

## The Bible Overview

When I was ordering the publicity for Christmas I also included an order for a New Year Poster – it was bright and colourful and jolly and announced “Happy New Year!” Unfortunately I got two of the digits in the order number the wrong way round so when the parcel arrived and I unrolled the poster, instead of reading “Happy New Year!” I saw the question “Depressed?”

“Oh no,” I thought, “that will never do for January.” But then I unrolled the rest of it and read the quote from Jeremiah 29:11; “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

And I thought to myself, “Do you know what? I think more people need to hear that message in January than a cheery but superficial “Happy New Year!” So I have put the poster up.

And today as we tackle a 20 minute overview of the Bible to lay the foundation for the rest of this year that verse from Jeremiah should really sit over everything.

You see, is the Bible dull? Is it incomprehensible? Is it God’s way of saying, “Stop having fun?” Is it depressing? No! The big message of the Bible is God saying, “For I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

So let’s take a quick look at what that means by first of all seeing the Old Testament foundation

We start at the beginning and in the beginning God made it all; the heavens and the earth and to top it all he created human beings in his own image and we read that “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.”

But Adam and Eve – humanity, chose to reject God as their ruler, as their king. That rejection is what the Bible calls sin and the result of sin was devastating because God withdrew his blessing from humanity and all of creation – it’s what’s known as the Fall.

Now, the Fall meant that people no longer related to each other or creation as they were supposed to do. In their pride people attempted to build a tower up to heaven, they thought that they could become as powerful as God. Genesis 11: 4 records, “they said, Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

People wanted to do things their own way without God, but God’s response was to do the very thing proud humanity was trying to avoid; he confused their language and scattered humanity – he reminded them of his authority, but God didn’t give up on them.

This reminds us that the message of the Bible is one of hope – Humans have set themselves against God, but the Bible tells us all about God’s Kingdom; that he rules and he saves – he is faithful and calls us to have faith in him.

So, what is God’s message of hope? Well, it is wrapped up in a pledge, God chose one man, Abraham and made a special pledge, or promise to him. At Babel people tried to make a name for themselves, but God promised to make a name for Abraham and promised him a special relationship.

God would make Abraham's descendants a great nation and give them their own land so that through them the whole world would be blessed forever.

Listen to what God says in Genesis 12:1-3, "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 into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Abraham's descendants became known as Israel they went to Egypt and there they ended up as slaves, but God never forgot about them and his promise to Abraham. So, "During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob." Exodus 2:23-24

So God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt by bringing them through the Sea; this was called the "Exodus" – it was the LORD known as Yahweh who saved them and Moses who led them out of Egypt and eventually into the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy 26:8-9 sums up exactly what happened, "So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey;"

But if this nation was to be God's people there needed to be some ground rules, so on the way to the promised land God gave them what is called the Law.

“These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.” Deuteronomy 6:1-2

Now, although Israel was ruled by God they began to look at other nations and they saw that these pagan nations had Kings – “We want one of those too” they said, so God gave them kings whose job it was to be God’s representative on earth. Now here is the king you have chosen, the one you asked for; see, the LORD has set a king over you. If you fear the LORD and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the LORD your God— good!”

And the most famous King was King David who came to represent Israel’s relationship with God.

However, as we have briefly seen already, throughout their history God’s people have disobeyed God’s law and neglected their special relationship with God. They didn’t love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength and they didn’t love their neighbours as themselves – even their kings like David forgot about God.

Because of all this God took his people out of their Promised Land and sent them away to the surrounding nations. And because they were in exile God’s people were absolutely devastated because it seemed to them that God’s promises were being undone, listen to Psalm 137.

“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, Sing us one of the songs of Zion! How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy. Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. Tear it down, they cried, tear it down to its foundations! O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks”

Now, although things look bad; God’s people have rebelled against God and God has exiled them, before during and after the exile God sent prophets whom he spoke through to call Israel back into their special relationship with him. The prophets reminded Israel first of all that God had made a special pledge with them and secondly it was the people of God who were at fault, not the Lord.

The prophets warned that the exile was coming, but they also comforted the people reminding them that God is a faithful God and that he would not forget his pledge, so they also pointed forward to the ultimate fulfilment of that promise.

