

Hello, and welcome to this first class of our discipleship groups!

This is the first of four lessons having to do with God's Word. The purpose of these discipleship courses is to help you become a deeper student of the Bible, which is God's Word to us.

I have heard people say many times over the years that they want to read the Bible, but they also have a lot of difficulty understanding it. This, feeling of being lost within the biblical text, then, becomes a reason why they don't pick up the Bible. I get it! It's hard to read something you are not familiar with and don't understand the context.

So, Whether you have studied the Scriptures for many years, or you have only read a portion of them, or this is your first time ever opening up the Bible, this lesson is going to help give you a broader context for the story of the Bible. In the next lesson, we will look at the overall story of the Bible. But in order to understand this overarching "meta-narrative" of the Bible, we need to understand how it is put together—or the structure of the books of the Bible—and what the overall history is. This will help us understand some of the historical context of the Bible so when we are reading it, we don't feel lost. READY? Good!

Let's start with the structure of the Bible. This may not seem like new information to some, but it is always a good refresher to start at the very beginning and revise some things we knew, and some things maybe we have forgotten, and some things that maybe some have never heard before.

The structure of the Bible is broken down into blocks of books. These books are, for the most part, NOT presented in chronological order, they are presented more by groupings. The first grouping is the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These first five books are also known as the books of Moses, who is the author. These books do happen to be in chronological order, and they talk about the creation, the pre-flood era, the after-flood era, and the populating of the world. From Genesis 12 and on, there is a shift from a focus on the whole world, to focusing on one man: Abraham. It is Abraham and his descendants—the Israelites—that are the focus of the rest of the Old Testament. In Exodus through Deuteronomy, we see the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery, and how God formed them to be His special people.

After the books of Moses, comes the second block of books: The History books, which include, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. These are also mostly in chronological order.

Then come the books of Poetry, which contain Job, Psalms, Proverbs,

Ecclesiastes (NOT ECCLESIASTIKS—a lot of people mispronounce that name!),

and, finally, the Song of Solomon rounds out the books of poetry.

Then come two blocks of books known as the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets. The Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Though the book of Lamentations is not a long book, is among this genre of the Major Prophets because Jeremiah was the author. Now, it needs to be said that these are not known as “Major” prophets because their message is better, but because their prophetic books are longer than the other prophets.

There are 12 Minor Prophets whose books are generally much shorter in length, and they are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. They prophesied throughout the times of the kings, the exile, and when Israel came back from the exile. If you are not sure what I mean by “the exile”, just hang in here for a few more minutes, and I will explain. These 12 Minor Prophets finish out the Old Testament.

The New Testament has only four blocks of books. The first are the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The second is the history section, which is only the book of Acts. After that, we have the Epistles. Once when a kid in Sunday School was asked what the Epistles were, he answered saying that they were the wives of the Apostles!

The Epistles are letters and correspondence from the Apostles to either the churches or to specific people, as we see in the cases of Philemon, Titus, and Timothy. We are literally reading someone else’s mail!

These Epistles consist of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John. These Epistles were written by Paul, Peter, John, James (the brother of Jesus), Jude (the brother of Jesus), and the unknown author of Hebrews. And the final book, which is a genre all of its own, is the Book of Revelation.

Now that we have understood the structure of the Bible, we need to understand a general outline of the history of Israel. The story of Israel is, by and large, presented in chronological order in the first 17 books of the Bible. Much of Genesis through Esther contain the historical narrative of the history of Israel.

Next week, we will discuss the Bible's theological meta-narrative, but for our purposes this week, we need to understand the Bible's historical sequence so that when we read it, we know what is going on and where we are in history and in God’s unfolding story.

The Bible follows the family line of Abraham all the way through Jesus Christ. In Genesis 12-15, God called out Abraham from his country in Ur and his family and promised him through a covenant that he would be the father of many nations. Abraham then had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac was the heir of the covenant God made with his father, Abraham. In fact, after Abraham’s wife, Sarah, died, he married again and had other sons who also became nations. The Bible will follow the storyline of Isaac, not Ishmael, though Ishmael also became a great nation. Isaac married Rebekah

and had twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Jacob was the heir of the covenant God made with Abraham. The Bible follows the story of Jacob, not Esau, though Esau also became the great nation of Edom, which is seen throughout the Bible.

God eventually changed Jacob's name to Israel, and Israel had twelve sons who became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. His sons were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. It is important to know these names because they appear all throughout the Bible.

