

Introduction

The Bible is a great gift. The Creator of all things entered into our human story and spoke to us. He inspired people over many centuries to share words into books that reveal His mind, bringing wisdom into our lives and light to our paths. But God's biggest intention for the Bible is to invite us into its Story. What God wants for us, more than anything else, is that we make the Bible's great drama of restoration and new life the story of our lives, too.

The appropriate way to receive a gift like this is to come to know the Bible deeply, to lose ourselves in it precisely so that we can find ourselves in it. In other words, we need to immerse ourselves in it – to read God's word at length and without distraction, to read with deeper historical and literary perspective and to read through the Bible with friends in a regular rhythm. This is the purpose of our Bible reading plan.

Our Bibles are divided into two "testaments" (another word for "covenant"). The Old Testament, comprising three-quarters of the Bible, describes the life of God's people - Abraham and his descendants and the ancient nation of Israel. The New Testament centers on the story of Jesus the Messiah, the culmination of the Old Testament's long history. The work of Jesus resolves all the narrative threads of the Bible as He fulfills God's intentions for Israel, for humanity, and for creation.

The prophets of Israel had said that a new covenant of a different kind was on its way. As Jeremiah put it: "The day is coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors ... I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts." And Isaiah announced, "People from many nations will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of Jacob's God. There He will teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths.'" This would fulfill God's covenantal promise to Abraham: "All the families on earth will be blessed through you."

All these things that the prophets foretold are fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus. In Him, God came to earth as a human being both to show and to teach His ultimate intentions for humanity and creation. Jesus explained and lived out the deepest meaning of the Scriptures and the story of God's people. He also offered Himself as the ultimate sacrifice both to bring peace between God and humanity and to make peace between all people possible.

Background

By the first century AD, Israel had been suffering under foreign rule for centuries. Now subjugated by the Roman Empire, God's people are divided about what to do. Zealous factions advocate violent rebellion. Many teachers and other religious leaders are urging people to get more serious about following Israel's distinctive way of life under God's law. And those running the Temple in Jerusalem survive by making compromises with their Roman overlords.

Israel's ancient prophet, Isaiah, had foretold a time when a messenger would come to Jerusalem proclaiming the Good News that God is returning at last, that His people are being saved. But Rome had its own version of the good news, and it wasn't about Israel's God. The empire's version was about the great blessings brought by their own powerful leader, Caesar Augustus.

He is, they said, “a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere”. The birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning for the world of the good tidings that have come to men through him (from the Priene Calendar Inscription in Asia Minor, ca. 9 BC).

Into this world a Child is born in Israel. He is a descendant of King David, but He comes from a humble family. An angel speaks to His mother, Mary, before He is born. He tells her that this Child will be the long-promised and long-awaited Messiah, Israel's King, the One who will fulfill their history. Remarkably, Scripture's account of the ministry of Jesus echoes particulars of Israel's history

Before Israel's Exodus, Pharaoh killed many Israelite babies, but Israel's deliverer, Moses, escaped; King Herod also kills many Israelite babies in trying to kill Jesus, but Jesus also escapes. The family of Israel went to Egypt to survive a deadly famine; the family of Jesus also survives by going to Egypt. Israel passed through the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land; Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River before beginning His ministry in Israel. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness, where they struggled with temptation; Jesus spends forty days fasting in the wilderness and is tempted by the devil. And as Israel had twelve sons who fathered twelve tribes, Jesus chooses twelve men to be His closest followers. In all of this, Jesus is reliving aspects of the ancient narrative of Israel, but now with a different outcome.

Jesus is refreshing Israel's story and renewing Israel itself - through Himself.

In His opening message to the people of Israel, Jesus calls them to be the light they were always meant to be, announcing the Good News that something unprecedented is happening in Israel's story. He demonstrates in powerful words and miraculous deeds what it looks like when God comes as King: teaching, correcting, and healing. Jesus is widely recognized as a rabbi and a mighty prophet in Israel, but the current religious leaders see Him as a dangerous new problem. Jesus critiques their leadership, thus threatening their positions of power.

This tension between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders rises until Jesus travels to Jerusalem for a final confrontation. His twelve disciples now recognize Him as the Son of David, the Messiah, but they still don't understand His mission. They assume Jesus is going to fight His enemies and claim the throne. But Jesus talks about fighting a different kind of battle.

He says His struggle is against the powers of darkness and the spiritual ruler of this world.

Then during Israel's annual celebration of the Exodus, Jesus shares a final Passover meal with His disciples. He tells them that his death will inaugurate the new covenant promised by the prophets. He is arrested by the religious leaders and handed over to the Romans for execution. He is nailed to a cross, with a mocking sign posted above His head that reads "The King of the Jews." It certainly looks as though Jesus has lost, that He is no king after all. But three days later, Jesus is raised from the dead and appears to His disciples.

It turns out that Jesus willingly went to His death as a sacrifice for the sins of His people. Through His sacrifice, He wins a surprising victory over the spiritual powers of darkness. He takes on sin and death directly – ironically, through death – emptying them of their power over humanity, and He rises from the dead to confirm His triumph. This unexpected story of Israel's Messiah reveals God's long-term plan. All the earlier covenants were leading to this one. The life and ministry of Jesus brings all the narrative threads in the Scriptures together into a single, coherent story.

Format

The story of Jesus is told from four different perspectives in the Bible books known as the "Gospels" ("gospel" means "good news"). All four authors desired to portray the vastly rich and meaningful story of Jesus from a perspective that would resonate with their original audiences. Luke and Mark are written primarily to Gentiles (non-Jews), who are less familiar with the history and traditions of Israel. (Luke is actually the first part of a two-part work along with the book of Acts, which tells the story of Jesus' earliest followers.) The Gospels of Matthew and John are likely written to Jews who are familiar with Israel's previous story.

The other books of the New Testament, mostly letters, are also written to these different groups. In our reading plan, books of the New Testament that aren't Gospels are grouped with the Gospel that shares a similar audience. Paul's letters were sent to Greek-speaking followers of Jesus who were mostly Gentiles, and thus are fittingly grouped with Luke-Acts. Luke often traveled with Paul to share the Good News. We will encounter Paul's letters here in the likely order that they were written. Based largely on the apostle Peter's memoirs, Mark's Gospel is grouped with the letters that Peter sent from Rome and a similar letter from Jude. Like the Gospel of Matthew, the books of Hebrews and James address Jewish believers, so these three books are grouped together. Finally, the writings of John (the Gospel and three letters) are grouped together as they were originally addressed to the same communities.

The book of Revelation is unique among the New Testament books in its historical setting and literary genre. Nevertheless, like all the other books of the New Testament, it's a "revelation from Jesus Christ," and its content centers on Him. It is placed last in this edition because it provides a fitting conclusion not only to the New Testament but also to the entire Story of the Bible. As the book of Revelation draws to a close, God brings His purposes for humanity and creation to their final culmination in "a new heaven and a new earth." We are left with the grand promise that all will be made new in Christ.

This fresh arrangement of this reading plan highlights the depth of the New Testament's fourfold witness to Jesus the Messiah. The Son of God, who fulfills all the longings and promises of the collected Scriptures, can be viewed here through the rich variety of lenses provided by the books of the new covenant.