



**Churches 4 All**

Whimble - Talaton  
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# **Sermon Series June/July 2016**

# **The Bible's Big Story**





# The Bible's Big Story

## Introduction: reclaiming the Bible's big 'Narrative.'

How do you see the Bible? Is it just a random collection of books? A lot of rules and regulations, lists of commands to be obeyed? Or of creeds—lists of things to be believed? Or instructions for living in our complex world? Or is it something that has been broken into fragments so that we can use the pieces for literary criticism, or for moral teaching, devotion or theological study? Whilst there are passages that may do all of these things, much of what we call the Bible—the Old and New Testaments—is neither a rule book nor a manual; it is narrative, a 'big story', or collection of stories within a coherent whole.

And it is 'story' that gives meaning to the events of our lives; we all depend on some kind of story to provide a broader framework for our lives. The story which gives our particular life its meaning might just be our own life story; or it might be the story of my town or country – (very important if you are Welsh!) or it might be bigger even than this. Leslie Newbigin puts it like this: *'The way we understand human life depends on the conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life is a part?'* As humans, he would argue, we need a *big* story as a way of understanding the way the world actually is: without one, life is reduced to a random series of meaningless events. So is there *one* story that provides a framework of meaning for everyone, everywhere?

Our society is both pluralist and secular. For the more 'secular', there is no 'grand narrative': *'your truth is your truth and mine is mine'* and they are equally valid. Others, however, would still lay claim to having the one big story. Christians, Muslims, those who believe that human reason will ultimately triumph through science and technology all claim that their story gives meaning to individual lives and communities. But these big stories can't co-exist – choices need to be made. The Bible claims to be the one true story of the world and its universal history, most fully demonstrated in Jesus, who claimed to be God on earth. N T Wright says *'The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth.'* He goes on to say that God gives us so much narrative in the Scriptures because stories invite us to come into a different world: *'You invite them to share a world-view or better still a 'God-view'.*

This sermon series is about finding that big story in the Bible. Recognising too that, as players ourselves, and in continuity with the actors in previous acts, we have a part to play in shaping what happens next in the unfolding drama: which is God acting in history for the salvation of the world and the establishment of his Kingdom.

Bible readings for Sunday May 29th:

Genesis 1:1-31 and Revelation 22:12-21 (Bookends!)

Questions for reflection, to help us find our place in the story:

- Imagine this scene: *a florist delivers a beautiful bouquet to a woman at her doorstep, but when she reads the card that comes with the flowers, she faints dead away. What stories would give this event meaning?*
- Do you think that people in the western world today have a basic world story? What would the outline of that story look like if it was expressed as answers to these questions?
  - Who am I? i.e. what does it mean to be human?
  - Where am I? i.e. what are the origins of our world?
  - What's wrong? i.e. why does the world seem in such a mess?
  - What's the remedy? i.e. can humans fix the world's problems?
  - 'What time is it?' i.e. where do we fit in?
- How would a Christian answer those questions?
- Do you think the Bible has a 'Big story'? If so, what do you think it is?

# Overview of the Bible as a six Act play/drama:

**Act 1: GOD CREATES:** God establishes his kingdom

**Act 2: MAN UNMAKES:** The Fall - Rebellion in the Kingdom

**Act 3: GOD PERSISTS:** God chooses Israel, through whom he plans to restore the Kingdom

*Act 3 scene 1:* A people for the king

*Act 3 scene 2:* A land for his people

**Interlude** – when God goes quiet (The inter-testamental period)

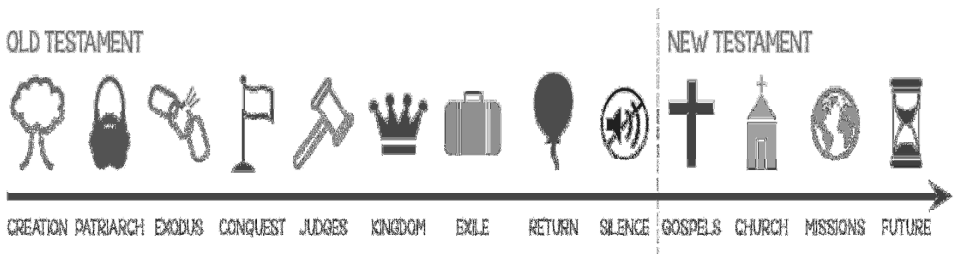
**Act 4: CHRIST REDEEMS:** The coming of the King (Jesus)

**Act 5: MAN REPENTS:** The Mission of the Church – to spread the news of the King

*Act 5 scene 1:* From Jerusalem to Rome

*Act 5 scene 2:* And into all the world

**Act 6: THE KINGDOM FULLY COMES:** The return of the King – redemption completed



# Act I: GOD CREATES: – God establishes his kingdom

God creates and declares it 'good'. He creates humankind and puts them into a wonderful garden. Humans are given their identity as wonderful creatures within this wonderful God-given world. This good God gifts this wonderful place for them to be, giving them commands and responsibilities: but then they blow it big time and get kicked out of the garden. Does this sound familiar? Of course... it's not only Israel's story, Israel's experience (as we shall see in Act 3) but our story, our experience. Genesis is narrative, not science; and the story highlights some important themes:

- Who is God? God is the artist of creation, the source of everything – and he is good, kind, wise, powerful and sovereign. He is 'completely other' in that he stands apart from all he has made – eternal, mysterious and uncreated, yet is connected to it and has willed it into life, reigning over his Kingdom in a deeply personal way. He walks with his creation, showing intimate and personal concern for the needs of humankind. He is a creator who invites us into a relationship.
- Who are we? Humankind is the high point of God's creation. We are not random products of time and chance but are designed and made by God to be part of his creation and to work with our creator, being fashioned in his own image to reflect something of his inexpressible glory. We are distinct, from other creatures as well as from each other. We are male and female, so that we stand in relationship to one another, as well as to God.
- What has God made? In Genesis we get a glimpse of the way the world was meant to be: glorious in colour, joy, beauty, texture, variety, and harmony and free from damage, pollution, pain, sin and death. We therefore also catch a glimpse of humankind's stewardship responsibility towards all that God created.

Bible readings for Sunday June 5th:  
Genesis 2: 4-25 and John 1:1-14

Questions for reflection, to help us find our place in the story:

- Genesis shows us that God is intimately concerned with his creation. What are the dangers of losing sight of this and seeing God as remote and vaguely 'up there somewhere?'
- What would it mean for us to live day by day believing ourselves (and each other) to be the masterpieces of God's creative work? What does it mean for us that we are made in God the creator's own image?
- What does Genesis mean for us in terms of our responsibility to the created world – countryside, oceans, forests, as well as to the economic and political structures that affect the created world?
- How does Genesis inform our answers to the questions - Who am I? Where am I?

## **Act 2: MAN UNMAKES: The Fall – rebellion in the kingdom**

God gives humans the freedom to obey or defy him. We can choose to live under his rule and reign and experience life and peace; or we can choose to be autonomous, a law unto ourselves. As Adam and Eve succumb to the temptation to the latter, they realise it brings disastrous consequences. 'Sin' manifests itself as rebellion (disbelieving their wise and loving Father who plans only good for them). Down the ages, now, we are tempted to find other 'gods' – like money, pleasure, knowledge etc. - and succumb to the desire for autonomy: to play at being God. Sin results in a damaged and distorted creation.

At the heart of this temptation to autonomy is a lie sold to humanity by one who seeks to kill, steal and destroy. It's a lie that distorts and undermines the truth of who God really is and what he has said. *'Did God really say...?'* It's a lie that ignores the penalty for disobedience – *'You will not surely die.'* It's a lie that damages our relationship with God (so that we feel the need to hide from him - *'I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid'*) and with each other (*'she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.'*) It's a lie that ignores the wide-ranging freedom and permission that God gives us to explore the goodness of his garden. It's a lie that undermines our identity as beloved children of God. When our image of God is distorted by lies about his character, the way we see the world is also skewed and our relationship with God and with others lacks a true foundation.

Things get so bad that God brings about the flood. But his promise to Eve was that her offspring would overcome the serpent's offspring. Through a line of 'promise-bearers' (beginning with Abel and his brother Seth continuing down through his line to Noah) will come the King who will reign for ever. Through Noah, God renews his gracious commitment to his original purposes for creation and a remnant (of humans and creatures) remains in the ark. From Noah's son Shem will come Abraham, from whose family will come the promised 'Messiah'.

Bible readings for Sunday June 12th:  
Genesis 3:1-15 & Luke 4:1-13

Questions for reflection, to help us find our place in the story:

- How do you imagine God? In what ways might your image of God been 'distorted' - for example, by lies you may have been sold as to who God is and what he has said? Can you see yourself as his beloved child?
- 'Sin' is often regarded as something trivial, like eating a biscuit when on a diet. How does seeing sin as rebellion, idolatry and the desire for autonomy change the way we regard it?
- In what ways have God's good gifts (food, drink, sex, work, leisure etc.) and our human relationships (family, marriage, friendships etc.) been distorted by sin?

## **Act 3: GOD PERSISTS: God chooses Israel, through whom he plans to restore the Kingdom**

The history of Israel is a very long one and is obviously very difficult to squeeze into 2 short Sunday sermon slots! So, what follows is a very 'bird's eye view' of around 2000 years of God's dealings with his people.

*Scene 1 – a people for the King:*

Noah responds to God's command to *'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'* and the population grows into one big family with one common language. But, unsurprisingly, the people's sinful desire for autonomy from God causes them to build the tower of Babel, *'that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'* God scatters the people and confuses their language: but again, he remains steadfast in pursuing his purposes for creation.



He chooses Abraham and calls him to a land he will show him. He makes a solemn agreement with Abraham and through this 'covenant' we begin to see God's response to what has gone wrong with his creation: *'I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'* (Gen 12:1-3). God will establish his own people among the nations and will bless them so that they will be a blessing to others. God has not given up on the world or its people. His plan is secure: to redeem the whole of creation, and this he now promises to do through one man (Abraham) and one nation (Israel).