This is what Jeremiah announced, “The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the LORD. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

So at the end of the Old Testament we have journeyed from Creation when everything was very good into a fallen world where God's people are no longer free because of their constant rebellion against God and where they are reminded of their unfaithfulness by the constant humiliation of being subject to godless nations.

However, God has not forgotten his promise - his pledge, so as we open up the New Testament we come to the fulfilment of that pledge and that comes through the life of Jesus.

Jesus was born a Jew, an Israelite, a descendant of King David and he lived the life of special relationship with God that all of Israel was supposed to live. Jesus fulfilled the words of the prophets and unlike everyone else Jesus never disobeyed God. So we read,

Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

The Good news is declared – a Saviour has been born and he has come to reconcile people to God. Mark tells us in his Gospel.

“After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’”

But it wasn't just the life of Jesus that was important it was also his death.

On the cross Jesus willingly died to take the punishment for sin that we deserved, the penalty for rebellion against God our Lord and our King.

The Old Testament was pointing ahead to this moment when at the Cross Jesus; God the king was also God the Saviour.

God's amazing plan was to demonstrate his awesome faithfulness and love for his people by acting as a self-sacrifice. Romans 5:6-8 says, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

But as we look ahead to Easter we know that Jesus didn't only die for us, he also was raised from the dead by God.

In doing that God showed that the penalty for sin had been paid for once and for all and so that the whole world could be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus.

Paul wrote about it, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures"

So the Bible tells us about God's Kingdom; that God rules and God saves through Jesus.

And that leads us on to Pentecost because when Jesus returned to reign at God's right hand he sent the Holy Spirit to live in his followers.

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of truth (John 14:17) and he tells us that the Holy Spirit makes Jesus known to his people and to the world. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and comforts believers with the truth of God's just love for us. Listen again to Paul,

“We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.”

On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was given to the disciples and they began to proclaim the good news of Jesus in many different languages. God’s pledge to Abraham that he would provide a blessing to all nations was being fulfilled – all the nations of the world were becoming part of God’s kingdom and God left his Spirit to be with us until Jesus returns.

One day – we don’t know when, but one day Jesus will return. The Bible tells us that when that happens he will come as the powerful and glorious king.

He will express the fullness of God’s kingdom by judging the whole world. That means the Babel attitude of pride and rejection of God will be punished but those who trust in Jesus will be saved from God’s holy, righteous and just condemnation – not through any goodness of their own, but because of what Jesus has done for them – and they will be with God for ever.

2 Thessalonians 1:8-10 puts it like this; “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.”

But until Jesus returns God’s people are to live in a way which honours the privilege of being in the Kingdom of God and share the good news of the Gospel so that as many as possible can be led to faith in Jesus.

So what will happen after Jesus returns?

Well, the Bible tells us that God will make a new heavens and a new earth that will last forever. This can be thought of as the ultimate Promised Land. In this new creation death and pain will have been destroyed and God will live with his people in perfect fellowship. Listen to Revelation 21:3-4; “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.””

God’s plan for the world began with creation and “ends” with the New Creation. God keeps his pledge and the world becomes the Kingdom of God it was always intended to be where he rules and humanity rules the New Creation under him.

So the New Testament takes us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the return of Jesus and the New Creation.

What it means is that all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness – the New Testament can’t be read without the Old Testament because the New Testament is the fulfilment of the Old Testament. And the Old Testament needs to be read alongside the New Testament because the Old Testament is the foundation of what we discover in the New Testament. And so the Bible as a whole reveals to us God’s Kingdom where God rules and tells us the good news that God saves through Jesus Christ.

Statistically this weekend is the most depressing in the calendar – Christmas and New Year have been and gone, the weather is cold and grey, the credit card bill has just arrived. Aren’t you ready for a bit of good news?

Folks we've just gone through the whole Bible and discovered that God says, "For I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." And it is all there in God's living Word; what a great story of hope, rescue and salvation – what an amazing future promised through Jesus in the New Creation. And that's why we are going to spend this year understanding that big picture a little better. Amen.