

WELCOME!

We are so glad that you are joining us for Part 2 of *Know Your God: The Bible Overview*.

This year we are studying the whole Bible, focusing on the major themes from Genesis to Revelation, so that we can see how the one big story of the Bible works together as a whole. By focusing on key themes and events we will not only see how the Bible fits together, but most importantly, we will see God and come to know Him more and more deeply.

Over and over again the Bible speaks of the importance of our minds, what we know and how we think. It teaches that people are transformed by their minds being renewed (Romans 12:2), and that before we were Christians we were enemies of God in our minds (Colossians 1:21). Paul worked with all his energy so that the Christians he was teaching would understand and know Christ completely (Colossians 1:28-2:3) and he prayed that the church would come to know God better and to know what he has done and will do (Ephesians 1:17-18).

The point of *Know Your God: The Bible Overview* is that as we work through each lesson we would come to know God more. As we know God more fully (understanding who He is, what He has done, and what He is doing) - our minds and lives will be shaped by Him. It is our prayer that as we study this overview, we will be people who continually have our attitudes, aspirations, hopes and thoughts aligned with the mission and purposes of God.

Here's what you can expect each week as you do the study at home, and as we get together.

AT HOME:

You will have a whole week to focus on the lesson on your own. Create space and time to read the passage carefully, and answer the study questions to help you organize and observe the passage. Some of the questions will help us slow down to pay careful attention to what is in the passage, so we can better understand what we are reading and make important observations about what is happening. Other questions will help us think how the themes of the passage apply to our lives today. Make time every week to allow the scripture you've studied to shape what you think and pray about.

Doing the lesson could take you anywhere from 2-4 hours a week, depending how fast you read and how much time you want to spend thinking through the questions. You don't need to do all the questions all at once; feel free to work on one question at a time, as you have time during the week.

TOGETHER:

Each week as we get together, we will read the scripture, discuss some of our observations, hear teaching on the passage, and spend time discussing and praying through how this scripture applies to our lives.

We are looking forward to studying *Know Your God: The Bible Overview* with you!

Northview Adult Ministries Team

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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)

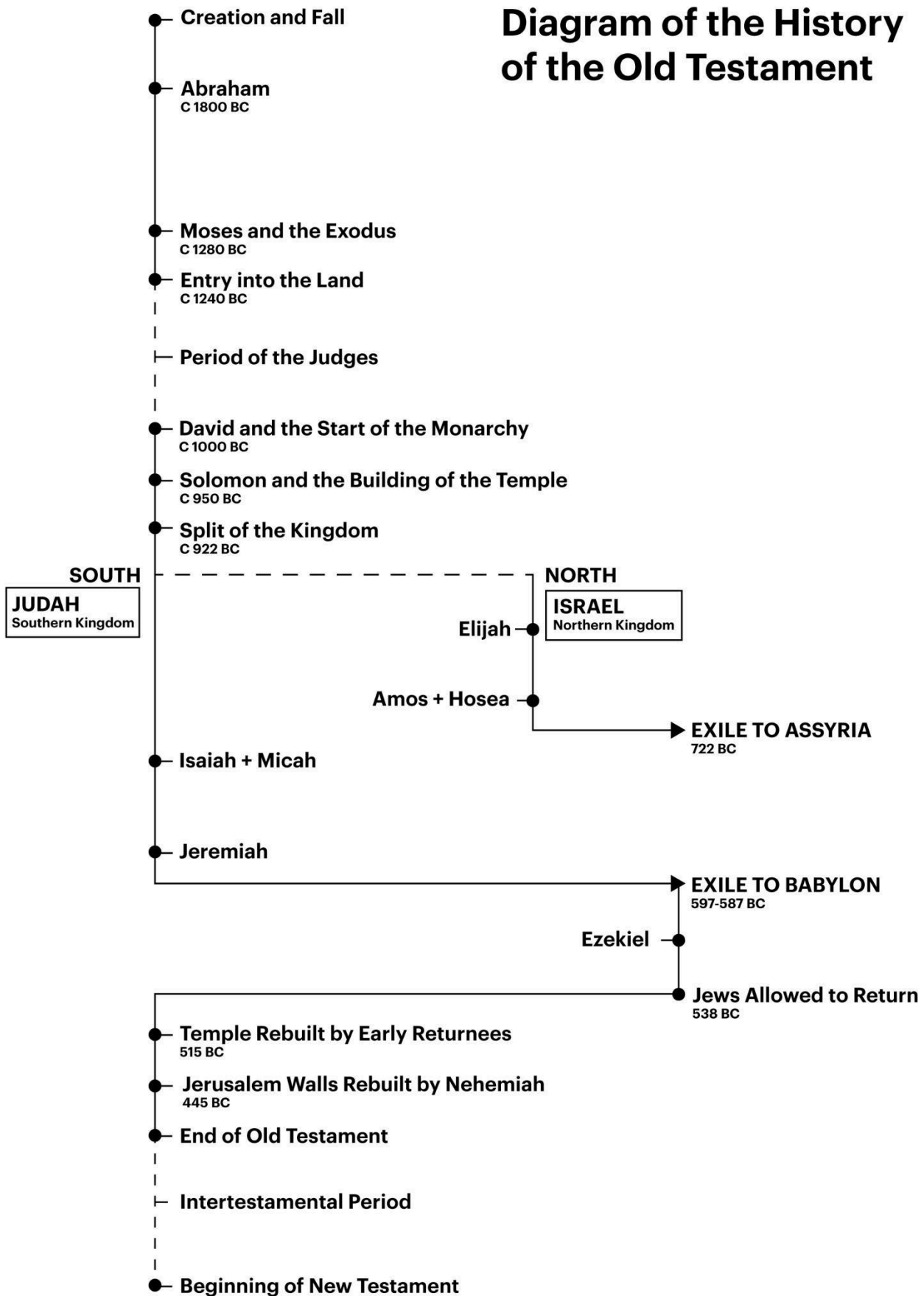
God's promises first really begin to be fulfilled some 400 years later, in the NT, with Jesus' birth, death and resurrection. In Jesus, God provides the king who is indispensable to the fulfilment of all his other promises. In Jesus, God begins the rescue of his people that he promised in the prophets 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 5: A RULER FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

THE SEARCH FOR THE RIGHT RULER

One of the main strands of the story of Judges 1 to 2 Samuel 7 is that the right leader will help deal with Israel's sin and failure to inherit God's promises. Thus, Judges shows how a leader like a judge helps, but indicates that this is not enough. It implies that a better ruler, a king, is necessary, as we've seen.

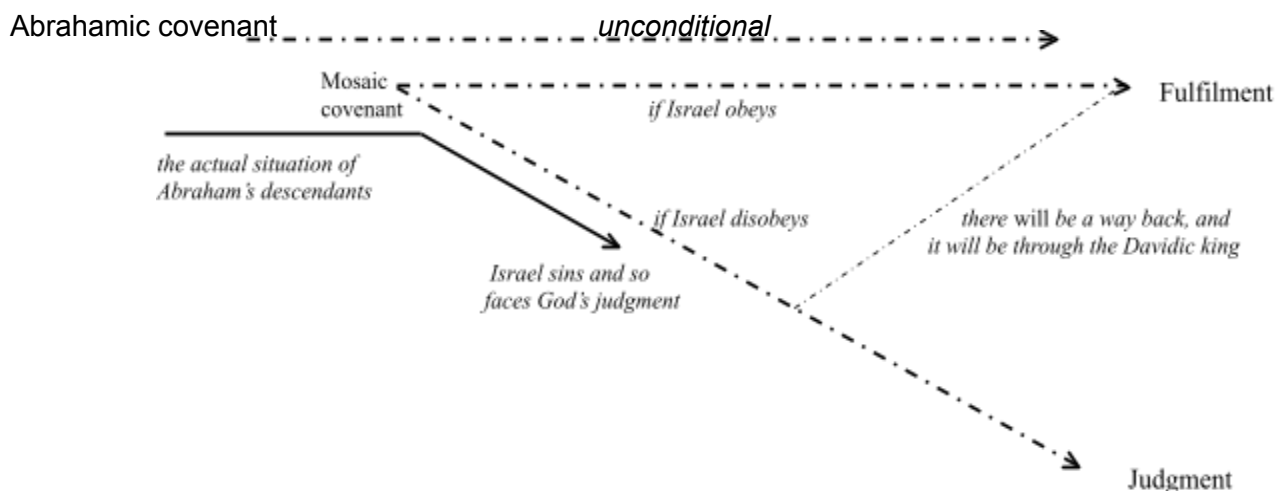
In 1 Samuel, the first candidate to be the necessary, right leader is the priest, but the sons of the priest sin (see 1 Samuel 2:12), implying that the line of the priests cannot be entrusted with the job of providing Israel with ongoing godly rule. Similarly, the sons of even a godly judge like Samuel sin (1 Samuel 8:3). The next candidate for the job of leading Israel is the king, and at first this does not look promising either. The first king sins badly (see 1 Samuel 15), and as we've seen, so does the son of a godly king like David. However, God makes his covenant with David, and this changes everything. We now know where the right ruler will come from, so from now on the search for the right leader narrows down to the search for the right king.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS COVENANT

God's covenant with David is vital. In it God is promising that David's descendant will not only help Israel do what is right, he will actually *succeed* in accomplishing what is necessary for God's promises to be fulfilled. Further, as a result of him Israel will enjoy these blessings *permanently*. They will have the land, peace in it, God dwelling with them and right rule forever. This is extremely important because at last we can begin to see the *means* by which God will fulfil his promises and plan.

