow be evident in our resurrected state.

3) Keep in mind that not everything is literal

We have to bear in mind that prophetic books such as Daniel, Zechariah and Revelation (the 3 books most commonly used in predicting end time events) are all 'apocalyptic' literature. 'Apocalyptic' literally means 'to uncover', and is used to give a 'heavenly' perspective on earthly events, rather than to be taken literally. A good example of this is Isaiah's pronouncement of judgement over Babylon (Isa 13) in which he talks about the sun, moon and stars being darkened. The heavens would tremble and the earth shake from its place. The overthrow of the Babylonian empire by the Persian empire occurred in 539BC. This was indeed a massive and terrifying event for all the nations, a change of power base and all the resulting tumult. However, none of these signs foretold by Isaiah happened literally, and therefore we have to be wise when apocalyptic language is used.

4) Keep in mind that 'all scripture is ... useful'

If we have a view that the book of Revelation is a prophecy full of predictions about the end of the world, what we are saying is that it will really only be useful for one generation who experience all these things. For the rest of history, the book has pretty much been useless. Unfortunately that is how the book is treated today by most Christians. They think 'if we are in the final generation then it will become obvious, otherwise I'll just ignore it because it's too confusing or scary'. Surely God intended more for the book than just to help one generation? Revelation can be read as a letter revealing how the early Christians should handle the persecution at the hands of the Roman and Jewish authorities, and how each generation of believers can stay faithful to Jesus in the midst of a world that has refused to acknowledge the rule of Jesus, and how the believers will ultimately overcome. Once you recognise how these scripture work, you will find much more meaning and encouragement, and avoid the problems of trying to squeeze world events into these apocalyptic pictures.

The end of the story

Although much misunderstood, the book of Revelation does give us a glimpse of where the new creation is headed. As would be expected, we see echoes of the original creation, but now brought to fulfilment (Rev 21-22).

- There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain (Rev 21:4) The old order of death has now been totally transformed, and everything that belonged to that order has been destroyed.

- There will be no temple, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Rev 21:22). Heaven and earth have finally been joined together.
- There will be no sun or moon for the glory of God gives it light and the lamb is its lamp (Rev 21:23). The sun and moon were given rule over the heavens, to govern the day and the night. They were symbols of the true king of the heavens and so now they are not needed, as God himself is fully revealed. There will be no night, and no interruption of God's presence.
- They will reign for ever and ever (Rev 22:5) - at last the mandate given to Adam and Eve is finally fulfilled in humanity as they reign over the world in true partnership with God.

Assignment: How would you tell the big story of the bible?

7.1 - Retelling the story

We have now been through the biblical story in some detail. This is the story that we need to learn well, and which will eventually start to shape our lives and our studies. Of course, it's possible to tell the same story in many different ways, emphasising different parts, particularly for various audiences. This week we will look at the whole story in three different ways. Of course there are many ways to recite the biblical story, but these three ways seem to be foremost in the minds of the apostles as they write the new testament.

The story of the Kingdom

Chapter 1 - The garden kingdom

The creation story presents us with God as ruler over all his creation. There is no doubt as he brings order to the chaos, and breaths life into dust, that he really is in charge. It's an amazing moment when he puts his image upon mankind and gives them his authority to govern his creation, and fill the earth with his rule. Mankind becomes God's representatives on earth, working in partnership with God. This partnership was based on intimacy and trusting obedience with the creator, in essence, what the bible calls worship. The garden kingdom was destined to grow until the whole world was brought under the rule of God.

Chapter 2 - The co-rulers rebel

Instead of working alongside God in humble partnership, mankind chooses to listen to other voices, to worship things other than God, and are drawn into choosing right and wrong for themselves, and living independently from God. The consequences to their lives and to the creation that they are caring for are disastrous, as jealousy, hatred, violence and oppression come to characterise the world.

