

Beginning With God

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Why I wrote this book

Several years ago I was having lunch with a friend of mine who has had more than his fair share of challenges. At that time he was meeting with a group of people, all of whom were struggling a lot. The night before, his group had discussed faith and how you can really know what you believe.

But his question to me had an embattled ring to it. He gestured, for emphasis, with a fork pronged through a piece of barbecued pork, and asked, “What’s to keep you from just walking away from Jesus Christ and saying you don’t believe it anymore?”

Spontaneously, I said, “I suppose if you’re calling Jesus Christ ‘it,’ you haven’t really met Him.”

He said, “That sounds important. What do you mean?”

I said, “Well, if the Lord is only a concept to you, of course you can decide at any point that it’s not the concept you’re looking for. Anyone can change his mind about a concept.

“But if you know Him as a Person, you can’t suddenly say, ‘I’m not going to know you anymore.’ Real people are not mere concepts, and your discomfort with them does not make them any less real. You can give up on a concept, but you cannot deny the reality of a person you know.”

My friend got a smile on his face as if he had just found something he had lost, and said, “That’s it. I was troubled because I was treating the Lord as a concept. Now that I remember He’s still with me in person, I’m not worried about losing Him.”

It wasn’t what he said that influenced me. What moved me was the change in his countenance as he reawakened to the Lord’s presence and activity, seeing He is more than an impersonal fact.

Most people I’ve known would claim to believe that God exists, but the information doesn’t seem to interest them much. Yet time and again I’ve seen striking change in their lives when they realize that God is not merely out there as a piece of data, but He’s actively doing something in this world, something much bigger and more important than anything else.

The most specific place to discover what He’s up to is in the Bible, but there too most people don’t seem interested. I suppose they imagine the Bible to be either insufferably dry or hopelessly difficult to understand, and in either case it will seem neither interesting nor significant to their lives

My experience has been that the Bible is intensely interesting and immediately significant, provided you start with the awareness that God gave it to us to make Himself known.

The Bible is not merely a collection of human sayings and thoughts. It is God’s revelation of Himself. It is the story of what God has done and is doing in His relations with people. The Bible is not a theory of what might be, but rather an inescapable declaration of what is. If you have the faintest interest in the meaning of life and eternal destiny, you will have to grapple with what it reveals.

If someone very fascinating and important to me wrote a book and said, “Here’s what you need to know about me,” and I had their own thoughts, ideas and stories in print

and in my possession, I would want to find out what was in it. A lot of that fascination would vanish if I thought the book to be nothing but a random collection of obscure sayings. And if I decided beforehand that it couldn't be true or relevant, I'm sure I wouldn't see the point.

But the Bible is both true and relevant, and much of what I need to know to live meaningfully is there in the very beginning of the book.

Most of the conversations I've heard about the first chapter of Genesis are limited to what it has to say about science. The arguments seem to be over how the world was made. The discussions all seem to be ignoring the story, which is about knowing the Maker. If you come to the Bible hoping to know God, you see more there.

The best mysteries involve a character that is not fully revealed, but you're aware he's there and he's up to something. As both Author and main Character of His story, God is very active throughout the plot. It's not always obvious to the other characters where He is or what He's doing, but the fact that He is there and He is up to something—that's what the story is all about.

God doesn't merely exist and leave it up to people to play all the roles in the story. God is the main Character. He gets the first word, and He gets the final word. In fact, it's His word that brings about everything else. Ignore what He is saying, and there is no story.

This book is a bird's-eye view of life themes essential to a relationship with the Lord as He reveals them in the first five books of His written Word, the Bible. The Jews call these books the Torah, meaning "the Law," and Biblical scholars also call them the Pentateuch, meaning "five vessels" or "five books."

I wrote this book to help myself see and understand what is in the beginning of His story and, I hope, to help others see and know the God who reveals Himself in its pages. I focused on the first five books, because this is where God begins in making Himself known. If you want to know Him, it's where He starts. The rest of the Bible makes more sense if you begin with God where He begins.

We learn in the first few pages that it didn't take long for people to become more interested in what they were doing than in what God is doing. That's been our problem from our beginning, so it's no wonder that we focus on ourselves and tend to overlook the main Character. My hope is that our awareness of the main Character as revealed in the Pentateuch will reawaken us to the excitement in His story and our part in it.

Chapter 1

Genesis 1-11: How Good It Was, How Bad It Went

Introduction: Why do an overview-type study of the Bible?

What is God like? What were His goals in creation? What's wrong with the world? How does God feel about it? These are essential questions, and in the Bible, God is not slow to answer them. They come up in the first few chapters.

The goal of this study of the first five books of the Bible, is to help you see what God is doing by seeing how He began doing it.

This study will look at major sections of the Bible instead of relatively short passages. The purpose of an overview is to get the big picture, to see how the major patterns clarify direction.

If your goal is to drive from Greeley, Colorado, to Fairfax, Virginia, it won't do you much good to know only the roads in Greeley and Fairfax. You need a map big enough to see where they are in relation to each other, and what roads lead from Colorado to Virginia.

If your goal is to go from where you are spiritually to where you long to be, you need a big enough picture to understand what is essential to getting from here to there.

In studying a few verses of God's Word, or even a chapter at a time, you may remember repeated ideas, but you're not likely to see the over-arching story line. You see the trees, but you have little concept of the forest. You might spot Greeley and Fairfax, but you have no idea how they are connected.

The trouble with that perspective is that you view vast portions of the Bible as incomprehensible and therefore uninteresting—portions the Lord included for a purpose.

One typical way of using the Bible is to look up the parts that strike us as relevant, ignoring the context before and after them, so that we view the Bible NOT as the epic story of God's plans for us, but more like the phone book: irrelevant until I need to know something specific.

The Bible is not a phone book. It is the essential message by which God makes Himself known to us, along with His purposes, His eternal life, and His way of saving us. It is the story of how He works—patiently, meaningfully, and often unexpectedly—to bring lost, dying people to Himself.

Unless we gain a vision of God's forest, even the trees will seem insignificant. We must know what God is committed to, lest we view His Word as a collection of random stories and sayings, and who needs more of those?

The Bible is the link between two worlds—not the worlds of Greeley and Fairfax, but the world in which I make choices about my time and relationships and possessions and actions, and the world in which God is shaping His people for eternal joy. We desperately need to see the connections. We need our daily choices to be informed by God's overarching plans.

So we set out to better know God, to more intentionally embrace His purposes, and to more fully experience His glory. To that end, we begin with the first 11 chapters of the Bible.

Genesis 1-11

The Bible begins by telling us, within the first few chapters, that this is about God, that what God does is very good, and that what we have done with God's good creation is very bad—much worse than we usually think.

The first two chapters tell us how good it was, and the next nine tell us how bad it went. The rest of the Bible will be about God's restoration of a horribly fallen world.

You could divide this opening section of Genesis into five parts. We begin by looking at how good it was in parts 1-2, then at how bad it got in parts 3-5.

1. Creation: God does good (Genesis 1-2)

The Bible begins with God creating everything that is.

The Bible will end with God revealing His *new* creation, after He has destroyed evil forever.

Here at the beginning we have **two descriptions of God's creating work**. They tell us **two things about God**:

The first account, Genesis chapter 1, describes creation by "Elohim," the High God, God-the-mysterious, the holy Other, God transcendent, beyond His creation. We learn right away that the most fundamental distinction of all is the distinction between the CreatOR and the creatED. God is the Maker; everything else is made.

God alone is God. Everything else is not. That is basic, and we make a mess of things when we confuse those facts.

The second account, chapter 2, describes the same creation by the same God, but here He is called "Yahweh," the "I AM" (see Exodus 3:14), the personal Lord who is intimate and present with His creation, and makes Himself known personally. Even though He is fundamentally distinct from His creation He is not distant and impersonal, but intimately involved in every detail of it.

He is transcendent, and He is intimate.¹ Both perspectives are true, and we are seeing, from the very beginning, that God reveals Himself to His creation as both holy God over us and present, personal Lord with us.

These two chapters also tell us **two things about creation**: Chapter 1 is a rather objective description of what God made. In its rhythmic cadence, like the breath He breaths into man and the heartbeat He gives to man, we learn that God placed His creation into the setting of time.

While chapter 1 sets creation in time, chapter 2 set it in location. Man is given a home in a garden. Chapter 2 is a more personal description of God's involving man in His creation, and what man needed to know about it—namely that there is endless goodness for man to enjoy, but man must not make the mistake of thinking he can judge

for himself what is good and evil (verses 16-17). Knowledge of good and evil is based on God's character, not our whim.

So God reveals from the very beginning not only that man is a part of creation, but also that man is given responsibility over creation—as stewards under God's perfect authority, not as autonomous lords. God is God, and we are not. And yet He assigns us a responsibility to care for creation. We are not merely part of creation; we have a unique responsibility within it.

Our fulfillment and our eternal life are in right relationship with the LORD and right relationship with His creation. The Bible will elaborate on these two truths, but we encounter them in the first two chapters. **God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.**

2. Marriage: God makes Himself known through relationship. (Genesis 2)

The very next relationship, after the one involving God and man, is the relationship of man and woman. (So the term “man” in the first sense is generic and in the second sense is gender-specific.) In terms of order, this is very significant:

- (1) God creates a world—for His glory;
- (2) God creates a people to inhabit this world—for His glory; AND
- (3) God establishes a specific relationship—for His glory.

In His image (1:27) He creates male & female, plurality and relationship. Being in His image involves plurality and right relationship. After creating everything “good,” and creating man “very good” (1:31), God says it is “NOT good for man to be alone” (2:18). Then God creates woman and establishes this holy relationship: a man united to his wife, one flesh (2:24).

From the beginning, marriage is designed to make God known. This man-woman relationship was ordained by God as part of perfect creation before sin ever disrupted the scene. From the beginning, God puts it in the nature of man—man still perfect in the image of God—to be a sharer. It is God's character not to be selfish with His glory, but to pour out His love on those He has created. So it will be His image in man not to exist for self alone, but to find fulfillment in right relationship with God and in sharing oneself with another.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind . . . and love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments,” Jesus said (Matthew 22:37-40). We are fulfilled NOT by being closed vessels, but by being channels of God's goodness.

And although man is made steward over the animals, it's not enough to do good to animals. Only wives are co-heirs of the gracious gift of life (1 Peter 3:7). So God created a woman—not another man—to share a unique relationship. God created a person who is both like and unlike Adam. This is a different kind of unity—not a unison, but a harmony.

The New Testament recognizes this as a sign pointing to the perfect union of Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:31). The two becoming one flesh (Genesis 2:24) is a sign pointing to the union of Christ's community to Himself (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 1:22-23). As the man and woman become one flesh in Genesis 2, so the

Assembly, the Body of Christ, is united with Christ in the wedding of the Lamb in Revelation 19, and they live together in harmony in the new creation (Revelation 21:2).

Don't read Genesis 1 and miss chapter 2, that the culminating act of creation was establishing a relationship meant to point to the ultimate aim of God in creation—namely the consummation of His relationship with His community, His people, His bride. From the beginning of the story, God is pointing toward the culmination of the story.

Marriage points to God, and it points to the consummation of His relationship with His beloved. **God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.**

3. The Fall: People turn from God's goodness to their own destructiveness. (Genesis 3-5)

After chapters 1-2 show us the goodness of God's creation, the relationships through which He will make Himself known, chapters 3-5 show us what went wrong.

We learn early on that we have an enemy who works to destroy us: the serpent, Satan (Revelation 20:2). Early we learn His tactics: He prompts doubt and confusion (Genesis 3:1-3). He contradicts God's clear words (3:4-5). He feeds us the lie that we should be in God's place—judging good and evil for ourselves (3:5).

And chapter 3 reveals the consequences of our sinful choices: We are disobedient to the Lord (3:6). We become self-consciousness (3:7). We alienate ourselves from the personal God (3:8-10). We alienate ourselves from each other, blaming each other (3:11-13). And in a now-fallen creation we are no longer free (3:14-19).

Keep in mind that the name for God in this passage is Yahweh, God as personal with us. In sin we tear apart the very things God has put together for His glory and our joy. **God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.**

Chapter 4 reveals a further consequence of sin: hostility and violence. Specifically, in the story of Cain's murder of Abel, we see hostility toward the one who is favored by God. Persecution of those who have received God's grace goes way back. It will be a primary result of sin until the Lord casts it all in the lake of fire.

If the story of Cain's murder were not enough, chapter 4 emphasizes that Lamech also murdered a man.

Chapter 5 reveals another consequence of sin: Death becomes the norm. We are told not only who came between Adam and Noah, but we are reminded repeatedly that each one died. From our perspective, that seems normal. But coming immediately after the Fall, it is a new and awful consequence of sin. Death was not the norm in the beginning. Death entered the world through sin. Now we can scarcely conceive of a world free from sin and death.

So we have an enemy. When we listen to the enemy rather than the Creator, we foster death. Rather than trust, peace and wholeness, we spread the cancer of alienation, hostility and violence.

4. The Flood: God judges evil but saves people in a covenant. (Genesis 6-9)

God does not tolerate evil. We learn early on that God finds it so horrific that He is determined to judge it, and to wipe it out. And yet God's purpose to bring a community to Himself is not ended. God graces a faithful remnant, and saves them. God reveals that He is a Savior who establishes a covenant relationship with His people (9:9) and hints that He plans better things for His covenant people.

Countless children have grown up thinking the story of Noah is about animals. Here's the significance of the animals in the story: they show that God still cares about His creation, and He still makes man a steward of creation.

But at its essence the Noah story is about the horrific sinfulness of man, the extent to which God will go to judge sin, and His commitment to save a covenant people. **God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.**

Jesus pointed to Noah's story as a warning of judgment.

As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken, and the other left.

(Matthew 24:37-40 NIV)

So Jesus says people, hardened to their sin, will be taken in judgment, and the covenant people will be left, like Noah.

So the story of Noah is both a judgment story and a salvation story. In Isaiah 54, the Lord compares *His* people to a wife who has been sent away, then brought back, and says,

This is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed, says the Lord who has compassion on you.

(Isaiah 54:9-10 NIV).

Peter recognizes Noah's story also as a symbol of the baptism through which people now come to faith in Christ, faith *through* the water and faith *in* the risen Christ (1 Peter 3:20-21).

So early on God made clear that He judges sin and also that He saves those who put their faith in Him. **God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.**

5. The Tower: God frustrates the plans of the selfish. (Genesis 10-11)

We see the goodness of God's creation. We see the disaster of our sin. We see God both judging sin and saving people from it. Next we see that God frustrates the selfish.

God destroys nations and God raises up nations, and these nations strive to exalt themselves—to be proud of their own names rather than rejoicing in the name of the Lord. But God will not allow them to succeed in self-exaltation.

The people set out to build a tower *to the heavens*, “so that we may make a *name for ourselves*” (11:4). God frustrates the plans of those who work for their own name, who try to build their own way to heaven. It won't work, because **God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.**

How does one have a name? In the Bible, a name is not merely a label. A name indicates the value of an individual—one's unique character. God's character and name is the same from eternity. A created being's character and name is given by the Creator. You find your identity in right relationship with Him.

The Bible makes much of the Name of God. But early in the story, people go wrong in wanting names for themselves. They seek their own identity, rather than an identity in relationship with God.

Notice that in the story of salvation, God deals personally and specifically with people by name. The story of Noah is the story of God saving a man named Noah and his family, involving them in His covenant and eternal purposes. Notice by contrast that in the story of the Tower, the people seek a name apart from God. God frustrates the plans of all the people. We don't know their specific names, and the names don't matter. The plans of the people to make names for themselves (11:4) come to nothing but frustration.

Do you see the difference? When you walk with God, you have a name forever, and you're involved in His eternal purposes. When you build to make a name for yourself, you come to frustration, and your name is forgotten. You can't reach heaven by your own efforts. **God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.**

Adam and Eve wanted to be in the place of God, choosing for themselves good and evil, and it brought disaster. Cain wanted to advance himself; it brought death, exile and infamy. The builders of the Tower wanted to make a name for themselves; they achieved only frustration. Noah, in obeying the Lord, laid down his name to ridicule; He, with his family, was saved, and he has a name in the epic story of faith:

Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

(Hebrews 11:6-7 NIV)

When it comes to following the Lord, beware the temptation to seek a name, to seek to be known for your innovation and special-ness. That's a recipe for frustration and alienation from God.

But we might ask, "What about creativity? Aren't we supposed to express ourselves? The Bible answers both questions:

God is the Creator, and being creative means being like Him in being a life-giver rather than a destroyer. Our creativity, then, is a reflection of His creativity. We are truly creative when we will seek in all our endeavors to exalt transcendent truth and beauty, not to merely express ourselves. True creativity will be an expression of the glory and truth that captivates us—not an attempt to be thought clever or cunning or strong or sexy in and of ourselves.

Whether in the arts or construction or services or politics or business—true creativity is always a reflecting back to God of His revelation of Himself. Everything in life either acknowledges His reality, His truth and His glory, or it belittles or denies it—and ends in frustration and judgment.

If you try to build your own tower to heaven, you're doomed to frustration. **God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.**

So what has the Lord revealed to us in the first 11 chapters of His Story?

First, the Lord has shown us that He, both transcendent beyond us and personal with us, **is both the source of all that is and the meaning behind it.** He not only created all things, but He clarified that He is both Life-Giver and Meaning-Giver. He alone provides the knowledge of good and evil.

The first application, is that your life is not random and accidental. Every little struggle of your existence is part of a cosmic brokenness which the Lord alone can restore to goodness. In order to share in the restoration process, you need to understand your brokenness, you need to turn to the only Source for wholeness, and you need to understand that the struggle itself may be part of the restoration.