Thus, God's revelation of how he will deal with the cause of the Fall develops, just as his promise to deal with the consequences of the Fall develops. In the Mosaic covenant, he gives Israel the responsibility to deal with the cause by obeying his commands and not sinning. As Israel fails in this responsibility, he provides the sacrificial system and leaders to help. Now he says that one day he will provide a leader who will actually solve the problem completely. Note, however, that we do not yet know *how* this Davidic king will solve the problem, nor has he yet come. All we have currently is the first explicit promise that there will be a solution. Meanwhile Israel continues sinning and heading for judgment.

THE DIAGRAM OF THE COVENANTS AND SOLUTION TO THE CAUSE OF THE FALL LOOKS LIKE

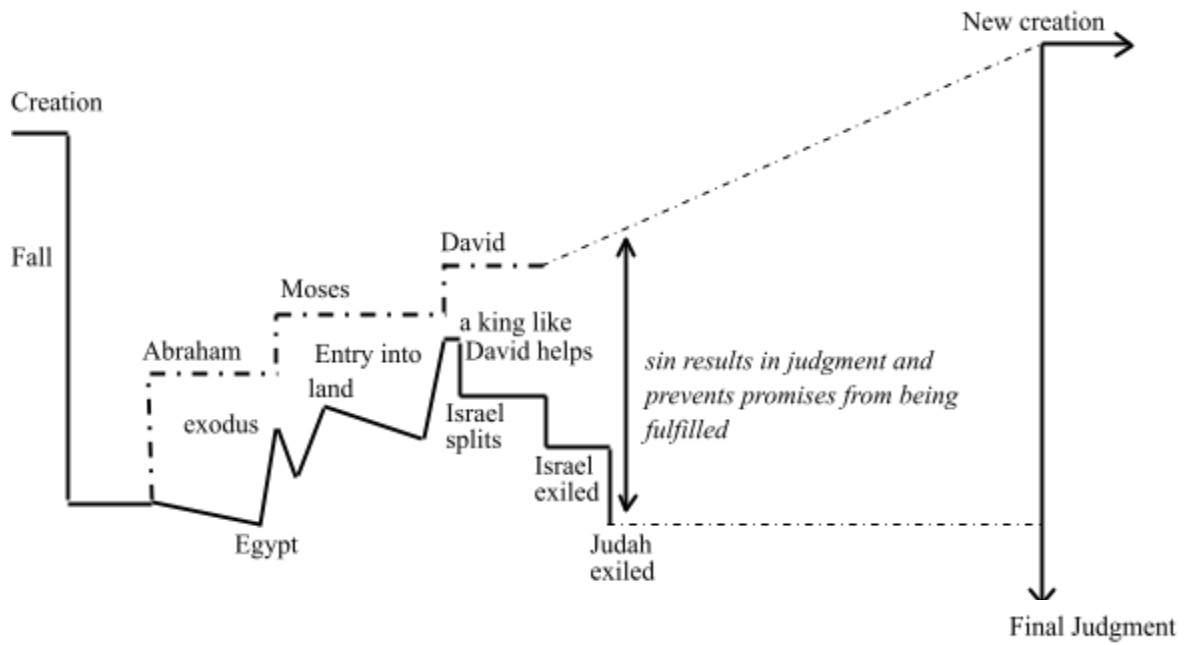


THE HISTORICAL FULFILMENT OVER THE NEXT 400 YEARS

The story of 2 Samuel 8 through to 2 Kings 25 is of how the king promised to David is *not* found in the next 400 years, as we've already begun to see. Israel reaches her peak under David and Solomon, but even then the promises are still not quite fulfilled, as we've seen. Nevertheless, under these kings Israel comes nearer than at any other time to inheriting what God has promised. Godly kings like David and Solomon (at the beginning of his reign) really do help hugely. After Solomon, the state of Israel declines over the next 350 years until all the punishments of Leviticus 26 come to pass and she is conquered and exiled. The decline of Israel during this period is not uniform. There are good times and bad, with a few reasonably good kings and some dire ones, but never the promised one. However, there are 3 great, decisive steps down which culminate in the total demise of Israel as a nation, and in lesson 13 we studied the first two. The three downward steps are:

- The kingdom of Israel divides into two
This is a result of Solomon's sin and takes place at his death in 922 BC, as we've seen. The northern kingdom is confusingly called Israel. It is the bigger kingdom, containing 10 tribes. The southern kingdom is called Judah and only consists of 2 tribes, but it also contains the key institutions like the Davidic monarchy, the city of Jerusalem that God has chosen and the religious centre – including the temple with the ark of the covenant.
- The northern kingdom (called Israel) is conquered and exiled
This occurs 200 years after Solomon's death in 722 BC. Assyria (the emerging superpower in the area) conquers Israel and takes the survivors into exile, as we've seen, and there they disappear. This brings the northern kingdom to a total end. Assyria also invades Judah, but does not succeed in destroying her. While all this is happening, however, God is speaking to Israel through his prophets and revealing some key truths about what he's doing through them. Amos and Hosea are based in the northern kingdom, while Isaiah and Micah speak to Judah (the southern kingdom).
- The southern kingdom (called Judah) is conquered and exiled
This happens a further 150 years later in two stages in 597 BC and in 587 BC. Babylon has replaced Assyria as the regional superpower and she conquers and destroys Judah and takes the survivors into exile into Babylon. Yet again God speaks through his prophets at this time of national disaster, this time through Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The exile of Israel and Judah is probably the most important historical event in the OT, and over the next 6 lessons we'll examine what happens in it and what the prophets are saying at the time.

THE DIAGRAM OF GOD'S PLAN TO DEAL WITH THE FALL NOW LOOKS LIKE THIS



LESSON 14 - THE PRINCE OF PEACE

ISAIAH 9:1-7 & 11:1-16

God has made great promises to Abraham and his descendants, but Israel is miles from enjoying the fulfillment of them. However, Israel's failure to inherit God's blessings is not going to stop him from accomplishing his plan so, even as Israel is being judged, God sends his prophets to her (see *Briefing 5*). Thus, as Assyria sweeps through the area carrying the northern kingdom (Israel) into exile and laying waste the bulk of the southern kingdom (Judah), Isaiah comes speaking God's Word. One of Isaiah's main jobs is to tell Israel what will happen after the period of punishment, and this is what he is doing in this passage.

The prophecy in this lesson probably comes shortly before the northern kingdom falls. Assyria is already a major influence and threat in the region. She has invaded Israel in the recent past (2 Kings 15:19-20) and conquered and exiled some of the northern fringes of Israel (2 Kings 15:29); and Judah has voluntarily become her vassal in order to elicit her help in a war with Israel and Syria (2 Kings 16:5-9). Isaiah has been prophesying that God will use Assyria to punish Israel and Judah terribly (see Isaiah 7:17-20, 8:48), and the darkness, distress and gloom of Isaiah 8:21-9:2 refers to this coming judgment.

To see where Isaiah fits into the timeline of the Old Testament, go to the *Diagram of the History of the Old Testament* on page 6.

Read the passage:

1. Read Isaiah 9:1-7 and Isaiah 11:1-16.

(Note: Ephraim is an alternative name for the northern kingdom Israel.)