Chapter 3 - God's rescue plan is launched

God intervenes in Abraham's life, promising to bring his blessing to the whole world through Abraham and his offspring. Abraham's response is to believe God's promise, and demonstrate the same trusting obedience that is necessary to live in partnership with God. Wherever this same trusting obedience is seen in Abraham's descendants, the beauty and benefits of God's rule are shown. Joseph lived this way and rescued whole nations from starvation. Moses lived this way, and led Israel out from their slavery. Joshua lived this way and brought the people of Israel into the land promised them by God.

The climax of Israel's story comes with King David, the unlikely shepherd boy-poet, who stood as a model of a humble ruler, in partnership with God, living in daily trusting obedience. God spoke at this time of an heir to David who would reign forever, bringing the benefits of God's rule of justice and peace not just to Israel, but to the whole world.

However, Israel is most often found to follow the rebellion of their forefathers, listening to other voices, worshipping other gods and choosing their own way rather than God's. This leads to the wilderness experience, to violence and oppression of the weak, and ultimately to exile. This is where God removed their rule completely and they lived in foreign lands. Even on return to their home land, they were constantly under oppression from other rulers, and never able to express the beauty and benefits of living in partnership with God and bringing his rule.

Chapter 4 - The King has come

For many years, even throughout their exile and oppression, the prophets saw a day coming when the true King of the kingdom would arrive, and bring with him all the beauty and benefits of the rule of God. The people of Israel were filled with an expectation of the imminent arrival of this King. However, when Jesus arrived, it was as a very different king to what they all expected. His birth was shared with the animals, forced to flee as a refugee, and brought up in the worst neighbourhood. His message challenged the rich and powerful, but welcomed in the poor and the outcast. He refused to be a king as they expected, but constantly proclaimed a new kingdom where the least were considered great, where love and forgiveness triumphed over might, and where the treasures of living in partnership with God made other valuables to be hollow and worthless.

His true triumph came at the point of his crucifixion, as he took on himself the full consequences of the world's rebellion, entering into death itself and overcoming the great oppressor of humanity, the devil. His resurrection was a vindication of his place as the true King and Lord of all.

Chapter 5 - The people of the kingdom

Those who have aligned themselves with Jesus, the true King, have entered into his kingdom, and are living under his rule. In partnership with him, in trusting obedience, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they are bringing the rule of God throughout the



world. Jesus has sent out his followers to every place on earth to proclaim the message that Jesus is the true king, and to show the rest of creation all the beauty and benefits that come with his kingdom.

We know that Jesus will return one day and restore the universe fully under his rule, destroying evil and transforming every part to be totally whole and aligned to his purposes.

Discussion question: How are the New Testament letters shaped by this view of the kingdom of God?

7.2 - Retelling the story- The story of the temple

Chapter 1 - The first temple

The creation story comes to its completion with a garden where man and God live together in perfect harmony. Heaven and earth are joined together with no separation. This is the first temple, and Adam and Eve are the first priests, looking after the temple and representing God to the world. Mankind's mandate is to bring this same sense of order to the whole world, so that life will flourish and God's presence will be known everywhere.

Chapter 2 - The banishment

When those in partnership with God decide to live independently from God, the whole order of creation is shaken. Adam and Eve are banished from the garden and there is no longer any access. Heaven and earth are now separate, and there seems no way that mankind can find to reach God. In the absence of God's presence, mankind begins to resemble the beasts in the way they treat each other, with oppression and violence characterising their behaviour.

Chapter 3 - Reconnections

God's promise to Abraham is that through him, God will bring his blessing to all the nations of the world. We realise later on that this blessing is in the form of the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God. Abraham's descendant Jacob had an encounter with God that makes him wonder if he has stumbled upon the entrance to Eden (Gen 28:17), 'the gate of heaven'.

Moses meets God in a burning bush, and later on a burning mountain, where he pleads with God not to leave the people, to which God promises that his presence would go with them (Ex 33:14). Indeed, the people of Israel were called a kingdom of priests, a whole nation that could be God's representatives to the world.

However, God's presence was limited to the 'ark of the covenant' that was kept in the tabernacle that the Israelites carried around in the desert with them. Very few people

were ever allowed inside the Holy of Holies, where the ark was kept, and so God's presence could not be experienced by the vast majority of the people.