If you think you exist as an accident of impersonal processes, your outlook is as lonely and meaningless as it is false. Get to know the Life-Giving, Meaning-Giving Source, the God who is infinite and holy, and also intimate and personal.

Second, God creates marriage to make known to us Himself and His love. Having told us that our happiness depends on a right relationship with Himself, He establishes the first sign or symbol of that right relationship—a loving, committed marriage between a man and a woman.

The application of this will be difficult in a culture where narcissism and selfishness are central. We make romantic love to be all about ourselves and, in the process, miss both the point and the fulfillment in the relationship. Marriage is rooted in the Lord creating us to enjoy Him forever. If you leave Him out of your marriage, you won't find fulfillment in it.

Third, our root problem is following the enemy's lies rather than God's Word. The enemy lies about the right relationship with God, and when we act on the

lies, the consequence is the brokenness of the essential relationship with God, with each other, and with His creation.

The lies belittle the Lord. Where God is contradicted, disaster results.

Fourth, God promises to judge and destroy sin, but saves a people for a covenant relationship with Himself. This covenant relationship with God will be central to the rest of the story that unfolds through the Bible. Salvation to eternal life is in the covenant relationship. Outside that relationship is only doom.

Fifth, God does not allow us to find fulfillment in seeking names apart from Him. We find our true identity and our fulfillment in right relationship with Him. This is directly applicable to everything we do and our purposes in all we do. **God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.**

If you recognize the result of living apart from Him, give up your hopeless ways, turn to Him personally, and say, *“Lord, be the meaning of my life. Establish your covenant with me. Save me from my sin and show me my true identity in You.”*

¹In case you think I am confusing the terms intimate with immanent, I’m not. Theologians use transcendence and immanence to describe two different attributes of God. I am not denying God’s immanence, which means He is always vitally present with every molecule of His creation and every thought of His creatures. My point is that God is also intimate, meaning He is not only immanent but also personally interested and deeply involved in the lives of His people.

Outline

Text: **Genesis 1-11**

The Big Idea: **God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.**

Introduction: Why do an overview-type study of the Bible?

Creation: God does good (Genesis 1-2)

The first two chapters tell us two things about God:

Elohim, transcendent God

“I AM” (Exodus 3:14), personal Lord

They tell us two things about creation:

God made everything

God gives not only life, but meaning

Marriage: God makes Himself known through relationship. (Genesis 1-2)

(Matthew 22:37-40; 1 Peter 3:7; Ephesians 5:31; 2 Corinthians 11:2;
Ephesians 1:22-23; Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2)

**The Fall: People turn from God’s goodness to their own destructiveness.
(Genesis 3-5)**

The enemy (Revelation 20:2) has tactics:

He prompts doubt and confusion (3:1-3).

He contradicts God’s clear words (3:4-5).

He feeds us the lie that we should be in God’s place—
judging good & evil for ourselves (3:5).

Our sinful choices have consequences:

We are disobedient to the Lord (3:6).

We become self-consciousness (3:7).

We alienate ourselves from the personal God (3:8-10).

We alienate ourselves from each other, blaming each other (3:11-13).

And we are no longer free in a fallen creation (3:14-19).

Hostility & violence (chapter 4)

Death becomes the norm (chapter 5)

The Flood: God judges evil but saves people in a covenant. (Genesis 6-9)

Noah's story is a warning of judgment (Matthew 24:37-40).

Noah's story is a Savior's promise (Isaiah 54:9-10).

Noah's story is a symbol of a much larger covenant relationship (1 Peter 3:20-21).

The Tower: God frustrates the plans of the selfish. (Genesis 10-11)

The people set out to build a tower *to the heavens*
“so that we may make a name for ourselves” (11:4).

How does one have a name?

How does one live creatively?

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What in this chapter impacted you the most?
2. What does it matter that God is both transcendent and personal? What difference does it make to you that God is not only the Source of life but also the Source of meaning and the knowledge of good and evil?
3. Why does it matter that marriage is given from the beginning to point to God's purposes?
4. How do we tend to fall for Satan's lies in our contemporary lives?
5. What does Noah's story reveal about God's view of human sin? What does it tell us about God's saving purposes?
6. How is the Tower story a description of human history in general? What was their mistake, and what do we need to learn from it?

Chapter 2

Genesis 12-50: Kingdom Restoration Begins

Introduction: Why all these stories?

A couple has a baby in their very old age. A man cheats his brother and, afraid for his life, twice encounters God. A man repeatedly beaten down is put in a position to destroy—or to save. Stories. So what? I've had people tell me they don't see any value in stories. I hope that as we glide over the peaks of God's story in Genesis you will see a purpose running through them. I hope you can meet God in His defining story.

Genesis 3-11 tell us how horribly fallen the world is. Genesis 12 through the end of the Bible tells us how God is working to restore His Eternal Kingdom.

Genesis 12-50 tells how God began this process, primarily through the lives of three "patriarchs." We call them patriarchs because they are early "fathers" of our faith. So in this chapter we will look at God's dealings with Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. To see what God is doing throughout these stories, we're going to soar over them, noting the pattern of plot development. Don't be frustrated at moving too rapidly. Watch for the big picture of what God is doing over these lifetimes.

The Lord teaches Abraham to follow in faith. (Genesis 12-24)

Abraham's story can be broken down into seven encounters with God. Since God is the main character, notice what God reveals of Himself, His plans, and His ways.

First encounter: God says, "Go where I lead you." (Genesis 12:1-6)

The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you. I will make you 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.'

At the beginning of the story Abraham and his wife Sarah are still called by their original names Abram and Sarai. Abram, Sarai, their nephew Lot, along with their possessions and household, left Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) and journeyed to Canaan (present-day Israel) by way of Haran (present-day Syria). God spoke, Abram followed.

Note that God is using one family to bring blessing to *all nations*. In chapter 11 the people seek a way and a name apart from God. He frustrates their plans by turning them into many nations and tongues and scattering them over the earth.

Then, in chapter 12, God chooses one family to be a blessing to all nations. God says (in verse 2), "I will be the one to make your name great." God will bring salvation

to the nations, but He will do it by choosing one. God has plans for the whole world, and obscure people are at the center of them.

God tells Abram to follow Him. Noah was saved when he did what God commanded, even though it didn't make sense to anyone else at the time. God's command to Abram is similarly mysterious.

It can't have made much sense. Abram leaves possibly the greatest civilization on earth at the time to become a nomad. This is how God will bless all nations: not by leaving them to trust in their great resources—which is what got them into trouble in chapter 11—but by calling them to do the unexpected in the power of God. God does not bless by making us successful by worldly standards. He blesses by teaching us faithfulness to Him.

Second encounter: God reveals Himself. (Genesis 12:7-8)

After Abraham followed the Lord's leading to Canaan, verse 7 says, "The LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.'"

The amazing thing is not a promise of land, but that the Lord appeared! And Abram marked the occasion with a visible altar to the Lord, where He called on the Lord (verse 8).

In chapter 11, people build a tower and seek a name for *themselves*. In chapter 12, Abraham builds an altar and calls *God's* name. What's the difference? One approach is self-centered, the other is God-centered; One approach God frustrates, the other God uses for blessing. That's about as practical a lesson as you could learn. Are you striving in frustration for a name, or seeking God for blessing?

God reveals Himself, and Abram responds by calling on God. Then Abram goes to Egypt and makes a foolish, faithless blunder. Abram is not faultless. But God rescues Him (chapter 12). Then Abram gives Lot the rich country, and Abram settles for the wilderness (chapter 13). Before the third encounter with God, we see Abram learning by failure and by humility.

Third encounter: God says, "I promise a place for your people." (Genesis 13:14-18)

The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

So Abram goes, and he builds another altar to the LORD. The Lord promises to make Abram a blessing to all nations, He promises that Abram's people will have a place, and now the Lord promises that they will be many. God speaks, and Abram responds by following and exalting the Lord.

In chapter 14, Abram has to rescue Lot, and we get an idea how powerful Abram is. He has the resources to conquer kings. Then Abram meets Melchizedek, the king-priest whose name means *king of righteousness*. Melchizedek is from Salem, which means *peace* or *wholeness*. This little episode is loaded with foreshadowing of New Testament truths.

The king-priest blesses Abram, and Abram gives the king-priest a tithe, a tenth of his possessions. Abram is growing in leadership and in faith.

Fourth encounter: God makes a covenant. (Genesis 15)

This is the central God-encounter in Abram's story. The Lord speaks to Abram three times before this and three times after this. In this middle encounter God tells Abram not to fear, because "I am your sovereign (or shield), your very great reward" (verse 1). This is the Old Testament version of Hebrews 11:6, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe *that He is* (must know sovereign God) and *that he rewards* those who earnestly seek Him."

So Abram knows God is sovereign and cannot be thwarted, *and* that He knows God is the rewarder. If you want reward, follow the Sovereign. The Lord is both invincible and beneficent. He's powerful and good. He wins and He blesses. Those are the two essentials in trusting Him.

If God is not sovereign, we have reason to fear. If He's not good, we have reason to fear. If He is both, we have every reason to trust and not fear. It is this trust in God's sovereignty and goodness that God counts as righteousness (verse 6).

The Lord makes a covenant with Abram (verse 18), a permanent, committed, trust relationship in which two parties commit to the best for each other. In this covenant, Abram will trust in the Lord's name and promise, and God will count Abram justified by faith. God speaks the covenant, and Abram responds in trust.

In chapter 16, however, Abram doesn't trust. He tries to do it his own way. The result of that failed trust is hostility between his descendants—those descended from Ishmael and Isaac—to this day. So we can see long-range consequences for the sin of Adam, and of the builders of the tower, and of Abram.

Yet the Lord has not condemned Abram. Grace is not new. It was not a new concept in the New Testament. It is older than Abram. God was involving undeserving people in His covenant from Abram's time, and even Noah's time.

We see right away that God's covenant involves faithfulness to a people who cannot consistently live up to the covenant. They will have to live the covenant in faith, because they cannot fulfill it by works. Despite their brokenness, the Lord is faithful.

Fifth encounter: God gives a reminder of His covenant. (Genesis 17)

Abram is now 99 years old, and he and Sarah are still waiting for the promise. And God's covenant still stands. God's promise remains. To emphasize it, God gives Abram, "exalted father," a new name: *Abraham*, meaning "father of many."

The LORD says, “You’re now an alien here, but one day this place will be yours.” He also gives a sign of the covenant: circumcision of every male, symbolic of the promise being passed on to every generation.

Abraham laughs and asks if the promise couldn’t be through Ishmael.

God says, no, I’ll give a miracle son, and you’ll name him “Isaac,” which means “laughter.” God speaks and Abraham responds. Abraham is not always consistent or unwavering, yet the Lord’s Word is sure.

Sixth encounter: The Lord fulfills a promise. (Genesis 18)

The Lord appears *in the flesh* and says this is the year, Abraham, in which you will have a son. This time 90-year-old Sarah laughs, and the LORD says, “Is anything too hard for God?” What God has spoken will be. He is sovereign, and He rewards.

But God also warns of judgment on the city of Sodom for its evil. Abraham pleads with the Lord for the righteous people of the city. The Lord promises not to destroy the righteous.

In chapter 19 Sodom is destroyed, although Lot’s family is saved. Again while bringing judgment, the Lord preserves a remnant. In chapter 20 Abraham’s faith fails again, and again the Lord spares him. In chapter 21 Isaac is born at last, and the conflict with Ishmael begins. The story shows us the Lord’s sovereign, saving plan working in the context of unfaithfulness and conflict.

Seventh encounter (Genesis 22): The Lord blesses faithfulness.

God says in verse 2, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”

As in the first encounter, the Lord tells Abraham to follow to an unknown destination. As in the first encounter, the Lord calls Abraham to give up something priceless. As in the first encounter, Abraham heard from the Lord, and he must act on faith. Abraham has not passed every test of faith, yet the Lord has proven faithful.

But now Abraham is required to trust the Lord with the most precious of His gifts: Isaac, the son of the promise.

This time God does *not* come across as the personal Lord, the “I Am.” Here God seems the distant “Elohim” for the first time in Abraham’s experience. Here there is no laughter. Here Abraham hears no promise. He must act on a faith rooted in God’s past promises. Here God requires the giving of the only son, foreshadowing something Jesus would say: “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son. . .” (John 3:16).

God has spoken, and again, Abraham responds. Abraham does lay his son on the altar. And only then does he again hear the voice of the personal “I Am.” The boy is spared, and the “I Am” provides a sacrifice and restates His promise to Abraham.

The faith lesson could not be much more blunt (verse 16): “Because you have done this and not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you.”

The final lesson for Abraham is very like the first. Hear the Word of the Lord, trust the Lord, holding back nothing, and you will be blessed beyond your imagining. Seven times the Lord speaks to Abraham, and through these seven revelations Abraham grows into the father of faith He is called to be. **God patiently works with His people to bring them to a mature faith in His sovereign power and plan.**

After episode 7, we see the death of Sarah, and the choosing of a wife for Isaac, and the death of Abraham, and the story passes quickly through Isaac to *his* sons, Esau and Jacob.

The Lord teaches Jacob He's faithful even though we are not. (Genesis 25-36)

God revealed Himself and His will directly to Abraham, and Abraham responded. Jacob, by contrast, seems not to know God at all, at first. Everything about Jacob's family seems dysfunctional and chaotic—and yet for eternal purposes, the Lord chooses Jacob and shapes Him.

Again, we can see seven major developments in Jacob's story.

First development: Jacob has trouble with Esau. (Genesis 27)

Esau is the first-born, so he has traditional rights to the family inheritance. Jacob desires the blessing promised to Abraham, but Jacob seems oblivious to his dependence on the Lord who gave the promise. Jacob connives and manipulates. He deceives his father, with the help of his mother, and swindles Esau out of his birthright. So Jacob receives the blessing and promise of God's people. Esau receives a prophecy of the people who will descend from him.

Notice that it is God's intention to choose and bless Jacob, even though Jacob clearly does not deserve God's favor. As wrong as Jacob is, God uses the actions of this dysfunctional family in His long-range plan to bless every nation.

With Abraham, God was very overt about His intentions and expectations. With Jacob, God is every bit as involved, sovereignly guiding. But in Jacob's life, God is less overt, less obvious. Evidently God expects Jacob to know, through God's prior revelation to Abraham, what He has promised and what He requires.

What happens next?

Second development: Jacob encounters God. (Genesis 28)

Jacob has cheated Esau, and Esau is murderously mad. Jacob has to run for his life, so he heads north toward Abraham's old home and relatives.

As Jacob flees north, he lies down to sleep, and God speaks in a dream (the passage beginning with verse 13):

"I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I

will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west . . . east . . . north and . . . south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land.”

The covenant made with Abraham still stands!

How does Jacob respond? He wakes up and says, “Surely the LORD is in this place and I was not aware of it” (verse 16). He names the place “Beth-el,” meaning “God’s place.” God speaks a profound message, and Jacob has a rather immature response, more impressed with where God spoke than with what God said. But now Jacob now is aware of the “I Am,” the personal God. Jacob now knows the Lord is not merely an ancestral legend; He is personal.

Third development: Jacob has trouble with Laban. (Genesis 29)

Jacob gets to the home of his relative Laban, and falls in love with Laban’s daughter, Rachel, and asks to marry her. Laban says yes, in exchange for seven years’ labor. Laban tricks Jacob into marrying the older sister Leah.

The deceiver, Jacob, has been deceived: more family dysfunction. Jacob has to agree to another seven years of labor to get Rachel too. This time Jacob doesn’t flee his problems, but perseveres for 20 years. Are we seeing Jacob mature?

Fourth development: God blesses Jacob. (Genesis 30)

At the center of Jacob’s story, the Lord abundantly provides. Jacob gains 12 sons and a daughter, and gains a wealth of livestock. He tells Laban he wants to take his fairly-earned possessions and go home.

Laban says, “You can’t leave! God is blessing us because of you.” Laban, for all his manipulative ways, can see God’s favor on Jacob. Laban tries to use Jacob to get rich, and instead Jacob uses Laban to get rich. Through it all, God is increasing Jacob just as He promised—but for purposes far greater than Jacob’s alone.

At the center of Jacob’s story, as at the center of Abraham’s, we see that God is sovereign and good, a Lord and a rewarder.

Fifth development: Jacob has more trouble with Laban—then reconciliation. (Genesis 31)

Jacob tries to flee, but Laban catches him. They argue, but they finally agree to establish a covenant of peace before the LORD. Some reconciliation has been finally achieved between the two deceivers, Jacob and Laban. The tension between them seems to be finally resolved.

Sixth development: Jacob encounters God again. (Genesis 32)

Jacob is going home, and he knows Esau is coming to meet him. Jacob is afraid, after 20 years still fearing his brother's anger. Jacob sends his people and livestock ahead, and he stays behind to pray. Jacob first encountered the Lord when he was fleeing from Esau. Now returning to Esau in fear, Jacob has another profound encounter with God.

Our first record of an honest prayer from Jacob comes during this time of fear (32:9-11). It is followed by a strange night-long wrestling match between Jacob and the Lord, in which he says to God, "I will not let you go until you bless me" (verse 26).

The Lord does bless Jacob and—as with Abraham—gives Jacob a new name. He will no longer be known as Jacob, "the one who pulls your leg," but will now be known as Israel, "he struggles with God." That will become an appropriate name for God's chosen people.

Now Jacob knows not only that the Lord is personal, but also that his true identity is in relation to this God.

Seventh development: Jacob and Esau are reconciled. (Genesis 33)

Remarkably, when Jacob meets Esau they are peacefully reconciled, and Jacob builds an altar to "the God of Israel," God of the struggler. Finally Jacob is submissive to the Lord, and finally He knows the Lord as His personal Lord. The plot that began with a broken relationship resolves with a reconciliation.