Observe the passage:

2. What are the three or four main things promised in these two passages?

3. What is the main thing promised in 9:1-3?

Think it through: What does this mean, given the historical context of Israel?

(Note: Zebulun and Naphtali are northern tribes that are already in exile, see 2 Kings 15:29.)

4. What does Isaiah 11:11-16 *add* to the promises in 9:1-3?

Think it through: What is significant about the imagery Isaiah uses in 11:15-16?

5. What is Isaiah promising in 9:6-7?

Think it through: How do these promises fit in with the Davidic covenant?

6. What does Isaiah 11:1-5 *add* to what Isaiah promised in chapter 9 about the coming king? (Note: Jesse is David's father.)

Think it through: What is the significance of this?

7. *Think it through:* This is our last lesson focusing on Israel's king. Let's take some time to pull together what we've learned about this vital theme.

- Summarize the key things that God has revealed about the coming king so far. (Note: Look at back at your work in lessons 11, 12, and 13 or skim Deut 17:14-20, 1 Samuel 8, 2 Samuel 7, 1 Kings 11.)

- What *new* things do we learn about the king in this passage, things that we haven't seen before? What does this teach us about how God is going to fulfil his plan?

8. What is Isaiah promising in 9:4-5? What does 11:6-10 *add* to this promise?

- *Think it through:* What do these promises add to what we have previously seen of God's plan?

9. *Apply it:* How does understanding what God is promising here affect the way you view heaven, and this world? How should this understanding change the way you live and pray?

LESSON 15 - SIN AND PUNISHMENT

2 KINGS 24-25 & EZEKIEL 8-10

God's promises have evolved to the point where he is promising a new creation (see Isaiah 65:17-25) that is justly ruled by a great king and in which there will be perfect peace. Israel, however, is a million miles from experiencing this. She has split into two kingdoms; the northern one has been exiled and destroyed by the Assyrians and now, 135 years later, the southern kingdom is being exiled as well. To read about the time period of these events, see section #5 in the *Storyline of the Bible* on page 5.

This is one of the key events in the Old Testament, and we will look at it in both 2 Kings and Ezekiel. The 2 Kings passage describes the historical events of the exile, while Ezekiel (who is prophesying during the events described in 2 Kings 24-25) tells us what God is saying through his prophets at this momentous moment in Israel's history. This is a long passage and it's probably best to concentrate on Ezekiel, using 2 Kings as background.

As Israel disintegrates, God's prophets are looking forward to what will happen afterwards, when he rescues her. However, this good news of rescue is only part of what they are saying. Their message is dominated by warnings of the imminent disasters. This message of warning is what we see in Ezekiel 8-10, a passage showing what the Jews are doing at this time and how God will respond.

Read and organize the passage:

1. Read 2 Kings 24-25. List the three or four important events that are described in 2 Kings 24-25. (Note: See Lamentations 4:4-11 for an eye-witness account of what this was like.)

2. Read Ezekiel 8-10. Briefly summarize the what is happening in Ezekiel 8-10.
 - Ezekiel 8:1-4

 - Ezekiel 8:5-18

 - Ezekiel 9:1-11

 - Ezekiel 10:1-8

 - Ezekiel 10:9-17

 - Ezekiel 10:18-22

Observe the passage

3. In Ezekiel 8, *who* is sinning and *how* are they sinning?
 - List everyone mentioned and their actions

 - In Ezekiel 8&9, why is this so offensive to God?

4. At what point in 2 Kings 24-25 are the early chapters of Ezekiel taking place?
(Use these verses to work it out: Ezekiel 1:2-3, 2 Kings, 24:10-15, 25:1-2, and 25:8-10)
 - *Think it through:* Why does this timeframe make Judah's sin in chapters 8&9 particularly foolish?

5. In Ezekiel 9-10, what acts of judgment is Ezekiel predicting will happen?
 - How are these fulfilled in 2 Kings 24-25?

 - In what other ways does God punish Judah in 2 Kings 24-25?

6. In Ezekiel 9, who is saved from judgment and on what basis?

- In Ezekiel 9, who is judged, and what does this teach us about God's judgment?

 - *Apply it:* How does this affect your view of God?
7. What is happening in Ezekiel 10:4, 10:18-19 & 11:22-23? (see 1Kings 8:6-13 for reference.)
- *Think it through:* How much does this matter, and why?
8. To what extent are the events of 2 Kings 25 a complete fulfilment of what is prophesied in Ezekiel 9-10?
- *Think it through:* What implications does this have?
9. *Think it through:* To what extent has Israel received what was promised in the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants now, at the end of 2 Kings? In light of this, what are the key things God has revealed by the exile about his plan to reverse the Fall?

BRIEFING 6: THE EXILE

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EXILE FOR ISRAEL

The exile is one of the two most important historical events in Israel's history. It radically changes the shape of the whole nation of Israel and in many ways brings to an end forever the nation that was created at the exodus and that we think of as 'Old Testament Israel'. Thus, at the exile:

- Israel loses the land of Canaan. The land was very special to Israel. It was one of the first things God promised Abraham and one of the two main things Israel was rescued for at the exodus. Now, after being there for 650 years she has lost it, effectively forever. Judah will return, to some extent, to the land about 60 years after she goes into exile, but for almost all the rest of the biblical period it will not actually be hers, it will be merely a province in somebody else's empire.
- The people of Israel are scattered throughout the world. This is the end of Israel as a nation. The 10 tribes of the northern kingdom are lost forever, so scattered and intermarried that they cannot be identified as Israelites. Some of the people of Judah return at the end of the Babylonian exile, but many do not, as we'll see. Thus, even what remains of Israel is not united in one land. From this point on the Jews are a scattered people, not a nation.
- The city of Jerusalem and its temple are destroyed. The Jerusalem temple was the heart of the nation. It symbolized God dwelling with Israel in the place he had chosen (see Deuteronomy 12:5). Now it is gone. Although both temple and city are rebuilt after the return from Babylon, it is a very long time before either is more than a shadow of what they were before the exile, as we'll see. Worse, many of the things that made the temple special, like the Ark of the Covenant, are lost forever.
- The Davidic monarchy comes to an end. For over 400 years the Davidic line has ruled in Judah, and the fulfilment of God's promises is inextricably linked with the Davidic king. Now there is no king in Israel. In the 660 or so years between the exile and the end of the biblical period, Judah will only have a king again for a few short decades, and those kings will not be from David's line.

THE PLACE OF THE EXILE IN GOD'S PLAN

The exile is crucial in Israel's history, but it is even more important in God's revelation of himself and his plan. Thus, around 45% of the OT is written at or around this time. This emphasis means the exile must play a major part in the Bible's overall story, i.e. God's plan to put right the Fall.