The promise is a long time coming for old Abraham and his barren wife, but Abraham believes God (which is *'credited to him as righteousness'*) and God renews the covenant through Abraham's son Isaac, and through Isaac's son Jacob. Jacob has a famous son, Joseph (remember the technicolour dreamcoat!) Joseph is sold as a slave by his brothers and taken to Egypt where, through his God-given ability to interpret dreams, he ends up as Pharaoh's No.2, helping him plan for the forthcoming famine that Pharaoh has dreamt about. Joseph's brothers come looking for food in Egypt and there is a 'Long-lost family' happy ending. Joseph suffers unjustly at the hands of his brothers, yet he redeems their lives by forgiving them (ring any bells?)

Four hundred years after Abraham, God's people are still in Egypt! Joseph's and his brothers' descendants have multiplied according to God's promise, and a new Pharaoh subjects them to slavery. They cry out for deliverance, and God calls Moses (whose story is miraculous in itself) to confront Pharaoh, who refuses to let the people go. God sends plagues to convince Pharaoh of his sovereignty over creation and eventually Pharaoh relents. He makes a final desperate attempt to go after them but loses his army as God parts the sea to deliver his people. This deliverance from slavery and oppression becomes the basis for the annual feast of Passover (so called because the Israelites mark their doors with the blood of a lamb so that God will 'pass over' them when the final plague, death of the first-born, comes). This Passover event profoundly shapes both the calendar and memory of the Israelites.

Moses leads them through the wilderness, and it's not long before they are complaining about the lack of bread and water: so God miraculously provides bread from heaven (manna) and water from the rock. Three months after leaving Egypt, at Mount Sinai, God again reveals his desire to be in relationship with his people: for them to be his treasured possession and a kingdom of priests, a

holy nation, bringing blessing to the whole earth. He therefore gives them the 10 commandments and 'the law' to live by and instructs Moses to build the tabernacle (and the Ark of the Covenant to hold the 2 stone tablets with the 10 commandments on) in which God is able to dwell among his people and be worshipped. Despite another rebellious moment when the Israelites worship a golden calf, God forgives and comes to dwell with his people in the tabernacle. Adam and Eve, banished from the Garden, lose God's presence. Now, God allows his chosen people to experience his presence once more. They have 1) been redeemed from slavery by God's intervention; 2) been brought back to their loving Father and bound to him in a covenant; and 3) are favoured by God's own presence in their midst. Redemption – Covenant – Presence.

But God hasn't called his people to live in the desert. He promised Abraham that he would give them their own land and he now leads them through the desert towards it (the book of Numbers). The difficulty of travelling through the wilderness throws the Israelites into an almighty grump. God's anger consumes some of the camp but he relents when Moses intercedes. Spies are sent into the promised land but, whilst it looks extremely fertile and desirable, fear abounds because it is occupied by powerful and well-fortified peoples. Fear causes faith to collapse and they become depressed and angry that God has brought them this far only for them to die. Moses again intercedes for them but God makes them wait 40 more years in the wilderness until the faithless generation has died out.

After 40 years, the Israelites have reached the plains of Moab on the border of Canaan (the promised land). Moses preaches to the people (Deuteronomy) to equip them to be ready to enter it and to learn from their past failures. Joshua is appointed as Moses's successor and, following Moses's death, is commissioned to lead the people into the land God has promised through Abraham.

God has selected his cast (the Israelites) and given them their lines to learn (the law). He is now about to put them on the world stage!

Bible readings for Sunday 19th June (on the day away):  
Genesis 12:1-5 & Exodus 19:3-6

Questions for reflection, to help us find our place in the story:

- God's people, the Israelites, were redeemed from slavery, bound to God in covenant and enjoyed God's presence with them in the camp (tabernacle). Redemption – Covenant – Presence. How is this true for God's people today?

- We are very different from the ancient Israelites: but in what ways do we share with them something of the same calling, the same purpose?
- How might the idea that God's people are 'blessed to be a blessing' influence the way you look at your own life?

## Scene 2 – a land for his people:

God has formed a people for himself. He now is about to bless them by giving them the land he promised, where they can fulfil their call to be a blessing to the nations. Joshua sends more spies into the land of Canaan and their report is favourable. The Israelites set off for their new homeland and the Ark of the Covenant holds back the waters of the river Jordan so they can cross. Trusting in God's provision and guidance, Joshua leads Israel to take the land bit by bit, beginning with Jericho. (Only Rahab the prostitute and her family, who housed some of the Israelite spies, are spared.) The book of Joshua records how the Israelite armies continue to take possession of the land, dividing it between the 12 tribes, and ends with the Israelites firmly established in Canaan. The stage is set for Israel to live as a light to the nations, a foretaste of what God intends for his whole creation. Will they live up to the challenge?

Joshua dies and is not replaced. Israel falls into idolatry, worshipping Baal and other gods. Because of her disobedience, God hands Israel over to her enemies until such time as they are ready to turn back to him: at which point they cry out for deliverance from their oppressors and God raises up a military leader (a 'Judge') to deliver them. All is well for a while but then, when the Judge has died and Israel has forgotten the lesson, the pattern repeats: disobedience, oppression, repentance, deliverance. By the time of the last Judge, Samson, the cycle has worsened to the extent that Israel is in civil war and the Ark, which has become a sort of lucky battle charm, is stolen by the Philistines - but is returned because it causes havoc in their camp!

