

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...

1. Genesis 12:1-7

Why this text is important to the narrative.

This is the beginning of the action of Scripture and it begins with a promise. Or rather, a series of promises! The Lord calls Abram (whose name would be changed to Abraham in Genesis 17:5) to leave his country, people, and father's household to go to a land he would be shown. No reason is given for this choice; Abram hasn't done anything to warrant his selection.

The Lord makes a series of promises to him (which will be reiterated to his son, Isaac, and grandson, Jacob). The theme of the promises is blessing which must be seen in light of the curses in Genesis 1-11. The Lord will bless Abram, make his descendants into a great nation, give them the land of Canaan, and through them bless the whole world.

Abram's obedience to the command is an expression of trust but comes after the promises are given. One of the themes in the stories of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) is that the blessing of the Lord is not realised by their obedience nor threatened by their disobedience but is dependent on the character of the one who made the promises.

For further reading:

The following form the essentials to the patriarchal narratives. The primary tension is the provision of an heir and the many threats to the promise of God. Even though God isn't mentioned in all the stories he is still the main character and his faithfulness to his promises, especially to bless those who bless the patriarchs and curse those who curse them, continues to be the theme.

a. Genesis 15:1-15. In this text the Lord makes a covenant with Abram. A covenant formalises a relationship (think a modern day contract where two parties agree to certain responsibilities and obligations). Here the Lord reaffirms his promises to Abram. The curious ritual they perform – cutting animals in half and passing between them – was the ancient equivalent of "cross my heart and hope to die". The Lord makes a solemn vow to fulfill his promises. Abram is not asked to do anything though it should be noted that he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6; See Romans 4:1-5).

b. Genesis 17:1-27. In this text the Lord again reaffirms his promises and the covenant. This time he gives Abram a new name and male circumcision as the sign of the covenant.

c. Genesis 22:1-19. This text narrates the testing of Abraham. The promise heir has finally been born and the Lord commands Abraham to take Isaac and sacrifice him to the Lord. Abraham obeys but the Lord stops him before he kills his son and reaffirms his promise to bless all nations through him.

d. Genesis 28:10-22. Isaac and Rebekah, his wife, have two sons – non-identical twins. The younger son, Jacob, is the one through whom the blessing of the Lord will be realised. After having deceived both his brother and his father, Jacob flees to his relatives in the north. Along the way he sees a vision of the Lord where the promises of God to Abraham and Isaac are spoken to him. In response, Jacob makes a deal with God – to make the Lord his God if he would look after him! Eventually the Lord holds him to the deal (see Genesis 35:1-7) though notice that Jacob and his family still had idols in their possession – the blessing is not threatened by their unfaithfulness or realised by their faithfulness, but is based on the character the promise-maker!

The remainder of Genesis is taken up primarily with the account of Joseph, the beloved son of Jacob who is sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers but who rises to prominence due to the Lord's influence. Joseph is an example of how Abraham's descendants will be a blessing to the nations since he is responsible for feeding the whole region during a severe famine. Eventually his brothers are reconciled to him and Jacob and his whole household (now numbering in the seventies) relocate to Egypt.

2. Exodus 3:1-15

Why this text is important to the narrative.

Time has passed and, just as the Lord promised, the seventy descendants of Jacob have multiplied and have become numerous. So numerous in fact, that the Egyptians have become fearful of them and have enslaved them. In their hardship they cried out and the Lord remembered his covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and so he sends Moses to rescue the people from Egypt and to bring them up the land he had promised them.

The exodus is the definitive act of salvation in the Old Testament. This is reflected throughout the Old Testament in the phrase, "I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt."

The important thing to remember about this rescue is that it is linked to the purposes of the Lord expressed in his promises to Abraham: to bless all nations through Abraham's descendants.

