

The name of the first book in the Bible, Genesis, comes from a Greek word which means “origins.” In fact, the Hebrew word for this book, bereshith, means “in the beginning.”

Indeed, Genesis is about just that. Where do we all come from? How did the beginning begin? Did anything predate the beginning (Actually, John 1:1 supplies the answer to that question!)? Genesis tells us of creation, the fall, the rise of human government, the call of the first Hebrew, the rise of and blessing upon the Hebrew people, their long sojourn into Egypt, and how God superintended things in order to guarantee their survival. The writer included both the good and the bad aspects of the biblical characters introduced to us, warts and all. Structurally, Genesis is arranged around eleven separate units, each featuring the word “genealogy.” Genealogies figure prominently into the makeup of this book, and the reader soon gets introduced to the family-oriented predisposition of humankind. Genesis opens with the declaration that God created and ends with the declaration that Joseph died. The lesson is clear: all of us will eventually leave what God has created.

The Book of Psalms is universally held in very high esteem by both believers and non-believers. Of all the books in the Bible, Psalms has for centuries been a top candidate for “my favorite book.” Of the psalms, David is generally credited with 75, Asaph 12, and Moses one, possibly two. The sons of Korah may have written 11 of them. The rest are anonymous. The psalms, called *tehillim* in Hebrew, functioned as Israel’s hymnal. Several types are presented to us: lament, praise, imprecation, exhortation, etc. For the Church, this book is indispensable. It is the most frequently quoted Old Testament book by the New Testament authors. It contains several New Testament doctrines either outright or in germ form. Over the centuries, more sermons have been preached from the psalms than any other Old Testament book. Indeed, Martin Luther called them “the Bible in miniature.” The degree of affection for this book on the part of believers over the centuries can hardly be overestimated.

Yet another top tier candidate for “my favorite book” is that of Isaiah, for reasons not difficult to discern. The Book of Isaiah has been considered a masterpiece for centuries. Isaiah’s Hebrew is considered the most polished of all the Old Testament writers, for which he justifiably has been called “The William Shakespeare of the Old Testament.” Certain sections are positively magnificent in the Hebrew (i.e., 37:22ff). The question of Isaianic authorship of the entire book has been an object of sharp debate among scholars over the past 300 or so years. Conservative scholars credit him with writing the entire book; others see an additional hand at work in chapters 40-66; a smaller cadre see a third hand in 56-66. Regardless, this book has been held in the highest esteem since its inception. Of all the prophets, the New Testament writers quote Isaiah most frequently, especially in the messianic context. Interestingly, it is the Isaiah scroll among those of Dead Sea fame that is the most magnificently preserved, on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. It is considered one of the most priceless documents on earth today.

Mark is the shortest gospel at 661 verses. Most New Testament scholars believe Mark is also the first written gospel, although positive proof remains elusive. Whereas Matthew wrote for the Jew, Mark wrote for the Gentile, borne out by his tendency to explain Jewish customs to the reader (i.e., 7:3-4). That Mark had Roman readers in mind explains his tendency to inject Latin terms into his account (i.e., 15:16). Although his Greek may not be as polished as that of Matthew or Luke, Mark’s account nonetheless abounds in priceless details not found in the other two synoptics. His favorite word is *eutheos*, meaning “immediately”, found an astonishing 36 times. Because Mark is fond of the imperfect tense in Greek, the tense of continual motion, the Jesus of this gospel is in a state of perpetual motion, working miracle after miracle. Mark’s account may be short on parables, but it is long on action – and results.

