

WHAT'S IN THIS WORKBOOK

This *Introduction* is designed to help us get the most out of this Bible study. It includes:

- A guide to studying passages in the *Overview*. We'll find that there're a few differences involved in studying passages in the *Overview*, and this guide gives some suggestions about how to tackle these.
- An outline of the Bible's story. This gives us a bird's eye view of the whole Bible, and shows us where we are in the overall story at any point in the course.

The heart of this workbook is the *Studies*. Each study consists of:

- A brief introduction to the passage that sets the scene for the study, gives us some of what we need by way of context, and reminds us of the key relevant truths we've discovered so far.
- Questions are designed to help us think about the passage we are studying. We'll get much, much more out of our times in our study groups if we come having begun to think seriously about the passage we'll be studying. These questions are designed to help us do this, so come having worked through them. Some are distinctly harder than others, but have a go at all of them, even if you're not convinced that you can do justice to the question. It will mean the discussions in the groups will be much more informed and thought through.

In addition to the *Studies*, there are some short articles called *Briefings*:

- These summarize the overall story of the Bible so far, and give an outline of what's about to happen. In other words, these give us a starting point for thinking about each major new phase in God's plan, something that's a help because we're going through the Bible so fast.

STUDYING THE OVERVIEW

Studying the *Overview* differs from most other Bible study in three main ways:

In general, we'll not have studied what happens immediately before the passage we're looking at.

In the *Overview*, we're trying to find out what happens in the Bible as a whole. In order to do this, we need to go through the entire Bible, focusing on the key events and seeing how these relate to each other. The constraints of time mean we'll usually not study much of the immediate context of the event. It's an axiom of good Bible study that we must put the passage in its context, both immediate and biblical. In most Bible study, limitations of time mean we focus on the immediate context at the expense of the overall biblical context, but in the *Overview* it's the other way round.

Many of the passages we'll be studying are much longer than we're used to.

This is partly a result of the need to study at least some of the immediate context of the key events. More importantly, it is also a result of trying to get the whole of a major event into one study in order that we might understand it and not get distracted by detail. Finally, much of the Old Testament is written to be read in relatively large sections, so we won't do justice to it if we don't study it in large sections.

Much of the Old Testament (OT) can't be applied in the way we're used to doing in the New Testament (NT).

One reason is that the OT books are written to or about people who're very different to us. They are usually Israelites rather than Christians and they are often unique figures with unique roles in God's plan. This doesn't mean we can't learn from them, but we'll need to think harder before we can make the transition from them to us. Far more crucially, *much of the Bible is not actually about us and what we should do, but rather about God and what He is doing*, and we don't know how to apply this sort of material. This is true in the NT as well, but it is more obvious in the OT.

Having identified the differences, let's look at how they should be handled.

PUTTING PASSAGES IN THEIR CONTEXT

We can't understand any passage of the Bible without putting it in its context. Sometimes the immediate context is the only context we need and sometimes the context of the whole Bible is the only context we need, but often we need both. Since our aim is to understand the Bible as a whole, all the passages we'll be looking at fall into the latter two categories. Where the context of the Bible as a whole is the key, it doesn't matter that we won't know the immediate context. However, where we need both the biblical and immediate contexts then this workbook will explain the immediate context in the introduction to the study, and where necessary there will be cross-references and questions to help us further understand it.

STUDYING LONG PASSAGES

By far the best way to handle long passages is to work out what the main points of the passage are, and then to focus on these. This is the best way to study most passages, because the author's main points are the important ones, the ones God – working through the human author – is making. The detail is there to make these major points and to support them. When we're studying short passages we can afford the luxury of getting immersed in the detail, even though this may not be the best approach. However, when studying long passages it's vital to study it in the best way, and over the course of the year this will have the added benefit of teaching us good habits that we can apply to all our Bible studies in the future. In order to focus on the author's main points, we must first identify them. One of the best ways to begin to do this is to see what are the main steps in the author's argument, i.e. how the passage 'subdivides'.

