

# **Biblical Theology:**

## **Reading the Bible as One Book**

### **Covenant Life College**

**Teacher: John Loftness**

## **Session 1**

### **Summary of the Biblical Story**

*Understanding biblical theology requires a basic grasp of biblical history. What follows is a sketch of that history: an attempt at introducing the vast scope of the Bible's history and theology. If you are new to the Bible, don't be dismayed by all the details—simply try to get familiar with the events and terms, names and places. If you are well-versed in Scripture, you will find that I have left out many details. I did this to keep the summary short enough to be covered in one brief reading. I'm sure that this will need refinement and change and would appreciate any comment at the e-mail address below.*

*John Loftness*

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God creates “the heavens and the earth,” in other words he creates—everything that exists apart from his own being.

God creates a garden in a place called Eden where he creates and places a man and woman. He calls them to live and work and relate to God in this amazing place of peace and prosperity.

By yielding to a serpent's temptation, the man violates the one prohibition God gave him in the garden: he chooses a quest for knowledge independent of God over trust in God to supply the knowledge he needs to live a good life.

God judges the man and woman (and by extension, their progeny): death, alienation from God and from one another result, yet he also makes a promise—to use a descendent of the woman to crush the power of the serpent who also comes under God's judgment.

The consequences of this curse grow with the multiplication of humanity: murder and oppression fill the earth.

God destroys humanity through a flood, sparing one man, Noah, and his family by instructing them to build and enter an ark that will preserve them through the cataclysm.

Still, following the flood, sin spreads from Noah and his sons to the rest of humanity. People seek to erect a temple that will, through their own self-effort, give them direct access to god-like power. God judges then by scattering them throughout the earth and confusing their languages.

Out of the many nations that result, God chooses one man, Abram, to become the father of a great nation. He promises to bless him and to give him a vast number of descendants and to bless all the peoples of the earth through him. He promises him a land where his descendants can live—called Canaan, which was bounded by the northern borders of Egypt, the Euphrates, and the Mediterranean Sea.

Abram and his sons believe the promise, but by the time Abram's grandson, Jacob (who is renamed Israel) has 12 sons, it is apparent that the sons may become just like the depraved Canaanite peoples. To keep them as a people separated from the world, God sends Jacob and his 12 sons and their families to Egypt, where, after a period of initial favor, they eventually become slaves of the Egyptians.

After 400 years of slavery, God sends Moses to deliver the people from Egypt to Canaan. Moses serves as a mediator between God and people: he speaks the word of God to Pharaoh and to the Israelites. He enacts miracles to bring Israel out of Egypt into the promised land. He gives Israel laws from God so they can remain in right relationship with him and one another, dwelling in his presence, as they live in the promised land. These include:

- Laws regarding relationship to God and to competing false gods.
- Laws regarding relationships between people.
- Laws regarding how to approach God's presence in worship.
- Laws regarding how to re-establish relationship with God after violating his laws (i.e. through sacrifice)

Behind the Laws are promises: to bless Israel as they trust God's promises—a trust evidenced by keeping his laws—and to discipline Israel through progressively challenging punishments as the nation turns from the living God to trust the false promises of idols and disobey God's commands. The ultimate blessing is life in its highest potency lived in the presence of God with harmony within the nation and security from without. The ultimate punishment is being driven from the land and thus from the presence of God as the nation is scattered among many nations.

After Moses dies, Israel conquers the land of Canaan. Yet they repeatedly stray from faith in the Lord as they adopt the worship of foreign gods and the ways of foreign peoples. God sends the armies of surrounding nations to discipline his people. As they repent under this oppression, God delivers them. This cycle of apostasy, oppression, and deliverance continues for hundreds of years.

God gives Israel a king, David, to enforce righteousness in the nation and to defend the nation against foreign invaders. David is fantastically successful in subduing the surrounding nations and establishing a national government. His greatest passion, however, is the worship of the Lord. God promises him rest from his enemies, a father-son relationship between God and the king, the provision of a centralized location for a temple which his son will build, and an eternal dynasty. Despite a brief period of spectacular sin and God's resulting discipline, David lives a life that is zealous in its commitment to God. His sins, however, have consequences in his sons, creating periods of havoc in the kingdom.