GENESIS 12:1 – 19:29

BEGINNING THE LONG TREK

The call of Abram marks a crucial turning point in the book of Genesis. The focus of the story, up to this point, has been very broad, dealing with the universal themes of creation and the emergence of nations, but now it narrows down to a particular history which flows from the call of God to a single person. It is important to recognize the Bible's concern with families, with community. This is the starting point of the nation of Israel, and it reminds future generations that the foundational building blocks of their existence as a people were the families whose stories are told in these chapters. Family life is not idealized or romanticized in the Bible, and there are tensions, conflicts, and divisions within these groups, yet readers are taught that they emerged from what happened in the history of these families. Claus Westermann concludes that 'no other form of community can ever completely replace the family'.¹

It is extremely important to see the connection with what has gone before. The sharpening of focus, or the election of Abram, is not an end in itself, but part of a far wider purpose, embracing all peoples on earth. When Abram is told that his faith is the first step toward a time when 'all peoples' will be blessed (12:3), we are reminded of Genesis 10, which has already indicated God's loving concern for humankind as a whole. Divine election, then and now, retains its meaning only as long as those blessed by grace recognize their part in the bigger story of God's purpose for all humankind. This applies as much to the church as it did to ancient Israel, as Paul makes clear when he warns Gentile Christians against arrogance and insists on the imperative of continuing in the 'kindness ... of God'.²

¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, Augsburg Publishing, 1985, p23 ² Rom 11:17–24

GENESIS 20:1 – 28:9

GOD CAN BE TRUSTED!

God expresses His intentions to His people by making and keeping covenants with them. Covenants are evidence of the promises He has made, evidence that He can be relied upon. God made five key covenants: with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the world.¹ Over the next two weeks we will see the eternal and unbreakable power of God's covenant with Abraham. God's covenants are formal and legally binding oaths,² intended to remove every doubt and fear. All God's covenants are unilateral, meaning they are not usually conditioned upon anything that anyone else does.

Fears, insecurities, lies, deceit, impatience, instant gratification, presumption, and repeated mistakes hardly seem like the perfect ingredients to bring about God's perfect will and fulfillment of His covenants. Yet we will explore together how God used all of these things to bring about His perfect will. God has a plan and He will do whatever it takes to bring that plan to pass, without telling us how He will do it. That does not mean that God will trample on people and destroy them in the process. On the contrary, in using broken and flawed vessels, God will heal and restore us to display His glory to the world. He does not wait for individuals to be perfect before using them. God transforms the fearful into faith-filled, the insecure into bold, liars into people of truth, and the lustful and presumptuous into people of character and integrity. All of these attributes are developed in the individuals concerned because of God's amazing grace. God recognizes that mankind is deeply flawed. Astonishingly and thankfully, it is through His grace – the grace of the truly loving God and benevolent Father – that He stops at nothing to ensure that those who truly love Him are blessed so that they can each be a blessing to the world that God so deeply and dearly loves.

FOR FURTHER READING

Larry Richards, *Every Covenant and Promise in the Bible*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998

¹ Gen 9; Gen 12; Exod 19; 2 Sam 7; Matt 26:28 ² Heb 6:17

GENESIS 28:10 – 35:29

THE UNBREAKABLE PROMISE

I think it was Joyce Baldwin in one of her commentaries who first introduced me to the idea that God is the hero of the biblical narrative. It is an important corrective to studies of biblical characters, which easily become divorced from their original context and focus on moral lessons rather than God-centered truths. Jacob is such an interesting and complex character, but the main thing about his story is the God who chooses to work with him, making and repeating His promise. Another Old Testament scholar, Alec Motyer, provides the simple insight that one could summarize the whole story under the rubric, 'God makes and keeps promises'. In Genesis 28–35 the covenant promises of God are the reference point for each part of the story. It is the determination of God to keep His promise that makes sense of the Jacob story and ultimately makes sense of the big story and of our lives.

The grace of God in working out His promise is the other striking feature of these passages. There are some moments in this narrative that read like a TV soap. There is intrigue, infighting, deception, barefaced lying, and scheming. Just the ordinary lives of us sinners! God, however, works with this raw material, molding it and reshaping it to show that the work is His, not down to human ingenuity and ability and certainly not human righteousness. This wonder of grace continues in the church and in our individual lives. We don't parade our sinfulness as some sort of badge of honor; rather we glorify the kindness of God in using people like us to fulfill His promise, which will find completion in the new heaven and earth where righteousness does reign supreme.