There are two reasons for doing this:

- Dividing the passage into 'subsections' which deal with one sub-point makes the passage's argument more manageable. These subsections are often the right level of detail to work at, better than verses or sentences. If we get them 'right' then we're working with the steps the author himself used. In order to be clear about what sub-point is being made in a subsection, it is well worth working out a 'subtitle' for each subsection which summarises the sub-point clearly, accurately and succinctly.
- Once we've worked out the main steps in the argument, we can then see how they fit together and so see what the argument as a whole is all about. In practice, when we do this we'll often find that the subsections we initially identified don't fit together well, i.e. we haven't got the right subsections. This may appear depressing, but it's actually a key step in grasping the passage better. It shows us that we're not yet on the author's wavelength and we need to think further to work out what his argument really is. We mustn't give up, but must keep mulling over the passage until the pieces do fit. When we eventually do see how the author's argument is developing and how all the steps fit in, then we'll not simply be thinking on the biblical author's wavelength, we'll be thinking on God's wavelength (since he chose to use these authors), and this is a prize worth working hard for.

Subdividing and summarizing a passage is thus both an important exercise and a difficult one. It's one we need to begin to do near the beginning of our study, but we'll need to keep refining our conclusions as we come to understand the passage better. In order to remind us to engage in this exercise – and to help us get into the habit of doing this with every passage we study – a question on subdividing and summarizing the passage comes in every study. Often it's the first question, but don't simply do it quickly and then forget about it. Work at it, and keep revising it as your study progresses. Subdivisions and summarizes that accurately reflect the author's argument are an extremely useful 'end-product' of a study. They give us a 'handle' on the passage, something to remember the passage by and the foundation for applying it to ourselves correctly.

APPLYING WHAT WE LEARN FROM THE OVERVIEW

Many Christians find applying the Bible hard. The reason for this is that, often, the way we expect the Bible to change us is not the way God intends the Bible to change us! Many Christians treat application as being about changing their lifestyles, rather than about changing their underlying attitudes, goals, world-views, etc. In effect, they try to add Christian values to a basically non-Christian world-view. Of course it's not put like this, but the focus in applications on what we do means that this is what it amounts to. We all start off our Christian lives with a non-Christian world-view because we're products of the world we live in and were brought up in. As non-Christians we think of this world as primary and human beings (particularly ourselves) as central. When we are converted, this non-Christian world-view is given a tremendous jolt as we begin to see that God is the centre of the universe, not us; that he is the rightful Ruler of our lives, not us; and that there is an eternity beyond this world. But conversion is only the beginning of this process. As young Christians our world-view is still essentially non-Christian and needs to be reshaped. However, instead of doing this, many of us concentrate on adding Christian behaviour to our old world-view and look to the Bible to tell us how to do this. For example, the Bible is seen to tell us about going to church and having fellowship; praying and reading the Bible; not lying, cheating or stealing; and only having sex inside marriage. All these are excellent values which the Bible commends, but the Bible is actually about far more profound changes than these.

God wants to transform us, i.e. our attitudes, aspirations, and hopes. This is why his Word emphasizes the need for us to change the way we think. For example, Romans 12:2 tells us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds; in Ephesians 1:17-18, Paul's constant prayer is that the Ephesians would come to know God better and to know what He has done and will do; Ephesians 4:17-18 says the problem with Gentiles (i.e. non-Christians) is their futile thinking, their darkened understanding and their ignorance; Colossians 1:21 describes the Colossians prior to their becoming Christians as being enemies of God in their minds; and, finally, in Colossians 1:28-2:3, Paul says that the thing he is labouring towards with all his energy is that all the Christians he is involved with would completely understand and know Christ. In other words, the Bible is meant to change our mind-sets and world-views. It wants to continue and deepen the changes that began at our conversion. Thus, genuine biblical application is about changing the way we perceive and view God, what he's doing, the world, ourselves and our place in the world. If this occurs, then radically changed lives will follow naturally and inevitably. The goal of all Bible study, therefore, should be a transformed world-view, but this is particularly true in the *Overview*. This is because, as we study the whole Bible, we'll find it's all about God and what he's doing. The only thing we can do with this, and the thing we must do with this, is to allow it to transform our world-views. In other words, to come to see God more and more at the centre of the universe he's made and rules, instead of seeing ourselves there, and to come to see that what he's working towards is so much greater than what we originally wanted that we'll start to want it and work towards it as well. What this means for us as we work through the *Overview* is that we shouldn't look for what the Bible is telling us to do. Rather, we should allow it to communicate its main message and let it tell us about God and what he's doing (this is not something we'll need to work at, it'll jump out and hit us between the eyes!). What we will need to do is allow this to challenge what we previously thought. For example, is the God we see in the Bible the God we believe in? If not, we'll need to change our perception of God. Or, is what we see him doing what we think he ought to be doing? If not, we'll need to change our understanding of what we think He ought to be doing. Again, is the world as we see it described in the Bible the world we think we know? If not, we'll need to change the way we perceive the world.