Israel's descent into chaos is, in their eyes, because they, unlike their neighbours, have no king to lead them: so they cry to God for one. The book of Samuel begins with the story of Hannah, who is barren, praying for a son. Samuel is born; she consecrates him to God, who appoints him as priest, prophet and king-maker, who will appoint Israel's first king. It's a big deal – if Israel is to be a light to the nations, they must be *different* from the surrounding nations. But in asking for a king, they want to be like the others. Through Samuel, the Lord warns Israel of the dangers of a human king, but they are adamant and God grants their request.

It is God, however, who will choose Israel's first two kings - Saul and his successor David - through Samuel's anointing, establishing the mortal king as *'the Lord's anointed one'*.

When Saul finally loses the plot, David succeeds him. According to God, David *'is a man after my own heart'*, mighty in battle even against Goliath the Philistine giant (see 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 Kings). God covenants with David, as he did with Abraham, to make his name great and establish his dynasty; Israel is now poised, as a kingdom, to be a light to the nations. David will lead them to be a holy nation and a priestly kingdom. Will the *kingdom* of Israel live up to the challenge?

Things go well initially, but David is a sinner like the rest of us (a murderer and an adulterer) and 2 Samuel is a catalogue of his errors of judgement. Psalm 51 is the heartfelt cry of David, crushed under the weight of his guilt. God forgives him, of course, but sin always has consequences and the consequences of David's actions make grim reading. His son Solomon succeeds him as king and pleases God by asking for wisdom rather than wealth. He gets both from God and becomes legendary for both (see Proverbs and Ecclesiastes). Solomon's greatest achievement is building the Temple in Jerusalem (aka Zion), which also houses the Ark of the Covenant. As the ark is brought in, *'the glory of the Lord filled the temple'*.

This is a good time in Israel's history – she is stable, prosperous and peaceful, and God dwells in her midst. Jerusalem becomes a place of pilgrimage. As pilgrims walk up the hill to the temple, they sing a Psalm (Song) of ascents (e.g. see Psalms 120 to 134). Perhaps now Israel can fulfil her calling and draw the nations to God?

Unfortunately, like his father, Solomon isn't perfect either. He doesn't oppose the worship of God at places where other gods have previously been worshipped; he uses forced labour to build the Temple (which the people come to resent) and he takes many non-Israelite wives, opening the door to idolatry, which angers God. God promises to remove much of the kingdom from Solomon's family and, after his death, the kingdom of Israel splits into two: a northern kingdom (called 'Israel' and ruled by King Jeroboam) and a southern kingdom (called 'Judah' and ruled by King Rehoboam, Solomon's son). The split is caused when Solomon's heir, Rehoboam, rejects the northern tribes' request to lighten the burden of forced labour imposed by his father Solomon (1 Kings 12). How can God's people fulfil their calling now? Israel and Judah regard each other as enemies.

### *What happens to the northern kingdom of Israel?*

King Jeroboam's problem is that God 'lives' in the Temple in Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah. If he allows his people to travel south to worship, he fears they will end up giving their allegiance to Rehoboam, king of Judah, thereby undermining his rule of the northern kingdom. So he allows the worship of other gods – 2 golden calves, repeating the sins of his ancestors at Mount Sinai. His successors follow suit, reaching a particularly low point when Ahab becomes king and marries the Baal worshipper Jezebel. They are brazen in their rebellion against God, who raises up Elijah the prophet to confront them. The climax is the confrontation between Baal and God on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), which of course God wins. He uses Elijah, and Elisha his successor, to demonstrate that he, not Baal, is the Lord who overcomes hunger, thirst, drought, debt, disease, infertility and death. Will Israel return to God? In a nutshell 'No', despite the warnings of prophets like Amos and Hosea (who likens Israel to a wife who has become a prostitute).

The northern kingdom comes to an end when it is overrun by the Assyrians, the great Middle Eastern empire of the day, in 722BC. God's people are carted off to exile there and suffer again the consequences of their rebellion against God and betrayal of his covenant. After all, God is a jealous God. If I carried a picture of another woman around in my wallet, my wife would be hurt and angry. So is God when other things/gods/people are the object of his people's affections.

But does Judah fare any better?

### *What happens to the southern kingdom of Judah?*

Like Israel, Judah has a succession of kings, some good, some bad. For a while, Judah remains unconquered largely because of two particular kings who seek to honour God – Hezekiah and Josiah. But Hezekiah's successor promotes idolatry, despite warnings from the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and Habbakuk, and Judah is overrun by the new super-power of the day, the Babylonians, who have also overtaken Assyria. Most of God's people from the southern kingdom are marched off to be slaves in Babylon in 587BC. This exile is a re-enactment of the original Fall from Paradise. The Temple, built to represent the Garden of Eden, even with pomegranates carved on its walls, is destroyed. The glory, the presence of God, which filled the Temple, is taken away. The people are banished from God's land, as Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden.

It would be understandable if the big story were to end here. What a mess God's people have made of things; what hope is there for them? The curtain has come down prematurely on their dreadful performance on the world stage. And what of God, whose 'house' in Jerusalem has been destroyed? Has his purpose in redeeming creation through Israel failed? Thankfully, God is still God and, despite the disobedience of his people, his purposes endure. Throughout the turbulent and difficult periods of Israel's and Judah's histories, God punctuates the darkness and prophecies of doom with messages of hope through his appointed prophets, such as Isaiah (the 'Servant songs'), Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who suggest that the exile is not the end. God's promises to Abraham and to David remain: and he always keeps his promises!