For further reading:

a. Exodus 12:1-13. The Israelites' exodus from Egypt was preceded by a context between the Lord and the gods of Egypt (including Pharaoh). One after another, the plagues demonstrated the singular greatness of the Lord and his protection of Israel. In the final plague, the death of the firstborn sons throughout Egypt, the people of Israel were to put the blood of a lamb on their doorposts. When the angel of death saw it, he would pass over their homes. The Passover festival, remembering God's deliverance and protection, was a central festival of Israel.

b. Exodus 16:1-12. It becomes clear, very early on, that the people of Israel were going to find trusting in the Lord difficult. Even though they had seen such amazing wonders in Egypt and at the Red Sea, they grumble against the Lord and complain about their need. In response, the Lord provides them with bread from heaven; manna. Every day in their wilderness journey the manna fell with the dew and provided them with food in their travels.

3. Exodus 19:1-8

Why this text is important to the narrative.

As he promised Moses, the Lord brought Israel to Mount Sinai, where the purpose of their rescue comes into focus. It is his intention to enter into a covenant relationship with the people of Israel in which he, the Lord, will be their god (doing and providing all the things that the gods were supposed to do and provide) and they will be his people. More specifically, they will be his treasured possession (like the crown jewels, a physical representation of God's authority in the world), a kingdom of priests (mediating his blessing to the world and teaching the nations to live according to his ways), and a holy nation (which is more about being separated for a purpose with only some emphasis on moral purity). The people of Israel were to be a living, breathing, display home demonstrating to the whole world what it looked like to live in relationship with the one, true God and inviting them to do the same in order that they experience the blessing of God. This is the Lord's intention for the descendants of Abraham – and the people agree to his plan!

For further reading:

a. Exodus 20:1-17. The Ten Commandments function a little bit like an executive summary of the ways in which the Israelites were to live – as the Lord's people. It is critical to recognise that the Law was given after their rescue. It was, first of all, an example of grace and, second, the conditions in which the relationship with the Lord would flourish, not the conditions which initiated it. As an analogy, think of marriage vows which are the conditions within which the relationship will flourish.

b. Exodus 25:1-9. One of the most important emphases in Exodus is the construction of the tabernacle; the travelling temple in which the presence of the Lord would dwell with his people. It was a bit like a new Eden where the Lord would, once again, dwell with his faithful people. Or at least that was the plan.

c. Exodus 34:1-7. As Moses goes up Mount Sinai to receive instructions about their life with God (and the tabernacle) the people almost immediately turn to idolatry. They make an idol in the shape of a golden calf and engage in revelry. This breaks the covenant, threatens their existence, and, therefore, the very purposes of God.

In the aftermath of this apostasy, the Lord forgives his people and renews the covenant. It is here that the Lord also describes himself – one of the most important revelations of the divine character in the Old Testament and one that is reflected on in multiple places.

d. Exodus 40:34-38. Not only was the covenant renewed but the tabernacle was also constructed. The Lord would still dwell with his people, even though they were unlikely to be faithful. This commitment of the faithful Lord to an unfaithful people is an important extension of grace (and a consistent pattern).

4. Leviticus 19

Why this text is important to the narrative.

At first glance this chapter appears to more than earn its title: "Various Laws". It includes all sorts of laws about all sorts of things: fellowship offerings, harvest practices, social regulations, etc. What makes this such an important chapter is that it is anything but a miscellany of random laws.

It is, in fact, a demonstration that every single facet of life was to reflect the relationship with the Lord. How they worship, how they work, how they dress, how they treat others, and more. Everything was to be holy. It was the separate life they were to live – according to the values, attitudes, priorities, and behaviours of God himself.

5. Deuteronomy 1:19-2:7

Why this text is important to the narrative.

The book of Deuteronomy is a summary of Moses' last words to Israel. This text is an account of what was narrated in Numbers 13-14. The people, having been brought to the very edge of the Promised Land, failed to trust God's ability to fulfill his promise to give them a place to live. This failure brought a judgment on the whole generation who came up out of Egypt; they would die in the wilderness and the Lord would bring their children into the land. Only Caleb and Joshua would live to see the land (because they trusted the Lord's ability). Moses summarises their forty years of wandering in the wilderness by focusing on the Lord's provision – even in judgment he has not abandoned his people!