Letting the Bible challenge our world-view and mind-set is clearly vital, but it's not easy. All the studies have questions designed to help us begin to think about how the truths of the passage might change our world-view, but the difficulty and challenge is to answer these questions honestly and thoughtfully. The only way to let God revolutionize our thinking as he wants to is to mull over and wrestle with the truths we will discover. Don't simply answer these questions glibly (or worse, leave them till you get to the group). Instead, chew them over in the bath-tub or wherever you do your serious thinking. The result, over the course of the year, will be lives that are transformed and turned upside-down.

MAP SHOWING ISRAEL AND THE SURROUNDING NATIONS



Wright, Paul H. *Rose Then and Now Bible Map Atlas with Biblical Background and Culture*. Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2012.

THE PLOT OR 'STORY LINE' OF THE BIBLE

One of the main things we'll do in the *Overview* is to work out how all the various pieces of the Bible fit together to tell of God's one great plan for all eternity – and it will take us most of the year to do this. The basic story we'll see is summarized here, though doing it this briefly means leaving out some quite important elements and making everything appear much simpler and more one-dimensional than it really is. Nevertheless, it's worth having the main 'plot' laid out so that we can see it at a glance, can see where everything is going and have something to build on.

At its most basic, the history of the world, as told in the Bible, can be divided into 8 phases:

1. The Creation and Fall (Genesis 1-11)

These events set up the rest of the Bible. The Creation reveals God's power and authority. The Fall – in which humankind rebels against God and the whole creation is cursed as a result – is *the* problem that God is dealing with in the rest of the Bible.

2. From Abraham to Egypt (Genesis 12-50)

God begins his plan to rescue humankind from the effects of the Fall by promising Abraham that his descendants will enjoy *some* restoration of what went wrong at the Fall. God repeats this promise to Abraham's son and grandson, but no real fulfilment of this promise occurs in this period. However, this promise to Abraham is the fundamental promise that God is working to fulfil, and much of the rest of the Bible is devoted to showing how it develops into a promise to fully reverse the effects of the Fall. The importance of this promise is confirmed when Jesus is repeatedly said to be fulfilling God's promise to Abraham (e.g. Luke 1:73, Romans 4:16, Galatians 3:8,29).

3. The exodus and Mosaic covenant (Exodus 1 - Deuteronomy 34)

Over the next four hundred years, things actually get worse for Abraham's descendants and they become slaves in Egypt. Eventually, however, the time comes for God to begin to fulfil what He promised Abraham, so he rescues these descendants – now called Israel – from Egypt and brings them to Mt. Sinai. There he makes a covenant with them (the Mosaic covenant) in which he states that they will receive what he promised Abraham *if* – and only if – they obey his laws. However, if they disobey they will be punished. This covenant sets the agenda for much of the rest of the OT as we see Israel disobeying and being punished and God revealing how, in the light of this, he will fulfil his promise to Abraham.

Israel's disobedience begins swiftly, even before God has finished giving her his laws, and God responds by saying that those who have sinned will not enter the promised land. As a result, Israel spends the next 40 years in the desert waiting for that rebellious generation to die off.

4. From the entry into Canaan to Solomon (Joshua 1 - 1 Kings 11)

Israel eventually enters the promised land, but her initial success in conquering the land with God's help is soon spoilt by further sin, so Israel spends some 250 years being oppressed by the other inhabitants of the land. One of the reasons Israel is so very sinful is the absence of a king to help her obey (e.g. Judges 21:25), but eventually God gives Israel a monarchy. Israel's second king – David – is the greatest king she has in the OT, and under him Israel's enemies are subdued, and the land fully conquered. In David's reign, and that of his son Solomon, Israel gets closer than at any other time to obtaining what God has promised, and we see more about what is involved in God fulfilling his promise to Abraham. However, this relatively happy time does not last and does not result in God's promises being properly fulfilled because Israel still keeps rebelling against God. Even David and Solomon sin. The reigns of David and Solomon are marked by the writing of many of the Psalms and much of the Wisdom Literature (e.g. Proverbs).