### *Life in Babylon*

How catastrophic is the exile to Babylon for God's people! (See the book of Lamentations and some Psalms e.g. Psalms 80 and 137, the latter being a big hit for Boney M in the late 1970s!) Jeremiah and Ezekiel bring words of comfort and hope from God to the exiles, but they must learn to be a minority in a foreign land, as they had been under the Pharaohs in Egypt. Daniel and his friends refuse the idolatry that King Nebuchadnezzar tries to impose and God rescues them from the king's punishment in the lion's den. As a result, they are promoted to positions of influence in the Babylonian government.

In 539BC, the Persian king Cyrus conquers Babylon and God moves his heart to decree that the Temple can be rebuilt: so he allows some of the Israelites to return to Jerusalem. Some do, but not all. One of Cyrus's successors, King Xerxes, takes Esther as his queen. She exposes a plot by Haman, the highest ranking official of the king, to have the remaining Israelites killed because one of them, Mordecai, will not betray God by paying homage to Haman. With the plot exposed, Haman is hanged, Mordecai is promoted and the Israelites remaining in Babylon are spared. God's hand is again at work to deliver his people. Those who have returned to Jerusalem set about rebuilding the altar of the God of Israel, a powerful symbol of God's presence with his people, and then start to rebuild the Temple. The project suffers from local and international opposition but, spurred on by prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah, the Temple is completed in 516BC, some twenty years after the return from exile.

Will the Israelites fare any better this time in remaining faithful to their God, serving only him and being the 'light for the nations' that God intends? Well, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah show the roles that these two prominent men

played in keeping the Israelites 'on track'. Ezra the priest leads them into repentance for allowing inter-marriage between God's own people and foreigners (opening again the door to idolatry), and dissolves these marriages. And Nehemiah returns from Babylon to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, achieving this despite huge opposition. Ezra gathers the people and reads to them from the law of Moses. The people weep from a deep sense of their sin as they hear it and pray fervently that God will renew his covenant with his people, despite their persistent unfaithfulness.

So, what does the future hold for the Israelites? Things are looking up but, although the nation has been physically restored to the land, politically and religiously it remains a nation in exile; they occupy the land but only at the pleasure of their foreign/pagan rulers. The rebuilt Temple is but a shadow of its former glory and God's presence is distinctly absent. But God's reputation among the nations of the world is at stake: so it is that the prophets declare that, because God reigns, his purposes must triumph. Jeremiah speaks of a 'new covenant'; Ezekiel speaks of a 'new Temple' and a 'new Spirit'; Isaiah prophesies the coming of the suffering servant who will truly be a light to the nations, and Daniel prophesies the establishment of an everlasting kingdom for one like 'the Son of Man'. The best is yet to come! The hearts of the people really will turn at last to God. He has not forgotten his promises: he will renew Israel and draw the nations to himself for his blessing, as he promised Abraham. The Old Testament ends on this very hopeful note.

So how long will it take for God to keep His promise this time? The interlude is a long one!

Bible readings for Sunday 26th June:  
Hosea 1:1-11 and Mark 12:1-12

Questions for reflection, to help us find our place in the story:

- We have seen how Israel frequently abandons God and turns to idols. Has modern culture adopted idols of its own? What about Christians - and the Church? Why do you think God is so jealous for our affection and obedience?
- The Israelites often take their relationship with God for granted, forgetting that his blessing is guaranteed only if they remain faithful and obedient partners in the covenant relationship. In what ways might we take our relationship with God for granted?
- In Ancient Israel, individual sin has consequences for the whole community of God's people. In what ways, if any, is this still the case today?

## Interlude – When God goes quiet: the inter-Testamental period

As the Old Testament ends, around 400BC, Israel is enjoying relative stability under Persian rule. By the beginning of the New Testament, at the birth of Christ, Israel is under the imperial and brutal Roman regime. What happens during the 400 year interval?

The Jews who stayed in Babylon after the exile (the Diaspora – ‘dispersed’) either stay there, or move to Roman cities, setting up synagogues and keeping their faith alive through the celebration of the Jewish festivals. For the Jews who returned to their homeland, they too set about re-connecting with the ancient Law of Moses to prove their faithfulness. Pharisees and ‘teachers of the Law’ emerge, encouraging strict law-keeping. Israel comes under Greek control when the Greek emperor Alexander the Great conquers the Persians in 331 BC; Alexander is a ‘Helleniser’ (i.e. he insists on ‘all things Greek’) and Israel is saturated with Greek thinking, philosophy and language. During this period the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) is translated into Greek (known as ‘the Septuagint’ after the 70 Jewish scholars who began the work of translation) and again, Israel’s distinct religious integrity is in danger of being undermined.