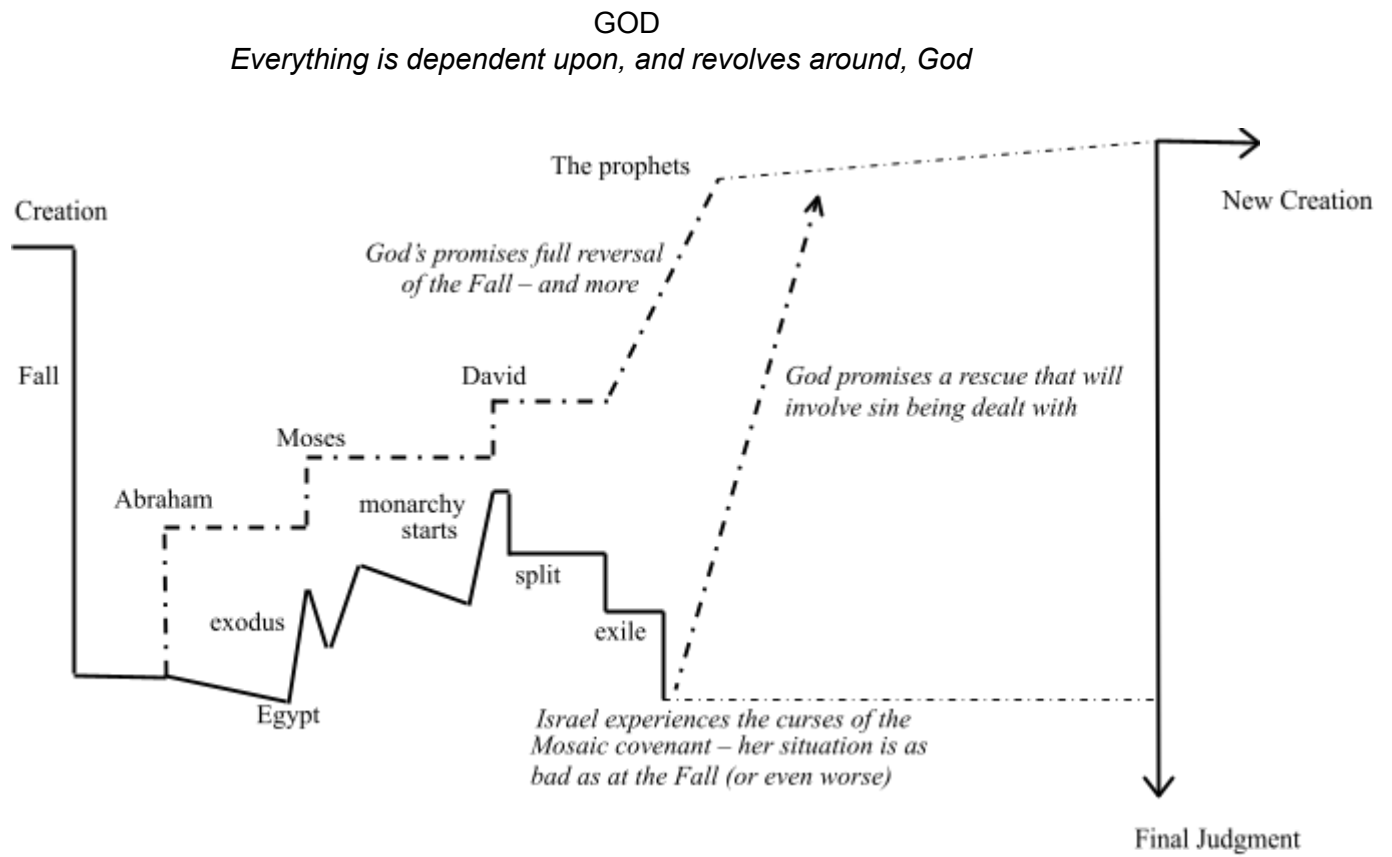
The exile is important because it is where it becomes clear that God is working towards a *full* reversal of the Fall. Up to this point, the elements of God's activity have fitted together, but apparently only for an *amelioration* of the effects of the Fall. We've assumed from the start that God is actually working for a complete reversal of the Fall since the NT (see Revelation 21-22) has indicated this, but the exile is the place where this becomes clear for the first time. The exile teaches us five main things about God's plan:

1. The exile shows that something radical needs to happen to the Mosaic covenant before God can fulfil his plan to reverse the Fall. Israel has shown that it is impossible

for her to obey the Mosaic law. As a result, she has lost all she ever had of the blessings of the Mosaic covenant and is experiencing all its curses. She is now as badly off as she was before the exodus, i.e. as badly off as the rest of humankind. Thus, Israel cannot obey the Mosaic covenant and will not inherit God's promised blessings through trying to obey it. However, God did not make a mistake in the Mosaic covenant. He has been teaching her many key lessons through it. Thus, he has shown her (a) her need – a need all humankind shares, but only she languishing in exile really appreciates, (b) that her predicament is the result of sin, (c) that she is incapable of doing what is right in God's eyes, (d) that sacrifices can help, though animal sacrifices are not enough, and (e) that there is hope because God is a merciful God.

2. At the exile, God, for the first time, promises things which fully reverse the effects of the Fall. Prior to the prophets, all God explicitly offers is some compensation for what was lost at the Fall (though Hebrews 11 says that those who had faith knew all along that he was offering a new creation). Now God explicitly promises a new creation (see Isaiah 11:8-9 and 65:17) and a solution to death (see Isaiah 25:7-8). These cannot be fulfilled in this world and represent a massive step up in what he is promising. He is now promising a full reversal of the effects of the Fall – and more, as we'll see.
3. At the exile we see the need for God to rescue his people. The gap between what God is promising and what Israel is experiencing has now become a vast chasm. Before she can enjoy what he is offering he must rescue her from her predicament, just as he rescued her from a similar predicament in the exodus. A 'second exodus' is precisely what God promises at this time (think of Isaiah 11:11-16), but there is one major difference between this rescue and the exodus: this time the rescue will have to be even more spectacular since what God is promising is infinitely greater. This is the rescue that God is primarily concerned with and that all the other rescues in the Bible have been illustrating. When this rescue is complete God will have accomplished what he's been working towards from the beginning.
4. At the exile, God promises to deal with the cause of the Fall (sin) as well as its effects. One of the main lessons of the Mosaic covenant was to show how great a problem sin is, how Israel can't deal with it herself, and how the rescue can't succeed until it has been dealt with. Now in the exile God promises to deal with this, as we'll see in the next few studies.
5. At the exile we see that the rescue will – and can – only succeed because of God and, further, that it is centred on him. At the exile God reveals many vital truths about himself, as we'll see. Most of what he reveals about himself is not new, but he reminds Israel of them because his rescue depends on him being as he reveals himself to be. For example, the promised blessings are incredible, but God reveals himself to be great enough to fulfil them. Similarly, the barriers to Israel obtaining the promises appear insuperable, but she can be confident that she'll receive them because God has committed himself to giving them to her, and he is faithful. Thus, God's revelation of *himself* is not incidental to his revelation of what he is going to *do*, but rather the two are inextricably linked.

THE DIAGRAM OF GOD'S PLAN TO RESCUE HUMANKIND FROM THE FALL NOW LOOKS LIKE



LESSONS 16 - THE SHEPHERD

EZEKIEL 34-36:15

Israel is in exile and is as far from enjoying what God wants to give her as Adam and Eve were at the Fall. In fact, her situation is worse since she is experiencing the additional punishment of the Mosaic covenant, for example, by being in slavery. However, God has promised to restore some of what was lost at the Fall, and even as Israel enters her darkest hour God is expanding and fleshing out these promises, making it clear that he is really promising a full reversal of the Fall. One of the most important expansions he makes to his promises is that he commits himself to removing the obstacles to Israel inheriting what he has promised. This development of God's promises (that he is committing himself to removing Israel's' obstacles) is the subject of this passage. The book of Ezekiel divides into two. Chapters 1-32 are largely (but not exclusively) about God's judgment, while chapters 33-48 focus on God's promises of hope (again not exclusively). The watershed comes in 33:21 with the news that Jerusalem has fallen. Thus, this passage comes just after the Jews hear of the destruction of all they held dear, when their fortunes are at rock bottom.

Read and organize the passage:

1. Read Ezekiel 34:1-36:15.
2. Briefly summarize what is happening in each section of Ezekiel 34.
 - Ezekiel 34:1-9
 - Ezekiel 34:10-16
 - Ezekiel 34:17-22
 - Ezekiel 34:23-31

Observe the passage:

3. In 34:1-10, who are the shepherds and what is God's complaint against them?
 - What are the consequences of the shepherd's failings? (Be specific.)

4. In 34:10-24, what are the three overarching things God is promising to do for the sheep?

- *Think it through:* Why is each of these three things necessary?

5. In 34:10-24, who will be the shepherd?

- *Think it through:* How can both verse 15 and verse 23 be true? Why is it important that they are both true?

6. List the main promises that God makes in Ezekiel 34:23-30 and 36:1-15.

- *Think it through:* How does what is promised here compare with the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants?

Dig deeper into the passage.

7. In Ezekiel 34:11-36:15, what are the main things God says He will do?

- *Think it through:* Why do you think He places such emphasis on what *he* will do? (Notice how often he uses the pronoun 'I'.)

- *Apply it:* How should this affect our view of our involvement in God's plan?

8. In Ezekiel 35:1-36:7, God intends to destroy Mount Seir (also called Edom) and the nations it typifies. Why is God doing this and why does He need to do this before He can rescue Israel?

LESSONS 17– A SOLUTION TO SIN

EZEKIEL 36:16-37:28

As we know, Israel is in exile and they have just heard about the fall of Jerusalem. Despite the apparent hopelessness of the situation, one of the key things God is saying to her in her predicament is that he will fulfil his promises. In fact, he will give her far more than he has previously promised: he will give her a new creation, and give it unconditionally. However, before he can give Israel any of what he has promised, various obstacles need to be dealt with. Through Ezekiel, God has been promising to deal with problems like bad leaders (he will replace them and shepherd her himself as we read in Ezekiel 34), the fact she is in exile (he will rescue her) and her political enemies want to prevent her from obtaining what God has promised (he will destroy them which we read in Ezekiel 35-36). Now, in this passage, God goes on to state how he will deal with some even more fundamental obstacles to the fulfilment of his promises and reveals even more about what he is actually promising. He also gives one of the most important explanations in the Bible of why he will rescue Israel.