With the final addition of the 12 sons of Israel, the Bible turns to a long story that sets the stage for how God is going to rescue Israel and establish them as His own special people. Here is the very short version of this story: Joseph was the eleventh out of the 12 brothers, and ten of Jacob's oldest sons hated their younger brother, Joseph. So, they sold him as a slave to Egypt and told their father that a wild animal had killed him. Long story short: God helped Joseph to ascend to the highest position in Egypt except for the Pharaoh. Then, there arose a famine throughout the world, but through Joseph's prophetic understanding and his administrative ability, Egypt had amassed lots of food. Joseph's brothers came to Egypt looking for food and, through a series of events, realized Joseph was in charge of Egypt. There was forgiveness and reconciliation, and Joseph invited his father, Israel, and his brothers to move to Egypt to be with him and be where the food was. ***All of this is in the book of Genesis, and this is where Genesis ends and Exodus picks up.***

The book of Exodus begins with the Israelites living in Egypt and greatly multiplying. Then, there ascended to the throne a Pharaoh who did not remember Joseph or why the Israelites were living in his land. The Egyptians ended up enslaving Israel for 400 years with cruel oppression. God then raised up a deliverer, Moses, and with many signs and wonders, God freed His people from their slavery in Egypt. From Egypt, God takes His people to Mt. Sinai where He makes a covenant with them—they will be His people, and He will be their God. This is where He gives them His Word, and they are to serve Him faithfully. For 40 years the Israelites wander the desert learning the lessons of how to be God's people—it is the message of spiritual transformation, and the story of each one of us. ***This is Exodus through Deuteronomy***, and Deuteronomy ends with Moses' farewell address to Israel as they are on the cusp of entering into the Land that God had sworn to give Abraham and his descendants.

God then selected Joshua as Israel's next leader after Moses. Joshua led Israel into the Promised Land, conquered it, and divided it among the tribes of Israel. This is yet another fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham.

After Joshua's death, we come to the Book of Judges, where Israel enters a period of spiritual, moral, and social decline. It needs to be noted that this decline was due to Israel's constant unfaithfulness to the Lord by worshipping idols instead of being faithful to the Lord. To get Israel's attention, God used the nations around them to oppress them. God raised up Judges to save Israel and guide them through these turbulent times for roughly 300 years. ***These are the books of Judges and Ruth***

After Judges, we come to the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, Israel asked for a king—something they should not have done because God was to be their King. However, God gave them Saul as their first king—and it didn't go well. The next two kings were the greatest in Israel: David and Solomon. David, however, is the greatest of all the kings of Israel. He is utterly faithful to the Lord and a man after God's own heart. God makes a covenant with him, and it is through David that God will raise up a King who will reign forever and ever. David was succeeded by his son, Solomon. At the end of Solomon's life, he is unfaithful to the Lord, and the Lord punishes his family line by leaving them only one tribe to rule. God tore 10 tribes of Israel away from David and Solomon's family line, and left them the kingdom of Judah to rule. This is the period known as The Divided Kingdom. During this time, Israel was ruled by kings in the north, and Judah was ruled by the line of king David in the south.

Throughout the period of the kings in the books of Kings and Chronicles, Israel is constantly unfaithful to God. The books of 1 and 2 Kings generally follow the kings of northern Israel, while the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles generally follow the kings of southern Judah. Out of all the kings, both in Judah and in Israel, there are only a few faithful kings...most are very bad, and they led the way for Israel's unfaithfulness to God and their refusal to listen to God's messages through the prophets—many of those messages we can read in the books of the Major and Minor prophets. As a result of their constant and unrepentant sin, God punishes them by sending them into Exile. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians, and we do not hear from them again in the rest of the Bible.

The story of the Bible now follows the kingdom of Judah and the family line of King David. However, they continue to follow the evil example of their brothers in the north, and they are equally unfaithful to God. Despite repeated warnings to turn back to God, they stubbornly follow their own ways, and they end up sharing the same fate that the Israelites in the North suffered. In 587 BC, the southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar and exiled into Babylon, and they remained there for 70 years. ***This is found in the books of Kings, Chronicles, and most of the prophets.***

During these 70 years, Babylon was overthrown by the Medes, and then the Medes were overthrown by the Persians. It was during the Persian empire that the story of Esther happened. Under King Cyrus, the Persians allowed a remnant of Israelites to go home and rebuild Jerusalem. This is the period of the remnant, and it ***covers the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.***

Once the remnant returned to Israel, they—once again—started to abandon the Lord and sin before Him. And God—once again—sends the prophets to get them back on track. But this time, the people are much more responsive to the prophets. The post-exilic prophets—or the prophets who prophesied after the Exile—are Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi.

After Malachi, there were 400 years of silence during which God did not speak through the prophets. This, however, does not mean that these years were uneventful. During these 400 years, the Persians were overthrown by the Greeks, lead by Alexander the Great. Alexander's empire included Israel. Later, the Greeks were overthrown by the Romans, and Rome was now the master of the known world—including Israel.

You need to understand that Israel was exiled in 587 BC, and even though a remnant was allowed to return, they were always under the subjugation of another empire. And though they were technically back in their homeland, they viewed themselves as being in “virtual exile”: Meaning that they in the land, but not in control. It is in this context that Jesus, who is of the line of David, is born to Israel. You can only imagine the people's excitement when He came doing miraculous signs and announcing “The Kingdom of God is here!” They were expecting Him to defeat all their enemies and restore the “kingdom” to Israel and give them back their sovereignty.

But Jesus had a very different mission. We will get into that story next week.

I hope this helps you grasp a larger context for the Bible's story. Nothing happens in a vacuum, and the historical context gives deeper dimensions to the Bible's message.

God bless you as you continue to read His Word with greater and greater understanding!