

The Big Picture of Scripture

Lesson 4: Tracing the Storyline of the Old Testament

- I. The Table of Contents.
 - A. *Genesis through Deuteronomy*, called the Pentateuch (“five scrolls”), contains the narrative from creation to the giving of the law by Moses to the second generation of Israelites.
 - B. *Joshua through Esther* contains most of the historical narratives. They tell the story of Israel from the entry into the Promised Land through the Babylonian captivity and the return to the Land under Persian rule.
 - C. *Job through Song of Solomon* contains Israel’s wisdom literature with reflections on life and how it should be lived before God. *Psalms* is the church’s expression of faith/response to God’s revelation, sometimes in praise, sometimes in lament, sometimes in prayer, sometimes in hope.
 - D. *Isaiah through Malachi* contains the writings of the prophets. Either pre-exilic, exilic, or post-exilic, the prophets are God’s messengers or covenant lawyers sent to His people. They accuse of sin, warn of judgment, and predict a future when God will judge the godless and save the faithful. Neither *Lamentations* nor *Daniel* belong in the prophets but have long been included. *Lamentations* is a lament after the destruction of Jerusalem and *Daniel* contains both a narrative of the Jews’ exile in Babylon and Persia and apocalyptic visions of the future of the Kingdom of God, a future that return from captivity fails to realize.
 - E. *The major contrast between the Old and New Testaments is that the OT prepares for the coming of the Messiah and the NT proclaims the coming of Jesus as the promised Messiah.
- II. Getting hold of the Bible’s storyline (cf. *Outline of Biblical History* handout). There’s a coherent storyline in the OT that runs from creation to the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile and it serves as the medium through which the plan and purpose of God’s saving work is revealed.
 - A. The Beginning: the creation narratives, Gen 1-3.
 1. The Bible begins with two narratives of God’s creating acts. Gen 1 relates the creation of all things out of nothing, by the Word of His power, in the space of six days, and all very good. Gen 2 relates the specific details of the creation of man on the 6th day as male and female, husband and wife, in covenant with God, under God’s rule, in perfect harmony and fellowship with God and His creation. —**The Kingdom of God** is *established* in the Eden-sanctuary of God as we see *God’s people living under God’s rule in God’s place*.
 2. **The Kingdom of God** is immediately *lost to humanity* when in Gen 3 the serpent emerges and tempts Eve to think independently of God, to think outside the box of God’s revelation. She involves Adam and they both fall under the bondage of sin, the curse of the law, and separation from God.
 3. But in an act of surprising intervention, God pronounces a judgment on the serpent that includes the first promise of a Curse-Reverser who will reverse the curse on God’s people, Gen 3.15, and covers His people’s shame with the skin of a slain animal, Gen 3.21.
 4. In judgment, God’s people are *exiled* from the Eden-sanctuary, and in an act of mercy, creation is made to fall with them so that the world is made fit for a fallen people to live in.
 - B. The progression of evil in the world, Gen 4-11.
 1. Beginning with hatred and murder in Adam’s own family, we read of the increase of evil in the world. Human wickedness reaches a point of such pervasive depravity that God declares the end of His patience and His determination to destroy Cain’s line in a flood, Gen 4-6.