Read and organize the passage:

9. Read Ezekiel 36:16-37:28.

10. Briefly summarize what is happening in each section of Ezekiel 36:16-37:28.

- Ezekiel 36:16-23
- Ezekiel 36:24-38
- Ezekiel 37:1-14
- Ezekiel 37:15-28

Observe the passage:

11. According to 36:16-23, what have been the consequences of Israel's sin? Why does the final consequence (verses 20-23) concern God so much?

12. In 36:16-38, why will God rescue Israel (see 36:22,23,32,36)?

- *Think it through:* How is this a rebuke and how is it an encouragement?

13. What is the difference between the promise in Ezekiel 36:25 and 36:26-27?

- *Think it through:* Why are both needed?

14. What is promised in Ezekiel 37:1-14?

- *Think it through:* How does this fit into God's overall plan?

15. What are the key things God is promising in Ezekiel 37:23-28?

- *Think it through:* Why are these crucial? (Consider what we've learned from the OT.
- *Think it through:* Which of these promises have been fulfilled for us Christians today, and which have yet to be fulfilled?
- *Apply it:* What implications does this have for the way you live your life and how does this affect your understanding of what you are hoping for?

Dig deeper into the passage.

1. In Ezekiel 35:1-36:7, God intends to destroy Mount Seir (also called Edom) and the nations it typifies. Why is God doing this and why does he need to do this before He can rescue Israel?

2. In lesson 14 we saw that Isaiah described God's rescue of Israel as being like the exodus (Isaiah 11:16). Here, in Ezekiel, there are hints of similarity and difference between what occurred at the original exodus from Egypt and what God promises to do now.
 - In Ezekiel 34, what parallels do you notice between God's rescue described here and God's rescue in the original exodus?

 - In Ezekiel 36:24-32, there are differences between what God says he'll do here and what occurred at the original exodus from Egypt. What are the 3 or 4 main overarching elements of *this* rescue and why are each important?

3. In Ezekiel 37:15-22, what is God promising in the event symbolized by the two sticks? (Note: 'Ephraim' is the northern kingdom.)

Think it through: In what ways is this a difficult, but also an important promise to fulfil?

LESSON 18 – THE GREAT RESCUER

ISAIAH 40

Isaiah prophesied to Judah about 150 years before her exile to Babylon, but in chapters 40-55 (and some other bits) Isaiah is speaking ahead to this exile and, in particular, the end of this exile (see Isaiah 43:14-21, 48:14,20-21 and also 39:5-7). Thus, this is an appropriate point in our study to look at these chapters and some of the great truths it teaches about that event. However, we need to keep in mind that these promises were actually given *before* the promises in Ezekiel were given, so Isaiah's original hearers would not have known what God says there.

God has made great promises to Israel, committing himself to giving her great blessings in a wonderful land. In fact, so great are his promises that it is clear that he is promising her infinitely more than merely rescue from exile in Babylon. He is promising her a rescue from the Fall, the issue he has been working at from the beginning. However, there is a vast gulf between what God is promising and the exile Israel is about to experience. This gulf raises a number of issues, and God addresses some of these in this chapter.

Read and organize the passage:

1. Read Isaiah 40.
2. Briefly summarize the what is happening in each section of this passage:
 - Isaiah 40:1-2
 - Isaiah 40:3-11
 - Isaiah 40:12-20
 - Isaiah 40:21-26
 - Isaiah 40:27-31

Observe the passage:

3. What are the 2 or 3 main overarching issues being dealt with in Isaiah 40?

4. In Isaiah 40:1-11, who travels on the 'highway' and where is he going?
 - In the surrounding chapters of Isaiah, there is also a highway with travellers: *Who* is going *where* on that highway? (see Isaiah 35:8-10 & 43:14-21)

 - *Think it through:* In light of this context, what event is 40:1-11 referring to?

5. *Think it through:* What does the picture of the highway teach us about God's promised rescue? When is this prophecy of the highway fulfilled?

6. What are the main things Isaiah 40:1-11 tells us about God's rescue of his people?
 - *Think it through:* Why is each thing important?

7. What are several things that Isaiah 40:12-26 teaches about God?
 - *Think it through:* Why does Judah need to grasp each of these as she faces exile and hears God's promise of rescue?

- *Apply it:* As we live in 'exile' from Eden and hear God's promises of rescue, why do we need to grasp each of the truths about God in Isaiah 40:12-26? Which of these truths about God do you find hardest to accept and live by?
8. *Think it through:* The picture of a sovereign, almighty God is given in Isaiah 40:12-26. Why does God teach this *immediately after* what he says in 40:1-11?
9. *Think it through:* In Isaiah 40:27-31, Judah doubts that God knows what is happening to her. In what ways is Judah wrong, and how does God correct her error with all of Isaiah 40?
10. What does Isaiah 40:29-31 mean, given its context?
- *Think it through:* Who will benefit from God's promise here, and why is this an important qualification?
 - *Apply it:* How are these verses (Isaiah 40:29-31) relevant to Christians today?

LESSON 19 – THE SUFFERING SERVANT

ISAIAH 52:13-54:17

In the previous five studies we've seen some of the key things God is saying through the prophets as Israel goes into exile. However, the truths he is revealing at this time are so important and so profound that he does not simply state them once. Rather he reveals them through many different prophets, each of whom focuses on a different facet of what God is promising to do. If the prophetic books are not read in the context of everything God is saying and doing in the Bible then it might appear that they are merely a disparate collection of obscure prophecies, but we are now in a position to see that God is dealing with a relatively small number of genuinely great issues and the vast array of prophecies are developing different aspects of these. In this passage Isaiah is prophesying to Judah (and, in particular, Jerusalem her capital) about the end of the exile, and making a crucial contribution to two of these great issues.

Read and organize the passage:

1. Read Isaiah 52:13-54:17.
2. Briefly summarize the what is happening in each section of this passage:
 - Isaiah 52:13-53:3
 - Isaiah 53:4-9
 - Isaiah 53:10-12
 - Isaiah 54:1-3
 - Isaiah 54:4-10
 - Isaiah 54:11-17

Observe the passage:

3. What are the 2 or 3 main issues in this passage?

4. "The servant" is a key character in the book of Isaiah. What are the 3 or 4 main things that Isaiah 52:13-53:12 tells us about the servant?

5. In what ways does the servant suffer? What does Isaiah 49:1-9a and Isaiah 50:4-8 add to our understanding of his suffering?

6. What are the main things that Isaiah 52:13-53:12 tell us about *why* the servant suffers? Why are each of these aspects important?
 - *Think it through:* How does this servant deal with the problem of sin? How does this fit in with what we've seen of God's plan?

7. What happens to the servant *after* his suffering? Why are each of these important?

8. What is God promising in Isaiah 54?

- *Think it through:* How do these promises relate to the promises to Abraham, Moses and David, and what do they add to what we've already seen of God's promises?

9. *Think it through:* How do the promises of Isaiah 54 follow on from Isaiah 53?

- According to Isaiah 54, why will God do what he is promising?

10. *Think it through:* As we reach the end of our lessons in the prophets, it's valuable to summarize what they say about God's promises and to organize the information that we've learned from lessons 14-19. Write down the 3 or 4 main areas in which the prophets are revealing important truths about God's promises. (What 3 or 4 headings can you group the big ideas under?) What are the main things they said about each area?