5. Decline of Israel and exile (1 Kings 12 - 2 Kings 25)

Israel's persistent rebellion means that she cannot obtain what God promised Abraham, and after Solomon dies she begins to lose even what she has already gained as God punishes her for her sin. Eventually she ends up even worse off than she was before the exodus. The decline from Solomon's time takes the next 350 years and occurs primarily in three great disasters:

- First, Israel splits into a 'northern kingdom' (Israel) and a 'southern kingdom' (Judah).
- Secondly, the northern kingdom is conquered and taken into exile by Assyria.
- Finally, the southern kingdom is conquered and taken into exile by Babylon.

This is the saddest, most depressing and least known stage in Israel's history. However, it is also one of the most important because it is the period when God reveals most about his plans as he warns Israel of impending judgment but reaffirms that he will, nevertheless, rescue her and fulfil what he promised Abraham. In fact, this is the time when he first reveals explicitly that he will fully deal with everything that went wrong at the Fall and explains how he will accomplish this. Most of the prophetic books of the Bible are written in this period, as are the historical books of Joshua – 2 Kings. All in all, almost 50% of the OT is written during this period, and it is impossible to understand what God is revealing and doing without some grasp of what he is saying during this period.

6. Return from exile (Ezra & Nehemiah)

Judah is allowed to return after some 60 years in exile in Babylon, but this return is not the triumphal event predicted by the prophets. Many Jews do not return at all, and those that do return come back in dribs and drabs over the 130 years between the end of the exile and the end of the OT. Further, though there is some rebuilding of Jerusalem there is no real fulfilment of what God has promised. The main reason for this is that the exile has not changed Israel's propensity to rebel against God. The point of this period in the OT is to show us that God is not yet fulfilling what he has promised. Relatively few books in the OT are actually about this period, but all of them make this point. Thus, by the end of the OT, God has made some truly amazing promises but has not yet begun to fulfil them.