Alexander dies without an heir and his empire is fought over by 2 dynasties; the Ptolomies (from Egypt), who rule over Palestine between 311 and 198 BC, and the Seleucids (from Syria) who rule between 198BC and 164BC. The Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes is a ruthless Helleniser who bans Israel’s distinct religious practices required by the Law of Moses. He outlaws circumcision, forbids Sabbath observance and Temple sacrifices and burns copies of the Torah (‘the law’ - the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible). He sets up the ‘*desolating sacrifice*’ to the Greek god Zeus in the Jerusalem Temple and sacrifices a pig, the most unclean of animals under Jewish law. Daniel prophesied this years earlier. A rebel band led by Judas Maccabeus rides into town to shouts of ‘Hosanna’ and cleanses the temple on 25th December 164BC, removing all pagan images and objects and rededicating it to the Lord. The Jewish feast of Hanukkah (‘dedication’) annually commemorates this event.

Within 20 years, Judas’s family, the Hasmoneans, eradicates Seleucid rule from Israel and, for the next 80 years, Palestine enjoys a period of Jewish independence and self-rule. Until, that is, the Romans arrive! They rule by force and intimidation. They enter Palestine under Pompey the Great in 63BC and rule



indirectly through a) co-operation with puppet kings such as Herod the Great (the last Hasmonean) and his descendants and b) Roman appointed Governors/ Procurators such as Pontius Pilate.

The cleansing of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus is another key moment in Israel's history: God has acted to deliver his people, re-establish the Temple and vindicate his law. But God's people, the Jews, are again under threat, this time from the Romans, who tax them excessively and put them to death if they oppose Roman will. The desire for a new deliverer is reaching fever pitch. God has visited his people in the past with dramatic acts of redemption – surely he will do so again? But when? *'How long O Lord, how long?'* Israel's hope is that the mighty act of deliverance will be accomplished by 'Messiah', the 'anointed one' who will usher in the rule and reign of God's Kingdom. Most Jews retain the hope for Messiah: but will he be what they are expecting?

Bible readings for Sunday July 3rd:  
Psalm 79 and John 10:22-39

Questions for reflection, to help us find our place in the story:

- In this period of history, many Jews either a) sell out to the prevailing pagan culture (like the Sadducees, who worked hard to keep the peace by agreeing with the decisions of the Greek or Roman rulers and were more concerned with politics than religion), or b) react against it with violence and hatred (like the Zealots, who sought to root out paganism by any means possible) or c) withdraw from the culture and isolate themselves (like the Essenes to 'cocoon' themselves from pagan influence). Compromise, Fight or Withdraw - what are the pluses and minuses of these approaches to our Christian lives today?
- 'Hope' is a powerful force during the inter-testamental period. Where does western culture place its hope for the future?
- What is the Christian's hope? What part does it play when God seems quiet and far off?

## Act 4: CHRIST REDEEMS: The coming of the King (Jesus)

Enter onto the stage the essential character in this unfolding drama, the hero of our story. So heroic in fact that his story is told four times in the Gospels. Matthew and Luke begin with the birth of Jesus. Mark's gospel begins with Jesus's bold proclamation: "*The time has come. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!*" He demonstrates the characteristics of the Kingdom he is announcing with miracle after miracle – healings, deliverances, even resurrections!

A community begins to form around Jesus as he teaches about God's nature and his ways and encourages his followers to engage in the work he himself is doing. He particularly attracts sinners and outcasts, the poor and the lame, who seem to love being with Jesus, and he with them. He makes it clear that God's Kingdom is open to all who want to receive it. He has come to seek and save the lost.

Jesus' story-telling is mesmerising. He teaches about God's Kingdom in parables, explaining that it has come, but is not yet here in its fullness. It is both now and 'not yet'. The age to come (characterised by life, health, joy, peace etc.) overlaps with the present age (characterised by sin, death, violence, sickness etc.); the powers of both are evident. But one day, God's Kingdom will come in its fullness: Act 6 will bring down the curtain of history as we know it. In the meantime, he teaches his disciples to pray that '*God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven.*'

Perhaps the crucial question is, 'Who is Jesus?' His claim is that he is God's anointed one, the Messiah, and is God himself, the great eternal '*I am*'. Peter, James and John are treated to a glimpse of his eternal glory at the transfiguration. Jesus is crucified by those who reckon his claim to be '*one with the Father*' to be blasphemy. But '*on the third day, he rose again...*'

Significantly, Jesus comes to fulfil God's purposes for Israel. He comes to accomplish what Israel could not. Adam has been thrown out of the Garden for his rebellion and humankind has lost the presence of God. God initiates redemption by choosing Israel, a family for Abraham, whom he will bless and dwell among, a light to the nations. But Israel's history is a catalogue of failure. Jesus comes as

the true and better Adam, who prays in a garden and obeys perfectly his Father's will where Adam has failed. Jesus is the true and better Israel, coming out of Egypt and for forty days resisting Satan's temptation in the wilderness: where the Israelites failed for forty years. He is the true and better Moses who promises to come down from heaven and fulfil the law of God to the letter. He is the new Temple in which the Spirit of God dwells among his people. He is the sacrificial 'lamb of God' who takes away the sin of the world. We begin to see how Jesus has been present in every act of this big story.

He is the one who redeems his people from slavery (of sin), makes a new covenant with them (written on hearts and sealed with his blood) and promises that his presence will dwell within them, by his Holy Spirit. Redemption, Covenant, Presence. The promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus regains what Adam lost. The cross of Christ reveals God's self-giving love, mercy, faithfulness, grace, justice and righteousness and the resurrection validates his claim to be God's anointed, defeating the last great enemy: death itself.