David later on gave instructions to build the Jewish temple, which Solomon his son completed. However, even Solomon recognised at the time that a mere building, however grand, would never be able to contain the almighty God (2Chron 6:18). The temple became a symbol of God's promise to the Israelites that they were his people and he would live with them. This was what made them unique among all the kingdoms of the world.

However, the prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of the glory of God leaving the temple, and soon after, the Babylonians destroyed the temple and took the Israelites out of their land. It seemed to the Israelites that God's presence had gone from the world. Even after rebuilding the temple, the Holy of Holies remained empty, and they waited for God's presence to return and live among his people as he had done previously.

The prophets saw and proclaimed that God indeed would return to his temple and restore the nation to their former glory. Haggai said that the later temple would be more glorious than the former (Hag 2:9). Ezekiel saw a huge temple, and a river flowing from it that was bringing life to all the nations of the world. Habakkuk saw the whole earth would be filled with the glory of the Lord. The promise was that one day heaven and all of earth would be reunited.

Chapter 4 - The true temple

Jesus was announced by John as the word become flesh and living (tabernacling) among us. Jesus was indeed the true temple that everything had been pointing to. Here man and God were truly joined. Here people could meet with God, receive from God, find forgiveness, deliverance and restoration. At the moment of his death, the curtain that separated the Holy of holies was torn from top to bottom, and what was kept hidden away could no longer be contained.

Chapter 5 - The living temple

The new creation first announced in Jesus began to burst out everywhere. First those who had been with Jesus gathered together and 120 of them received the presence of God in a new way as they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Heaven was invading earth. The temple was expanding. Before long thousands of others in Jerusalem were also experiencing the presence of God in their lives through the Holy Spirit. The apostles then took the message beyond the borders of Israel, to their Gentile neighbours and were amazed to find God's presence filling them too. Jesus' call to go and make disciples of all nations means that God's temple will be ever expanding, until the day that Jesus returns and transforms everything so that heaven and earth are fully joined together once more, this time forever.

Discussion question: How are the new testament letters shaped by the story of the temple?

7.3 - Retelling the story- The story of covenant

Chapter 1 - The first partnership

When God created his perfect world, he put mankind in charge over everything. This was clearly based on a partnership agreement that God had made with Adam and Eve, showing them how they should care for the creation, and giving them clear instructions for what they could and couldn't do. With this partnership, the garden flourished, and mankind were given instructions to go and fill the whole earth.

Chapter 2 - The partnership broken

When they ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they declared independence from God, and broke the partnership that God had made with them. With mankind living independently from God, choosing to define good and evil themselves, the world that they were given to look after was also corrupted, and became characterised by violence, fear and oppression.

Chapter 3 - God's promise to heal the world

God way of healing the world is to make a covenant, firstly with Abraham and then to his descendants. A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties that cannot be broken. God's side of the agreement was to bless Abraham, to give him descendants, a land and to bless the whole world through him. Abraham's side of the agreement was simply to believe God. All that Abraham did to please God subsequently came from this faith.

When Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, they met with God at Mount Horeb, and God again made a covenant, this time with a whole nation. This is seen as a wedding, with both parties promising to be faithful to each other. For the Israelites, this would mean following a large number of laws given to set them apart as a nation. However, Jesus later summarises them to simply be 'Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself'. Israel was called to be the light to the nations, showing the world how to live in partnership with God.

However, they continually broke the covenant that God made with them, prompting the prophets to use words such as prostitute, adulteress and divorce. This concluded with the exile to Babylon, a physical sign that the covenant they had made with God had been broken.

Still the prophets saw that a new agreement was coming. In the midst of exile, Jeremiah speaks of God making a new covenant with his people in which the law would be written on people's hearts. Ezekiel speaks of a time when God would remove the hearts of stone and give hearts of flesh, moved to obey God with a new Spirit.

Chapter 4 - The covenant revealed

As Jesus sat to eat the passover meal with his disciples on the night before he died, he declared to them a new covenant that God was making. They were no longer to celebrate what God had done in releasing Israel from slavery to the Egyptians, but they were to remember his death, and their deliverance from the evil one that had ruled over them.