If there is one thing to take from these stories it is renewed trust that what God has begun, He will bring to completion.

GENESIS 37–50

JOSEPH: THE TRUE STORY

Many people know the story of Joseph more from the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* than from the original account of his life in the Bible – or they think they do. There are some significant differences, however, in the way the story is told, not least in terms of its significance.

Joseph's is a moving personal story, full of lessons for our own lives. It is also a searingly honest account about a special family which knows the joys and challenges of family life. Chosen by God to play a significant role in the unfolding story of God's special covenant people, the dysfunctional family and its dynamics are laid bare. It reads at one level like a classic tragicomedy. The story, however, is not primarily about personal development or family life, but about God at work to achieve His own ends. He does so often through puzzling, mysterious circumstances and even through episodes that seem pointless. Only by looking back can the remarkable hand of God be traced as Joseph is betrayed by his brothers, his employer's wife, and a fellow ex-prisoner. Only by looking back can we see the purpose of the grief Jacob bore. Only on reflection can we discern the astonishing way in which God arranges for Joseph to become a power in a foreign land and for the children of Israel to arrive in Egypt during a time of desperation. The providence of God looms large over every aspect of the story.

Genesis ends with something of an unfulfilled longing. God has still not delivered on His promise that Israel would possess her own territory. Before the promise is met, there will be many years of oppression. That lies in the future. Looking back at the end of his life, Joseph is convinced that God will keep His word and 'will surely come to your aid' (50:24,25), because that is what he himself has experienced time and again throughout his life.

FOR FURTHER READING

RT Kendall, *God Meant it for Good*, Authentic, 2003

MARK 1:1 – 3:6

A BRILLIANT STORYTELLER

To write about Jesus is dangerous and difficult. Dangerous because I would hate to get anything wrong; difficult because we all know these stories so well. However, as I have worked on these chapters I have seen things I have never seen before. I have discovered how Mark is elliptical, often suggesting rather than explaining, inviting the reader to look beyond the surface meaning. He loves paradox and irony. At times the Greek text is more ambiguous than English translations might indicate.

I see in Mark parallel narratives: on the face of it there is a simple story, but underneath lies a dark theme. Mark keeps Jesus at the center of the story, but hostile elements lurk in the shadows. The Pharisees are watching, and in the background, there is also Herod Antipas, son of the Herod who tried to kill Jesus when He was a baby. Jesus was aware of these dangers, but He never let them deter Him from what the Father had sent Him to do. At the end of the Gospel, of course, the evil forces unwittingly join God's will when they send Jesus to the cross.

Jesus has entrusted the Good News to us fallible disciples. I have heard His voice as I write, sometimes encouraging me, sometimes holding me back. I have frequently used hymns to introduce the daily notes. My mother-in-law used to spend her quiet time at the piano; like her, I think hymns when I worship. The English language has a treasure-chest of magnificent, biblical hymns. I've received immeasurable help from Logos Software, which has made it possible for me to consult a wide variety of commentaries and dictionaries. I would single out the *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*,¹ which has helped me to visualize the story anew and to better appreciate the significance of Capernaum. The Jesus of Mark's Gospel is alive. I pray that He will speak to you through Mark, as He has spoken to me.

¹ Barry Beitzel, Lexham Press, 2018

MARK 3:7 – 6:29

DEMANDS OF DISCIPLESHIP

These chapters focus on the demands of discipleship. To emphasize what it means to follow Jesus, Mark weaves into his Gospel a series of narratives that highlight sharp contrast and heightened irony in the responses of various characters to the teachings and miracles of Jesus. In 3:7–35, we see the conflicts and opposition to the ministry of Jesus intensified. Both His family and the Pharisees sought to discredit Him by asserting that He is out of His mind and collaborating with Satan. This is contrasted with confession by evil spirits that Jesus is the Son of God. Then, in 4:35 – 6:6a, Jesus reaches out to a number of vulnerable individuals. He crosses boundaries that divide the disciples and the people, demonstrating His power and authority over the forces of nature, demons, illness, and even death. Yet when Jesus returns to His hometown, He is met with unbelief and rejection.

