

A Guided Walk-Through the Biblical Narrative

A synopsis of Genesis 1-11

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The pinnacle of this good creation was humanity; made in his image and given the glorious task of ruling everything as his royal representatives. The description of the garden – a slice of God's order in the uncultivated world – reinforces the special vocation human beings have been given. Alongside this vocation the Lord has given them wide permission as well as a single prohibition to observe. Tempted to question God's good intentions to them they transgress the prohibition, pervert the permission, and neglect their vocation and are driven from the garden.

This is not, however, the end of God's plans or of his commitment to them. In judgment there is grace, but destructive power of sin escalates until the whole the world is destroyed. Even this doesn't wash away the problem of the human heart and soon the world returns to its rebellious ways. Given God's commitment not to destroy the world again, the question becomes, what will he do to bring about his purposes in an unfaithful world?

The answer begins with Abram...

Part 4

16. Nehemiah 8:1-12

Why this text is important to the narrative.

In the aftermath of the exile the people of Israel appear to be changed. The new community of faith is centred on the rebuilt temple, representing their commitment to their relationship with the Lord. This text is one of the high points in post-exilic Israel as the people, not the leadership, request that the Law be read (and it is not read at the temple, but at a regular gate in the city) and, when it is read (and explained), they respond with contrite hearts and a renewed commitment to the things of God!

Have things finally turned the corner? (Spoiler alert: No!).

For further reading:

a. Haggai 1:1-15. This opening prophetic from Haggai to the post-exilic community demonstrates that not everything is rosy. The temple, which had begun to be rebuilt, had been put on hold until the people had gotten their economic feet under them. This natural prioritising was confronted by the prophet.

What is remarkable is that the people respond to the prophetic word and complete the temple! Rejecting the prophetic word was one of the reasons for the exile in the first place – it is a promising response to God's command.

b. Nehemiah 13:6-22. Nehemiah, the Jewish governor who had been responsible for rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem (which also functioned as a symbol for the rebuilt faithful community – another of Nehemiah's passions). These brief stories are a depressing ending to a promising story. While the problems are different to the idolatry of the kings, the hearts of the people still do not appear to have been "fixed" (as in "fixed to God").

c. Malachi 1:2-5, 6-14. These oracles are some of the latest in the Old Testament (there is internal evidence that Malachi may have ministered in the 5th century B.C.). These oracles paint a picture of a community of faith that is still "kicking against the goads" – the opening

question in the first disputation (the primary form Malachi uses) places the following question on Israel's lips: "How have you loved us?". How have you loved us!?! Really? After all this time, this is still a question?

17. Psalm 2

Why this text is important to the narrative.

One of the themes that began to be developed in the post-exilic period was the Messianic hope. The term "messiah" means "anointed one" and its roots lie in the monarchy (though priests were also anointed). Psalm 2 – purposefully placed second in the Psalter – demonstrates the second way God is at work in the world. (The first psalm places the Law at the top of that list!): through his king. This psalm was no doubt used in ascension liturgies with the kings of Israel, but it began to take on greater significance as it pointed forward to the king that would come. It is through the king that God's rule on the earth is made clear; the king is the Lord's representative.

For further reading:

a. Psalm 110. This is another well-known Messianic psalm (frequently quoted by Jesus and the New Testament authors).

18. 1 Chronicles 11:1-9

Why this text is important to the narrative.

The books of Chronicles, written in the post-exilic period, outlines a paradigm for how the people ought to live while they waited for the promises of God to be fulfilled. After the longest genealogical account in all of Scripture, the narrator begins the story of Israel, not with Abraham, or Moses, but with David – not the first king of Israel, but the one by whom all others were evaluated.

This is a striking place to start and places the hope for a king like David (and Solomon). The stories of David (and Solomon) focus on his faithfulness with his failings largely ignored. These failures were well-known, and the narrator isn't trying to rewrite David's history. Instead, he is presenting an idealised portrait of the future and the kind of leadership the people truly need.

For further reading:

a. 1 Chronicles 15:1-29. It is difficult to miss the focus on the temple throughout Chronicles. This points to a central feature of his programmatic history: the community of faith ought to be rightly organised around a heightened commitment to worship.

b. 2 Chronicles 20:1-30. While there are many other prayers in Chronicles, this one has been chosen as a prime example of how the community of faith must also be a community of prayer while they wait.

19. Psalm 73

Why this text is important to the narrative.

This is a slight detour before we turn to the New Testament, but it introduces an important theme: the suffering of the righteous. This psalm is one of the most exquisite examples of a faithful response to this reality of life. The problem of the righteous suffering (or the wicked prospering) is that it's supposed to be the other way around! The righteous should surely prosper (as Psalm 1 seems to affirm). In Psalm 73 the psalmist describes how his feet nearly slipped (a metaphor for losing his faith) as he saw how well the wicked did and how poorly he was doing! The change comes when he enters the temple and remembers two points of faith: that God will judge and, perhaps more importantly, that it is better to be with God even if he is suffering! This is the primary position of faith.

For further reading:

- a. Job. This is a long reading, but it outlines the same issue raised by Psalm 73. The central question is not actually about the suffering of the righteous, but whether God is worth loving even if the righteous suffer. This transcends the question of why the righteous suffer and outlines how they are to live in the midst of their suffering.
- b. Habakkuk. This is shorter reading that reflects again on this issue. The prophet ends in the same spot – regardless of what he sees and experiences he will trust the Lord.

20. Luke 3:21-38

Why this text is important to the narrative.

This genealogy is important because it connects Jesus to the promises made to David, to Abraham, and to the purposes of God in creation. The story of Jesus, which Luke is about to recount, begins with the creation of the world (and all that implies!).

For further reading:

- a. Matthew 1:1-17. Matthew's genealogy connects Jesus' story to David and to Abraham, but also demonstrates the perfect timing of God – fourteen generations (twice seven) between major events.