Chapter 5 - The new covenant is the same covenant

The apostles, led by the Spirit, began to understand that, because it is impossible for God to make a promise and then lie, that all the covenants that God has made are really one and the same. Or to be more precise, the new covenant in Jesus is the fulfilment of all the other covenants that God has made.

His people have been filled with the Holy Spirit, and so are in perfect partnership with God as they live out their call to bring his rule to all creation.

His promise to Abraham of many descendants, a land and blessing to every nation has been fulfilled as many millions of followers of Jesus are sent out into the world, bringing the blessing of God's Spirit to every nation.

His agreement with Moses and the people of Israel are 'shadows' and signposts, revealing more of the character of God and his ways, ultimately seen in Jesus. Each follower of Jesus has a lifelong, unshakeable and binding contract made with God. His part of the contract is that he will be our God and will never leave us. We will be with him through this life, through death and on into the resurrection and new heavens and earth. Our part of the contract is simply that we believe.

Discussion question: How are the new testament letters shaped by the story of covenant?

7.4 - Retelling the story - Ephesians through the biblical story

Over the past 3 sessions, we have explored 3 ways of retelling the biblical story. There are other emphases that we could have used, but we have considered the most common ones. Today we consider the importance of keeping the biblical story in mind as we study passages in the bible, and in particular in the new testament.

The term exegesis is used by preachers and theologians. It simply asks the question What meaning did the original writer intend for this passage?

Answering this question will help us to then understand how we should apply the passage to ourselves and those we are teaching.

To answer this question we need to understand the following;

- **Context** - What are the cultures of the time and the particular situation of the people being addressed?
- **Occasion** - What has prompted the writer to send his letter?
- **Story** - What biblical stories is the writer aware of when he uses various words and phrases?

The answers to the first two questions are often available in a good study bible which includes introduction pages to each of the books. You can also find information like this readily available online. However, the third question, regarding story is the one that we have spent many weeks now attempting to understand.

Let's look at Ephesians ch1 to see how Paul uses phrases which shows that each of the storylines that we have discussed are also in his mind. This will give us extra keys to really understanding everything that he intended when he wrote the letter.

Eph1:3

Blessing (Story of the covenant) - We understand that Paul sees the fulfilment of God's covenant with Abraham to be at work in the lives of the Ephesian believers. This blessing is therefore not just for themselves, but so that they will bring his blessing to the world.

Heavenly realms (Story of the temple) - Heaven is accessible now to those in Christ.

Eph1:4

Chosen / pre-destined (Story of the covenant) - God has chosen a people through whom he will bring his blessing to the whole world. The story of election is more to do with being given a job to do than with being in or out of God's favour.

Holy and blameless (Story of the temple) - Heaven and earth can only meet together where earth has been made holy, like heaven. We therefore have the purification system in mind which has been done for us in Jesus.

Eph 1:5

Adopted (Story of the covenant) - God has made a binding promise to bring individuals into his family.

Eph 1:7

Redemption (Story of the kingdom) - People were slaves in the kingdom of darkness, but have been redeemed, that is rescued and set free.

Eph 1:9

Mystery of his will (Story of the temple) - God's will has been revealed in which he will bring everything in heaven and earth together under the headship of Jesus.

Eph 1:13

Holy Spirit (Story of the temple) - Heaven has joined earth with the giving of the Holy Spirit, who is a deposit, guaranteeing the believer of the fullness of our inheritance.

Eph 1:17-18

Eyes of your heart enlightened (Story of covenant) - The fulfilment of God's promise to give people a heart of flesh and that all his people would know him.

Eph 1:19

Incomparably great power (Story of the kingdom) - Jesus has been exalted over every other power, and we have been given a place of rule alongside him, filling the earth as his body.