What do we see in Jacob's story in comparison to Abraham's? We see a messed-up man in a messed-up family who does NOT follow the Lord. Yet the Lord makes Himself known to Jacob anyway. Jacob seeks to advance himself, and loses everything. But Jacob learns to trust the Lord, and experiences extraordinary blessing.

Jacob's story could be summed up as three broken relationships—with Esau, with God, and with Laban—then, at the center of the story, God's blessing, leading to three resolutions—again, with Laban, with God, and with Esau.

Early on, Jacob seems to know only that the God of Abraham and Isaac is real, and that this Lord still has purposes for Him. God's covenant with Abraham continues to be fulfilled. Through the trouble into which Jacob gets himself, God works to teach Jacob—now called Israel—to trust Him. **God patiently works with His people to bring them to a mature faith in His sovereign power and plan.**

The Lord proves He is sovereign over Joseph's ordeals. (Genesis 37-50)

Israel (Jacob) does not depart from the scene, but the focus of the story turns to his son Joseph. Joseph is the 11th of Israel's 12 sons. His is the story of one man's journey in God's providence, and of a family's journey into a place and circumstance in which God will grow them into a promised nation.

And we see another development: God spoke to Abraham repeatedly. God spoke to Jacob less often, but ordered his circumstances so that Jacob learned the same kind of lessons as Abraham. God doesn't interact audibly with Joseph at all, yet He gives strong symbols that Joseph is in His favor and still plays a significant role in the covenant.

First development: Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt. (Genesis 37)

Joseph is given a symbol, and His brothers take offense. A prophetic pair of dreams symbolize Joseph in authority over his brothers. Resentful and angry, the brothers throw Joseph into a pit, then sell him to a passing caravan. Joseph ends up sold as a slave in Egypt.

This is not an uplifting start. Abraham's life of faith began by leaving city life for the wanderings of a nomad. Jacob began his journey of faith by fleeing for his life. Joseph begins by being sold down the river. The Lord seems determined to shape His people by humbling them first.

Second development: Joseph is a trusted servant, but gets thrown into prison. (Genesis 39)

Potiphar, a wealthy official, buys Joseph as a slave. Joseph proves responsible and trustworthy, and Potiphar puts Joseph in charge of the estate. But Potiphar's wife lies about Joseph, and he ends up in prison. *Jacob's dishonesty* got him into trouble, and he had to learn faithfulness. But *Joseph's honesty* seems to get him into trouble. Calamity is not always a consequence of unfaithfulness. Sometimes the Lord brings it on the most trustworthy.

Yet Joseph keeps rising above his circumstances. Notice the awesome message in **verses 20-23**: "The LORD (the personal *I Am*) was with Joseph (in prison!) and gave him success in whatever he did." By now we should see that circumstances do not limit God's faithfulness, or our faithfulness, or our success in God's plans. In prison, Joseph once again is entrusted with leadership. He proves trustworthy, and he is put in charge of the prisoners.

Third development: Joseph again proves to be favored by God, yet is let down again. (Genesis 40)

Two fellow prisoners have dreams. Joseph, by God's power, interprets them. The Lord is with Joseph, enabling Him to help others. In exchange Joseph asks to be remembered when one of the prisoners is restored to favor with Pharaoh.

But Joseph is forgotten. He spends two more years in prison. For the third time, Joseph's connection to God seems to get Him nowhere.

Fourth development: After three downers, Joseph is finally raised up. (Genesis 41)

At the center of Abraham's story God makes a covenant. At the center of Jacob's story, God blesses and multiplies Jacob. At the center of Joseph's story, Joseph is finally raised out of all the defeat.

Pharaoh has a dream—the third time dreams have played a key role in Joseph's story. Pharaoh is troubled that he doesn't know the meaning.

His cupbearer finally remembers Joseph, who is summoned to interpret. By God's power, Joseph interprets the dream—which is relevant for all the region. Famine is coming. Store up grain for the lean years. Could this be symbolic of the need to store up trust in God for the hard times? The Patriarchs' stories all seem to point that way.

Pharaoh recognizes God's wisdom on Joseph. He puts him in charge of the land, to prepare for the lean years.

Notice a pattern: The Lord gives Joseph a dream, he ends up in a pit, then in slavery. The Lord gives Joseph a trusted position, he ends up in prison. The Lord gives Joseph a position *and* a dream interpretation, he's *left* in prison. But then the Lord gives Joseph an interpretation, and he's given a greater position than anyone could imagine. He has foreshadowed Jesus' words: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things" (Matthew 25:21).

Joseph's ultimate position makes possible the fulfillment of the first dream, the dream that so offended his brothers.

Abraham's story was built around seven encounters with God. Jacob's story was built around seven major relational developments. Will Joseph's story follow a similar pattern? We've already seen four major plot developments. It should not surprise us to find three more. Notice what happens next.

Fifth development: Joseph is in a position to help his family, but Jacob won't trust. (Genesis 42)

Famine strikes, as the Lord foretold through Joseph. Joseph's 10 older brothers travel to Egypt looking for food, so the whole family does not starve to death. They meet Joseph, but they don't recognize him—and he doesn't let on. Everyone back home has assumed Joseph is dead.

Joseph is now in the dreamed-of authority over his brothers. He demands one thing of them: Go home, get the youngest brother, Benjamin, and bring him to Egypt. Brother Simeon is required to stay in prison awaiting the others' return.

Now the story shifts back to Jacob. The ten sons tell him they must bring back Benjamin, but Jacob *won't release control of His one son*. Does that ring a bell? Abraham was required to lay down his only son. Jacob is reluctant to give up his twelfth.

Powerful symbolism and irony is going on: Joseph is in a providentially-ordained position to save his people. But the brothers don't know him, and the Patriarch is motivated not by faith but by fear of losing what he has.

Sixth development: All the brothers bow before Joseph, and he provides for them. (Genesis 43)

The nine brothers convince Jacob to let them take Benjamin with them back to Egypt. The brothers who sold off Joseph are now sticking up for Simeon—the one brother (they think) who was left behind in Egypt. They return to Joseph, still don't know who he is, and he provides for them.

Seventh development: Joseph reveals God's providence. (Genesis 44-50)

Joseph tricks his brothers. He accuses them of stealing a special cup, which he had hidden in Benjamin's grain bag. Now they are the ones being falsely accused. The tables have turned at last.

But—surprise!—Joseph did this to emphasize their dependence on his mercy. Yet a bigger surprise comes in chapter 45: The man before whom they bow is Joseph, their brother! It turns out his dream was not arrogance, but providence.

At first the brothers fear Joseph. But he tells them, “God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God” (45:7-8).

Joseph knows that this story is really about what God is doing. Joseph not only demonstrates but also verbalizes the faith in God's providence that the story has been about all along!

The whole family is brought to live in Egypt, where they will grow into the nation God promised to Abraham. At the end of the book, Joseph re-emphasizes the point (50:20):

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid.”

Isn't that amazing? To the one who remains faithful, as Joseph did even in the worst of circumstances, God proves sovereignly faithful to His covenant. He is Lord, and He is a rewarder.

So what have we learned?

Abraham trusts the Lord, and his story is mostly about waiting, not always faithfully—and the Lord proves faithful to His promises.

Jacob shows little faithfulness—yet the Lord continues to prove faithful to His plans.

Joseph demonstrates extraordinary faithfulness—and the Lord's sovereign power to do the unimaginable is revealed all the more.

We see in chapters 1-11 that God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him. We see man's failure to apply that in the Fall, in the Flood story, and in the Tower story. But in chapters 12-50, we see God teaching His people to live by it again.

How does the Lord begin to restore His Kingdom? In Abraham's life we see God teaching a personal, covenant relationship. In Jacob's life we see God faithfully providing for His people in spite of their unfaithfulness. In Joseph's life we see the value of a mature faith in God's sovereignty through all trials.

Abraham showed the value of trusting the Sovereign Lord. Jacob showed the value of trusting the Sovereign Lord. Joseph showed the value of trusting the Sovereign Lord. Why do we feel the need to explain away God's sovereign power and plan?

God patiently works with His people to bring them to a mature faith in His sovereign power and plan.

Lord, I confess my faithlessness and frailty. Like Abraham, I fear and I fall into sin. Like Jacob I am slow to realize your presence and purpose. Like Joseph I get beaten down by circumstances beyond my control.

Yet you work in the lives of people like me. You teach me your covenant ways. You grow me toward faith. You redeem my trials for salvation yet to come. You make me part of something far larger than my little sphere of activity. You draw me into Your salvation story. You mean it all for good.

Give me eyes to see you at work, ears to hear you speak, and a heart to know You as you truly are. Amen

Outline

Text: **Genesis 12-50**

The Big Idea: **God patiently works with His people to bring them to a mature faith in His sovereign power and plan.**

The Lord teaches Abraham to follow in faith. (Genesis 12-24)

First encounter (Genesis 12:1-6): God says, “Go where I lead you.”

Second encounter (Genesis 12:7-8): God reveals Himself.

Third encounter (Genesis 13:14-18): God says, “I promise a place for your people.”

Fourth encounter (Genesis 15): God makes a covenant.

Fifth encounter (Genesis 17): God gives a reminder of His covenant.

Sixth encounter (Genesis 18): The Lord fulfills a promise.

Seventh encounter (Genesis 22): The Lord blesses faithfulness.

The Lord teaches Jacob He’s faithful even though we’re not. (Genesis 25-36)

Jacob has trouble with Esau. (Genesis 27)

Jacob encounters God. (Genesis 28)

Jacob has trouble with Laban. (Genesis 29)

God blesses Jacob. (Genesis 30)

Jacob has more trouble with Laban—then reconciliation. (Genesis 31)

Jacob encounters God again. (Genesis 32)

Jacob and Esau are reconciled. (Genesis 33)

The Lord proves He's sovereign over Joseph's ordeals. (Genesis 37-50)

Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt. (Genesis 37)

Joseph is a trusted servant, but gets thrown into prison. (Genesis 39)

Joseph again proves to be favored by God, yet is let down again. (Genesis 40)

After three downers, Joseph is finally raised up. (Genesis 41)

Joseph is in a position to help his family, but Jacob won't trust. (Genesis 42)

All the brothers bow before Joseph, and he provides for them. (Genesis 43)

Joseph reveals God's providence. (Genesis 44-50)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What in this chapter impacted you the most?
2. Abraham's story reveals some glaring imperfections in His choices, yet he is held up to us as a father of faith. Why does God so highly value our faith in Him?
3. Jacob's life is marked by relational conflicts, yet the story leads to reconciliation. How does his relationship with God directly influence his relationships with others? (Contrast 28:16-22 with 32:9-12; 24-30.)
4. Joseph's life is marked by being unjustly let down by others and being surprisingly raised up by the Lord. What is so significant about the conclusions he draws in 45:4-8 & 50:19-21?
5. Why do you think God communicated differently to Abraham, Jacob and Joseph?
6. What was different in the ways Abraham, Jacob and Joseph followed the Lord? What was consistent through all their stories?
7. What do you know about God because of these stories? How does that influence your relationship with Him?

Chapter 3

Exodus Salvation Is Displayed

Introduction: What difference does it make?

When teaching the message of Exodus to children, I led them through this little drama, hoping to capture the contrast of the Lord's sovereignty and His people's faithlessness:

People: "We're sad!"

God: "I'm going to deliver you. I've chosen Moses."

People: "We don't want Moses. He makes things worse."

God: "Watch as I defeat your enemies and lead you to freedom."

People: "We're thirsty."

God: "Here's water."

People: "We're hungry."

God: "Here's food."

People: "We don't know where to go."

God: "Follow my directions."

People: "We'd rather worship a gold statue."

God: "Then you'll die. I made you to live with Me."

What difference does it make to know the Lord? That question is central to the book we call Exodus. I imagine you know the basic story. An older generation knows that Moses was played by Charlton Heston, Pharaoh was played by Yul Bryner, and the Red Sea was played by Universal Studios.

A younger generation saw the animated "Prince of Egypt," which is a marvelous piece of art in its own way. But both films have a major flaw. They don't really tell the story as it is told in the Bible, because they don't really tell it from the perspective of the main character, who is God.

Like Genesis, Exodus is about God. What difference does it make? Why do we need to know this story? Because in it God has made Himself known. In fact, what God reveals about Himself in Exodus is so fundamentally important, you probably cannot live an eternally meaningful life until you've come to know what God has to show of Himself in this book. Without this truth, we are probably wasting our lives.

Where have we been so far?

In the beginning was God. We begin with Him. In Genesis we meet God as both transcendent above us and personal with us, being the Creator of all things and the Meaning behind them. We see the vital importance of man in right relationship with others—first with God, and second in marriage. We see that an enemy misleads us into

judging good and evil for ourselves, rather than trusting God's truth. We see the consequences of following the lie: alienation from God and from each other, hostility, death, and frustrated, pointless lives. We see that God judges sin and promises to end it, but He also saves people for Himself in a covenant.

God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him; and God patiently works with His people to bring them to a mature faith in His sovereign power and plan.

How does Exodus connect to Genesis?

Genesis ends with God saving His people from starvation by sovereignly sending Joseph ahead to be in a position to provide for them. So Genesis ends with the people of Israel living in Egypt as shepherds.

Exodus begins with an explanation of what happened over the next 400 years—namely, the *family* of Israel, descended from his 12 sons, grew into the *nation* of Israel, still living in Egypt but eventually enslaved by the Egyptians.

The Exodus story begins in painful circumstances. God's people are slaves, and their sons are being murdered. God said (in **Genesis 15**) that He would give Abraham many descendants, and now, 400 years later, He has done so. God said these descendants would be strangers in a country not their own, that they would be enslaved and mistreated for 400 years, and so they have.

The accuracy of this foretelling reveals the sovereignty of God over all their circumstances. Like the slavery and mistreatment of Joseph in Genesis, this slavery and mistreatment are not accidents. They are part of what God intends, in order to bring about salvation.

God told Abraham He would bring His people out again with great possessions. After 400 years—as you might imagine—that part is hard to believe. I assume that is intentional. If it was easy to believe, we wouldn't have to see God in its occurrence. Since it is nearly unimaginable, all credit for it would have to go to the Lord. The plot of Exodus is a great salvation story in which God is clearly the main character.

What does Exodus reveal about us and God?

Genesis tells us what is wrong with the creation—that we sin and separate ourselves from God's truth and grace, so we are in serious trouble. We need a Savior.

Central to our understanding of God is the recognition that *He is a saving God*. He showed it in the stories of Noah, and of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. But the primary story, the story that would stand for the next millennium and more as the symbol of God's saving power and purpose, is told in Exodus.

The central term for God's work of restoring His fallen creation, for getting His people out of their deadly peril, is *salvation*. Savior is the term for the one doing the saving, and salvation sums up what God, our Savior, does to save us.

This means, of course, that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. That idea is essential to true salvation, and it is amazing how much difficulty we have understanding that simple idea: that *God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves*.

People have had two primary misconceptions getting in the way: The first is the idea of religion, by which I mean the effort to do what we must to save ourselves. Saving ourselves misses the central concept of salvation altogether. If salvation is God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves, then our efforts to save ourselves can only get in the way. We need to focus on the Savior, not on ourselves. That's very hard to do—impossible, in fact, without God's empowerment—but it is essential.

The second misconception is more recent, and it is the idea that we don't need salvation.

For eons people sought some means of saving themselves, which is why human history and even prehistory cannot be understood apart from religion.

Then suddenly the idea emerged, very prominently, that the answer to this peril we're in is to deny it, and thus deny any need to be saved from it.

Both of these misconceptions can be traced back to the lie the enemy told in Genesis 3: "You can do it by yourselves," and "you don't need the Lord." These are simply two more ways of saying, "you can be like God, deciding good and evil without Him." Neither of these ideas solve our problem, nor are we as a race one step closer to solving it now than we were when God spoke to Abraham.

We can't do it. I can't and you can't. We're hopeless without a Savior.

God, who is both the transcendent "God above all" and the personal "*I Am*," made Himself known to Abraham, Jacob and Joseph as the Savior. But the most powerful and memorable story of God's salvation in the Old Testament is the story of the Exodus.

As in the stories of Jacob and Joseph, the Exodus does not teach us salvation as an abstract concept. The trouble is real and tangible, and the salvation is real and tangible. It happens in life experiences to real flesh-and-blood people. Ever since the Exodus, God's people have been called to remember what God has done, and to know the stories so as to be participants in the salvation.

The book of Exodus describes both the drama of this severely hurting, downtrodden people, and the initial basic instructions for following Him. Salvation encompasses both parts—the salvation story and the instructions.

What is the basic plot of the Exodus story?

1. God's people are in trouble, but God is quietly working for their salvation. (Exodus 1-4)

As the book begins, God's people are in trouble. They are enslaved, oppressed, and being murdered. But wait! *God is quietly at work*, raising up a servant to lead the people to freedom.

We can see God's sovereignty in his foretelling to Abraham exactly what would happen to His people in Egypt. But we further see it—working quietly, on a small scale—in raising up a deliverer named Moses.

In Genesis, it was *Joseph's* slavery and imprisonment that put him in a position to save his people. Here in Exodus, it is the slaughter of the Hebrew boys that puts Moses in a position to be raised in the Pharaoh's household, getting the best education available, and learning the Pharaoh's language and diplomacy. A sovereign God can work through circumstances like those.

In Genesis, it was the sin of Jacob's sons that sent Joseph to Egypt, and in Exodus, it is Moses' murder of an Egyptian slave-driver that sends him fleeing to Midian to learn to survive while shepherding sheep in the wilderness—which is what Moses was doing when God called Him to return to Egypt to lead His people out of their bondage.

Moses' experiences were not random and insignificant; they were valuable preparation for his role in God's saving plans. What was true of Joseph is also true of Moses—and of their people as a whole.