David's son Solomon inherits his father's throne and brings the nation to the apex of its glory. He builds in Jerusalem the temple God promised to David. Yet Solomon fails to obey God's commands to the king codified in the Law of Moses. He takes foreign wives, worships their gods, makes foreign alliances, builds his army through foreign help, and multiplies his wealth beyond God's blessing.

God's punishment for Solomon's sin falls on the son who inherits the throne—named Rehoboam. He has most of his realm stripped from him, ending up ruling only the territory of one of the 12 tribes (that of Judah), yet he retains authority over the capitol city (Jerusalem) and its Temple. Ten of the tribes and most of the northern territories go to another king—named Jerhoboam—from the tribe of Ephraim. The nation is politically divided, yet God intends it to remain spiritually and religiously unified around the worship of him in Jerusalem.

The first king of this new northern kingdom (called "Israel") fears he will lose his kingdom if his people go to Jerusalem to worship, so he erects two rival temples, centered on calf idols to represent the Lord. This introduces a tradition of syncretism which culminates in the official worship of a Canaanite deity called Baal.

After more than 200 years of existence, God sends the Assyrian army to destroy the northern kingdom of Israel. The people are scattered throughout the Assyrian empire with only a remnant remaining in the land.

The southern kingdom (called "Judah") fares little better. They worship foreign gods and make foreign alliances. Their one advantage is the covenant

God made with David regarding the dynasty and the Temple. Still God fulfills his promises to discipline his king and his people. After 400 years of kings sitting on the throne of David in Jerusalem, God sends the Babylonian army to destroy the city with its temple and to send the king and the nobility and upper classes into exile in Babylon.

During the period of the kings, prophets play a critical role. In the early period of their ministry, they speak primarily to kings, but as time progresses and apostasy continues, their attention turns increasingly to the nation as a whole. Their role is less to predict the future than to warn the king and his people that if they continue in sin, they will be subjected to the disciplinary punishments that God promised in the Law of Moses. Yet the prophets also offered hope: if the people would repent and turn in faith to the Lord, he would bless them—again, according to the promises made in the Law of Moses. These prophets were largely ineffective in changing the direction of their own generation, yet they were enormously effective in shaping the future hope and direction of God’s people in future generations. Some key promises:

- Isaiah: though Babylon would destroy Judah and Jerusalem as an agent of God’s discipline, the Lord would send his servant to suffer for the people in order restore them to the Lord and plant them in a land that would be like Eden.
- Jeremiah: though Babylon would destroy Judah and Jerusalem as an agent of God’s discipline, the Lord would make a new covenant with his people and restore them to the land of Israel. In this period of restoration, God’s people would obey him and know him not because of external rules but from an inner motivation of the heart.
- Ezekiel: though Babylon would destroy Judah and Jerusalem as an agent of God’s discipline, the Lord would reestablish Jerusalem and the temple with a new David serving as an eternal, righteous king. The Lord would restore his people by giving them new clean hearts that would cause them to walk in his commandments. This restored kingdom would center around a restored temple of fantastic proportions where the presence of God would dwell forever.

As prophesied, the Lord did execute his discipline, as he warned he would in the Law of Moses. Judah was destroyed as a political entity, Jerusalem was destroyed as a city, and the temple was razed, its holy objects carted off to Babylon. Both king and priests, the ruling class and temple priests, were sent into exile in Babylon.

Yet about 70 years after this discipline began, the Persians overthrew the Babylonian empire, and the Persian king decreed that the Israelites should return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple.

Over time the temple was rebuilt and the city restored, yet the nation would remain a vassal state to numerous empires (Persia, Greece, and Rome). The restoration the prophets promised proved in reality to be only a shell of the predicted future glory. During this period, hope grows among the people that God would fulfill the prophet's vision of a glorious kingdom free from foreign domination with a harmonious people bringing pure worship to God at the temple. These hopes tended to focus on a future king who would conquer the nation's enemies and establish righteousness in Israel.