Eph 1 Summary - We see the theme of the temple dominating Paul's thinking, as he sets out the big picture that God is joining heaven and earth together under the rule of Christ (Ch1:10). This is experienced now by the church, through the power of the Spirit in us (Ch1:14), as we rule alongside him (Ch1:23). He will go on to recognise how God is building his church into a temple, where God is living by his Spirit (Ch2:21-22), and how this unity of heaven and earth is already demonstrated in us by the joining of different cultural groups (Ch3:6), which we need to protect (Ch4:3). Our goal is to grow up and fully display Christ (Ch4:15-16), being filled with the Spirit rather than living as the rest of the world does (Ch5:18).

Assignment: Take another passage in an epistle and do a similar study.

8.1 - Developing your theology

Introduction

Sometimes people will ask you 'What does the bible say about', or you want to teach on a certain subject. Rather than just taking a verse here or there, we find it best to see how a theme develops with the story of the bible.

General principles

Creation principle - What do you see in creation regarding your theme? What does that tell you about the heart of God?

Fall principle - What impact does the fall have on your theme?

Israel principle - How does the theme develop in the story of Israel? What does this tell you about God's heart or the nature of the fall?

Jesus principle - How does Jesus provide the fulfilment of the story? What does he teach regarding this subject?

New creation - How does the new testament church handle this subject? What does the theme look like at the fulfilment of new creation?



Let's use these principles to work through 'what does the bible say about Sabbath?'

Creation: In the creation story, we see that God rested on the 7th day (or Saturday in our modern understanding). God stopped to enjoy what he had made. We see that Sabbath was beneficial for the whole creation. We notice that all the other days were referred to with 'evening' and 'morning', but the Sabbath isn't given an end, as if it is showing that the 7th day was an ideal, one day to be realised.

Fall: Man's quest for independence from God brings death into the world, and humanity is banished from God's presence. The ground is cursed, and so the rest that Adam and Eve had known in Eden is lost.

Israel: The Sabbath is installed as part of the covenant made with Moses and Israel, both as a way of being like God, and also to celebrate the freedom that they had been given by being released from their captivity in Egypt. This regular practice was a reminder of all that God had done for them, and a weekly declaration that their ultimate trust was in God as their provider.

The Mosaic law also contained instruction for a Sabbath for the land every 7 years, signifying the need for all of creation to know the rest that God provides, and again reminding the Israelites that God himself was their provider. In connection to the weekly Sabbath and the Sabbath year was the year of Jubilee, the Sabbath of Sabbaths. During this ultimate Sabbath year, slaves would be released, debts cancelled and all land returned to the original owners.

Jesus: Jesus' attitude to the Sabbath was quite confusing to the religious rulers. He seemed to undermine the common understanding of Sabbath, defending his disciples when they ate grain from the fields, even making a point of healing and delivering people on the Sabbath, and using these power encounters to teach the Pharisees that the real heart of the Sabbath was more than what you weren't allowed to do. His emphasis seems to reflect the Jubilee theme of freedom, both in terms of bodies being healed, and people being truly restored to God. He saw himself as the ultimate Sabbath, offering rest to the weary and restoration to those who knew they needed it.

New Creation: As far as the new testament church was concerned, the Sabbath that they had practised for so long had now come in the person of Jesus. They had found rest with God, and true freedom. As believers, they would meet together on 'the Lord's day' (the Sunday), to break bread together, remembering Jesus' death and resurrection. Some still practised the Sabbath as before, but others saw every day as special. The church communities based themselves on the Sabbath principles of justice, freedom, forgiveness, generosity, and receiving the favour of God. Their hopes were in the coming of Jesus to restore the world to its new creation rest, where the whole earth is filled with his presence.

Discussion question: How would you teach the Sabbath in your context?

8.2 - Developing your theology

Today we will repeat the task of studying the development of a theme, rather than just looking at it as a static truth.

Money and provision

Creation: From the creation story we see that ultimately all resources come from God. He provides seed, the rain, the sun and the nutritious soil. He also provides the strength and skill of the farmer.

However, we see that provision comes as man and God work together in partnership, with man responding to God's call to go out and bring order to the world with faith and obedience. This brings God's provision and sense of joy and fulfilment for those who work in partnership with God.