7. From Jesus' first coming to his return (New Testament)

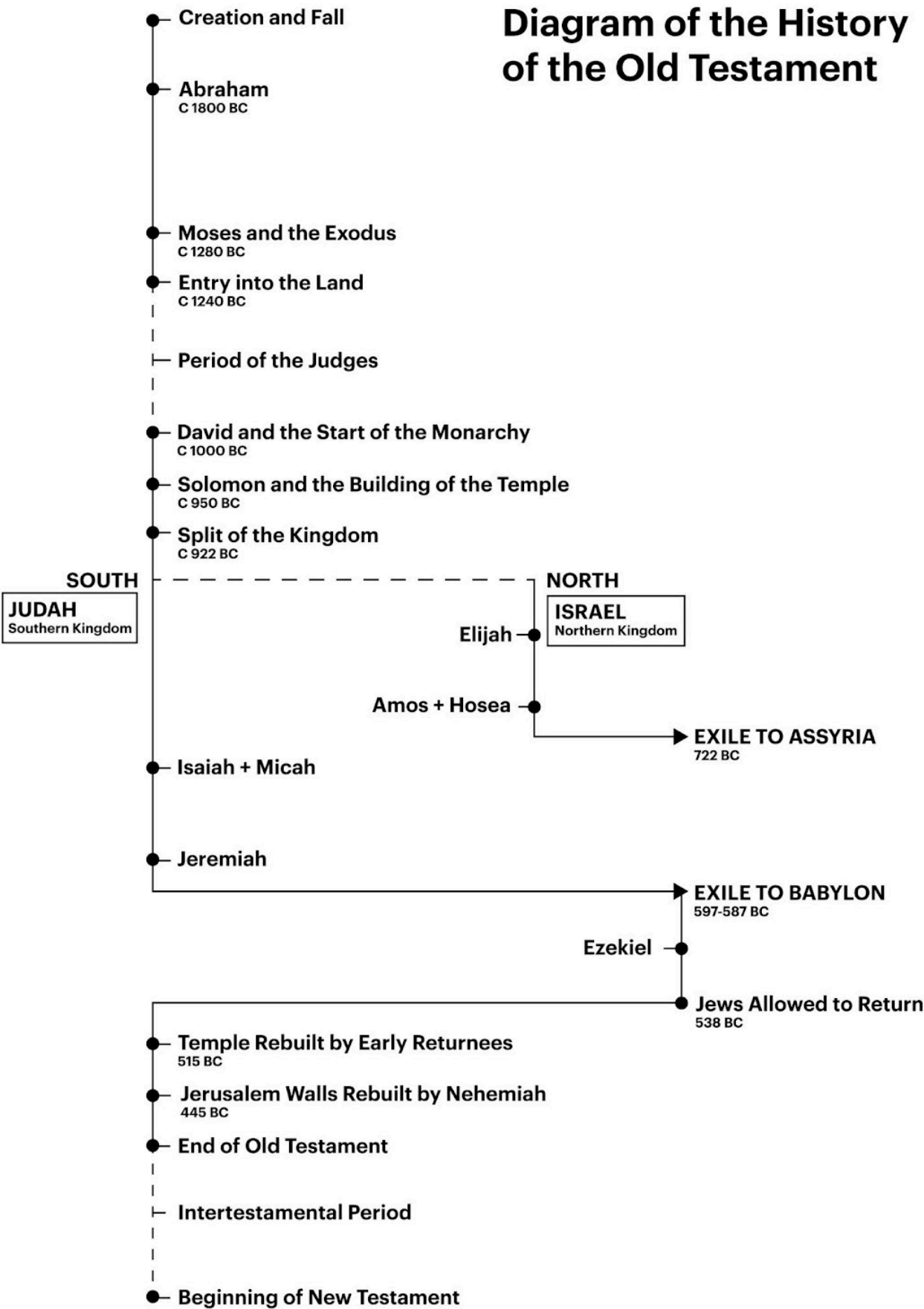
God's promises first really begin to be fulfilled some 400 years later, in the NT, with Jesus' birth, death and resurrection. In Jesus, God provides the king who is indispensable to the fulfilment of all his other promises. In Jesus, God begins the rescue of his people that he promised in the prophets at the exile. Finally, in Jesus, God provides a solution to the problem of sin, the problem that prevented OT Israel from receiving what God had promised and the cause of the Fall itself. Nothing, therefore, now stands in the way of God's people inheriting all that God has promised, in particular a reversal of all that went wrong at the Fall.

However, only God's people will experience God's great promises and even they will have to wait for Jesus' return before they can experience all that God has promised. The NT, therefore, is in large measure explaining who God's people are and telling them how they must live as they wait. We are, of course, currently in this stage of God's plan, which is why we often find the NT immediately relevant.

8. Jesus' second coming and the new creation

The fulfilment of the rest of God's promises – in particular, the actual reversal of all that went wrong at the Fall – will occur when Jesus returns and God brings about his new creation. Then those who are his people will enjoy the fruits of Jesus' solution to the problem of sin. This stage in God's plan still lies in the future, but the Bible ends with a few tantalizing visionary glimpses of the immense treasures God has in store for his people. We do not yet experience God's promised new creation, but God has revealed enough for us to begin to know what it will be like and to look forward to it eagerly.

Diagram of the History of the Old Testament



BRIEFING 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE OVERVIEW

WHAT IS THE OVERVIEW?