So we learn in **Exodus 1-4** that the suffering of God's people is not unknown to God. It's part of a plan to make Him known to them as Savior.

2. God proves sovereign over hearts and nature. (Exodus 5-11)

Back in Egypt Moses confronts Pharaoh—whom God has hardened. Moses meets Pharaoh and says the word of the LORD is: “Let My people go.” Pharaoh doesn't care what the LORD says, and makes it harder on the slaves. This is no surprise to Moses, because the Lord told Moses He would harden Pharaoh's heart. (We see this in 4:21; 7:3-5; 8:15, 32; 9:12; 9:34-10:1; 10:20; 11:10; 14:17). The Lord is sovereignly working in the whole situation.

In fact, the Lord tells Pharaoh specifically, “*I have raised you up for this very purpose*, that I might show you My power and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth” (9:16).

But the Hebrews don't see it. They go to Moses and say, “May the LORD judge you” (5:21) for bringing this trouble on us.

Moses asks God, “Why have you done this?”

God says, “So you will see my power. I am the LORD who made myself known to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and established my covenant to give them a home. Let them know I will redeem them with mighty acts of judgment, then they will know Me” (6:1-8). That's God's aim—that they will *know Him*.

But in their pain and discouragement, the people don't listen to the Lord's word (6:9). So the Lord sends 10 plagues on the Egyptians (chapters 7-11), while sparing the Hebrew slaves. The plagues themselves are a demonstration of His superiority over the Egyptian gods (12:12), and He does this so that the Egyptians will know He is the LORD (7:5), that there is no one like Him (8:10), and that the earth belongs to Him (9:29).

So we learn in Exodus 5-11 that God is sovereign over hearts and over nature, and uses both for the sake of His glory among His people.

3. God provides a means of salvation in the Passover. (Exodus 11-13)

The Passover brings redemption of God's people.

The tenth and final plague involves the Lord striking down the firstborn of every family in Egypt. But He provides salvation for the Hebrews. They are instructed to ready themselves for departure, and to make bread without any yeast—bread that would not spoil on a journey.

Each family was to take a spotless lamb, slaughter it, sprinkle the Lamb's blood on the tops and sides of their doorframes. When the Lord came to take the life from the firstborn, He would *pass over* those living under the blood of the lamb.

That night, the people were to eat of the lamb, and burn the remainder. The Lord told His people to remember this meal as an annual festival to the LORD, eating unleavened bread and a Passover meal.

This time the people obeyed, and were saved. Temporarily humbled, Pharaoh summoned Moses and told him and His people to take their possessions and go—and to pray for him! Sovereignly, the Lord even made the Egyptians favorable to the Hebrews (11:2-3), so that the Egyptians gave their former slaves wealth to take with them.

The Lord had done what He had promised to Abraham and to Moses, and the whole nation of Israel was brought out of bondage in Egypt. And the Lord gave them traditions to keep them separate from the pagans into whose lands they were going.

And He led them to the sea.

So in Exodus 11-13 we see at last God's salvation of His people—through a series of meaning-laden images that will carry all the way through the Bible.

4. The Exodus requires another act of salvation. (Exodus 14-15)

When the people are camped on the shore of the sea, Pharaoh, with a typically short memory, suddenly realizes he's just released a huge work force, and leads the army and 600 chariots after them.

The Hebrews see the Egyptians coming and, also demonstrating very short memories, say to Moses, "Why did you bring us out here to die? Didn't we tell you to leave us alone?"

The Lord says, "Why are you *crying* to Me? Didn't I tell you to *get moving*?" God's people are not to complain, but to obey, and they will see Him work. He reminds them that He is the one hardening the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will know He is the LORD (14:17-18).

He parts the sea, and the Hebrews go across safely. The Egyptians pursue them, and the Lord overwhelms the army in the waters. Without the Hebrews' help, the Lord has defeated their enemies. Moses leads the people in a psalm of celebration of God's power and unfailing love for those He has redeemed.

So in **Exodus 14-15** we see God's sovereignty over kings, armies and nature in saving His people so that they know Him as Savior. Salvation is not mundane and theoretical. It is dramatic and decisive.

But don't stop there! This is not the end of the story. Salvation doesn't end at deliverance from peril. It continues toward fulfillment in covenant. God's people will continue to need His salvation in provision, instruction, guidance and mercy as they journey toward the promise.

5. God provides for grumbling people. (Exodus 15-18)

Three days later the people are thirsty, and they start complaining. The Lord provides water. God says, “If you listen and obey, I’ll preserve you.”

Then the people complain about hunger, saying, “Why didn’t you leave us in Egypt?” God provides manna and tells them exactly how to have enough. Some of them disregard His instructions, and the manna goes bad.

They complain of thirst again—violently—and again God gives them water. Exodus 15-18 shows us the people complaining and the Lord providing.

6. The Lord establishes a special relationship with this undeserving people. (Exodus 19-39)

The people need direction, and God gives them the law, beginning with the Ten Commandments (20). God is making His own nature known in moral terms. The Lord does not give arbitrary rules; He gives the means for knowing and following Him and His plans. He elaborates on those ten basic laws with instructions about justice in relationships, injuries, property issues, and regular festivals to keep God central in all they do. He does not leave them directionless; He points the way.

In chapter 24 the Lord makes His covenant with the people, solemnized with the “blood of the covenant” (verse 8), and the law He has given is called the “Book of the Covenant” (verse 7). His people have the privilege of a special relationship with the Creator.

But there is still more. God’s presence with His people will be richly symbolized by the Tabernacle, an ornate and colorful mobile temple, full of imagery that will correspond to the heavenly city in the book of Revelation. Chapters 25-39 detail all the making of the Tabernacle, its furnishings, and the priests’ garments.

But right in the midst of these preparations, with Moses on the holy mountain receiving these words from the Lord, the people commit their most grievous sin (chapter 32). They grow impatient of waiting for the Lord, and they decide to make a golden calf as an idol to worship. This is their way of leaving the Lord and turning away—turning to paganism by worshiping a god of their own design. As Mark Dever puts it (“The Message of the Old Testament,” p. 96, Crossway, 2006), “This is like committing adultery on your honeymoon.”

At the very time God is establishing a special relationship with these chosen people, they are spurning Him for a pagan idol. The covenant is broken, vividly symbolized by the shattering of the stones on which the law was carved. This adultery brings consequences, but the covenant relationship does not end. The law has to be reemphasized in chapters 34-39.

So nearly the entire second half of the book is instruction for staying holy and happy in right relations with God and with each other. God does not save His people into chaos and anarchy, but into peace and fulfillment. And though we betray Him and bring about terrible consequences, His salvation purpose continues. His sovereign purpose is not overcome by our sin.

7. The Lord dwells amidst His people. (Exodus 40)

Ultimately, the goal of salvation is that God will be intimately close with His people and they with Him. The book of Exodus culminates in chapter 40 with the completion of the Tabernacle and the glory of the Lord filling it, vividly evident at the center of His people. This has been His intention all along—to dwell intimately in the midst of a holy people.

What have we seen in the Exodus?

1. At the beginning, the Lord's people are in trouble, but He is quietly working for their salvation. **The Lord has the purpose to save.**
2. In the ten plagues, the Lord makes His power and glory known in displaying His sovereignty over nature and over human hearts. **He has the power to save.**
3. In the Passover, the Lord provides a means for salvation. Those under the blood of the lamb are redeemed from death. In this redemption, they experience release from their bondage. **God provides the means for salvation.**
4. Through the waters, the Lord delivers His people from the wrath pursuing them. The Exodus becomes the central symbol of God's salvation until the Savior should arrive in the flesh. **God vividly demonstrates salvation.**
5. Though in the wilderness the people lack faith, the Lord meets their needs. They complain, but God always provides. He does not save and then leave us to destruction. **The Savior is also the Sustainer.**
6. In His Law the Lord makes known His covenant with His people. We rebel and fail Him, and suffer consequences, but we do not thwart His purposes. **The Savior leads us toward the fulfillment of His covenant.**
7. In the Tabernacle, the Lord made known His presence with His people. Never has He been a distant god. His goal is that we experience Him intimately. **The glory of His presence is the goal of salvation.**

What do we learn from Exodus?

The Lord is sovereign. (3:15-22; 23:17; Acts 4:24-28)

By sovereign we mean that God is not limited in His power and authority; He's Lord over everything. Sovereign also means that He is not passive; He's actively working through everything that is going on, using it for good purposes.

He's sovereign in circumstances. As we saw in the extraordinary events of Joseph's life, we see God use even the worst of circumstances—the order to slaughter the Hebrew boys—to uniquely prepare Moses to be the deliverer.

He's sovereign in human hearts. Repeatedly He hardens Pharaoh's heart in order to prove His power over Egyptian power and authority—a necessary lesson for those who had known only slavery to the Egyptians. Yet God also makes the Egyptians favorably disposed to give wealth to the departing Hebrews.

He's sovereign in nature. The ten plagues, the parting of the sea, food and water in the wilderness—again and again it is obvious that nothing can keep Him from saving His people.

The Book of Exodus cannot be reconciled with the notion that God treats everyone the same. God is the standard of justice, and yet He clearly grants mercy to a chosen people—not because they deserve it, but because God has a purpose. He calls us to trust Him because **He alone is sovereign.**

The Lord is Savior. (14:30-31; Matthew 19:25-26)

The central truth of Exodus is that God saves His people. And His salvation is not only FROM misery and death, but also INTO freedom and meaningful life. And not only that, but He purposes spiritual salvation into a lasting, loving relationship with Himself. He wants His people to know Him, to trust Him, to follow Him, and to be close to Him. He calls us to trust Him because **He alone saves.**

The Lord is holy. (20:1-8; Revelation 5:10; 6:10-11)

The term “holy” carries two ideas together: it means purely good, and it means distinctly separate from that which is unholy.

God is not indifferent to human sin and depravity. He in Himself is utterly pure and good, unpolluted by human selfishness, deceit and corruption. And He is determined to separate His people from it, and to deliver them into the joy of a free, trusting, loving experience of Him. He says (19:4-6), “*Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole world is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,*” almost the very words proclaimed in Heaven in Revelation 5:10.

This is why He teaches them to live holy lives, to ensure justice, to have compassion, to respect property, to keep Him central in their lives. Where God's holiness is in view, health reigns over the people. He calls us to trust Him because **He alone is holy.**

The Lord is gracious. (34:6; Romans 8:32)

Grace is favor shown to the undeserving. Clearly, the people that God saves in no way deserve His goodness to them.

Here is another way to look at the book of Exodus:

The people cry, but God is preparing their salvation.

The people reject His chosen deliverer, but He delivers them anyway.

The people complain, yet God provides for them.

The people commit adultery, and still God gives them His holy presence.

Over and over the people earn punishment and rejection. Yet the Lord does not reject them, but continues to nurture them toward wholeness. He calls us to trust Him because **He is gracious**.

The Lord is present. (3:12; 40:34-35; Revelation 21:3)

At the beginning, the Lord promises to be with Moses (3:12). At the end, the Tabernacle is completed and the Lord fills it with His glory (40:34), which foreshadows the declaration from the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation (21:3), “*Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.*”

In between, the Lord shows—by sparing His people, by the Passover, by leading them in fire and cloud, by parting the waters, by providing water and food, by giving them the Law—that **He is watching over His people every step of the way**.

What difference does it make?

The Lord is Sovereign. He is Savior. He is Holy. He is Gracious. He is Present. Since that is true, it doesn't make sense to live as if He were not present. The central message of Exodus is that **the Lord calls His people to trust Him unreservedly**.

The story gives vivid reasons for trusting Him. It leads to wholesome life, while refusal to trust Him leads to defeat. Look at what He says in **34:6-7**. “The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished.”

How does He do that? How does He forgive wickedness, rebellion and sin, yet not leave the guilty unpunished?

1 Corinthians 5:7 answers that question. “Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed.”

God saved His people from His just punishment by providing a Passover Lamb, so that everyone living under the blood of the Lamb might be forgiven. Were the lambs

in Egypt enough to cover all our rebellion? No. Those lambs pointed forward toward the one who was worthy to bear all our sin—Jesus Christ.

If we will trust Christ, and accept His punishment born on our behalf, and live under the covering of His blood shed for us, we will be spared the just wrath of God.

He calls us to put our trust in Him, unreservedly, that He might dwell with us in sovereignty and intimacy, in holiness and grace.

Lord, I acknowledge that you are sovereign, in no way dependent on anyone or anything, master of all things.

I acknowledge that you are the Savior, and I am completely dependent upon You for life and everything in it.

I confess that you are holy. You are all I truly want. You are the pure goodness for which I was created. And I confess that I have not lived according to that holiness.

I exalt your grace. I do not deserve the sacrifice of Christ, my Passover Lamb, yet You have made Your grace known to me.

I acknowledge your presence, right now and always, and I long to entrust myself to You without reservation.

“Who among the gods is like You, O Lord? Who is like You?

Majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders. . .

In Your unfailing love You will lead the people You have redeemed.

In Your strength You will guide them to Your holy dwelling.”

Outline

Text: **Exodus**

The Big Idea: **The Lord calls His people to trust Him unreservedly.**

Introduction: What difference does it make?

How does Exodus connect to Genesis?

What does Exodus reveal about us and God?

Salvation:

Savior:

God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Two misconceptions:

- 1) We must save ourselves.**
- 2) We don't need salvation.**

What is the basic plot of the Exodus story?

1. God's people are in trouble, but God is quietly working for their salvation.

(Exodus 1-4) The Lord has the purpose to save.

2. God proves sovereign over hearts and nature. (Exodus 5-11)

The Lord has the power to save.

3. God provides a means of salvation in the Passover. (Exodus 11-13)

The Lord provides the means for salvation.

4. The Exodus requires another act of salvation. (Exodus 14-15)

The Lord demonstrates the drama of salvation.

5. God provides for grumbling people. (Exodus 15-18)

The Savior is also the Sustainer.

6. The Lord establishes a special relationship with this undeserving people. (Exodus 19-39) The Savior leads us toward the fulfillment of His covenant.

7. The Lord dwells amidst His people. (Exodus 40)
The glory of His presence is the goal of salvation.

What do we learn from Exodus?

The Lord is sovereign. (3:15-22; 23:17; Acts 4:24-28)

The Lord is Savior. (14:30-31; Matthew 19:25-26)

The Lord is holy. (20:1-8; Revelation 5:10; 6:10-11)

The Lord is gracious. (34:6; Romans 8:32)

The Lord is present. (3:12; 40:34-35; Revelation 21:3)

What difference does it make? (Exodus 34:6-7; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Exodus 15:11-13)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What in Exodus impacts you the most?
2. How does the study of Exodus shape your understanding of salvation?
3. How do you see God's sovereignty in the Exodus story?
Does it enable you to trust Him more?
4. In what ways do you relate to the people being saved in this story?
5. What difference does it make that the Lord's goal is for His people to know the glory of His presence?
6. What is being celebrated in Exodus 15:1-18?
7. How should God's purposes, displayed in Exodus, shape the purposes of His church today?

Chapter 4

Leviticus: Learning to Be Distinctly the Lord's

Introduction: How can we address our spiritual flaw?

Four children were playing in the park when one of them collapsed to the ground and began to suffer a seizure. One of the friends said, "Don't worry about it. It's normal."

A second friend said, "I think I can handle this," and proceeded to push candy into his friend's mouth, only risking further injury to his sick friend.

A third child said, "We need help!" and began to run for home shouting, "Help! We need help!" The third child was the wisest of the three.

Those three children represent a larger view of the human need.

The fact is, for all of human history—and as far as we know, prehistory—mankind has had an intense and powerful awareness of the spiritual realm. Every culture and era has shared an awareness that nature and human life are somehow impacted by and dependent upon the spiritual reality.

And at the same time, we have always had the awareness that we have not mastered the spiritual, that, as a rule, we have failed in our relation to the spiritual. We are obviously flawed when it comes to spirituality. We have a desperate need.

In response to this reality, we have three choices:

Choice A. We can live in denial of spiritual truth.

Like the child who considers a seizure normal behavior, some consider our spiritual sickness acceptable. We can choose to ignore or devalue the overwhelming testimony of all peoples across all ages, and we can live pretending there is no spiritual truth—no possible satisfaction for this spiritual hunger.

The major flaw in this approach is that it's not really an answer, but only a denial. It's like asking a question in class and having the teacher say, "The question is not real." This approach does not answer the ultimate questions, it does not get you anywhere beyond an imminent death, and it renders your whole existence essentially meaningless. It's pointless to talk about meaning in life if you deny the basis of any meaning in life.

Choice B. We can pretend that we are in control of spiritual reality.

Some people admit that denying the spiritual is a dead-end and, ultimately, an unlivable world view. They acknowledge the spiritual in some form. But, unwilling to submit to the spiritual as being greater than they are, they pretend to control it. Their religion—whatever its form—is an attempt to so manipulate the spiritual that they can turn it to personal advantage.

One way to put it is that they want a tame god. They structure their lives around an idol that works for them, an idol that will support what they like and oppose whatever they dislike. This is very convenient, and it is probably what has made religion so

popular for so long. It caters to our comfort zones and our sense of control—like thinking candy will cure a seizure.

But if the meaning behind all of creation is something we can master and control, why for all of history have we been so bad at it? Why do we have such an abysmal track record at controlling it?

Choice C. We can live according to the spiritual truth in which we exist.

This is less comfortable, because this means that we recognize that the spiritual Truth is actually bigger than we are. It is authoritative over us, not subservient under us. Like the law of gravity, we may find it inconvenient, and we may defy it, but we do so at our own peril. We do not control it. We can only be shaped by it.

Those who recognize fundamental spiritual Truth realize that we can find no peace until we are somehow reconciled to the greater Reality.