Fall: When Adam and Eve rebel against God, one of the consequences is that work becomes hard. Our best endeavours do not always produce the results we would hope for. However, this has meant mankind becomes more dependant on God.

Israel: The blessing that Israel understood was primarily material or physical, seen in terms of money, livestock, land and family. The Mosaic law gives direction about giving, and in particular about tithing, the practice of giving away 10% of your earnings. This had a number of benefits, including

- Supplying the needs of the priests
- Giving to the poor
- Saving for feasts and celebrations

Tithing also had the effect of teaching generosity to the people and helping them to recognise their dependance upon God as their ultimate provider. Ultimately the law teaches that those who keep the covenant will have good crops, a healthy family and protection from harm.

The wisdom literature also speaks a great deal about provision, connecting hard work, a righteous life and generosity to rewards in life and prosperity. It also teaches about the dark side of wealth, and how it can capture the heart and become as an idol. It also introduces the concept of the righteous poor and the wicked wealthy.

Jesus: Jesus spoke a great deal about money, but seemed to turn its importance upside-down. He is clear that God is a great provider, and generously looks after his creation, but money itself is seen as minor or even an obstacle to really enjoy life in the kingdom of God. A summary of his teaching can be found in Luke 16, where he compares worldly wealth with someone else's property, that you only get to look after, whereas there are true riches to be found in the kingdom of God which have nothing to do with money, and they really belong to you. Wherever we find a rich follower of

Jesus in scripture, it is only noted because of their willingness to give away what they have. There are certainly those that Jesus invites to follow him, but because of their riches they refuse his offer.

New Creation: The early Church had certainly found these true riches (life with God, true community, joyful even in suffering), so much so that they found it easy to generously give away their possessions when others had needs. They looked after the poor and vulnerable. The church leaders were taught to be an example to the community by working hard so that they could support themselves and give generously to others that couldn't support themselves. Tithing was not mentioned, but generosity was always encouraged among their own community or when they heard about needs among the church further away. The only people that received regular payments from the church were those who carried out apostolic work into new places, those who carried the responsibility of preaching in the larger churches and the widows who prayed and worked hard to help their local church communities. This is a good understanding of where we are currently with money and provision. God is still providing, but there is a clear responsibility on each member of the church to work hard and become a provider, so that they can become God's channel for blessing others through their generosity.

Perhaps the new heavens and earth will provide us with an opportunity to return to growing and producing our own food, in an Eden like environment, although very little is said in the scripture regarding this.

Assignment: Find another subject that you would like to study in this way.

8.3 - Going deeper

We've looked at how the big story of the bible should shape how we interpret any individual passages that we read, and how doctrines can be rightly brought together by seeing the development of certain themes throughout the entire story. This session considers how to look at different parts of the bible, and in particular how we can find links into the big story, which will give us a richer understanding of the scriptures we are studying.

Looking at narrative

Narrative is how we describe the story parts of scripture. Some stories in the bible can be confusing, particularly when characters that we know are chosen by God do things that we think are wrong. For example, how come Jacob takes 4 different women to produce a family? And God seems OK with it! Reading a story like this has led to all kinds of immorality. So a story in the bible needs to be read so that you can track the whole plot and see what is going on. The bible will rarely give a commentary on

the rights and wrongs of what is happening, so you are left to see for yourself if the decisions that people make are wise or foolish. For Jacob (and all the polygamous relationships in the bible) we find much heartache and difficulty as a result of the relationships that do not reflect God's plan in creation.

So read a story in full, and allow it to speak to you. Consider what you can learn from their weaknesses, or find encouragement in their faith. The bible was written as meditation literature, which means that the writers expected people to read and reread the stories, finding fresh insights and meanings as they considered particular words, stories, patterns and numbers that were seen in other places in scripture.

Repeating words: Some words stand out all the way through the biblical story, and tie these stories into the big story. For instance, the word 'offspring' is used at significant moments. We see Eve promised an 'offspring' that will crush the head of the serpent. Abraham heard God promise him an 'offspring' that would bring his blessing to the nations. Isaiah prophesied about the child that would take on God's everlasting government. The gospels Matthew and Luke give accounts of this offspring finally coming to earth. In Revelation, the 'offspring' escapes the dragon and is taken to rule with God. These words tie these passages in to the same big story, and help us to understand the significance of each of the individual stories.