So, to be part of God's family, Israel, we now need to be joined to Christ. Being '*in Christ Jesus*' means that we have forgiveness of sins; it means that we will share in his resurrection from the dead; it means that the Spirit of God is alive within us; it means that we have authority to continue the work that he began; it means that we have good news. The good news is that God has done everything needed for our salvation, that our fumbling attempts to keep God's law no longer cut us off from Him. This is the good news that God wants his people to share with others, so that they too can be a light to the nations.

Bible readings for Sunday July 10th:  
Hebrews 8:1-13 & John 15:1-8

Questions for reflection, to help us find our place in the story:

- Jesus teaches that God's loving purpose is to restore the whole of creation under his gracious authority as King in 'the Kingdom of God.' How might we explain this today?
- What did Jesus accomplish on the cross? Why is it such an important part of the drama of Scripture? How is it important in your own story?
- '*On the third day, he rose again.*' What is the significance of making this confession?

# Act 5: MAN REPENTS: The Mission of the Church – to spread the news of the King

A person's last words on earth might be the most important words they ever speak. In the last pages of the Gospels, Jesus's last words leave clear instructions that will shape the future of his church. God's people are to tell the story and make disciples of all nations. 'As the Father sent me, even so I send you'. There is a banquet being prepared in heaven and it's the task of the Church to get the invitations out! Jesus began by inviting Israel and now tasks his followers with moving further afield with the good news.

*Scene 1 – From Jerusalem to Rome:*

The first chapter of Acts records the ascension of Jesus into heaven. This is coronation day! Jesus is exalted to the right hand of God and shares the throne of God over all creation and all peoples.

The confession of the early church becomes 'Jesus is Lord', often throwing them into conflict with the state authorities for whom only 'Caesar is Lord.' Now it's the feast of Pentecost, the Jewish agricultural feast which draws Jews from all over the known world (the diaspora) into Jerusalem. And what's happening? In fulfilment of the prophecies of Ezekiel and Joel many years before, God pours out his Spirit, the universal presence of Christ, no longer limited to the constraints of a human body or a man-made Temple. He can be everywhere at once! The Spirit comes in wind and fire bringing the powerful presence of God and the life of his Kingdom. God is coming to dwell *within* his people. Each hears the good news in their own language as the first disciples receive the gift of tongues. The message is clear: the gospel is no longer confined to the Jewish nation or the Hebrew language. Christ, by his Spirit within his people, is spreading the news.

Christian communities are formed. The sign of membership is baptism, a symbol of turning from idolatry, getting your sins washed away and receiving the Spirit of God. The hallmarks of these new communities are love for one another, a devotion to the teachings of Jesus, prayer, fellowship and the breaking of bread. These communities are attractive to outsiders. They radiate the light of God's Kingdom; they bear witness to the love of God, and people come, on a daily basis, eager to join! The church is a light to the nations! Israel has been renewed.

Of course there is hostility to the message, as there was towards Jesus. Not everyone wants to submit to the lordship of Christ and many of the early disciples are thrown into prison or even martyred. But amazingly, the church prays for even more boldness and more and more come to believe the message, often seeing, too, an increase in hostility. The severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem causes the believers to disperse into Judea and Samaria, which the Spirit uses to take the message further afield.

One of the persecutors is a man called Saul. He has a vision of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus and, as a result of this personal encounter, realises that he must rethink all that he thought he knew. He changes allegiance, becoming a champion for the Gospel among the Gentiles (non-Jews) with a major role in the first part of Act 4. It's a big deal for the early Church when they see Gentiles being filled with the Spirit and entering God's Kingdom. It's a sign that the Gospel is now for all nations, not just Israel, and Saul (who becomes Paul) makes many missionary journeys to preach in Gentile territories. He plants new churches and establishes witnessing Kingdom communities wherever he goes, writing letters to the churches in Corinth, Rome, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, Thessalonica, to encourage perseverance and faithfulness, to teach them and lead them into maturity, or to correct errors in their theology or practice.

Many disputes arise in the early church over whether Gentiles need to be circumcised (the ancient badge of ownership for God's people) or avoid certain foods, as the Law of Moses taught. It's easy to overlook how difficult it must have been for the early (Jewish) church to give up the traditions that for so long had safeguarded their distinctive religious identity. But the Spirit leads the churches into wise solutions, reminding them that they are saved by grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone.

This is the church of the first century - people who live in a new world (God's Kingdom), with a new identity (sons and daughters of God, in Christ) and with a new relationship to God (able to call him 'Abba', Father), and whose love, virtue and godliness is to spill over into every aspect of life, to '*shine like stars in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.*'

It's at this point that we run out of Bible. The New Testament records the life of Jesus and the early church of the first century and then stops. So what happens next? That's where we come in - this is where we enter the stage, confident of our place in the story of God's purposes for the world and understanding the previous Acts, so that we keep continuity with the people of God who

are blessed to be a blessing!