This means that we need answers to our long-term awareness that we have failed spiritually, and we need to know how we may be restored. We cry out for help from someone more authoritative than ourselves.

What have we seen so far?

We must begin with God. In Genesis and Exodus we see that the Lord is the preexistent spiritual Reality who has created everything else for His own purposes. He created us to enjoy intimacy with Him.

But we quickly broke the relationship. We sought to deny the spiritual Reality, and to make a different spirituality of our own design. We chose to seek spiritual satisfaction apart from the Lord, instead of in Him, and this led to alienation from Him and from each other. This led to hostility, death, and meaningless, frustrated lives.

But the Lord began the process of restoring His people to Himself by growing broken people back into a true knowledge and experience of Him.

He started with individuals—Abraham, Jacob, Joseph—and then grew their family into an entire nation that would need to be taught to know Him.

God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him;

**God patiently works with His people to bring them to a mature faith
in His sovereign power and plan; and**

The Lord calls His people to trust Him unreservedly.

What is the central theme of Leviticus?

The key term in God's process of growing us toward Himself is "**holy**." That word does not have the best reputation today, but it's not the word's fault. Most people today associate "holy" with "making me feel guilty," or with "acting like you're better than anyone else."

Let's clear up something right away. I'm not better and more deserving than anyone else. I mess up just as Abraham and Jacob did. I whine like Israel in the wilderness. I worship golden calves. My golden idol might be a toy that I think I deserve

or a fantasy that I make up in my mind or an inner argument to make me feel justified in my hatred. If the Lord and my society did not place certain restraints around me, I would turn life into a nightmare. Apart from His common grace, I would, you would, and everybody else would. Without help, we are not good. We're destructive. We don't deserve holiness; we deserve all the evil we bring on ourselves.

When the Lord tells us He is holy He means that He is *purely good*, unlike His broken and pervasively evil fallen creatures. We use "good" to mean "better than someone else." But God's goodness is the basis for all good. He's not good merely in being better by comparison. He's the definition of good. That's what we mean by "holy."

The True, Holy One is so good that we would all be head-over-heels in love with Him if we were not so corrupted by our own sin.

Holiness is the preexistent Good, and to be holy is to be vitally distinct from all that is unholy—all that is corrupted, ruined, contaminated, and destined for destruction.

"Holy" means not only qualitatively good and not bad, but it also means *quantitatively* good, in the sense that holiness transcends destruction. The holy endures forever and cannot be overcome by short-lived evil. Holiness is a more fundamental reality than sin.

We learn, in the first few chapters of the Bible, that our sin wasn't a mere mistake. It was a radical rebellion against the Holy One, a corruption that contaminated all of creation and all people far more than we want to admit. If the Lord didn't have a plan to rescue some of us from ourselves and make a way to restore us to Himself, we would all be justly doomed—because all sin is doomed to destruction. It will not exist forever.

Genesis shows some of the undeserving people whom the Lord chose to restore to Himself, and Exodus shows us a whole nation of undeserving people that the Lord was raising up for Himself. But even these chosen people are still under the influence of the Fall. They want to make up good and evil for themselves, rather than live under the reality of the Holy and Sovereign God. They prefer a tame god of their own design to the true Holy One.

The true Lord cannot and will not be tamed. He will not give up his goodness. He will remain Lord forever, and His chosen people will be made holy in a restored covenant relationship with Him. Life is not rooted in corrupt people like you and me; life is rooted in its Holy Creator and Sovereign Sustainer. So you and I need help, big-time, if we are ever to enjoy His realm of holiness.

That is why, at the center of His people's journey from bondage to their promised destination and home, we have the book of **Leviticus**. If God's chosen people are ever to know freedom and fulfillment, this nation of slaves, who know how to do nothing but complain, must be instructed on how to begin relating to and following the Holy One.

They are on their way through a poisonous thorn-field of pagan gods and goddesses hand-crafted to appeal to our darkest consumer desires—gods that we can tame and manipulate for short-lived pleasures and destructive ends. How will the Holy One guard His people from these poisons? By *building their lives and routines radically*

around Himself. Every detail of their lives, from daily conversation to annual events, will be about their Holy Life-Giver and Sovereign Sustainer.

They must learn that the Living One, unlike pagan idols, does not come and go dependent on human whim. He is always present, and they are dependent upon Him at every second. For His eternal glory and for their lasting joy, they must be made holy.

I count about 60 times the book of Leviticus grounds its laws in being holy, summarized in **20:26**, “*You are to be holy, because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.*” Leviticus is about making God’s people holy—meaning, keeping them close to God and separate from the poisonous paganism around them. **To enjoy the realm of holiness, we need a distinct relationship of trust in the only true God.**

How can we understand Leviticus?

It is fair to ask, why all these seemingly arbitrary rules?

At one time, I had a job writing “how-to” manuals. Most of us at some point have been required to *read* a “how-to” manual, but few people chose to do so on their own. I would guess that most of us would rather struggle to figure out something by ourselves than go through the drudgery of reading the instructions.

Leviticus reads like a “how-to” manual. To be blunt, Leviticus is not, at first glance, a very interesting book. I have read it several times, and I found it perhaps the least interesting book in the Bible. It seems to be on a par with reading a guide for typewriter maintenance. Why is it in our Bibles?

It is hard for anyone in our time and place, including New Testament Christians, to see the relevance of all these seemingly ceremonial laws.

It helps to remember three things if we are to understand Leviticus:

1. Leviticus comes in the middle of a story.
2. The world of Leviticus was different from our world.
3. Like all the Old Testament, Leviticus points forward to a fulfillment.

1. Leviticus comes in the middle of a story.

Leviticus—even more than other books of the Bible—makes no sense outside of its context. It is literally in the middle of the five books of the law, with Genesis and Exodus coming before it and Numbers and Deuteronomy coming right after it.

Genesis showed us Creation and the Fall, then showed us how the Lord began rebuilding a covenant people for Himself. Part of that process was to take the family of Israel into Egypt.

Exodus showed us the Lord growing this family of Israel into the nation of Israel, a nation of slaves that had to be redeemed and delivered from Egypt. It showed us the Lord introducing the people to their total dependence on Him, and also introducing them to the Law in which they might remain His holy people.

Numbers and Deuteronomy will show us how the Lord prepared His people for the Promised Land they were to inhabit.

Right in the middle of this story, Leviticus gives this long collection of laws for keeping a people holy unto the Lord. Some of the laws are about keeping weekly and annual habits by which to remember the Lord. Some are about physical health issues. Some are about dealing with sin. Some are about staying separate from their pagan neighbors. But all of them are for a purpose—namely, keeping a chosen people with a life history of slavery, and surrounded by pagan cultures, in a distinct relationship of trust in the only true God.

Leviticus begins to make sense as you begin to see the reason for the rules.

A 1984 film taught a whole generation the value of following some directives. (Whether anyone learned what it was teaching does not diminish the value of the lesson.) In *The Karate Kid*, a boy named Daniel wants to learn Karate. He asks Mr. Miyagi to teach him.

Mr. Miyagi starts by having Daniel wax his car, applying all the wax in a counter-clockwise motion: “Wax on.” After all the wax is applied, Mr. Miyagi directs Daniel to polish off the excess wax, always rubbing in a clockwise direction: Wax off.” Daniel does this until he gets fed up.

What does this have to do with Karate? Mr. Miyagi is supposed to be teaching him, not taking advantage of his time to get chores done. Daniel is about to quit and walk off when Mr. Miyagi throws a punch and commands, “Wax on!” Daniel instinctively moves his hand in a counter-clockwise rotation and blocks the punch. Mr. Miyagi throws another punch and commands, “Wax off!” Daniel again moves instinctively, blocking the punch with a clockwise motion.

The point was not merely to get a car waxed. The point was to work essential muscle memory into Daniel. In order to learn the needed and longed-for lessons, Daniel needed to trust the master.

Leviticus is a series of “wax-on, wax-off” directives that look to a grumbling people as a colossal waste of time. How will they learn the muscle memory of holiness? By following the rhythms of the Lord’s directives they will learn to be more than slaves to the surrounding nations. They will learn a special relationship with their true Life-Giver and Sovereign Sustainer.

Leviticus comes in the middle of a story. It was not written for the obscure corner of a reference library. It was written to bring order and focus to a people in imminent danger of being consumed by cultures ignorant of the true God. **To enjoy the realm of holiness, we need a distinct relationship of trust in the only True God.**

2. The world of Leviticus was very different from our world.

To understand the story, we have to understand something about our own world. Unless you have come from a radically different culture, you have lived your whole life in a western society with at least a thousand years of presumed monotheism, in which God is assumed to be one, not many. Pagan pluralism is returning noticeably, but our western culture went for a long time without a pagan world view.

Secular vs. Spiritual

In addition, our society has at least 200 years of secularism, in which we think of spiritual matters and public matters as two different things—and this assumption has only increased in the last two generations. We might think of it as separation of church and state, or we might think of it as private religion versus public life, or we might even think of it as “Here’s how I act when I’m thinking about God,” as opposed to “Here’s how I act when I’m doing something else.”

My point is, *our* world *assumes* distinct categories of spiritual and non-spiritual. We presume that spiritual thinking belongs in its own place and it does NOT belong in the secular arena. We experience that in a practical way whenever we hear that it’s okay to talk about God here, but it’s not okay to talk about God somewhere else. We have invented the concept of “secular,” which means we have a whole category considered neutral and outside of God’s interest and influence.

In the history of the world, that is a fairly new way to think, and it was not the way anyone thought 3000 years ago. In the 15th century B.C., in the Middle East, the categories were not secular and spiritual; the categories for them were worshipping the many pagan gods, or—as the Hebrews were learning—worshipping and serving the “*I Am*,” the only true and living God, Who is holy.

Pagan vs. Holy

You also have to understand that worshipping pagan gods was not about doing your own thing under the civil laws of a pluralistic society. Worshipping pagan gods often meant sacrificing your own children, or other human sacrifice. It might mean mutilating your own body. It often meant engaging in all manner of abnormal sexual activity. It might mean using hallucinogenic drugs. It usually meant summoning spirits, or practicing sorcery or witchcraft, or some attempt to exercise spiritual control over others or do them harm.

None of this was about worshipping a private deity in your own way. Doing your own private thing was not a concept anyone had. No one was deluded into thinking one life could avoid connection to the larger world. All of these pagan practices were about seeking ecstatic experiences and wielding spiritual power over nature and over other people. Pagans performed grotesque rituals so as to tap into the power of spirits and gain some power for themselves. That’s what pagan religion was about.

These Hebrew slaves had lived for generations under the oppression of a pagan people who, as far as they could tell, did in fact control them and keep them in subjection through pagan spiritual powers. That is the only culture the Hebrews had known—*except* that they had an oral history, handed down for 400 years, that their fathers Abraham and Isaac, Israel and Joseph, had walked with the personal Lord, the “*I Am*,” and He had promised to deliver them.

So they cried out for relief from the oppression of their pagan overlords, but they had no example of how to live any other way. What did freedom mean to them except to try the same pagan exercises for themselves?

Into this pagan environment comes a wonder-working God who proves His power over the pagan deities of Egypt. This “*I Am*” miraculously delivers His people from their oppression. But where will He take them to escape more of the same? Everywhere, they

are surrounded by people who have rejected the One True God to immerse themselves in paganism. The Lord will have to do two things:

First, He will have to *teach them a different way*, the way of trusting Him unreservedly, living for His glory, and honoring Him by valuing the life He alone gives, the sex He created for His glory, and the peace and compassion that radiate His character. His people won't be a dog-eat-dog society of oppressing one another. It will be distinct; it will be holy.

Second, He will have to *establish a distinct society* in which the deadly cancer of paganism has no place. It will have to be strictly dealt with and radically eliminated. Instead, God's people will be openly dependent on Him, trusting Him in everything. Unlike pagan priests, Israel's priests will not seek or demonstrate special powers. Their rites will be very public, not secret, and their sacrifices will not be to gain power, but rather to acknowledge the graciousness of the Lord. Everything they do will be to connect each other to the Holy Lord and affirm their reliance on Him. They will be, in fact, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6; cf. 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6). **To enjoy the realm of holiness, we need a distinct relationship of trust in the only true God.**

How is this relevant to us today?

Perhaps we're not as different from pagan cultures as we think.

I explain all this not only so that you can understand why Leviticus was written, but also so you can recognize that, despite the artificial categories we invent of "secular" and spiritual, our world may have more in common with the ancient one than we recognize.

If we today have more civilized laws—and human rights—than they did, it is because our Judeo-Christian heritage gave us a vastly different set of values than pagan societies hold—values based on the God who makes Himself known in the five books of the Law. But those values will not remain if we reject the Lord who is the "*I Am*," and begin embracing paganism again. We will soon find ourselves again in a culture where people justify sacrificing their own children, experiment with drugs, perform abnormal sex acts, seeking to tap into spirits, and seeking to destroy one another instead of working together.

We will stop valuing life as a sacred trust before the Holy God, and we will start making good and evil to be whatever we want it to be. That which is abominable to God will be considered a free choice in a secular society, and oppression—of children, of the old, of women, of men, of whole people groups—will inevitably follow.

Who will deliver us from this environment of death? The same Lord who delivered His people from it before.

The world of ancient Israel was not deluded with this false concept of secular. The categories of thought for Israel were not secular versus religious, but rather pagan versus holy.

I hope you can see, then, that the laws that make up Leviticus are not arbitrary and irrelevant. They were a very practical means for the people of God to remain safe from the destructive, oppressive values of the pagan world in which they lived.

And ignorance is no excuse. These laws include sacrifices for the sins committed in ignorance (5:17 is one of many examples). It's vital to teach God's Word, and remind each other of it. If your ignorance gets somebody killed, it's no consolation that you meant well. We need to know the Truth.

Perhaps appealing to popular culture is not as innocent as we think.

Leviticus 10 includes a rare story in this book, but not unusual in the Pentateuch. It tells of two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, who went into the holy tabernacle and offered "unauthorized fire." In other words, they weren't following the Lord's specific, repeated instructions on how to approach Him. They were trying some idea they had picked up from the pagan culture around them. The Lord immediately sent out fire that consumed them.

In our secular mindset, we say, "Well, that's harsh! They were hardly doing anything blatantly destructive."

Don't be so sure. Don't assume you're in a position to sit in judgment on the Almighty. Don't assume that the all-knowing Lord is without purpose in His commands.

This story appears just after the priests have been ordained to carry out the Lord's ministry. If they immediately disregard His specific instructions, and begin introducing their own ideas, how long will it be before you can't tell the people of God from the cultures around them? How long before they're rebuilding golden calves to worship?

Holiness is a life-and-death matter. Life is dependent on holiness. Eternal life is the domain of holiness. The Lord, the Life-Giver, is the definition of holiness. He would not be more loving to let his children play with fire.

Which prompts me to ask, how much that is done in the church today in the name of attracting our culture is, instead, turning them away from the holiness in which is their only salvation?

Don't get me wrong: I'm committed to Christ's mission. I fully believe we must understand a culture in order to communicate with it. I'm not trying to freeze history in the past, nor am I suggesting the 18th-century German culture of the Amish is holier than the 21st-century American culture we live in.

But if our lives and our message are not distinguishable from those of the world around us, where does one see the face of God? Where is the fruit of His Spirit visible? Where is the holiness without which the world is dying?

In answer to the judgment of Nadab and Abihu, the Lord gives a clear command in verse 10: "You must *distinguish between the holy and the common*, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given." Why? Because disregarding the Holy One is deadly.

The church today needs to ask whether our purpose is to look hip or postmodern, or whether it is to glorify the Holy One and carry out His clear instructions: proclaim His Word, preach the gospel, be His ambassadors of reconciliation, love the outcast—but not the ways of the world.

Maybe we need to be careful that our worship is not merely man-centered popularity with a religious accent—and make sure we are voicing the supremacy of the Lord and the glory of His grace on which our lives depend. The church of Christ is not a hobby for religious people; it's His body on His mission for the salvation of the world.

To enjoy the realm of holiness, we need a distinct relationship of trust in the only true God.

3. Like all the Old Testament, Leviticus points forward to a fulfillment.

Leviticus is not complete in itself. It points toward a completion to come later.

The Book of Hebrews

The New Testament book of Hebrews has been called a commentary on the book of Leviticus. Its key verse (3:12) reads, “*See to it that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*”

It points out the supremacy of Christ over Moses. It holds up Jesus’ Levitical role as our great High Priest. It says that the role of the Old Covenant is to show us the peril of our sin and direct us to God. It says (in 10:3-4), “those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” It is Christ, not the Levitical law, that makes us right with God.

The book of Hebrews shows that the New Covenant transforms our hearts and makes us holy through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. And it reminds us that God’s people have a long track record of following in faith, knowing not only that God exists, but that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

The book of Hebrews shows Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the whole Levitical system, so that His new community can be realized in the Holy City. If you read Leviticus and Hebrews back to back, I think you’ll have a deeper appreciation of both.

The New Testament understanding of Levitical Holiness

The New Testament recognizes Jesus as the Lord, the “*I Am,*” who has now appeared in the flesh, and also as the fulfillment of the law for us, so that we, who have fallen so short of God’s holiness (Romans 3:23), may be made holy through faith in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21).

You could sum up Leviticus in Romans 12:1-2: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, *holy* and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—His good, pleasing, perfect will.”

What are we to do with the laws of Leviticus today?

Must we apply them word for word? No, we have proven that we can’t do that, even if we see the good purposes in them. Do we then ignore them as irrelevant? No, because the New Testament says if it weren’t for the law, we wouldn’t know how far from God we have fallen (Romans 3:20; 7:7).

What we need is to know how the law is to be fulfilled, since *we* cannot do it. How can we become holy and right with God?