Repeating stories: Sometimes a similar story line can be seen repeated with different people at different times. This again points us to see the bigger story, and perhaps the importance of the story being told. For instance, the temptation story of Adam and Eve is one that is repeated in different ways, but with similar phrases used. Eve saw, she desired, she took. Abimelech took Sarah. Achan saw the riches of Jericho, desired them and took them. David saw Bathsheba, considered her beauty and took her. Finally we see Jesus under temptation refusing to take the easy way out, but constantly submitted himself to God, saying 'Not my will but yours'.

Repeating patterns: Sometimes we see certain elements in a story repeated a number of times. For instance, chaotic waters seem to be mentioned often. We see these waters before creation, when the earth was empty and without form. They appear again in the flood narrative, as God removes his sustaining hand from creation, and the world reverts back to the chaos. Moses led the Israelites through the waters that threatened to trap them, and Joshua likewise led the people through the Jordan and into the promised land. This may be where we see the symbolism of baptism becoming such a crucial part of the story, first with John the Baptist, and then with Jesus. In the book of Revelation there is a sea of glass in the throne room, no longer churning and raging, but at complete rest.

Repeating numbers: Certain numbers are repeated in various stories, and can be viewed as connecting them. The number 40 is probably the best example, apparently used when illustrating the testing of faithfulness. So we have Noah in the ark during 40 days and nights of rain, Israel in the wilderness for 40 years, and Jesus in the desert for 40 days. The number 7 is also a favourite.



Looking at Poetry

Poetry is found everywhere in the bible, in the narrative sections, the prophetic books and also in the Psalms. The writers make extensive use of metaphors, and will often refer back to historic events in order to make their point. For instance we find the prophet Isaiah (Isa 17:12-13) comparing the rebellious nations to the chaos waters that we noted above. This helps the reader to understand the chaos and instability that they caused, and also way that they would flee far away at God's voice, just as the Red Sea had done at Moses' command.

If the writer speaks of flowers and a garden, he is usually referring back to the garden of Eden, and the plans that God has to restore all that was lost there. Similarly, when they speak of thorns and thistles, it is usually a way of talking about the judgement that is coming to a nation.

Looking at Apocalyptic writings

These are books such as Zechariah, the second half of Daniel, and most famously, the Book of Revelation. These all contain heavy symbolism which can appear at first to be very confusing. Apocalyptic simply means 'to uncover', as though through these images and symbols we get to glimpse at God's perspective. Often the symbols used in these books have been used before somewhere, and so the best way to begin to understand them is to go back to where they were first used. The book of Revelation is full of symbolism and references to the old testament. We therefore need to take our time reading through it, and probably need to use other commentaries to give us a fuller understanding of what is being revealed.

For example, there is continuing fascination with the beasts of Revelation. Where do they come from?

From our reading of the whole bible we can say the following;

- Beasts were made alongside humanity on the 6th day, but were never given the image of God in the same way that humanity were.
- Humanity can often act like the beasts when they are in rebellion to God.
- The prophet Daniel sees the empires of the world as represented by beasts, living in rebellion to God and destroying the people of God.
- The book of Revelation uses this same imagery, alongside imagery of the flood, the exodus and the exile. Its message is that the true people of God will finally emerge through the persecution and reign with Jesus.

This may all seem like it gets very complicated. This session is supposed to give you some further ways to keep studying and encourage you to keep learning and growing. Ultimately the bible is meant to be understood in community. It is simple enough for a child to grasp the big story, but the more you read, the more you realise how much more there is to fully understand, and how much we need each other to share our thoughts, questions and insights.

Discussion question: Find other metaphors which are repeated in the bible.

8.4 – Reshaping everything around the big story

We've finally come to the end of our course. Hopefully you have found some helpful new ways to read, understand and apply the bible. This session is more personal in that it brings together something of my own journey of discovery in reading the bible as one big story, and how it has reshaped so much of my understanding of what God is doing and how to get involved.

