

Introduction: The title of this series of studies¹ is "***Journey Through the Bible***." We began this three lessons ago by considering how we got our Bible (in 2 parts – Hebrew/Greek & English) and "The Big Story" (an overview of the main plotline and categorization of the books of the Bible).

My intention in this series is certainly not to give a detailed exegesis of the text, or even try to cover all of the events of the Bible in a cursory way. My desire is to cover a book (or closely connected group of books) in each lesson for the purpose of *preparing you to read the Bible for yourself*. It is to give you the information that can help you, and hopefully interest you, in the text of Holy Scripture.

This week will be considering the book of Genesis, the book of beginnings, the first and foundational book of Holy Scripture. Before we look into this book, I want to remind you of three things that I will repeat many times throughout this series.

1.) ***The Bible is an anthology of writings of various literary genres.***

God has chosen to speak not in what we would call a systematic theology or simple morality code, but in a wide variety of types of literary styles (narrative, poem, genealogy, hero story, theological address, sermon, law code, proverbs, prophecy, fantasy, biography, etc.).

The most striking quality of the Bible as a book is its variety. - David Norton

This being true, it is very important as we seek to understand Scripture, that we labor to keep this in mind as we approach the various parts.

There is a sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are. – C.S. Lewis

2.) ***The Bible is the Word of God, and thus true in all that it affirms.***

This is the Book of books. While "truth" can be found in all kinds of writings, this is the ultimate standard.

The Bible is not "partly true and partly false, but all true, the blessed, holy Word of God." – J. Gresham Machen

3.) ***The Bible is written for an intensely practical purpose.***

The Scriptures are given, not merely to give us information, but to instruct us how to live. It communicates what we are to believe and how we are to live for the ultimate purpose of glorifying God.

For this reason, we do well to heed the words of James Hamilton when he states "The word of God will stand a thousand readings; and he who has gone over it most frequently is the surest of finding new wonders there."

I. LITERARY OVERVIEW

Author: Probably much of the early material found in Genesis was either passed on through oral tradition (from Adam onward) or God revealing it directly to the human author. Traditionally, and in Scripture itself, this book as well as the next four (known as the Pentateuch or 5 scrolls) are attributed to Moses. This section is often referred to as "the Torah", "the Law", "the Book of the Law", or "the Law of Moses." While we could allow for *some* later editorial work² as a whole they are to be seen as the work of Moses. We are told in Acts 7:22 that Moses was "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds", indicating that he was literate and trained in Egyptian literature, thus having the skills to be the human instrument of writing Scripture.

Audience: As written by Moses, it was likely intended to communicate to the Jewish nation their origins first as humanity, then as descendents of Abraham. It tells them, as they are about to enter into the promised land, the promises that were made to their fathers and how they got into Egypt.

Challenges: From a New Testament Christian perspective, there are several challenges to reading Genesis.

1.) ***The challenge to take interest in these ancient events and characters that seem so remote, and at times "irrelevant", to living the Christian life.***

To face this challenge, we can call to mind the New Testament's frequent use of these events and their importance. We can also look to two direct references as to their importance to Christians who were not Jewish, but rather Gentile.

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. (Romans 15:4)

¹ These studies are heavily influenced by *Ryken's Bible Handbook*, by Leland Ryken, Philip Ryken, and James Wilhoit and *The Literary Study Bible* edited by Leland and Philip Ryken.

² 6 Modern textual criticism, as influenced by Julius Wellhausen's work in 1878, attributes the Pentateuch to several different authors known as **J**(ahwist), **E**(lohist), **P**(riestly), and **D**(euteronomist).

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1 Corinthians 10:11)

2.) The challenge as we are introduced to places and customs that are foreign to us, as well as genealogies which seem to "break" the flow of the story.

To help with this, we must learn to sort through that material, trying to see what is most relevant. We will have more understanding as we read it repeatedly. In reading them, we should also remember that these events are rooted in real history, not some merely "spiritual" realm.

3.) The challenge to discern what to think about the actions of the characters.

Because Genesis is mostly narrative with almost no direct command to the readers, we need to try to understand what the author is teaching by the examples of the main characters. We have to ask "Is this something that the author wants us to imitate, or something that we should see as wrong?"

This is where our increasing understanding of all of Scripture is important, that we can make judgments even when the storyteller does not make comments about the action. We should also look at the consequences of their actions, to notice the outcome.