The answer to both is the person of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God became man to identify with us. He fulfilled the law for us, becoming the Levitical sacrifice that makes true atonement for our sin. He calls us to come to God on the basis of His fulfillment of the law, not our own (Hebrews 8:26-27; 9:12-15). You can't do it, so Jesus did.

Through Jesus Christ, we can now be made holy (the Latin term is "sanctified"), not because we can make ourselves holy, but because as we live in Christ *He* makes us holy (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). **To enjoy the realm of holiness, we need a distinct relationship of trust in the only true God.**

Jesus provides the unique relationship of trust that makes us holy.

Since, then, you cannot make yourself good enough by keeping all the Levitical law, will you place your trust in Christ to be holiness for you, and follow His loving leadership to eternal life?

Lord, free us from living in denial. We know our spiritual need is real. And free us from the impossible burden of trying to solve the problem on our own. We know we can never accomplish holiness apart from You.

We cast ourselves on Jesus Christ to be our perfect sacrifice, our interceding High Priest, our holiness. Give us a purer trust in You alone, and show us the way of eternal life for Your glory, and our joy.

Outline

Text: **Leviticus**

The Big Idea: **To enjoy the realm of holiness,
we need a distinct relationship of trust in the only true God.**

Introduction: How can we address our spiritual flaw?

Choice a. **We can live in denial of spiritual truth.**

Choice b. **We can pretend that we are in control of spiritual reality.**

Choice c. **We can live according to the spiritual truth in which we exist.**

What is the central theme? (20:26)

How can we understand Leviticus?

1. Leviticus comes in the middle of a story.
Why was it needed when it was written?

2. The world of Leviticus was very different than our world.

Our categories: Secular vs. Spiritual

Their categories: Pagan vs. Holy

To preserve a holy people the Lord will have to do two things:

Teach them a different way

**Establish a distinct society
(Exodus 19:6; cf. 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6).**

How is this relevant to us today?

Perhaps we're not as different from pagan cultures as we think.

**Perhaps appealing to popular culture is not as innocent as we think.
(Leviticus 10)**

3. Like all the Old Testament, Leviticus points forward to a fulfillment.

The Book of Hebrews (Hebrews 3:12; 10:3-4)

**The New Testament understanding of Levitical Holiness
(Romans 3:23; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 12:1-2)**

**What are we to do with the laws of Leviticus today? (Romans 3:20; 7:7;
Hebrews 8:26-27; 9:12-15; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:13)**

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What in Leviticus impacted you the most?
2. Do you see the distinction between denying spiritual truth, trying to control spiritual truth, and living under the authority of spiritual truth? Are those categories a problem for you?
3. How would you define holiness? Is God's definition different from yours? Why would God's holiness be more attractive than the false "holiness" we sometimes portray?
4. Is "secular" a legitimate category? What do you mean by secular?
5. What threats to God's people in ancient Israel are threats to His people today?
6. How do we as the Church reach out to our "pagan" culture without becoming "pagans" ourselves? What is the line between "going to all the world" as Christ commands (Mark 16:15) and conforming to the pattern of the world (Romans 12:2), which God forbids (1 John 2:15-17)?

Chapter 5

Numbers Help Crossing the Minefield

Introduction: Salvation for those who don't want it

Don Miller tells the story of a group of American hostages in some hostile corner of the world, held in a filthy, dark room for months. A team of Navy SEALs, as part of a covert operation, flew in by helicopter, stormed the compound, and burst into the dark room where the hostages were huddled in a corner.

The hostages were terrified. The SEALs told them they were Americans and called them to follow, but the hostages wouldn't move. They crouched in their corner, close together, fear on their faces.

Having spent months in darkness, their minds could not comprehend salvation. They saw men with guns and loud voices and thought only of further pain and oppression. Their minds were not enlightened by their recent experience, but rather darkened by it. They couldn't see reality.

The SEALs did not know what to do. They couldn't carry every hostage.

Then one of the SEALs got an idea. He put down his weapon, took off his helmet, and got down on the floor next to the hostages, leaning in so close he was touching them.

He softened his face and put his arms around their shoulders. This was different. None of their tormentors had ever acted this way.

The SEAL just stayed there, looking around at each one until the hostages started making eye contact, looking into his face. Then, when they were all looking his way, he said, "We're Americans. Will you come with us?"

He slowly stood up and waited. One by one, the hostages got up, until they were all ready to do what the SEAL did. He led them out, and they all ended up safely on their way home. (Blue Like Jazz, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003, pp. 33-34)

I read that story right after I had been talking with a friend about what God had done in coming into human flesh and laying down His life for us. I said, "When you know someone that wonderful, you want others to know Him too."

She said, "I don't want to know someone who threatens me."

As I process these thoughts, I am still thinking about her. I want her to enjoy the Savior as I do. She doesn't see a Savior. She only perceives a threat—someone wanting to rob her of the freedom she *thinks* she has. I see her huddled in the darkness, thinking this is better than going with the Navy SEAL.

As I read the Old Testament book of Numbers, I see people led by the providence of God, but kicking and screaming like a drowning child fighting his own rescuer. The people of Israel are at the threshold of the land of promise, the land flowing with milk and honey. At the very doorstep, they're afraid to go in.

Perhaps now we should see them as the *children* of Israel—not merely because they literally descended from him, but because they are very like children: jumpy and frightened and irritable and stubborn.

I have a lot of memories of my childhood. Many are very happy recollections—family trips especially. I loved making a journey together.

I also remember intense boredom—especially in the third grade, and especially with math assignments. I understood math; I proved I could do it. Yet I did *not* understand math; I saw no point in filling out a whole page of math problems. I understood the literal meaning of numbers, but I didn't understand the purpose. My teachers did not find me a willing learner. They did not reveal to me the life journey of which mundane calculations are a part. It might have helped an imaginative learner like me to see the bigger picture.

I also remember chronic fears—fear of things that creep in the dark, fear of getting beat up, fear of hateful people attacking my street, fear of not being able to handle the next grade in school. It took me years to realize that every year I was afraid of the next year, and somehow, God always got me through the next year.

The book of Numbers is not a children's story. In fact, it is full of severe consequences for a refugee people who will not trust a Savior. It's also full of mundane numbers, and the boredom of wandering for 40 years in the wilderness. Its key event is centered on the fear of going where the Lord has promised to take His people.

What have we seen so far in this story?

Out of context, the Lord in these stories often appears to be a strict parent. As a child, I often thought my parents—two wonderful people—were very mean. But as a parent, I more often looked at my young children as stubborn, selfish, and more than a little phobic. I wanted happy fulfillment for them as much as I've ever wanted anything. But I knew that leaving them immaturely stubborn, selfish and phobic was not the way to their happiness. So at times I had to be a severe father.

You will not understand the Bible if you view it from the perspective of a stubborn, selfish, phobic child. The Bible was written so you could know God. He's the Main Character. He's the one with whom you need to sympathize, if you would draw near to the mind of the Author.

You cannot understand the book of Numbers if you take the view of the stubborn, selfish, phobic children of Israel. All you'll see is a mean father. You need to look at it from His point of view. He loves children and plans happiness for them—meaning He must not allow them to think that being stubborn, selfish and phobic is the way to get there. It will require some severe discipline.

What these books show us thematically

To understand the book of Numbers you must first understand something of Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus.

We started by meeting God, the main character, who revealed Himself immediately as the Creator of all good, transcendent above us, yet personal with us, the Source of life and of meaning. We saw, though, that we quickly fell, choosing to live for our own idea of good and evil, rather than according to His Truth. Our choices have led to alienation, hostility, death, and meaningless, frustrated lives.

We have made a big mess of things, and we deserve to be banished from His presence. But He still has a purpose that involves raising some stubborn, selfish, phobic children to grow into happy people who enjoy Him and all the infinite joy He has to offer.

He started this new family with individuals like Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. He led them and promised good things for them and their children. He even showed that He can work through the worst circumstances in which they find themselves. He led them into Egypt, where they became a nation of slaves. Then He demonstrated His sovereignty over the political and religious powers of the mighty Egyptian civilization. He demonstrated His sovereignty over nature and over hearts.

He led His people out of bondage and toward the Promised Land. Every step of the way, they proved . . . well . . . stubborn, selfish and phobic. But He didn't give up on them. He gave them laws, both to make His character known, and to guard them from the destructive ways of the pagan peoples all around them. He is determined to shape a people whose lives are radically bonded to Him and His holiness. We have seen that . . .

God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him;

**God patiently works with His people to bring them to a mature faith
in His sovereign power and plan;**

**The Lord calls His people to trust Him unreservedly; and
To enjoy the realm of holiness,**

we need a distinct relationship of trust in the only true God.

What these books show us chronologically

The Lord's work of creating a people for Himself, out of our horribly fallen race, begins in the people of Genesis. God called them out of the great pagan civilization of Mesopotamia, and led them as nomads in Canaan for three generations. Then He led them into the great pagan civilization of Egypt to become a nation. But because they were made a nation of slaves, the Hebrews were kept separate from the Egyptians. The ethnic oppression against them was keeping them separate from their pagan oppressors.

Four centuries after Joseph brought them into Egypt, the Lord used Moses to lead them out. The book of Exodus describes what happened over a relatively short time to bring God's people out of bondage in Egypt and to Sinai to begin being shaped as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).

Leviticus records the law given to them in that first year as they were camped at Sinai. And that brings us to the book of Numbers, which records what happened over the next 40 years; Numbers covers the bulk of the 40 years in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan. Deuteronomy will describe what happens just before they enter the land of promise.

Numbers

What was obvious about God's people in Exodus is magnified in Numbers. In Exodus the people repeatedly complained, and in Numbers they complain even more. In Leviticus, God provided instruction, and in Numbers, we see how much they need it.

Like life with stubborn, selfish, phobic children, the book of Numbers is messy. It is a staggering journey full of mundane rules and calculations for squabbling children and relational conflicts in a family short on faith. The dominant theme in this book is God's necessary discipline of a people that does not want to live by faith.

For a theme verse, I would turn you back to the New Testament book of Hebrews, where Hebrews 12:6-7 says, "*The Lord disciplines those He loves. . . Endure hardship as discipline.*"

How does God work faith in people who defy Him at every turn?

In the big picture, I think the most impressive thing about God in these books is that (a) He knows what He is doing, and (b) He is extraordinarily patient with people who refuse to trust Him.

Patience is a very good thing, but it has limitations when it comes to teaching. Punishment as a strong deterrent is more effective—although it prompts accusations of meanness from stubborn, selfish, phobic children.

Perhaps a different kind of illustration would help. In 2006, several ministry partners and I were visiting a chapel service at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and we heard R.C. Sproul deliver a message on Leviticus 10. All of us left with the vivid memory of his description of an experience as a college professor:

At the beginning of the semester, the professor hands out a syllabus. It clarifies that understanding the subject matter is the reason for the class, and in order to grasp the subject matter, students will need to write three papers. It states clearly that a five-page paper will be due September 15, another one October 15, and the third on November 15.

The professor asks the students if they understand clearly what is required in order to pass this class. The students respond that they understand.

When September 15 rolls around, 150 students turn in papers; 50 students don't. They plead with the professor for leniency. Was the assignment not clear? Was the deadline not explicit? "Yes, but we managed our time poorly, and it will never happen again. Please give us a little more time."

The professor grants a two-day extension, saying, "Don't let it happen again." The students praise the professor. "He's wonderful! Merciful! Gracious! We'll never let you down again, professor!"

When October 15 rolls around, 100 students turn in papers, and 100 don't. Was the deadline not clear? "Yes, but you cut us some slack last time." But didn't you agree not to be late again? "Yes, we just need a couple more days." Okay, but this won't happen again, understood? "We understand."

When November 15 rolls around, 50 students turn in papers, 150 don't. Is this progress? The professor pulls out the grade book. "Shelley, where's your paper?"

"It's not here."

"That will be an F."

What does Shelley say?

"But, but . . . NOT FAIR!" Now nobody is singing the professor's praises.

Why? Was the deadline not clear? Whose fault is it if Shelley fails?

The professor is committed to one thing: getting students to know what they must know. In what way has the professor been a bad guy? You might fault him for being too lenient, but you can't honestly fault him for being cruel. (Wednesday, April 26, 2006, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary chapel.)

God is leading His people in the wilderness. They want to leave and go back to Egypt—the land of their bondage, where their children were being murdered. They want to worship pagan gods. They want to reject the leaders God has given them. They want to avoid the land of promise. They fight, it seems, every step of the way against salvation.

How would God reveal His justice and His mercy to people like these? There will be severe consequences for their rebellion, yet He will get them mercifully home.

We could summarize the book of Numbers in four categories:

- 1. Law: God's instruction.**
- 2. Sin: The people's rebellion.**
- 3. Rejection: The people's unreadiness to enter the land of promise.**
- 4. Salvation: Foreshadowing the fulfillment of God's plans for His people.**

1. Law: God continues to give clear instruction.

Chapters 1-10 carry over what was begun in Exodus and continued through Leviticus. All these laws have been given while the people are camped at Sinai, in their first year out of Egypt. The Lord gives instructions on how to be a holy people, distinct from the paganism around them. But now it includes a numbering of the people, from which the book gets its name. This census specifies who these people are, just so there is no confusion as to whom these laws are for. These are God's chosen people. They are not to be like all the pagans reveling in darkness. They are specially chosen to be holy unto the Lord.

After their biggest rebellion, chapter 15 reminds the people of the laws about sacrifices and sins. After another major rebellion, in chapters 18-19 they get another reminder about the laws of priesthood and purification. After years of further rebellion, including infidelity with the Moabites, they have in chapter 26 another census—to remind them of who they are. In chapters 28-30 the Lord instructs them again about worship, annual feasts, making vows, and keeping the Lord before them and their integrity in Him.

Chapters 32-36 show they are nearing the end of the 40-year journey. Chapter 33 specifically lists all the places they have moved over those 40 years. Two of the tribes are allotted land east of the Jordan River. Cities are designated for the Levites and as places of refuge. Chapter 36 ends with instruction about inheritance.

In short, Numbers shows that the Lord continues to instruct His people, and remind them of prior instruction—because they need the instruction and the reminders. And has that really changed for God’s people today? In our sin, we think we’re wise enough to make it up as we go along. But the all-knowing Lord knows we need much more training and discipline.

These instructions are not the rantings of an over-anxious parent. They are the loving leadership of a holy Savior.

2. Sin: The people continue to complain and rebel.

I titled this chapter “Help Crossing the Minefield,” because this forty-year journey is not the pleasure cruise the people wanted. They are challenged by the journey itself. They are challenged by the baggage of their oppressed past. They are challenged by the paganism all around them. They are challenged by their stubbornness, selfishness and phobias. They are journeying not only through the wilderness, but also through the spiritual minefield of a fallen world. What kind of sins do we see?

Sins of complaint

A familiar pattern recurs in chapter 11. In the immediate wake of the Lord’s instruction, the people start to complain. The Lord punishes the people. Moses intercedes for the people. The punishment stops.

In chapter 12 Aaron and Miriam—Moses’ only brother and sister, who have direct access to him—begin to stir up dissension against Him. The Lord punishes Miriam and vindicates Moses.

When you watch this pattern continue since early in the Exodus story, you can’t help but conclude that essential to the problems of God’s people is the sin of discontent. This is why I pray so often for a spirit of joy and encouragement to be contagious in me and in my church fellowship.

Sins of misplaced ambition

Chapters 16-17 tell of another great mutiny. After further instruction from the Lord, a man named Korah leads 250 community leaders in opposition of Moses and Aaron with the specific charge, “You’ve gone too far. If we’re all holy, why do you get to be the leader?”

Moses tells them it’s not about getting to lead; it’s about serving the Holy Lord—and they’re rebelling against Him. The ground opens and swallows all the rebels, with their families and possessions—a vivid depiction of judgment.

The next day everybody is complaining about Moses, calling him a killer. The Lord sends a plague, and thousands more die. Moses intercedes, and the rest are saved. Repeatedly the people attack their leader while the leader is praying for the people.

This story illustrates not only human spiritual leadership, but the grace of the Lord. Jesus “always lives to intercede” for His people, even as they rebel (Hebrews 7:25). His Spirit intercedes for those who don’t know how to pray as they ought

(Romans 8:26-27). God shows His love toward us by taking on Himself what we deserve, even as we are in rebellion (Romans 5:8).

Sins of getting in the way of God's glory

Chapter 20 is heavy with symbolism. The people experience another shortage of water, and begin to complain again. They have golden memories of how much better they had it back in Egypt, where they were enslaved and whipped, and their children murdered. I point this out to suggest that we have a capacity to wish for the good old days while conveniently forgetting all the challenges of those not-as-good-as-we remember-them old days.

But this time Moses himself is so angry about their sinful hearts, he disregards the Lord's clear instruction. The Lord wants Moses to speak to a rock that water may come from it. This would demonstrate the power of God's word. In his anger, Moses strikes the rock to release the water, so the life-giving water appears to be a work of the leader instead of the work of the word of God. Moses himself is disciplined. He will not be allowed to enter the land to which he leads the people.

So the warnings against rebellion apply even to the leaders. If Aaron and Miriam, and even Moses, are disciplined for not giving glory where it is due, let leaders and aspiring leaders of God's people realize that we are not above correction. As often as I have sinned, as tempting as it may be to accept credit that is due to the Lord alone—and especially to the power of His word—I cannot assume I will get to participate in the best times ahead for my church. Perhaps I will only lead them to the doorstep, while others take them in. That's entirely up to the Lord. But leaders, take heed.

The Savior of sinners

Chapters 20-24, nearing the end of the 40-year journey, bring the people into conflict with some of the pagan nations. In chapter 21 the people speak against God and Moses, desiring again to return to Egypt. The Lord sends venomous snakes to discipline them—but He also provides a way to be saved from the effects of the snakes. A bronze snake is erected, that those who look to it might be healed.