Reshaping our thinking

Around preaching the gospel - We need to reclaim the most important message ever spoken, which has somehow been lost or distorted in many Christian traditions. The gospel is a much bigger story than we had realised. Jesus is the true King of all, and everyone that submits to his rule is welcomed into the family of God. Our message of salvation isn't about escaping the world, with its sin and coming judgement. It's rather about being rescued by God from the powers that have held us in slavery and therefore bringing hope and healing to the creation that God loves.

Believers are new creations - Heaven is not some place way up there, far, far away. As believers, we have experienced the new creation already. Heaven and earth have become joined in us. This understanding has changed how I pray, how I worship, how I think about myself and the challenges I face. No longer is it just me, trying to do my best. I really can know God's empowering presence everywhere I go.

Loving rather than law-keeping - Although many churches seem very concerned about outward appearances and what you can and can't do as a Christian, the story we have is much more about growing up in our love. This is the mark of Christian maturity. It's the measure that God seems most concerned about, and so should we.

The Church is vital in God's purposes - God has chosen to show himself through real life communities, demonstrating the power of the Holy Spirit in changing lives to be increasingly generous, forgiving, merciful and others-centred. This is not something that just happens. We need others in our lives who are loving us, leading us, correcting us, praying for us and encouraging us. We also need those who are not like us, who are from a different culture or background, who may disagree with us or annoy us or maybe even dislike us. These are priceless people that God uses to grow us up. Remember, love is the sign of maturity, and it's easy to love those who are like us, even the unbelievers love those that love them. The true church working as God has planned will have conflict, differences of opinion, many different styles and practices, but it will also be a place where broken people are loved and healed, where different cultures are acknowledged and celebrated and where onlookers are amazed that such a diverse group could actually love each other.

The Church is not the goal, the kingdom is - with our high value of the church community, we can be fooled into thinking that we must put all our efforts into making the church as glorious as possible. Actually, that's not the goal. The church exists to work in partnership with God to bring all of creation under the rule of Christ. The goal is the kingdom. That is what is worth giving our best for. The kingdom advances as people are healed and set free, and as they are purposefully released to be good news to their neighbours and communities.

Reshaping our preaching

The question in my mind is always 'Is Jesus the hero?' We can make our church meetings about ourselves so often. We sing songs that declare how dedicated and passionate we are. We can preach messages that challenge people to give up sin, to get more serious with God, devote themselves to God's purposes. We can send people away, either feeling good about their high levels of commitment, or feeling guilty that they just don't seem to have what it takes to live a good Christian life. In either case, sending people away to try harder will produce very little fruit for God. Our preaching needs to recognise Jesus as the only hero. The only one who can rescue those who have strayed. The only one who has perfectly obeyed the Father. The only one who can make it possible for the Holy Spirit to fill our lives and produce fruit within us. We do well to regularly send people out from our preaching with renewed awe at who Jesus is and what he has done for them, and what he is doing in and through those who trust in him.

Reshaping our churches

Churches often see the world as their enemy, and as such will avoid engaging as much as possible. Seeing the world as God sees it, with a good creation in need of redemption, will help us to go out of our way to be influencers. We won't be so fearful of being 'infected' by sin, but rather see ourselves as channels of God's mercy, reaching out to people who desperately need to hear the good news. We are called to start shaping the world around us, living in ways that reflect the coming age rather than the age we currently live in.

In this regard, there is a constant call from God to look after the needy, to go to the most vulnerable, to stand up for justice for the oppressed. We were never meant to be people who care for people's 'souls' and not be too concerned about their bodies. This will of course bring conflict with those who gain from the oppression. Part of our ruling with Christ is to suffer with him, through rejection, through mistreatment, and outright persecution. However, in our ruling with him, we get to love the world like he does, even those who mistreat us.

Reshaping our mission

Our mission is not to grow our church or become popular in our towns and cities. Our mission is to bring God's kingdom to every part of the earth that does not currently experience it. This will be in our personal lives, our families, our workplaces, our



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