Through these accounts, Mark invites us to ponder our own journeys of faith. There are times when we may face conflicts and opposition in our service for the Lord. At other times, we may be discouraged because we may not see fruitful outcomes from our labor. Some people may even reject our message of the gospel. Yet we are called to be faithful disciples by bringing the message of the kingdom of God to all people. In doing so, we must be willing to cross the geographical, ethnic, religious, ritual, and gender boundaries that divide us.

Following Jesus is not an easy journey, but it is an exciting adventure. It involves taking risks. It involves getting out of our comfort zone to reach out to others. It calls for our obedience. It calls for our faithfulness. The demands are certainly high, but nothing is more fulfilling than to see lives being transformed into the likeness of Christ – both those to whom we reach out and our own. Come, let's follow Jesus!

ISAIAH 1–4

TRUTH, GRIEF AND HOPE: PART 1

Isaiah the son of Amoz (not to be confused with the prophet Amos) lived and worked during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. If he began toward the end of Uzziah's reign and continued to the middle of Hezekiah's reign, that covers a period of at least 40 years, possibly longer. He seems to have come from a wealthier and more socially influential background than many of the other prophets and was clearly well educated and certainly a trusted advisor of Hezekiah. 2 Chronicles 26:22 implies that he was a trained writer-historian and it could have been in that context that he began to function as a prophet, poet, and politician. His wife was also a prophetess (8:3) and his two sons, Shear-Jashub (7:3) and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (8:3) whose names, meaning 'a remnant will return' and 'swift to the spoil, speed the plunder' were used to emphasize Isaiah's message.

Walter Brueggemann sees 'the prophetic tasks of the church' as 'to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair'.¹ Anyone reading through the earlier chapters of Isaiah will see very clear examples of each of these tasks, though the concentration is more on the first two than the last. It will probably be a surprise to some people to see just how politically focused Isaiah's prophecies are! It may also be a surprise to realize how relevant they are in our world. There is a difference in that he was living among and speaking to a people who, as a nation, were in a covenant relationship with God, whereas we, as a nation, are not. Nevertheless, the principles of ethical behavior and of the consequences of failing to take God's requirements seriously speak very clearly to the world and to God's church today.

ISAIAH 5–12

TRUTH, GRIEF AND HOPE: PART 2

It is interesting how selective we often are as we read Scripture. Even those of us who really do want to take the Bible seriously tend to focus on passages that inspire and encourage us and to set aside passages which are not so affirming. Most of us, when reading Isaiah, skip very quickly to chapters 40–55 where the main emphasis is on hope for the future and where we can find a blessing for our own hearts in every chapter. We are tempted to ignore the fact that they are placed in the midst of, and need to be read in the context of, chapters 1–39 and 56–66, which are full of judgment and condemnation. If you ask people what they know of these particular chapters, it is likely that they will mention Isaiah's call in chapter 6 and the prophecies about the coming Messiah in 9:6 and 7 and chapter 11, but will rarely recall anything else. We assume that all the prophecies of hope and restoration will be literally fulfilled across the board. Some are tempted to disregard the literal fulfillment of the prophecies of destruction and annihilation referring to them as Isaiah's historical situation only. God, however, chose to include a large number of these judgment passages in His Word, and we must find ways of identifying how they too can speak to us as vitally as the verses of chapters 6, 9 and 11. Look out for the times when Isaiah is speaking the truth to a society that lives in illusion and think about how we can speak that truth in our societies.¹ Look out for when Isaiah grieves in a society that practices denial and take time to grieve for our world. Look out too, for his proclamation of hope to a despairing society, and think about the hope that we can proclaim.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, see note for Introduction to Isaiah 1–4 on page 76