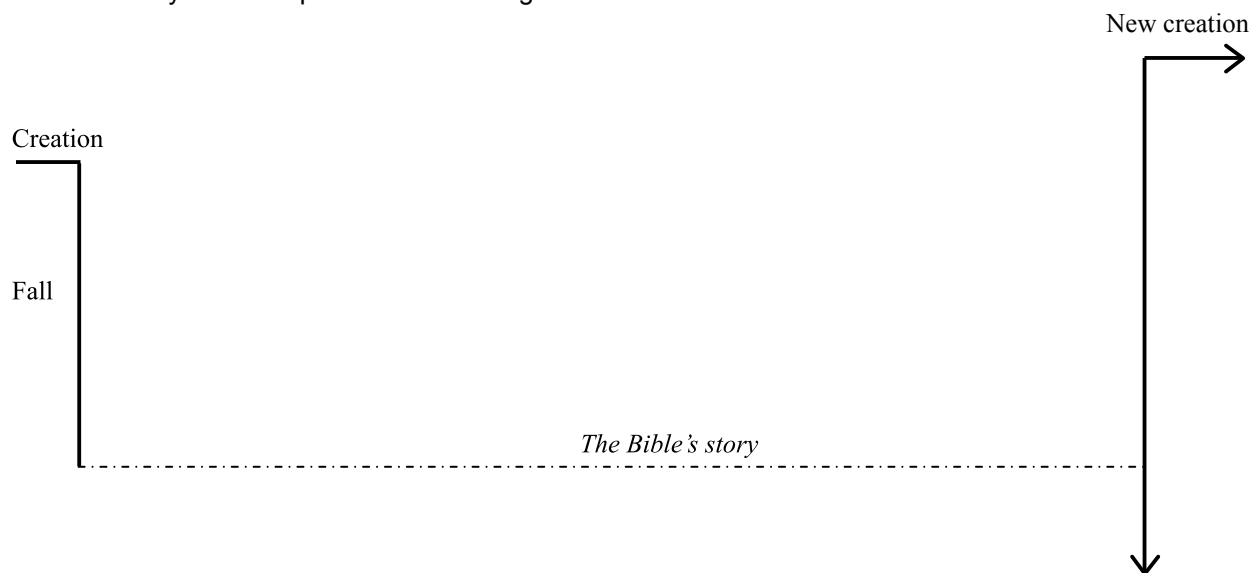
The Bible is one book written by the One God telling us about his one plan for all time and eternity. The *Overview* is a look at the whole Bible in twenty-seven studies which aims to see what this One God has revealed of himself and to understand what this one great plan for all eternity is and why it is so important. The emphasis throughout, therefore, is on seeing that the various events, themes and points in the Bible *do* fit together, on understanding *how* they all fit together and on understanding the implications of this for us. Not surprisingly, we will find that Jesus lies at the heart of what God is doing (cf. Ephesians 1), but seeing how he is the turning point in God's plan, the key that enables God's purposes to be fulfilled and the climax of all that God is doing will transform our understanding of what he has done and help us to worship him as we ought.

THE BIBLE'S BASIC 'PLOT' OR STORY LINE

At its most basic there are three elements to the Bible's story:

- In the beginning God created the world and he made it good (Genesis 1-2). Adam and Eve rebelled against him, and this led to the world being wrecked, the event referred to as the 'Fall' (Genesis 3).
- At the end of the Bible, we see that God creates a new heaven and a new world to replace the one that has been ruined (Revelation 21:1-22:5). God has put right the problems caused by the Fall.
- The bulk of the Bible, however, lies in-between these two and tells of how God accomplishes this, i.e. how he puts right all that went wrong at the Fall. Over the year in the *Overview* we will study the steps along the way, seeing how God deals with the various problems of the Fall, why he does things the way he does and what 'put right' means. The multitude of historical events and his various actions all fit in to his reversal of the Fall. The three main things we will see him do are:
 - Deal with the *effects* of the Fall.
 - Deal with the *cause* of the Fall.
 - *Rescue* his people from the Fall.

This Bible story can be represented as a diagram as follows:



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THIS ONE OVERALL STORY?

Three of the most important reasons why we need to grasp the Bible's one overall story are:

The Bible's main overall story communicates the most important lessons God wants us to learn.

Like most good authors, God's main message is seen in what his book *as a whole* is about, not in just what some corners of it are about. The individual parts of the Bible are important because they contribute towards the whole, but they are just parts, each teaching only one facet of God's truth. When we have the 'big picture' of the Bible it will become much clearer which issues are central to God's revelation and what exactly God is saying about them. Understanding the Bible's overall story, therefore, will help us focus on and understand correctly the most important issues God is communicating and it will prevent us from being distracted by less important issues. What we will see over the year is that the Bible's overall story is of God and his one great plan for all eternity. *The Bible's overall story is particularly important today because Christians are losing sight of what God is really doing i.e. that he is working out his plan for all eternity, and so is working on an infinitely bigger scale and for infinitely more important ends than we usually think.* Christians, increasingly, are concerned with what is happening in this world here and now and, in particular, with themselves. We badly need to regain the biblical picture of the God who created and rules the whole world and who is working towards his great eternal goal of putting everything under Jesus. Seeing the Bible as a whole will give us this biblical picture and show us that it is not simply one truth among many, but *the* truth the whole Bible is teaching.