2. But *God's purpose to establish His Kingdom* cannot be thwarted. So—as the main Actor in the biblical story—He chooses Noah and his family for salvation along with pairs of animals to repopulate the earth after the judgment of the flood, Gen 6-9. **The Kingdom of God** is *preserved* in Noah's family in the ark-sanctuary of God. Note: the concepts of *grace* and *covenant* are introduced for the first time in God's relationship with Noah.
 3. Two lines of people had emerged from Adam: a godly line through Seth and a godless line from Cain. Only Seth's line in Noah survived the flood, but we see the same division again: a godly line through Shem (a piggy-back line through Japheth) and a godless line through Ham, Gen 10-11.
 4. Refusing to obey God's *recreation mandate* and spread over the whole earth, the descendants of Noah are scattered by an act of divine judgment at the Tower of Babel and the *Kingdom of God* appears to be lost for good by the ungodliness which fills Shem's line, Gen 11.
- C. The covenant of salvation, Gen 12-50.
1. We're introduced to one of the most significant events and one of the most important figures in the biblical story: *the covenant with Abraham*. As Noah was chosen to receive grace from God, so now Abram is chosen by God to receive a blessing of eternal significance, Gen 12.
 2. God calls Abram to follow Him to a land of His choosing and promises him a land, a nation of descendants, and a blessing for all the nations of the earth, Gen 12.1-3. —**The Kingdom of God**—*God's people with God's presence in God's place—is promised* to Abraham's descendants by covenant.
 3. Abram and his wife Sarai are childless, but he believes in God's promise, Gen 15.1-6. These promises of God are formalized as a covenant in Gen 15, and in Gen 17 Abram's name is changed to Abraham as a token of God's faithfulness to His Word.
 4. Eventually, the promise is fulfilled with the birth of Isaac. Then Isaac fathers Jacob, who has twelve sons. God sends a famine to drive all Abraham's descendants into Egypt for 'safe-keeping' and 'growth'. In time the king of Egypt enslaves Jacob's descendants and puts them to forced labor, Gen 21-50. —The promise of **the Kingdom of God** to Abraham is *lost* in the captivity and slavery of all Abraham's descendants in Egypt.
- D. The exodus: a template of salvation.
1. God raises up Moses to confront Pharaoh and command him to let God's people/son go. It takes ten plagues to convince him, and even then he has second thoughts and pursues them into the Red Sea. Having spared the Israelites through the Passover lamb, God brings the nation out by a miracle in the Red Sea and destroys the armies of Egypt, Ex 1-15. The narrative reveals unmistakably that the main character in the Bible's storyline is *God*.
 2. The descendants of Abraham come to Mount Sinai and are now recognized as the nation of Israel, a people belonging to GOD *by virtue of His covenant with Abraham*. At Sinai, through Moses, God gives Israel His law to govern their life as the redeemed people of God, Ex 20-23. God makes a covenant with Israel regarding their life in the Land, Ex 24.
 3. Next, Israel receives the Lord's commands for a tabernacle and a priesthood. God will dwell in their midst, but only on His terms. His contact with the people will be mediated through the priestly ministry of the Tabernacle, Ex 25-40. Other laws are given about life as the special people of God set apart from the world's nations and religions, *Leviticus*.
- E. Entry into and possession of the promised land.
1. Unbelief leads to a false start in the process of taking possession of the land and a whole generation is condemned to die, *Numbers*. After 40 years in the desert, as the next generation

prepares to enter, God speaks through Moses to prepare them for this momentous step. God renews the covenant of Ex 24 with the second generation of Israelites, *Deuteronomy*.

2. Under the leadership of *Joshua*, the Israelites cross the Jordan and begin to take possession of Canaan. The land is divided between the tribes by God. They left many enclaves of the idolatrous Canaanites in the land and this leads to warfare and many challenges to their possession of the land and their faithfulness to God. God mercifully sends a series of judges to deal with the situation but it's clear that a Monarchy is needed, *Judges*.

F. Consolidation, greatness, and kingship.

1. In time, Samuel is established as God's prophet over Israel. The fledgling nation is beset by hostile neighbors such as the Philistines. The people begin to hanker for a king to rule over them like the nations. Samuel presides over the choice of Saul, whose reign is a failure. Then a young David is chosen by God and anointed by Samuel. The death of Saul at the hands of the Philistines sees David anointed as king, *1Samuel*.
2. David's most notable achievements include the capture of the Jebusite stronghold of Jerusalem and bringing the Ark of the Covenant to the city. He also achieves political greatness for the Kingdom of Israel, subduing all his enemies on every side. Even though he commits murder and adultery, he is established as the king God has chosen for His people, *2Samuel*. —**The Kingdom of God** is finally *restored* and *realized* under David, which passes to Solomon, 1Kgs 4.20-34. At last, *God's people are living under God's rule in God's place*.