4.) There is also the challenge of the miraculous.

As modern people who live and breath the atmosphere of *anti-supernaturalism*, we can be tempted to consider the events as merely fantastic. We meet this challenge by remembering (as Genesis tells us) there is more to this world than meets the eye. God, who is by definition "super-natural" (above created nature) created this world and is active in it. It does no good to deny or explain away the opening chapters of the creation story, nor of the flood, nor of the Tower of Babel. These are so foundational that in doing so there is the necessary unraveling of all that is supernatural including the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus.

5.) As is true of all of the narratives of Scripture, there is the challenge of the use of our imaginations.

Thoughtful and imaginative reading is necessary for us to "enter in" to the story. As we read, we are challenged to both keep in mind the particular episode of event as well as its place in the bigger story.

Form/Genre: The book is itself an anthology or collection of stories. While much of it is narrative, it does not read like a modern book of narrative. Rather, it is a cycle of collected stories with sometimes jarring transitions. While there is a connection between the stories, it often is more episodic in form (i.e. individual incidents or events that together comprise a larger story). Specifically, the stories are a collection of a kind of "hero story." These show both the weaknesses, strengths, failures, and triumphs of central characters, known as protagonists.

One thing we must keep in mind is that the one universally present character is God. This is not merely the story of humanity or of Abraham and his descendents, but of God and His working in history. As some have rightly said, history is really "His Story."

II. OUTLINE

PART 1: PRIMEVAL HISTORY

Participants: The Whole Human Race

Plotlines: God Creates and Blesses His Creation (Chs.1-2), The Human Race Rebels (Ch.3), Consequences of Rebellion (Chs.4-11)

Main Events: Creation, Fall, Flood, Tower of Babel

Main Characters: Adam and Eve, Satan, Cain and Able (then Seth), and Noah

PART 2: PATRIARCHAL HISTORY

Participants: A Particular People

Plotline: In response to humanity's rebellion, God begins to graciously work through Abraham and his descendents to bring about the events that will redeem a people, and ultimately His creation that has been corrupted.

Main Characters: Abraham (Chs.12-25), Isaac (Chs.21-27), Jacob (Ch.24-35; 46-49), Joseph (37-50)

III. KEY THEMES

1.) Genesis gives answers to some of the greatest philosophical questions. The opening chapters give a historical and philosophical explanation to questions like "Is there a God?", "What is God like?", "What is man?", "What is the nature of the world in which we live?"

2.) Genesis is important because it sets the backdrop for everything else in Scripture. Because God works in and through history, the bringing about of salvation through Jesus Christ has centuries of history behind it. In particular we see the history of the foundational character of Abraham. He is considered throughout both the Old

and New Testaments as a key character. He is mentioned 251 times in the Bible, and is particularly connected even to Gentile Christians who have believed on Jesus (see especially [Galatians 3](#)).

- 3.) *The best of the “heroes” in Genesis are remarkably flawed.*** Beginning with Adam and Eve, through to Noah and the Patriarchs, there is the unveiling of sin in the best of people. There is proud rebellion, drunkenness, incest, unbelief, lying, and polygamy. This doesn't end in Genesis, but goes throughout the Bible. This is the black backdrop of human frailty that sets the stage for the sinless and perfect life of Jesus Christ.
- This should humble us and cause a large amount of sympathy and patience in our own lives and at the lives of others. While we are aiming for Christ-likeness, we also realize that “the best of men are but men at best.”³
 - I was reminded of this reality this past week as there was some discussion of the use of the [Book of Virtues](#) for our CHET school. I brought up the fact that the editor of that book, Bill Bennett, was later found to have a serious problem with gambling. Eyebrows were raised, and I commented on how all of our heroes, outside of Christ, are flawed and often had lives seriously tainted by sin.
- 4.) *Genesis reminds us that God is incredibly gracious.*** While judgment is especially seen in the curse, the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, He continues to work with fallen humanity to work out His goal of salvation. This grace is especially seen in that God enters into “covenants” or oath-bound promises. This includes the covenant he makes with Noah and the whole creation ([8:20-22](#)) and especially with Abraham (Chs. [12](#) & [17](#)).

³ Ascribed to General John Lambert, Parliamentarian commander who played an important role in Cromwell's military victories over the Royalists in the English Civil War.