LESSON 20 – After Babylon

NEHEMIAH 1, 4, 5, 9, 10, & 13

God has promised wonderful things, more in fact than a full restoration of all that was lost at the Fall. He has promised (a) a great rescue from exile with sins forgiven through the sacrifice of his servant (Isaiah 40:1-11, 53:4-6,10-12); (b) new heavens and a new earth with perfect peace, justice and knowledge of God, and Jerusalem rebuilt in dazzling splendour (Isaiah 11:3-9, 54:11-12, 65:17); and (c) God himself ruling Israel through his perfect Davidic king and Israel responding in obedience and so enjoying these blessings forever (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 36:24-31, 37:24-28). The big question is, when does all this happen? Fifty years after the destruction of Jerusalem, in 539 BC, Cyrus the Persian king conquers Babylon, and the next year he gives permission for the Jews to return to Canaan (Ezra 1:1-4). Is this the return from exile the prophets were promising? Initially there are encouraging signs. Some Jews quickly return and rebuild the altar and start rebuilding the temple (Ezra 1-3). But then things bog down. Opposition means the temple takes 20 years to build (Ezra 4:1-5, 4:24-6:15 – note that 4:6-23 refers to a different, later incident). After that nothing much happens until Ezra returns 60 years later, in 458 BC (Ezra 7:1-8), but all he seems to do at this time is to try to sort out the problem of intermarriage (Ezra 9-10). Nehemiah returns 13 years later still, and his book is just about the last glimpse we have of Israel in the Old Testament, so studying it will show us how much of God's promises are fulfilled by the end of the Old Testament.

For this historical setting, see section #6 in the '*Storyline of the Bible*' on page 5.

The book of Nehemiah opens in Susa, the main capital of Persia, in 445 BC, almost a century after the beginning of the return to Canaan.

Read the passage

1. Quickly read the whole book of Nehemiah (it's worth it for the context!)
 - If you are limited for time, focus on reading the key chapters: 1, 4, 5, 9, 10 & 13
 - You could also listen to the book. The free ESV Bible app has audio (it's about 1 hour)

Observe the passage:

2. What is the situation in Jerusalem in Nehemiah 1, 4, & 5?

- *Think it through:* Compare this with what we've seen of the promises in the prophets.
 - Which of the promises of blessing in the prophets have *been* fulfilled?
 - Which of the promises does Nehemiah stress have *not* been fulfilled?

3. Summarize Nehemiah's achievements in chapters 1-6.

Think it through: To what extent are God's promises fulfilled in greater measure through what Nehemiah does?

4. According to Nehemiah 1, 9, & 10, why did Judah *originally* go into exile?

- *Think it through:* To what extent do Nehemiah and the Jews consider that the exile is now over?

- What is the main thing they do to try and change their *current* situation?

5. *Think it through:* Judah is not successful in her attempt to do what God commanded. What are the implications of Judah's continuing sinfulness, even after the exile?

- What sins are focused on in 13:7-31? Why do you think these are singled out?

6. Which covenant does Nehemiah appeal to in chapter 1?
 - *Think it through:* What do you think is the significance that Nehemiah appeals to this covenant, rather than the promises in the prophets?

7. *Think it through:* What does the book of Nehemiah imply is necessary before God's promises in the prophets are fulfilled?
 - *Think it through:* How does this help us better understand what Jesus accomplished?

8. *Apply it:* How do Nehemiah's efforts affect your view of how much human beings can accomplish in furthering God's plans? How should this affect the way we live?

BRIEFING 7: THE RETURN FROM EXILE

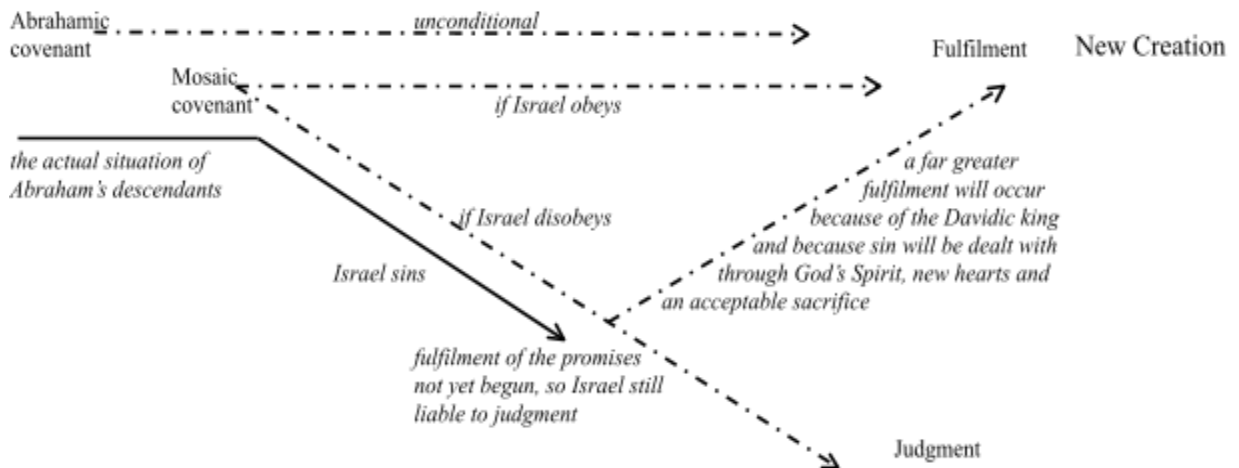
THE STATE OF GOD’S PLAN AT THE END OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

By the end of the OT God has very nearly finished revealing most aspects of his plan to rescue humankind from the Fall and the final judgment that still awaits fallen humankind. For example:

- The promises of blessing are nearly complete. By the end of the OT God has virtually finished his promises of what he will do about the effects of the Fall and of how he will rescue Abraham’s descendants to enjoy his new creation. Little is added after this, instead the NT *assumes* God’s promises and tells us how God accomplishes the first step on the path to their eventual fulfilment. Thus, if we neglect the OT (as we tend to today), we’ll understand little of what God is intending to give his people – and this is exactly what is happening in the church today, with dire consequences for our understanding of what God is doing.
- Similarly, God’s explanation of what is involved in dealing with sin is almost complete. The first step in God’s plan to *fulfil* his promises is to deal with sin, and this is what the NT deals with. As a result, it repeats a lot of the explanation of what is involved in this, so our neglect of the OT is not as serious in this area as it is with God’s promises. However, seeing how God’s plan has developed helps us grasp *why* dealing with sin matters and how it fits in with God’s overall plan.
- God has revealed most of what he is going to do about himself. God reveals all his main characteristics through what he says and does in the OT, e.g. his power and might, his holiness and justice, his love and grace, his patience and mercy, and his faithfulness to his promises. Again, the NT *assumes* its readers know God as he has revealed himself in the OT, so our neglect of the OT means we don’t know God properly. For example, many Christians today confuse his patience with sinners with indifference to sin. No student of the OT would make that mistake.

Thus, God’s promises and his revelation of his plan are almost complete, but so far he has done little about implementing his plan and fulfilling his promises. This is the main thing still remaining in God’s plan and, until it occurs, Israel continues to remain a sinful people living in a fallen world and, under the terms of the Mosaic covenant, facing the threat of God’s final judgment. Not surprisingly the big question is ‘when will the exile come to an end and God’s promises be fulfilled?’.

THE DIAGRAM OF THE COVENANTS AND SOLUTION TO THE CAUSE OF THE FALL LOOKS LIKE:



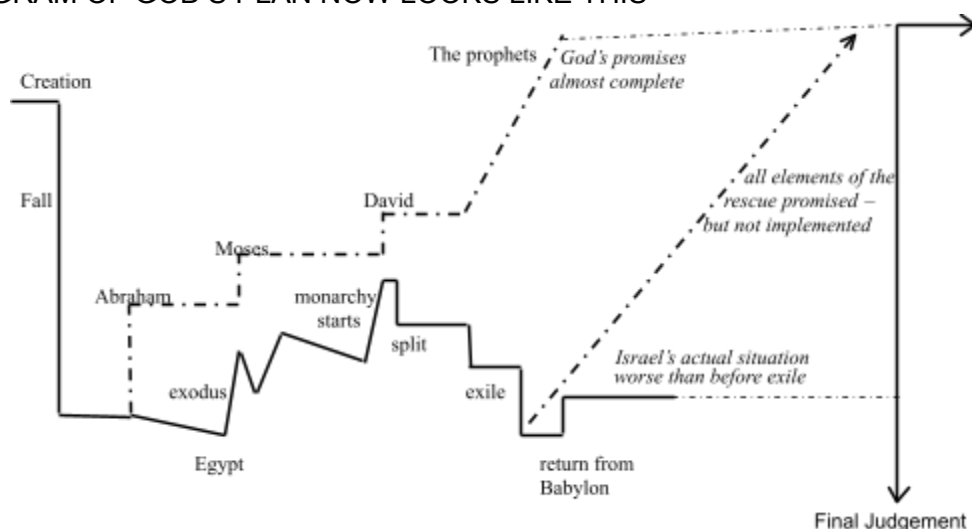
HISTORICAL FULFILMENT IN THE 600 YEARS AFTER THE EXILE STARTS

There is a widely held view that the return promised in the prophets is fulfilled – at least in part – when Cyrus allows the Jews to return to Canaan in 538 BC. However, this does not accord with the biblical evidence. There is relatively little in the OT about Israel in the years after 538 BC, but the main point of virtually all that there is is to show how *little* has been fulfilled before the end of the OT period, and how all that happens falls far short of what God promised. For example:

- Isaiah is promised a triumphant return (Isaiah 35:1-10, 40:3-11), but what actually occurs is a feeble trickle back. Relatively few return just after 538 BC (Ezra 2). A few more make the dangerous journey much later (Ezra 7:1-7, 8:15-23). Finally, many never return but choose to remain in exile.
- At the heart of God's promises is the Davidic king (Ezekiel 34:23-24, 37:22-25), but the Jews never again have a Davidic king, and are not even an independent nation for another 400 years.
- The prophets promised a great relationship with God centred on a wonderful temple (Ezekiel 47:1-12), but the temple built by the returnees is so small that the people weep (Haggai 2:3, Ezra 3:12), and the relationship with God enjoyed by the returnees is one of sinfulness and hostility, just as it was before the exile (Malachi 1:6-9, 2:11-13,17).
- The prophets promised peace and prosperity (Ezekiel 34:25-29), but after their return the Jews face a lot of opposition (Ezra 4) and poverty (Haggai 1:6-11).
- There is certainly no eternal life or new creation.

As we've seen, Israel's situation continues much like this right up to the end of the OT. Israel at the end of Nehemiah's time is not a great nation with a Davidic king but rather a province of the Persian empire, she is still sinning and still not experiencing much by way of triumphant return, prosperity or peace. The 400 or so years between the end of the OT and the beginning of the NT sees no further fulfilment. This does not mean nothing is happening. On the contrary, this is an eventful time historically. Israel remains under Persian rule until 332 BC when Alexander the Great conquers the entire region. But Alexander's Greek empire splits after his death in 323 BC and since Israel lies near the boundary of two of the factions she is fought over for the next 150 years. In 167 BC the Jews rebel and eventually gain their freedom in 141 BC. However, by 63 BC Israel is under Roman rule. None of this is in the Bible because it is not relevant to God's plan. He has finished his promises and not begun their fulfilment. This all changes in 4 BC when the NT opens, as we'll see in our next study.

THE DIAGRAM OF GOD'S PLAN NOW LOOKS LIKE THIS



LESSON 21 - FULFILMENT BEGINS

LUKE 3:1-4:13

The Old Testament contains two major 'beginnings': the beginning of God's creation and the beginning of God's people, Israel – but both are ruined by sin. Thus, God's good creation is ruined when Adam and Eve rebel against him, and God's rescued people Israel fail to obtain what he promised because they sin. God, however, is working to put right what has gone wrong. So far this has involved him promising to deal with the effects of sin and then to deal with sin itself. Thus, he has promised (a) that he will create a new heaven and a new earth and (b) that he will rescue a people from this fallen creation, will forgive them, and will make them sinless so they can enjoy this new creation forever. However, up to this point in the story these promises have not yet been fulfilled. The initial fulfilment of these promises in Israel was all lost at the exile, showing that this was not what God was actually promising. Similarly, Israel returned from her exile in Babylon following Cyrus' decree, but no significant promise was fulfilled at this time, showing that this also was not what God was really promising. Now, some 400 years after the end of the OT, everything changes. God makes a third new 'beginning': the beginning of the fulfilment of what he has promised. The New Testament compares and contrasts this new beginning with the previous two in various ways.

Read the passage.

1. Let's read Luke 3:1-4:13.

Observe the passage:

2. Every gospel describes John the Baptist's ministry in terms of Isaiah 40:3-5 (see Luke 3:4-6). *Think it through:* What are the main things this indicates about what Jesus has come to do?

3. What is John doing in 3:7-14?

- *Think it through:* How does this contribute to his job of preparing the way for Jesus and what lessons does this have for us as we look to Jesus?

4. What would the Jews mean if they were to say, “We have Abraham as our father” (3:8), and how does John respond to this?

- *Think it through:* What implications does this have for what God is about to do?

5. What does John say about Jesus in 3:15-17?

- How does this help prepare the way for Jesus?
- *Think it through:* In the light of what you learned through the OT, what is the significance of Jesus baptizing “with the Holy Spirit” (3:16)?

6. What is Jesus called in 3:21-4:13, and who else is called the same thing in these verses?

- *Think it through:* In the light of this, what is the significance of the temptation narrative in 4:1-13?

7. Read Exodus 4:22. In light of this passage and the scriptures that Jesus quotes in reply to the devil, do you think it is valid to compare Jesus facing temptations in the desert with Israel facing temptations in the desert at the exodus? If it is, what is the significance of Jesus resisting temptation, unlike Israel?

8. *Think it through:* How does the contrast between Jesus' response to the devil's temptation and both Adam's & Israel's responses help us better understand Jesus and what he has come to do?

9. In the three temptations in 4:1-13, what is the basic, underlying sin the devil is trying to get Jesus to commit? What is Jesus' basic response?
 - *Think it through:* What lessons can we learn from this about the nature of sin and obedience?

10. In summary, what 3 or 4 headings would you write to best encapsulate everything this passage teaches us about Jesus and what he has come to do?

LESSON 22 - GALATIANS 3

JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

God has begun to fulfil the promises he made in the OT, but a key question is ‘who will be saved?’ or, alternatively, ‘what must a person do in order to inherit God’s blessings?’. Most Jews assumed the answer was that those who obeyed the Mosaic Law would be saved and inherit God’s blessings. However, the question of what a person must do in order to be saved causes a lot of confusion in the early church. Two major reasons it causes such problems are (a) Jewish ‘Christians’ who are still confused about whether they need to keep the Law to be saved, and (b) the conversion of Gentiles, which raises the question of how much of the OT law they need to keep and whether they must become Jews (see Acts 15:1-5). The question of whether or not Christians must keep the Mosaic law is, in fact, one of the great issues in the NT and it continues to confuse many Christians, so it’s crucial for us to see what the NT says about this.

The letter to the Galatians shows us the issues at stake and what the apostles say about them. The Galatians have heard the gospel and responded, but now some are beginning to say that they must live according to the OT law. In response, Paul writes the most vehement letter in the NT to point out how wrong they are and how serious the consequences. Chapter 3 is the heart of his reply.

Read the passage.

1. Read Galatians 3 and briefly summarize each section:

- Galatians 3:1-6

- Galatians 3:7-9

- Galatians 3:10-14

- Galatians 3:15-29

Observe the context:

2. Let’s begin our observations by looking at the context to see what’s at stake.

How serious is the error that Paul is opposing (see 1:6-9, 2:4-5,21, 3:1-5, 4:9, 5:1-4)?

- *Think it through:* What does Paul mean by what he says in these verses?

3. It is vital to see exactly how the Galatians have gone wrong so we don't do the same thing. What are the Galatians doing that is wrong (see 1:6, 3:1-5, 4:10,17-21, 5:1-4)?

- *Think it through:* Why do they want to do these things? (Note: they are *already* Christians!)

- *Apply it:* In what ways do you do similar things?

Observe the passage:

4. From 3:1-9, how are God's blessings obtained, and what does this mean?

- *Think it through:* What are the two main ways Paul makes his argument?

5. *Think it through:* From what we've learned in the OT, what is the significance of Paul's use of Abraham in 3:1-9 to prove his case? What does 3:7 mean, and how does it fit in with everything we saw in the OT?

6. In 3:10-18, what are the several things Paul says about the OT law, and what does he mean by each of these? (Hint: use Paul's argument, as well as what we've learned in the OT.)

- In 3:19-25, what does Paul say the role of the law really is?
7. What are Paul's 2 or 3 main points in 3:26-29, and what do each of these mean?
- *Think it through:* How do they show the Galatians they are wrong to seek to keep the law?
8. In summary from Galatians 3, what are the 2 or 3 main roles that Jesus fulfills in our inheriting God's promises, and how do these help us better understand what he has done?
9. *Apply it:* In the light of this passage, what is involved in continuing our Christian lives the same way we began (3:3 "Having begun by the Spirit...")?
- What does this mean for you in practice, day to day?
 - How does this affect your view of what is involved in living as a Christian?

