

READING THE BIBLE IN ELEVEN DAYS

BIG MOMENTS IN GOD'S STORY

1 BIBLE PASSAGES

The following eleven sets of Bible readings are taken from pivotal moments in the history of God's dealings with his people and his world. A brief commentary has been written to accompany the readings. The idea is that you read the passages first and then read the relevant short commentary on the passages. In order to help you read it through in a week of daily readings, the readings have been broken up into suggested daily 'bites'.

1.1 DAY 1

CREATION Genesis 1-2

FALL Genesis 3

1.2 DAY 2

PROMISE Genesis 12; 15; 17

1.3 DAY 3

EXODUS Exodus 1-2; 15; 19:1-20:21; Psalm 105:23-45

1.4 DAY 4

CONQUEST AND SETTLEMENT Joshua 23-24

KINGSHIP 1 Samuel 8; 2 Samuel 5-7

1.5 DAY 5

EXILE 2 Kings 17:1-23; Jeremiah 31;31-37

RETURN AND RESTORATION Ezra 1-3

1.6 DAY 6

BIRTH AND DEATH OF JESUS Matthew 1:1-2:12; Mark 1:1-15; Mark 14-16

1.7 DAY 7

GOSPEL TO THE WORLD Acts 9-10; Romans 1.1-17

NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH Revelation 19-22

2 BIG MOMENTS IN GOD'S STORY

2.1 CREATION (GENESIS 1-2)

Creation provides us with the setting of God's story. It tells us that God is the Creator who makes the universe, the world, and all living things. In particular, he creates human beings and does so with a purpose in mind. That purpose is that humans live in right relationship with him, each other, and the environment that he has put them in.

2.2 FALL (GENESIS 3)

However, the human story is one of disappointment. Humans do not live according to God's purpose. They move out of relationship with God and his will for them. This bid for independence from their creator deeply compromises the health of each relationship that God made them for (with him, each other, and the environment in which he placed them). Prior to the fall there was harmony in these relationships. After the fall these relationships are full of disharmony.

The rest of the Bible tells the story of how God works in the world to resolve this situation.

2.3 PROMISE (GENESIS 12; 15; 17)

Genesis 12:1-3 begins with a promise. Genesis 1-3 portrayed him as a creator. In Genesis 12 we see him begin his great work of redemption. God shows us what he intends to do by giving promises to Abraham. God promises Abraham three very great things. He will give him a land, children (he will make him a great nation), and will bless him and cause him to be a blessing.

Underneath these very concrete and physical promises there lies a greater reality. God is promising a place where Abraham and his descendants will live with other humans from all over the world before God in a relationship of great blessing and richness. This is God's longterm intention for the world and his people and it will be accomplished through the person of Abraham and his descendants—the nation of Israel.

God's promise to Abraham is filled out more in the Bible's second great covenant, God's covenant with Abraham (the first covenant is made with Noah in Genesis 6-9).

2.4 EXODUS (EXODUS 1-2; 15; 19:1-20:21; PSALM 105:23-45)

The book of Exodus tells us how eventually the descendants of Abraham end up out of the land of promise and in Egypt instead. At first they fare well but eventually they are enslaved and are persecuted by the Pharaoh of Egypt. As a result of their hardship they call out to God to remember his promise to Abraham. God answers their call and raises up Moses. Through him, he rescues his people and brings them out of Egypt. In this deliverance he showed them how he is related to them in a very concrete way. He is their God and they are his people.

This relationship finds expression in another covenant: the Sinai covenant. Like all relationships this covenant has two sides—God's side (i.e. what he has done and will do for his people); and Israel's side (i.e. what he expects them to do in response). Israel's side is outlined in the law, which has a number of key elements, including...

- Moral requirements (i.e. how to act in relation to God, to people, to the wider world).

- Priesthood (i.e. how the people are to be represented before God).
- Cultic requirements, including those related to sacrifice (i.e. how the people can obtain forgiveness and be assured of it).