When Jesus was born, Israelite history had reached its nadir. Roman soldiers were garrisoned in Jerusalem and policed the city which was controlled by a Roman military officer. Rome appointed a king, called Herod, over the province. Herod may have paid some homage to the Jewish religion, yet he was ethnically descended from the Edomites (an ancient foe of Israel) and morally and spiritually corrupt. Religiously the nation was ruled by a corrupt priesthood. Judea (as it was then called) was a seething cauldron of political and religious parties, all who sought the deliverance of Israel from her woes.

Though Jesus is a direct descendent of king David through both his mother and father and he is born in the ancestral birthplace of the great king, he carries none of the secular markings of a king: he is born to peasant parents from a culturally backward province and spends much of his childhood as an exile in Egypt.

When Jesus begins his public ministry at around age 30, a number of things become apparent: he has fulfilled the Law of Moses without sinning, he has a profound knowledge of the Law and the Prophets, he has power over sickness, wicked spiritual powers, nature, and even death. Like Moses, he provides the people miraculous bread in the wilderness and teaches them God's law. Yet he remains poor and his followers prove to have no real clout in the nation as a whole. His popularity tends to center on his ability to heal, feed, and perform miracles.

Because of the envy of the religious leaders and fear of insurrection by the Roman ruler, they conspire to get rid of Jesus. On the heels of a corrupt public trial and vicious flogging, they execute Jesus using the tortuous method of nailing him to a wooden cross.

To the amazement of his followers and the consternation of those who arranged for his death, Jesus rises from his tomb after three days. He meets privately with his disciples over many weeks. He demonstrates to them that his

physical body has in fact been resurrected and tells them that he must leave them and return to heaven. But he promises that he will send them his Holy Spirit so that they may continue to effect his saving plan by preaching his good news (or gospel) in the earth prior to their own resurrection. He ascends to heaven before their eyes.

Weeks later, during the temple festival of Pentecost, the Spirit comes upon the disciples with power. Flames of fire (signifying the Spirit's presence as a flame signified the presence of God at the Tabernacle and temple) appear over the disciples' heads. The city is filled with Jews from throughout the Roman world, and through a miracle, the disciples are able to preach to them in their various native languages. They call for repentance and faith in Jesus. Three thousand believe through that one event.

As the number of Jesus' disciples grows, they are ostracized from the Temple precincts and the synagogues. They gather instead in homes and continue the ministry he began, declaring that his death is the only sacrifice that can remove God's penalty for their sins and provide them with a life of obedience and blessing in the presence of God. They declare that Jesus' sojourn in heaven is temporary, but that he will return to effect a universal judgment over all of mankind before he establishes his universal kingdom of eternal peace and prosperity in the presence of God on the earth. Though they are persecuted, at times violently, their numbers grow.

In a vision, the leading apostle, Peter, sees that God sent Jesus not just to save Jews, but also non-Jews (or "Gentiles"). Through the work of numerous Jewish converts to Jesus (most notably Paul) the gospel spreads throughout the Roman world.

The close of the Bible finds the church growing, yet facing great challenges: persecution without, false teaching and corrupt practices within. Expansion seems to come with opposition. The apostle John receives a revelation from Jesus showing him that the church is the battle ground for a heavenly war in which Jesus is establishing his kingdom on earth through the preaching of the gospel and the planting of churches and Satan is seeking to oppose Jesus' conquest through political and cultural persecution and the seductions of the world system.

The vision ends with Jesus conquering and judging his enemies and enforcing his rule over all people. Through cataclysmic events, he forms a renewed earth—his throne established in a gloriously restored Jerusalem. He eradicates sin, suffering, and death and presides over a new Eden, with no prospect of sin or judgment in the future. His people live and work together in harmony before the presence of their great King.

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