Bible readings for Sunday July 17th:  
Acts 1:1-11 & Matthew 28:16-20

*Scene 2 – and into all the world.*

Now we step onto the stage of history. Will we fluff our lines, or freeze in the stage-lights, like rabbits in headlights? Having been entrusted to perform the continuation of Act 5, how are we to live our lives today so as to allow the story to move forward toward the conclusion that God has already written for it? Well, the overarching plot of the biblical story so far is that Israel is called to be a light to the nations, but fails miserably. Jesus picks up the mission and accomplishes the salvation of the world. He then commissions his church to carry on the work he has begun in inaugurating the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven. So now it is up to us, as part of that church community, to continue the mission of Israel, the mission of Jesus and the mission of his early church: a mission involving the redemption and restoration of the whole creation.

The mission is not about a Jesus-enabled escape to a new dimension, one day being evacuated out of the created world into a purely spiritual existence. Though some Christians view the world like this, it is not a biblical worldview. Salvation is the restoration of God's rule over all of creation and human life. God's Kingdom is about more than our own personal salvation; it's about justice, peace, stewardship, citizenship, business, economics, art, music, education, politics, ecology, freedom, healing, wholeness, family, neighbourhood, village: the whole of life. God calls us to be loving, serving communities who can bear witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and seek to bring every aspect of life and creation under his rule and reign. The way we live as parents, children, workers, citizens, consumers, friends, should bear witness to the restoring, loving, transforming and redemptive power of God. Together we are a signpost to the kingdom that God is bringing into fullness and a preview, a taster of what is to come.

Jesus hasn't left us with a rigid model of how to accomplish this mission. Rather, the Spirit inspires us to creative action within the communities in which God has placed us. As Rowan Williams puts it, *'Mission is listening out for what God is doing and then (creatively) joining in.'*

I hope that you are beginning to get a sense of how, through history, God has been at work in his world and among his people, fashioning both into the great

Kingdom that has been his plan since the dawn of time. Each of us has a unique and special place in that story. Why not pause now to pray, to ask God what that place might be?

Bible readings for Sunday July 24th:  
Colossians 3:1-17 & John 20:19-23

Questions for reflection, to help us find our place in the story:

- How do you think the church you are part of measures up to the description of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42-47) or in Antioch (Acts 11:19-30)?
- Are there traditions and practices that your church needs to let go of (like the early church) in order to keep in step with what the Spirit wants to do?
- How does your own calling fit into the overarching drama of Scripture?
- How might we be witnesses for the kingdom in the areas of our lives like money, sexuality, work, friendships, care for the needy?

## **Act 6: THE KINGDOM FULLY COMES: The return of the King – redemption completed**

We have the privilege of knowing that the story will end well: that creation will one day be fully redeemed and that God, who once declared his creation as ‘good’, will have utterly restored all that he has made. The story we are engaged in charts the march towards that end.

With our limited brainpower, we can’t begin to comprehend what the climactic conclusion of history might look like; but although *‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him,’* we do get glimpses of what happens when the final curtain falls. John is allowed a vision, a glimpse of the new heaven and the new earth, which he records in the book of Revelation. It paints a picture much like the Garden of Eden: peace and harmony between God and his creatures: no sin, sickness, pain or death; no enmity between humans. Creation is fully renewed, healed, redeemed and restored.

How and when will all this happen? Well, no-one knows the day or hour, though many have claimed that ‘the end of the world is nigh’. There will be

signs, but it is better to concentrate on the new world that will be birthed rather than on the signs of the old one ending, otherwise it may seem to God that we are more concerned about the contractions than the baby!

In John's vision he sees a scroll with seven seals containing the names of the great multitude who will share in the salvation of God. An angel asks, 'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?' Who is able to bring history to its intended climax and overcome all the powers of hell, death and evil? John begins to weep when no-one comes forward. He begins to panic that God's purposes will ultimately go unfulfilled. Let's face it, it certainly feels like that from time to time. But he is encouraged to look again at the big picture, to see that '*the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed*': he is worthy to open the scroll. John looks again and, through his tears, sees not a lion but the figure of a blood-soaked slaughtered lamb, Jesus, Lamb of God who, through his blood shed on the cross, has bought for God people from every tribe, language, race and nation. And billions of angels begin a chorus of '*Worthy is the lamb...*'

God's purposes will be fulfilled! Good will triumph over evil. God's redeemed will live in resurrection bodies, in a new creation, where sin and death are no more and where the presence of God can be enjoyed forever. The Seventh Day of Creation has returned. God reigns. Chaos and evil are totally banished. The head of the serpent is crushed. And redeemed humanity comes to live in peace and fulfilment in God's presence. There, then, is fullness of joy...

Bible readings for Sunday July 31st:  
Revelation 21:1-7 & Matthew 24:36-45

Questions for reflection, to help us find our place in the story:

- Let's go back to some questions that were posed at the beginning of this series and see what, if anything, has changed. How would you now express answers to the following questions?
  - Who am I? i.e. what does it mean to be human?
  - Where am I? i.e. what are the origins of our world?
  - What's wrong? i.e. why does the world seem in such a mess?
  - What's the remedy? i.e. can humans fix the world's problems?
  - 'What time is it?' i.e. where do we fit into the solution – what does it mean for us in this time and space?
- How would you now tell the Big Story of the Bible?

*This series is based on the book, 'The Drama of Scripture' by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, and the writings of ex-Bishop of Durham, N T (Tom) Wright*