Jesus would refer to this very thing in John 3:14-15, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in *Him* may have *eternal* life.”

If your memory of family trips is that you always got into trouble, you might relate to the children of Israel in the wilderness. But the Lord makes clear that He is for them, not against them. Balak, the king in Moab, tries repeatedly to get Balaam, the prophet, to pronounce a curse on the people of Israel. But the Lord will not allow Balaam to curse them. Instead, Balaam repeatedly tells that they are blessed by God, and that God's people will be victorious.

Pagans hear of God's love for His people, even if the people themselves forget. Even as the Lord is defending His people, they are cheating on Him in chapter 25, getting into idolatry and sexual immorality with the Moabites. Again it takes a plague to get their attention.

Set against the Lord's instruction is the evidence that the people desperately need to learn. They are short-sighted, stubborn, selfish and phobic, time after time. Why does the Lord keep speaking to them? Because He loves them, and they need the discipline. *He* doesn't need it, but they do.

3. Rejection: The people's unreadiness to enter the land of promise.

It turns out that the people are on two journeys. They are journeying toward the land of promise, but they are also journeying toward the holiness to which the Lord has called them.

The central event in Numbers is the people's refusal to enter the land of promise. In chapters 13-14, the people have arrived geographically, but not spiritually. Shortly after they leave Sinai, still a matter of only months since leaving Egypt, they are camped on the southern border of Canaan, the Promised Land, and twelve spies are chosen to explore the land the people are to inhabit. Ten of the spies return and announce, "It's a wonderful land, but we can't take it. The opposition is too big."

Only Joshua and Caleb want to move ahead, saying, "If the LORD is pleased, He will give it to us. *Only do not rebel against the LORD and do not be afraid.*"

Here is the destination toward which the people have been journeying. They are at the gate, and what do they do? They break down. They weep. They wish they were back in the not-as-good-as-they-remember days in Egypt. They want to choose a new leader to take them where they want to go.

The Lord suggests to Moses they should all be stricken down for their faithlessness. Moses again intercedes for the people, and he uses an interesting argument: "Lord, You've brought them this far. If you destroy them now, the nations will say You were not able to save them. Remember that You're slow to anger and abounding in love and forgiveness, even though You don't leave the guilt unpunished."

But the Lord has both a judgment and a promise in mind. He declares that none of that generation will make it to the Promised Land, except for Joshua and Caleb. Their children will be heirs of the promise. A whole generation misses the promise because they couldn't remember that the Lord was in charge.

The people don't see the fulfillment of the promise, because they're not ready to see it. The problem is *not* that God is not ready, but that the people are not ready. They still don't know how to follow in faith.

And what does the Lord do next? Teach them how to fight? No, He teaches them how to worship, how to keep the Lord in view. He keeps teaching them. *He keeps disciplining them, because He loves them, and He still has a plan for His people.*

4. Salvation: Numbers points forward to fulfillment of God's plan for His people.

This book points forward to fulfillment in several ways. We can see examples of hope in the blessing, the lampstands, the inheritance, and even the discipline.

The Blessing (6:22-27)

Near the end of the book, Balaam is unable to curse God's people. But toward the beginning we see why. The Lord has chosen to bless them. The Levites are to remind the people with this proclamation (in 6:22ff):

*“The LORD bless you and keep you.
The LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.
So,”* He says, *“they will put my name on the Israelites.”*

What does that mean? It means the Lord had a plan to bless His people, to radiate Himself to His people through His grace, and to make them look like Him so they will know wholeness, with the result that they will be known by His character.

To and through His people He will make known His blessing, His grace, His peace, and His holy goodness. The name *Israel* means, *he struggles with God*, but the struggle leads to a blessing of His grace and fulfillment.

The Seven Lamps (8:1-4; Hebrews 8:5-7; Revelation 1:12-13)

In chapter 8 the Lord told Moses the priests were to have the seven lamps in the Holy tabernacle always shining directly in front of the lampstand. What was there? According to the instructions in Exodus 25 and Leviticus 24, that is where the table was which held the 12 loaves representing God's people. In other words, the light of God is to remain shining continually on His people.

The New Testament book of Hebrews (8:5-7) tells us that the Lord's instructions to Moses about the tabernacle were “a copy and shadow of what is in Heaven.”

In Revelation 1:12-13, at the beginning of John's revelation he writes, “I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone ‘like a son of man,’” that is, the Messiah. John sees that Jesus Christ is there where the Lord's light always shines on His people. Jesus is the light of God on His people. Jesus is the offering of the people before the Holy God.

Inheritance (27:1-11; 36; Hebrews 11:14-16)

Numbers ends with a provision for an inheritance for women from families without a male heir. How will they have land and a home once they reach the Promised Land? This request arose in chapter 27 when five brotherless daughters, whose father was dead, ask Moses about what was to become of them once they reached their destination.

This is striking—especially since this is how the book ends—because these women were asking about their inheritance in the Promised Land while everybody else seemed to be intent on going back to Egypt. And the Lord doesn't rebuke them for

asking. He seems pleased to make sure they have a connection to land in their future home. It seems this attitude is what the Lord desired all along. Finally! Some people who don't want to go back but actually expect to go forward!

Hebrews 11:14-16 celebrates people with that kind of faith: "People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."

His Discipline (Hebrews 12)

All this would sound wonderful—His blessing, His constant attention and grace, joy in reserving for us an inheritance—if it weren't for the chronic complaints and rebellion of His people. When you read the story from God's perspective, you don't see a mean God. You see people in need of a lot of discipline and, amazingly, a Lord who keeps leading them forward to the promise.

Hebrews 12 seems to be the commentary on Numbers. "The Lord disciplines those he loves. . . Endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined . . . then you are illegitimate children, and not true sons. . . God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. . . Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

Let us, each one of us, listen to our words, listen to our hearts in view of the stubborn, selfish, phobic people of God. Let us consider the serious consequences of bitterness, and the profound grace of the Lord who calls us not to turn back, but to follow on.

And "let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Lord, give me faith to follow not in bitterness, but in simple trust, to your glory and my joy.

Outline

Text: **Numbers**

The Big Idea: **The Lord disciplines those He loves. Endure hardship as discipline.**

Introduction: Salvation for those who don't want it

What have we seen so far in this series?

What these books show us thematically

What these books show us chronologically

Numbers & Hebrews 12

How does God work faith in people who defy him at every turn?

1. Law: God continues to give clear instruction.

2. Sin: The people continue to complain and rebel.

2a. Sins of complaint (Numbers 11-12)

2b. Sins of misplaced ambition (16-17)

2c. Sins of getting in the way of God's glory (20)

2d. The Savior of sinners (20-25; John 3:14-15)

3. Rejection: The people's unreadiness to enter the land of promise. (13-14)

4. Salvation: Numbers points forward to fulfillment of God's plan for His people.

The Blessing (6:22-27)

The Seven Lamps (8:1-4; Hebrews 8:5-7; Revelation 1:12-13)

Inheritance (27:1-11; 36; Hebrews 11:14-16)

His Discipline (Hebrews 12)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What in Numbers impacted you the most?
2. Exodus showed God's salvation despite the fact that the people clearly did not deserve it or even want it at times. What does Numbers add to our understanding of the salvation God is working in His people?
3. When have you seen the value of strict discipline? In a parent? Teacher? Coach? Employer? Mentor? What role do negative consequences play in good discipline?
4. In Numbers even the leaders, even Moses, shared in the rebellion, and suffered for it. What lessons might spiritual leaders gain from this book?
5. The central event seems to be the people's refusal to enter the land of promise *when* the Lord led them to. This fear impacted the next generation. What is the difference between wise caution and godless fear? Does **1 John 4:16-18** shed any further light on this?
6. How does **Numbers 6:24-27** impact your understanding of what the Lord wants for you?

Chapter 6

Deuteronomy: A Meaningful Past, a Vital Present

Introduction: God wants us, and we don't want Him.

One way to summarize all that we have seen in the Pentateuch is in two simple statements:

God wants us; and
We don't want God.

It's there in every episode. God wants us. He never stops thinking about His people. He never stops working on their behalf. He never stops sovereignly working through all the circumstances of their lives to save and sanctify a people set apart for Himself. He never stops making people holy unto Himself. He never stops preparing people to be the glorious community. God wants us.

It is just as obvious, from Genesis 3 all the way through Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, that we don't want God. We have to be wrestled, kicking and crying, out of slavery and into freedom. His people are even known by the name *Israel*, which means, "he struggles with God." Presented with the choice of freedom and blessing or slavery and decay, we go after slavery and decay every time. It's amazing how strongly our will is bent toward slavery. We will choose almost anything over trusting the Holy Lord.

God wants us, and we don't want Him.

As we come to Deuteronomy, the last book of the Law, we see the Lord reviewing with His people all that He has revealed and all that they have been through. And He presents them with a fork in the road. One path is the path of life and the blessing of the Lord. The other is the path of death and destruction (30:19-20).

But almost as soon as He presents those two paths, He tells the people two more things: He says He will never leave them nor forsake them (31:6); and He says they are going to choose the path of death and prostitute themselves to foreign gods, and that it will take disaster and difficulty to teach them His faithfulness (31:16-21).

These themes run all the way through these books. God wants us, He keeps speaking of an eternal commitment, a covenant, and He keeps sovereignly working through even the worst of circumstances to accomplish salvation.

And yet, we don't want God, and we repeatedly choose the wrong things, leading time after time to our own destruction.

That seems like an irreconcilable difference. Unlike pagan views of God, He is not in our debt so that we can do something to control him or obligate Him. To the contrary, God is already committed to saving a people who don't deserve His favor. The problem is not that we must win God. The problem is that we are universally prone to self-destruct. We make terrible choices. We don't need to soften God's heart toward us; we need God to soften our hearts toward Him. If He doesn't, we are surely doomed.

Phil Yancey writes (The Bible Jesus Read, Zondervan, 1999, p. 78), “Moses’ life had a single theme: God did it.” That’s what this is all about. God’s people don’t want what they really need, so God does it.

God is committed to an undeserving and chronically unfaithful people. He wants us, and we don’t want Him. God knows we’ve never wanted Him, so He calls us to know Him now. **The answer to our problem is the Lord we must know and rely on now.** That’s what Deuteronomy is about.

The Content of Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is really three sermons. We could summarize the message of Deuteronomy like this:

The whole past experience of God is relevant to the present.

The law and the covenant are wisdom for the present.

The worship of the Lord is to keep our trust active in the present.

The answer to our problem is the Lord we must know and rely on now.

Moses reviews all that God’s people have been through and reminds them that it is intensely relevant to the present:

4:7-9 *What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?*

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.

4:30-31 *When you are in tribulation and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the LORD your God and obey him. For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath.*

6:4-5 *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.*

6:10-12 *When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

7:7-8 *The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

8:2-3 Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you . . . to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

8:17-18 You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant.

9:4-5 Do not say to yourself, "The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity.

What is all this saying? **The answer to our problem is the Lord we must know and rely on now.** God's people have been dependent on God's favor and provision always. As Paul told the Athenians, "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

God's people are not to be like the rest of the lost world. They are not to worship images. They are to read God's Word aloud, and remind each other of what He has said and done, and teach it to their children, and live according to its truth in their present lives and in the challenges to come.

God's people are not to continually hear God's Word merely to keep church tradition alive. They are to continually hear God's Word because this is how they walk the path of life rather than death.

Clearly, God's people are called not to pretend that God does not care about the details of our lives, not to marginalize Him and pretend He doesn't matter. They are called—for their own benefit—to rely on Him every day in everything, to trust Him as sovereign over all things.

They are called not to set God's Word aside and imagine that grace means I no longer need to know it or think about it. They are called to know it above all things and keep it central to everything they do.

The problem is, we don't—at least not consistently. In a thousand ways, we reject the Lord and His Word every day.

Why is Deuteronomy in the Bible?

The name *Deuteronomy* means "second law" or "copy of the law," because it is essentially a review of what God has already revealed. In Deuteronomy, Moses is summarizing everything that God's people have learned and need to remember. Deuteronomy might be the first recorded expository sermon—or series of sermons—in history.

Here are God's people on the plains of Moab, looking across the Jordan river at the land of their forefathers. To Abraham, the Lord promised He would bring his descendants back to this land, and here they are.

These are the people who have completed the journey, and now it's time to enter the land they've anticipated for so long.

What would the Lord have us to keep in mind at a time of new beginnings? Significantly, it's not new information. It's not about doing something innovative or revolutionary or radically different. It's not about being evolutionarily more advanced than earlier generations.

What does the Lord want His people to know? He wants them to know what He has already said and done. Know the Lord by looking back at what He has revealed of Himself, His purposes and His ways. Know how He works by looking at what He has done. Know what to do by remembering what He has said. *Know Him by His Word.*

Deuteronomy is both a revered old leader preaching His farewell sermon, and a respected dignitary delivering the class's commencement address—except that these people are not expected to daydream and fiddle with their tassels and prepare to fling their mortar boards into the air at the end of the speech. They're called to remember, and proceed with wisdom and steadfast trust in the Lord as they take on all the perils of a new chapter in their life with Him.

The generation that thought as slaves has passed away. The generation raised to steward God's estate is here. But the character and purpose of the Lord has not changed. Their total dependence upon Him has not changed. The perils before them have not changed. Their distinct separateness from the pagans around them has not changed. The truth of God's Word has not changed. The way to live a blessed life has not changed.

So they need to remember all that God has already revealed. Don't waste the lessons of the past. Don't revise the message to fit your short-sighted agenda. Don't assume you're beyond all that now. The past is meaningful, and the present is vital. Listen, learn, and apply. Bring the revelation of the past into the life of the present. Learn the trustworthiness of the Lord for the challenges of the present.

The answer to our problem is the Lord we must know and rely on now.

Deuteronomy is the completion of at least three intertwined stories:

- The life and ministry of Moses
- The journey of God's people
- The articulation of God's Law

1. The completion of the earthly life and ministry of Moses

Back in Exodus, we met Moses as an infant, born to a slave family under the oppression of a Pharaoh who was killing every boy born to the Hebrews. We saw Moses providentially taken into that Pharaoh's house and raised with the best education available.

We saw him at the end of 40 years kill an Egyptian slave-driver and flee into the wilderness, where he could providentially learn the survival skills, the shepherding skills, and the humility to lead his people there.

We saw him 40 years after that, called by the Lord back to Egypt, to be the Lord's mouthpiece for delivering his people from bondage, then leading them on the 40-year journey from Egypt to the land of promise.

Now, at 120 years of age, Moses preaches his last sermon, climbs his last mountain, and dies with a view overlooking the home the Lord was giving to His people.

Deuteronomy is the completion of that story, and the prelude to the rest of the Old Testament story, which is background and vocabulary for the gospel of the New Testament.

2. The completion of the Journey of God's people

Deuteronomy is also the completion of that 40-year journey from Egypt to Canaan, from poverty to landholding, from slaves to stewards.

The story goes back even farther, to Jacob's 12 squabbling sons selling their brother into slavery, to Joseph's adventure in Egypt, to the whole clan following him there to be saved from starvation. And now the descendants of those brothers are the nation of Israel, returned to their homeland after 400 years. Deuteronomy brings a kind of closure to that story.

Recognize the spiritual significance of the journey. The Bible has two primary salvation stories. The Lord first reveals Himself as the great Savior of His people in the story of the Passover and Exodus from slavery in Egypt. The other central salvation story of the Bible is Jesus Christ, the Passover Lamb of God, the great Savior in the flesh, giving His life on the cross that His people be bought out of slavery to sin.

In addition, we have come to see that these salvation stories point to two great promises. Those saved from their oppression in Egypt were led to the land promised by the Lord to be their home. And in a corporate sense, viewing them as a people, it was a return home. Likewise, those saved from their slavery to sin are led to the eternal home the Lord has promised, where they will be truly at home as never before—and in a corporate sense, it will be a return home for God's people, a return to the unspoiled relationship we had with Him before the fall.

For 2000 years, the church has seen the vivid parallels of those two stories of salvation and promised land. Christians such as the American slaves who sang of their "home over Jordan" saw the experience of the Hebrews as a metaphor for the spiritual hope they found in Christ.

We understand the imagery of Exodus salvation and Promised Land home in glory. But when it comes to the journey, we are slow to see the significance. Looking back over 3000 years, we think of God's salvation story as taking slaves from Egypt directly into the Promised Land. We tend to forget the significance of that 40-year-journey in between.

In the days of air travel, it's easy to think of a trip from Denver to St. Louis without thinking of anything in between. You get up and go to the airport, and you can be in St. Louis by lunchtime. The Great Plains might never even cross your mind. But in the days of covered wagons, crossing the Great Plains was a perilous journey. People undertook it knowing the great risk, found it grueling, and questioned every day whether they would be better off turning back.

The slaves leaving Egypt expected a journey more like air travel. They were not expecting a grueling 40-year journey to get there. So the journey itself was made more difficult by their complaining and constant temptation to turn back.

The parallel for those saved from slavery to sin and eager for the freedoms of the eternal homeland is that we don't give much thought to the demands of *our* journey. It turns out we don't have air shuttle service. We have to endure the wilderness in between. And our complaining and constant desire to turn back only make our journey all the more difficult.

Make no mistake, the wilderness is where we are. This is not my home. I'm just a 'passin' through. If I would appreciate salvation, I need to long for the better land ahead. It does not help me to expect too much comfort in the wilderness. And it is just plain destructive to want to go back to the slavery from which I've been delivered.

But we do, don't we? We are tempted every day to gripe threateningly about the comforts we lack here in the wilderness, and we are tempted to think we will find satisfaction sooner by going back to the slavery from which the Lord has delivered us.

A young mother put it to me this way: "We're afraid God will take away something we love. But what makes us think we'll be able to keep it if we run from God?" If you're worried about losing something, running from God is not the way to greater security.