G. Decline, schism, and exile.

1. Solomon rules over the greatest and most extensive kingdom of Israel ever. He's noted for the God-given gift of wisdom and for the building of the temple. But the glory didn't last as he plays the fool with pagan women and introduces foreign gods into Israel. —**The Kingdom of God**, realized at last, is *lost* in the same generation. Something was still lacking. It appeared to be the substance but proved to be yet another shadow. The *pattern* of God's Kingdom is there (God's people under God's rule in God's place) but the *perfection* of the Kingdom is not (David's sin, Solomon's sin, etc.).
2. After Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam continues the idolatrous decline.
3. Led by Jeroboam I, the ten northern tribes apostatize and separate, setting up the Kingdom of Israel. Judah and Benjamin remain in the south as the Kingdom of Judah.
4. Despite the apostasy within Judah, God keeps His promise to David and his dynasty survives for 300 years. Two of the most virtuous kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, attempt to reform the faith of Judah, which is bent on imitating Israel, but it's too little, too late, *1 and 2Kings*.
5. The Northern Kingdom remains apostate and falls to the Assyrians in 722 BC who deport them to foreign lands. The Southern Kingdom survives the onslaught of Assyria, 2Kgs 19; Isa 37, but falls to the Babylonians in 597 BC. And in 586 BC Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed and the people are deported, *2Kings 17-25*.
6. Most of the major and minor prophets were written around this period. They're either warning God's people that their present sinfulness will result in exile (*Hosea* and *Jeremiah*), or comforting them during exile and reminding them that He will not abandon them (later parts of *Isaiah*, *Ezekiel*, *Daniel*). —**The Kingdom of God** is *lost* in the exile but the prophets promise a *restoration* of the **Kingdom** in the future with a remnant, Hos 1.10-11; 2.16-23; 3.5. *God's people will again come under God's rule in God's place*.

H. Return and reconstruction.

1. When the Babylonian empire falls to the Persians, a new policy is adopted which affects captive peoples. In 538 BC King Cyrus decrees that captives can return to their homelands. The books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* tell of the return and the beginnings of the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The people are still under the overall control of the Persians and remain so until the coming of Alexander the Great in 333 BC.
 2. Some of the minor prophets wrote during this period encouraging God's people that God is still keeping covenant (*Haggai* and *Malachi*).
 3. Despite the prophets' promises of a *restored Kingdom of God* with a new temple, a new king, and a restored nation in a restored land, the glory of the golden age of the Kingdom of David and Solomon never returned and the OT period comes to an end with a whimper rather than a bang, Ezra 3.12; Zech 4.1-10. —*Where, then, is the Kingdom of God?*
- I. The Jews in the inter-testamental period.
1. Alexander and his successors Hellenize the lands of the Ancient Near East. Jewish religion and culture clash with the Hellenistic Greek culture and the Jews suffer persecution. The Maccabean revolt in the second century BC did little to relieve the situation. Then the Romans came. Thus the Jews suffer captivity and oppressive rule since the end of the 6th century and in the time of Jesus they're subservient to Roman rule.
- J. The New Testament.
1. **The Kingdom of God** is *proclaimed* by Jesus as *fulfilled in Him*, Mk 1.14-15; Lk 11.20-22. *In Christ*, who is both the Word of God, the Head of God's elect, and the Temple of God, *God's people are under God's rule in God's place*, Mt 11.27-30. *In Christ*, God, humanity, and creation are all united and in perfect harmony, Col 1.16. *In Christ*, the curse is reversed and the people are restored to perfect fellowship with God, Eph 1.22-23.
 2. The four *Gospels* tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth, his birth, life, death, and resurrection. *Acts* takes up the narrative from the ascension of Jesus relating the early experiences of the Jewish Christians and their concern to understand where the Gentiles fit into the plan of God. Paul is raised up by God to take the good news of God's salvation to the Gentiles.
 3. The *Epistles* are written to deal with various situations in the churches of God. —**The Kingdom of God** is shown to be the *promised inheritance* of all those who are in Christ, Eph 1.13-14; 2.18-22.
 4. *Revelation* is a letter to the persecuted churches to encourage them with the assurance of their share in the victory of God and His Christ over Satan and all evil forever. —**The Kingdom of God** will be *consummated* and *eternalized* when Jesus returns in glory and the dwelling place of God is with men on earth. *God's people will be under God's rule in God's place*—never to be lost again, Rev 21-22.