The Bible's overall story is the best way to learn more about God.

By far the best way to know God better is to see what he does, because he acts in accord with his character. In fact, time and time again in the Bible God says that he wants to be known through what he does (e.g. Exodus 6:6-8, 9:14-16, 10:1-2). However, the main thing God is doing is working out his big, overarching plan, so the best way to get to know God better is to see him working out this plan. This will show us what his main concerns are, how he goes about achieving his purposes, what his main attributes are, how the various facets of his character fit together, etc. Knowing God better is one of the most important things a Christian can do, since the first and greatest commandment is to love him with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength (e.g. Mark 12:29-30), and we must know him to do this.

The Bible's main overall plot enables us to make much more sense of all the many different things God is doing and revealing in the Bible.

God and his one great plan for eternity gives us the *context* for every individual part of the Bible. Almost everything God does and says is making a contribution to this overall story and is meant to be understood in this way (not taken on its own out of context). If we study the individual books in this context, it is clearer what each one is about and why it matters.

HOW SHOULD STUDYING THE OVERVIEW CHANGE US?

Many Christians think that applying the Bible means trying to change their lifestyles; adding, removing or modifying things they *do*. However, genuine biblical application involves far more fundamental changes than this. Biblical application is about changing who we *are*; changing our attitudes, ambitions, priorities and world-views (what we think life is all about and where we fit into the world).

The *Overview* will not often directly tell us what to do, which is why some people find it hard to 'apply', but it *will* radically challenge our world-view and mind-set. Precisely because it teaches us about God and the main things he is doing, it will revolutionize our understanding of where the world is going, what it's all about, where God fits in and where we do. It will, if we let it, eventually turn our lives upside down, but because this is so fundamental, it's also slow. Don't expect a different 'application' each week, but *do* expect your understanding of God, what he's doing and how you fit in to be gradually transformed over the year, and do wrestle with how this challenges your world-view.

LESSON 1 – EPHESIANS 1:3-23

GOD'S PLAN FOR ETERNITY

This passage is one of the Bible's great summaries of what God's plan for eternity is all about. We're going to spend the year studying this plan in some depth, and a good introduction to this is to study a summary like this to see that God has a plan and to get a rough idea of what it is before we examine it in detail.

This passage also shows us how God and his plan should affect us. The second part of the passage is one of the New Testament's great prayers, and in it Paul prays for the Ephesian Christians in the light of what he has just said about God and his plan. Our aim for the year must be that what Paul prays for here becomes true in our lives as well, both because it is the right response to God and his plan and because Paul clearly thinks it is supremely important for Christians to respond in this way.

Organize the passage:

1. Read Ephesians 1:3-23
2. Summarize each section, briefly highlight the most significant things that are happening.
 - Ephesians 1:3-14
 - Ephesians 1:15-23

Observe the passage:

3. In 1:3-14, what are the main things God does for Christians?

4. What is God's 'will' or 'plan' in 1:3-14, and what is he doing about it?

Think it through: How does everything these verses say God is doing fit in with his plan?

5. In 1:3-14, what is God the Father's part in what he is doing, and what is Jesus' role?

Think it through: What does this teach us about God the Father and Jesus?

6. Focus on Paul's prayer in 1:15-19a
- How is this prayer influenced by God and his plan as described in 1:3-14? (notice that Paul starts his prayer with 'for this reason')

- What is Paul's main underlying request?

Apply it: To what extent are the things Paul prays for the things you pray for and want for your own life? If you don't share Paul's passion for them, why not? How might we make these things become more true in our lives?

7. What does 1:19b-23 teach us about God's power? How does God's power relate to His plan, (i.e. why is Paul telling us about God's power here)?
8. *Think it through:* How does this whole passage shape your understanding of what God is doing and of what the gospel is all about?

Apply it: How does this influence your understanding of the purpose and goal of your life?

Pray the passage:

Knowledge of God and his Word should shape our minds, hearts, lives, and worship.
Spend some time praying through the scripture you've just studied.

- Adoration. Based on this passage, what can you praise God for?
- Confession. Based on this passage, what might you need to confess to God?
- Supplication. Based on this passage, what will you ask God for?