If you want a happy life, going with the Life-Giver is the only way to find it. And that requires trusting Him in the wilderness. **The answer to our problem is the Lord we must know and rely on now.**

So we come to the end of the Moses story, and of the journey.

3. The completion of the Law

With the completion of Deuteronomy, the Old Testament Law is complete. These five books would be forever remembered to Hebrews as *Torah*, meaning "the Law." The rest of the Old Testament is made up of the historical chronicles of God's people, and the prophets He sent to call them back to Himself, and the wisdom literature that gives us a vocabulary for interacting personally with the Lord.

But the first five books contain the Law. They verbalize what is essential for a right relationship with the Lord. They reveal who the Lord is, what His purpose is, and what identifies His people.

The completion of Deuteronomy is the period at the end of God's statement of the Law. Note that it is *not* the *fulfillment* of the Law; that would happen in the Person of Christ, recorded in the New Testament. The complete Law still points to a later fulfillment.

Two overlapping concepts are essential to understanding the significant of the Law:

God's Law is relational.

God's Law is covenantal.

God's Law is Relational.

To understand God's law, you need to get away from legalistic thinking, and enter relational thinking. God's law is not like a law passed in congress—which may seem somewhat arbitrary if it is based merely on conditions of the time.

God's Law is based not on some temporary condition. God's Law is based on foundational reality. And the foundational reality is God Himself, on whom all existence depends. All reality is grounded in Him.

God is not a concept, like democracy; God is personal. So His Law is not legalistic, based on abstract concepts. It is relational. It points to Him.

Instead of being like, say, business law, God's law is more like the law of gravity. We recognize laws of gravity as fundamental realities of physics, so that we can do nothing without taking them into consideration.

Try to defy gravity, and you're going to get hurt. Air travel does not ignore gravity; air travel works within the awareness of gravity from the very outset. Planes don't fly by magic; they fly within existing laws of physics. The principles by which a plane can fly are in direction relationship to the laws of physics.

God's law is like that. It's not an idea that you can overrule by political process. It's a fundamental reality. You must work in relationship to it, or you'll come crashing down.

That's what Deuteronomy is saying. It reminds the people of God's foundational reality in all that they do. If He is ignored, their lives will come crashing down.

So you misunderstand God and His Law if you think it's the kind of thing you can take or leave. You can no more disregard God without consequences than you can disregard gravity without consequences. It's not legalistic; it's relational. **The answer to our problem is the Lord we must know and rely on now.**

God's Law is Covenantal.

Ever since Genesis 15, the Lord has been telling His people He has established a covenant with them. A covenant is not a legalistic agreement, like a contract. A covenant is a special kind of relationship.

God's Law is not only relational—in the sense that air flight relates directly to the laws of physics—but it is relational in the *interpersonal* sense, and specifically it is part of a covenant relationship.

A good example of a covenant is a good marriage. Marriage is not a legal contract, in which two parties enter into payment for services rendered. That would be confusing marriage with prostitution. True marriage is a permanent relationship of unending commitment to the best for each other. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.

Marriage is one example of covenant, and the Lord often uses that imagery to portray His relationship with His people—from Genesis chapter one, all the way to Revelation 21, marriage is given as an illustration of God's covenant with His people.

As another example, we have church covenants to reflect this reality. The church is the Bride of Christ, so how we relate to the church reflects something vital.

If you treat the covenant as a legalistic contract, you're doing business, not committing to a relationship. That's legalism. If you refuse to enter into the covenant, you're using the Bride of Christ, but refusing to commit. That's unfaithfulness. But if you enter into the church covenant, you're affirming a vital relationship with Christ and with His Bride. That's why we emphasize a church covenant.

God's Law described in Deuteronomy is like another kind of covenant. In the ancient world, nations had diplomatic relations. And one of these relations was a kind of alliance, in which a smaller nation, which had trouble defending itself, would join an alliance with a larger kingdom or empire. The alliance was not a law, in the legal sense; it was a relationship. The benefits of the relationship went both ways—the smaller nation would get protection, resources, and the security of being part of a much larger power. The larger kingdom would have the partnership and cooperation of the smaller nation, which would send tribute to the larger kingdom as a constant sign of its connection and devotion to the larger kingdom.

Under an unjust empire, this was like paying extortion money to the mob. But in the best of terms, this was a huge benefit to the smaller nation. A large kingdom might not need the partnership of the smaller nation at all, and could easily have overrun it and laid it waste. But sometimes as a sign of favor, the larger kingdom would extend its covenant to the smaller.

That's the kind of language used in Deuteronomy. Even the structure of Deuteronomy is the typical structure of an ancient covenant: Remember the past (know the history), define the specifics (know the law), exhort the people to be faithful (bring the history and the specifics into the present relationship).

As Moses reviews the Lord's relationship with His people, He uses language that is both relational and covenantal (30:19-20). Relationally, the Lord says, "I have shown you the way it is. If you work within My fundamental reality, you will live and thrive. If you ignore or defy My fundamental reality, you will come crashing down."

Covenantally, the Lord says, "I have established a special relationship with you. If you are allied with Me, you will receive my favor and protection. If you chose to leave and defy Me, you will be alone against overwhelming hostile forces, and you will suffer."

Again and again, the Lord uses covenant language and says, "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to him."

Then the Lord uses relational language: "For the LORD is your life, and He will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

Who will solve our problem?

The Lord wants us, and wants good things for us. But we don't want God. We don't choose what will give us life. Deuteronomy is bluntly honest about that.

31:19-21 *Now write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the Israelites and have them sing it, so that it may be a witness for me against them. When I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, the land I promised on oath to their forefathers, and when they eat their fill and thrive, they will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking my covenant. And when many disasters and difficulties come upon them, this song will testify against them, because it will not be forgotten by their descendants. I know what they are disposed to do, even before I bring them into the land I promised them on oath.*

God instructs Moses to write a song to be passed down from generation to generation—a song reminding the people that the Lord knew they would turn from Him and reject Him and bring disasters upon themselves. God knows that before it happens. He wants us, but we don't want Him. How will our problem be solved?

In the New Testament book of Romans, Paul the Apostle raises that very question (7:23-24): *I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*

Deuteronomy anticipates the answer. In 18:15 the Lord says He will send another: *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.*

Philip recognized that person when He showed up (in John 1:45): *"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."*

Paul recognized Him too. *"Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord . . . There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"* (Romans 8:1).

This is the Good News! God wants us. Then the bad news: We don't want God. But the Good News can overcome the bad news. God wants us so much that He came in the flesh to die in our place for our rebellion—the righteous in the place of the unrighteous, the Holy One in place of undeserving people like me—to replace our hard hearts with hearts for Him.

No one here wants to stand before the Holy God and have him judge you on the basis of all the things you have done and left undone—not if you're honest. The Good News is that because of Jesus, we don't have to approach the Judge that way. He invites us to trade our rebellious lives for His perfection, to place all our sin on Him, to accept His death in our place, and experience how the law of the Spirit of life sets us free from the law of sin and death. In Christ, the problem of Deuteronomy is solved. **The answer to our problem is the Lord we must know and rely on now.**

Lord, you see better than I do the wilderness I'm in. You know how long it will take to get me to the promised land, and You're faithful to teach me what I need to know along the way. My only assurance is in following You, and my full assurance is in following You. You are my vision, my Leader, my Provider, my Rewarder, and my Reward. Lord, be magnified. Amen.

Outline

Text: Deuteronomy

**The Big Idea: The answer to our problem
is the Lord we must know and rely on now.**

**Introduction: The problem: God wants us, but we don't want God.
(Deuteronomy 30-31)**

**The content of Deuteronomy
(4:7-9; 4:30-31; 6:4-5; 6:10-12; 7:7-8; 8:2-3; 8:17-18; 9:4-5)**

Why is Deuteronomy in the Bible?

1. The completion of the earthly life and ministry of Moses

2. The completion of the Journey of God's people

Recognize the spiritual significance of the journey.

Two salvation stories

Two Promised Lands

Two wilderness journeys

3. The completion of the Law

God's law is relational

God's law is covenantal

Who will solve our problem?

(Deuteronomy 31:19-21; Romans 7:23 – 8:1; Deuteronomy 18:15; John 1:45)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What in Deuteronomy impacted you the most?
2. “God wants us, and we don’t want God.” How have we seen that in the events of Genesis through Deuteronomy? How do we see it in our lives?
3. What do we learn from the example of Moses’ “Bible teaching” in Deuteronomy? Why do God’s people need the review of what God has said and done?
4. How do you relate to the wilderness experience of God’s people? In what ways are we like the people Moses led through the wilderness?
5. What is the significance of being in a covenant . . .
 - with a spouse?
 - with a church?
 - with God?
6. How has Christ answered for you the problem posed by Deuteronomy?

What Has the Lord shown us of Himself?

One of the popular toys of my childhood was a box of body parts—eyes, lips, feet, hands—that could be put onto any household vegetable or fruit to create a humorous character. This multiple-choice toy was marketed as “Mr. Potatohead.” It was an exercise in tinkering with a persona to fit your own whim.

In an age and culture so thoroughly ego-centric as ours, the god that fits us is a glorified Mr. Potatohead. Our culture raises each person to think herself the final authority on questions of ultimate importance. Decide for yourself what kind of god is worthy of your worship.

The Bible offends this whole concept by revealing that God is a personal being with distinct, unchanging characteristics since before nearsighted humans were ever on the scene. It is not up to us to create Him. It never has been. He does the creating. We live creatively only to the degree that we know Him and join in what He is doing.

All life is dependent on Him. All existence is sustained by Him. All truth is His truth. The only meaning that matters is the meaning that He gives endlessly to those who look to Him for it.

I find His truth freeing. Since He is the Source, the ultimate Good worth pursuing, I am free from the need to look for satisfaction in all the dead ends. Os Guinness and John Seel put it this way:

If He alone is God, anything else is either created or an illusion. If His word is truth, anything that differs is a lie. If His character is good, anything deficient or opposed is evil. Since God alone is God, the affirmation of who He is includes the denial of what He is not. The first duty of those who love God is to say yes to Him. The second is to know when to say no to anything else. (“No God But God,” Moody Press, 1992).

After these first five books, the Bible shows far more of God’s character. The historical books show us God’s longsuffering commitment to His people. The wisdom books give us the language of personal relationship with Him. The prophets let us hear the cry of His heart for His stubborn, struggling people.

But here at the beginning, in the first few books, we are given a context, an environment, in which to understand everything else.

We start by meeting God, the main character, who revealed Himself as Creator of all good, transcendent above us, yet personal with us. We saw that we fell, choosing to live for our own idea of good and evil, rather than according to the His Truth. Our choices have led to alienation, hostility, death, and meaningless, frustrated lives.

We have made a big mess of things, and we deserve to be banished from His presence forever. But He has never dealt with us on the basis of what we deserve. Instead, He has a purpose that involves raising some of these rebellious people into a family of holy ones who enjoy Him and all the infinite joy with Him.

He started this new family with individuals such as Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. He led them into Egypt, where they became a nation of slaves. Then He demonstrated His sovereignty over political and religious powers, over nature and over hearts. He led

His people out of bondage and toward the Promised Land, across the wilderness of desert and the wilderness of their own rebellious natures. But He did not give up on them. He gave them laws to make His character known and to guard them from the destructive ways of the world around them. And He promises to shape a people whose lives are radically bonded to Him.

**God created us to know fulfillment in Him, not apart from Him.
God patiently works with His people to bring them to a mature faith
in His sovereign power and plan.
The Lord calls His people to trust Him unreservedly.
To enjoy the realm of holiness,
we need a distinct relationship of trust in the only true God.
The Lord disciplines those He loves. Endure hardship as discipline.
The answer to our problem is the Lord we must know and rely on now.**

Of course, all this calls for help beyond what we can muster on our own. In our broken condition, we don't trust Him. We are not oriented by a relationship with Him. Poet Christina Rossetti expressed it in verse:

*God hardened me against myself,
This coward with pathetic voice
Who craves for ease, and rest, and joy;*

*Myself, arch-traitor to myself;
My hollowest friend, my deadliest foe,
My clog whatever road I go.*

*Yet One there is can curb myself,
Can roll the strangling load from me,
Break off the yoke and set me free.*
(quoted in "No God But God," Guinness & Seel, Moody Press, 1992)

That One who breaks the yoke and sets me free is the Lord Himself, who came in the flesh as the final Word of salvation. In becoming a man, God shows us His face. In the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, He paid the eternal price for an infinite debt. He became sin for us so that we could be free of our "deadliest foe" and become the righteousness that He created us to be (2 Corinthians 5:21). In rising from that death, still bearing its scars in His eternal body, He lives forever, able to save completely those who come to God through Him, ever living to intercede for them (Hebrews 7:24-25).

This fulfillment of God's saving plan for us in Christ is the message of the New Testament, rooted firmly in the revelation of Himself God made known in the beginning. Today He still calls us to repent (change our focus from self-centered thinking to God-centered thinking) and believe (trust Him to guide us in truth and grace) and know Him as the saving Lord He is.

*Show me your ways, O LORD.
Teach me your paths.*

*Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.
Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.
Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.
According to your love remember me,
for you are good, O Lord.
Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore He instructs sinners in his ways.
He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them His way.*

Psalm 25:4-9 NIV

Acknowledgments

I am overwhelmed at the thought of all those who have helped me hear the Lord in these Mosaic books. I mean “Mosaic” both ways: I believe Moses was the author through whom God revealed Himself to His people in these books, and seeing the Lord in them is a bit like looking at a mosaic, a picture made of tiles. At first glance, it might seem to be a random collection of squares, or of Bible stories. Step back and gaze at it again and you see that a beautiful image is there. I am indebted to those who have taught me to recognize the Lord and not get lost in the squares.

Mark Dever’s “The Message of the Old Testament” (Crossway Books, 2006) is a collection of sermons on every book of the Old Testament. Mark has given an invaluable resource in Biblical theology, and if you want a guide for reading the Bible I heartily recommend that you get this volume and its companion, “The Message of the New Testament.”

I read through these Mosaic books of the Bible in several translations, but I need to call special attention to Eugene Peterson whose introductions to each book in “The Message” (Nav Press, 2002) are brilliant at getting to the heart of God’s Word. Often we Bible teachers can so micro-analyze the text that we miss the point—and the main Character. Eugene Peterson does not miss the details, but he recognizes their connection to the gospel that runs throughout God’s Word. He is a craftsman with words and a lover of the Word. Since I first heard him speak at a conference years ago, he has been a mentor in print, fanning into flame my love for the Lord in His Word again and again.

No one outside my immediate family has influenced my life more profoundly than John Piper. He brought me alongside him when he began his preaching ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, and I have been wrestling, Jacob-like, through his sermons ever since. The sermons are available on desiringgod.org. I seldom study a passage of Scripture without recollecting long-past conversations with my professor, pastor and friend.

Among the sources on structure, background, and theology of the Pentateuch, particularly helpful to me is “Old Testament Survey” by William La Sor, David Hubbard, and Frederic Bush (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982). For a sense of the historical and cultural background, I value R.K. Harrison’s “Old Testament Times” (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970) and “The IVP Bible Background Commentary” (John Walton, Victor Matthews & Mark Chavalas, InterVarsity Press, 2000). For a systematic analysis of Old Testament theology I found J. Barton Payne’s “The Theology of the Older Testament” (Zondervan Publishing House, 1962) particularly helpful. Ronald Youngblood gives a concise survey of the Old Testament background of major theological themes in “The Heart of the Old Testament” (Baker Book House, 1971). Particularly helpful commentaries include “Exodus” (R. Alan Cole, InterVarsity Press, 1973), “Leviticus” (A. Noordizj, translation Raymond Togtman, Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), “Numbers” (Gordon Wenham, InterVarsity Press, 1981), and “Deuteronomy” (J.A. Thompson, InterVarsity Press, 1974).

Philip Yancey has a remarkable way of drawing me into the Bible as a participant, and he does so in “The Bible Jesus Read” (Zondervan Publishing House, 1999). He

notices things in Scripture that others miss, and his reflection on Deuteronomy seems to bring me into the presence of Moses and his struggling congregation.

One book requires special mention. In “Genesis, the Story We Haven’t Heard” (InterVarsity Press, 2001), Paul Borgman avoids the traditional approach of Bible commentary and gives a refreshing look at Genesis as an intricate work of literature. I had struggled to summarize the episodes of Abraham’s story in Genesis 12-22 when I read Borgman’s suggestion that the story is structured around Abram’s seven “visits” with God. Borgman goes on to say that the central visit, the fourth—in which the Lord articulates His covenant with Abraham—is a key or defining point in the story. Furthermore, the literary structure has the seventh visit corresponding to the first, the sixth corresponding to the second, and the fifth corresponding to the third, so that the pattern of the story unfolds like this:

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Genesis 12:1-3 | 7: Genesis 22:1-19 |
| 2. Genesis 12:7-8 | 6. Genesis 18:1-33 |
| 3. Genesis 13:14-18 | 5. Genesis 17:1-27 |
| 4. Genesis 15:1-21 | |

Thematically, this makes sense. But I was surprised to find, when I looked at my outline of the Jacob and Joseph stories, that I had divided each of them also into seven key developments *and* that the same thematic structure seemed to apply, with the fourth development being central to each story, the seventh bringing a culminating closure to the first, and so on.

Even though Borgman did not carry this structure beyond the Abraham story, and he reaches different theological conclusions than I, I am indebted to him for helping me process these masterpieces of literature from the Author whose pen is providence.

Phil Buettel provided a valuable second set of eyes to help me edit these chapters.

Above all, may all praise go to the Author and Fulfiller of our faith, whose book of life is not a ledger of accounts, but rather a story of His glory to be told through all ages.

David Shelley