2.5 CONQUEST AND SETTLEMENT (JOSHUA 23-24)

After God rescued his people from Egypt and instituted the Sinai covenant, he led them through the wilderness toward the promised land. Because of sin, the entrance into the promised land is delayed for a generation. However, under Joshua, they begin the conquest of the land and settle in it. The covenant is renewed under Joshua.

2.6 KINGSHIP (1 SAMUEL 8; 12; 2 SAMUEL 5-7)

For the first period in the land God rules over his people through judges under the direct appointment and empowering of God through his Spirit. The last of these judges is Samuel, who is also a prophet. Toward the end of Samuel's leadership the people of God express their unhappiness with this more spontaneous form of leadership and ask Samuel to take to God their request that they might have what they think might be a more stable leadership. They ask him to ask God for a king.

God gives his people a king. The first king is Saul, who does not really live as God required kings to live. God therefore rejects him as king and tells Samuel to anoint someone else. The second king is David.

With David God sews kingship into his great plan for his world and his relationship with his people. He enters into a covenant with David, which is a sort of extension of the previous covenants he has made with Abraham and at Mt Sinai. He promises that David's descendants will rule God's people forever. At the same time some other important things happen.

- The city of Jerusalem (Zion) becomes the capital of the promised land. In other words, Jerusalem becomes the focus of the physical promise of the land God promised to Abraham.
- The temple is built in Jerusalem and the ark of the covenant installed within it. In other words, God's announces that he will live among his people.
- The prophets become increasingly important. They become covenant guardians, reminding the people and their rulers of God's promise and covenant. They are to speak God's word to God's people and God's king and to make sure that they understand that their primary allegiance is to God.

2.7 EXILE (2 KINGS 17:1-23; JEREMIAH 31:31-37)

The books of Kings show us that kingship is something of a failure. After all, kings are human, that is, they are just like Adam and therefore they fail just like Adam.

The first expression of that failure is the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam. The people of God are divided into two. The southern kingdom becomes known as Judah. It largely consists of two tribes—Judah and Benjamin—under the rule of a Davidic king and with a capital based at Jerusalem. The northern kingdom becomes known as Israel and consists of the remaining ten tribes under the rule of various royal dynasties and key individuals and with a capital based at Samaria.

The kings in the north set up alternative sites of worship and the northern kingdom sinks deep into idolatry despite the role of some key prophets. In the end, they are conquered and destroyed by the Assyrians in 722BC.

The southern kingdom is not much better. They also engage in idolatry and neglect the warnings of the prophets that such disregard of the covenant will have dire consequences. Finally God sends the nation of Babylon as the agent of his judgment. Jerusalem is destroyed in 586BC and the people lose the land and are taken off to exile in Babylon. For many it seemed as though the promise to Abraham had come to a full stop. However, the prophets begin to bring words of comfort, telling the people of God that God is still their covenant God and he promises that although they have lost the land they can still be his people. He even gives them a promise of a new covenant in which the problem of sin will be finally and fully dealt with. He will remember their sins no more.

2.8 RETURN AND RESTORATION (EZRA 1-3)

Prior to the exile, prophets such as Jeremiah promised that the exile would not be the end. After seventy years in exile God raises up Cyrus the Persian who conquers Babylon and issues an edict that allows the return of the nation to the land. They return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and engage in reconstruction of the temple.

Sadly, the rebuilt city, reconstructed temple and reconstituted life in the land doesn't seem to measure up to God's promise and so the people continue to wait for fulfillment of all God's promises to Abraham and in the prophets. The people therefore continue to wait for the fulfillment of all of God's promises to Abraham. They look for...

- The rest of the land to be restored and for there to be peace from enemies.
- A great king descended from David who will be a powerful leader.
- A great prophet like Moses who will speak God's word to them.
- Jerusalem to become a great centre of the world where all nations will come to worship the true and living God.
- The great time of blessing.

2.8.1 SUMMARY

The Old Testament therefore provides us with three great things.

It tells us of the **SETTING** of God's purposes: the world, humans, human frailty, etc.

It tells us of the **PROMISE** of what God will do: bring the world into a place where they will be restored to harmonious relationship with God, each other, the environment that God has placed them in.

It gives us many **SIGNS** of what that might look like. For example...

- 'Covenant' suggests the possibility of a rich relationship between God and his people.
- 'Land' conveys ideas of prosperity, security, wealth and harmony under the blessing of God.

- The portrayal of cult, temple, sacrifice and priesthood conveys the possibility of some means by which sinful human beings can adequately be brought into the presence of a holy God and/or adequately represented before God.
- The prophets are a sign of our need to hear and live by the word of God and God's desire to provide a person who will speak to us the words of God in a clear and decisive way.
- Kings speak to us of some person who will lead us and rule us in justice and mercy just as God does.

However, the Old Testament leaves many of these things simply as signs and promises or hopes.

2.9 BIRTH AND DEATH OF JESUS (MATTHEW 1:1-2:12; MARK 1:1-15; MARK 14-16)

Each one of these signs or themes are taken up in the person of Jesus. He is their fulfillment.

Jesus is...

- A new Adam, who does what the old Adam failed to do.
- The descendant of Abraham, through whom all the nations of the world will be blessed.
- The new Moses who brings new deliverance, not from physical slavery, but from our slavery to sin and its consequence—death.
- The new Joshua, who leads his people.
- Great David's greater Son. He is the king, the messiah, who rules his people in justice and righteousness, always having their best interests in mind.
- God's replacement for the temple. In Jesus God has come into the world as God's presence in the world. No longer do we need a temple.
- God's replacement for the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. Old Testament sacrifices were sacrifices of sheep and goats. However, the sin that had been committed had been committed by human beings and therefore needed the sacrifice of a human being. Jesus is that great sacrifice.
- God's great High Priest, the replacement of the priests of the Old Testament. He alone can represent us before God, because he alone is sinless and he alone can offer the sacrifice that will deal with our real problem.
- God's great prophet, the one who declares to us what God is like and what he demands of us. He not only speaks God's word. He is God's word.

However, all of this does not come about the moment that Jesus arrives. The Gospels record the last days of the Old Testament era and it is only with the death of Jesus on the cross that the new covenant is made possible. His death therefore represents the beginning of the end. He fulfils the promises of God and all that remains is their being put into effect. The first sign of this is the giving of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

2.10 GOSPEL TO THE WORLD (ACTS 9-10; ROMANS 1:1-17)

The opening pages of the Bible clearly indicated that God created with the whole world in mind. This is seen in Genesis 12:1-3 where God promises blessing to all the nations through Abraham. With the death of Jesus and the giving of the Spirit this is now possible. Now the gospel can go to the gentiles.

For this reasons, after the day of Pentecost one of the most significant events recorded in Acts is the appointing and commissioning of Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. As Paul notes in various places in his letters, the heart of the gospel is the breaking down of the dividing wall between Jew and Gentiles. This is one reason why the book of Acts ends with Paul arriving in Rome, the centre of the Gentile world, to teach and preach the gospel. Finally the promises of God to Abraham are being put into effect.

2.11 NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH (REVELATION 19-22)

The last chapters of the New Testament take up so many of the themes that have been seen throughout the Old Testament. Jesus is the word of God and the Lamb of God. There is a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem, a new Eden, the possibility of eternal relationship with God in the presence of God, etc.

3 CONCLUSION

The plot and purpose of the Bible is therefore not simply about a distant past. It is God's eternal story about his purposes for his world and for humans. It is therefore also our story. It involves and includes us. We live in the midst of his plans and purposes, between the death of his Son and the sending of the Spirit and the coming again of Jesus Christ. If we really understand God's purposes as they are spelled out in the Bible then we are called to participate in them.