BRIEFING 8: WHO IS ISRAEL?

God has begun to fulfil his promises, but a key question the NT addresses is: who will benefit? *The Fall affects everyone, but not everyone will benefit from God's reversal of it.* God's promises are to 'Abraham's descendants' and to 'Israel', but who are Abraham's descendants and who is Israel? A cursory reading of the OT might suggest that 'Abraham's descendants' and 'Israel' are the nation of Israel, but a closer look shows this is not the case. The NT goes further, making it clear that God's promises to Abraham's descendants are for *Christians* and the *church*, not the nation of Israel.

Most people in NT times didn't see that the OT showed that God's promises are not for the nation of Israel, so when Jesus and the apostles taught this it caused some consternation. In fact, the issue of what makes a person a member of 'Israel' was one of the hottest potatoes of the time and, as a result, it is a key theme in the NT. It is so crucial an issue that the Bible uses several, complementary, arguments to show that God's promises are for *Christians*, not the nation of Israel, and that God always intended this. Most of us don't have the vested interest in this issue that the first century Jews had, but the issue of who will inherit God's OT promises still confuses many Christians and is something we must be clear about.

JESUS IS THE TRUE ISRAEL: THOSE WHO ARE 'IN HIM' WILL BE SAVED

The first argument for why 'Abraham's descendants' are not the nation of Israel focuses on Jesus. The nub of this argument is that Israel *does* inherit all God's promises, but the 'Israel' that inherits these promises comprises of *one person only*, Jesus himself (Galatians 3:16). Because he alone is obedient, he alone is the true Israel (Luke 3:21-4:13) who inherits all that God promised.

This is the final step in the OT principle of the *remnant*. The remnant is the idea that at every stage in history God's purposes and promises are for a smaller and smaller proportion of the whole. Sometimes this is because God only chooses part of the whole to inherit his promises, sometimes this is because his judgment on sinners means only a remnant is left. For example, initially, in Adam and Eve, God's purposes are for all humankind; then, God selects only Abraham and his descendants; then, he chooses only some of Abraham's descendants, first those descended through Abraham's son Isaac and then Abraham's grandson Jacob; then, only some of those rescued from Egypt enter the land; next, only some of Israel survives the judgment of the exile. Finally, the remnant is down to one person, Jesus. Everyone else is sinful and faces judgment. But now this narrowing goes no further because Jesus is sinless and so he inherits God's promises. Jesus is *the Israel* that the promises were always intended for.

However, the fact Jesus is Israel is not the end of the story but in many ways, it is the beginning. Now it is possible for people to inherit God's promises by being *in Christ*, and everyone who accepts Jesus is 'in him' (Galatians 3:27-29). Because Jesus inherits God's promises, anyone who is in him also inherits God's promises, whether or not they belong to the nation of Israel (Galatians 3:26-29, Ephesians 2:13, 3:6). Thus, *God's promises to Abraham's descendants and to Israel are inherited by Christians.*

THOSE WHO HAVE FAITH ARE ABRAHAM'S DESCENDANTS

The Bible's second reason why God's promises and plans are for Christians, and not for the nation of Israel, revolves around how a person *belongs* to 'Israel'. A superficial reading of the OT might suggest that a person belongs to 'Israel' by being born into the nation or by becoming a member of the nation by being circumcised. But the Bible's great truth is that the essential characteristic of a descendant of Abraham is *faith*. This is stated clearly in the NT (see Galatians 3:7, Romans 4:9-12), but it is also revealed in the OT. Thus, all throughout the OT, God's *true* people are those who have faith, as Hebrews 11 makes clear. Further, books like Isaiah state explicitly that faith is essential (Isaiah 7:9b). In other words, God's promises to Abraham's descendants are not to his *physical* descendants, but to his *spiritual* descendants. Having Abraham's *faith* is the mark of being part of the real Israel.

However, there is an important new development in the NT: faith is now not only an essential mark of God's true people, it is actually the *only* mark of those who belong to Israel (Galatians 5:6). Thus, a Gentile who has faith will be saved *without also having to become a Jew*, and a Jew who has faith has no advantages over a Gentile with faith.

The nation of Israel no longer has any special role to play, and the true Israel is now defined as those with faith, and national characteristics have nothing to do with it (like circumcision or descent). As a result of this redefinition of Israel, the new 'Israel' (the church) looks very different to the nation of Israel. Not surprisingly, this caused great offence to the Jews at the time. It also caused problems in the church as Jewish Christians wrestled to come to terms with this (Acts 15:1-21). Galatians 3 showed us some of the sorts of problems the early Christians struggled with in this area.

GOD CHOOSES PEOPLE FROM ALL NATIONS TO INHERIT HIS PROMISES

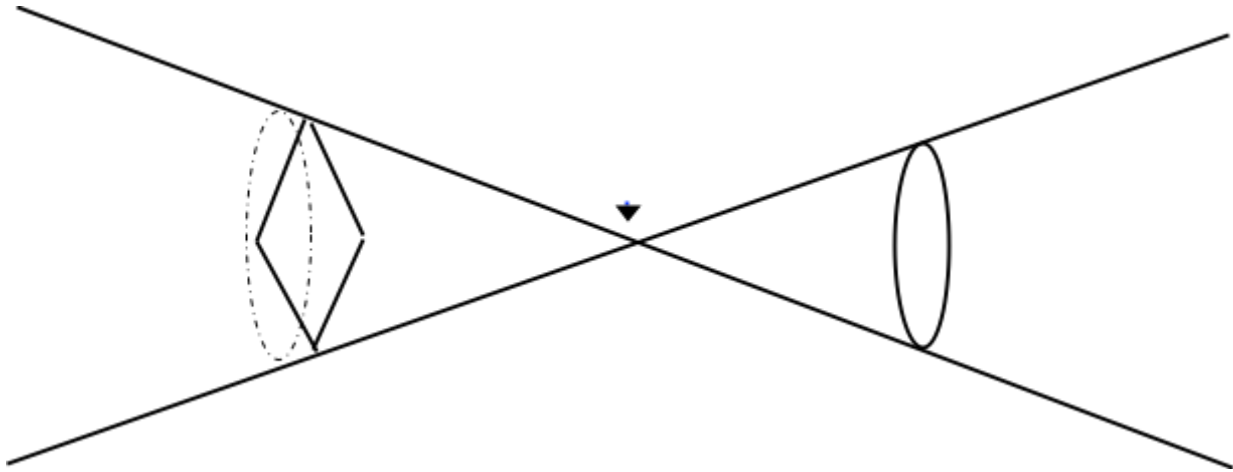
Finally, God's plan to reverse the Fall benefits people from all nations, but only some Jews. God is the one who chooses who he will rescue and he always intended to choose people from *all* nations, but only *some* of Abraham's physical descendants. Thus, right at the start, God promises Abraham that through him "*all* peoples on earth" will be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Conversely, God chooses first Isaac, then Jacob, meaning that from the start only *some* of Abraham's physical descendants were actually chosen (Romans 9:6-13, 22-29).

God's intention to rescue Gentiles is confirmed in the OT when God makes provisions for them to become members of his people (Exodus 12:48-49), an offer taken up by people like Ruth the Moabitess (who becomes King David's great-grandmother, Ruth 1:4, 4:13-17). This is confirmed even more explicitly when God says during the exile that his promises of a reversal of the Fall are for the Gentiles also (Isaiah 49:6). Similarly, we see confirmation of the truth that God has *not* chosen all Israelites when he rejects many of them for their sin (e.g. at the exodus when a whole generation dies in the desert).

The surprising development in the NT is how very different the 'true Israel' looks from the 'nation of Israel'. Someone who knew the OT well might have expected *some* Gentiles to be added into Israel and *some* Jews not to inherit God's promises. But they would have expected the 'shape of Israel' to remain roughly the same. However, God's promise to bless all nations is fulfilled by him *choosing vast numbers of Gentiles*, causing them to accept Jesus and be saved (Acts 11:1-21), and by him *not choosing the bulk of the Jews*, but rather, causing them to reject Jesus and lose his promises (Romans 9:1-29).

These are 3 distinct but linked arguments in the Bible, all making the same point: *God's promises to Abraham's descendants and to Israel are meant for Christians.*

The apparent recipients of God's promises change over time,



OT
In the OT the 'Israel' that inherits God's promises looks like the nation, but there are many clues that it's not.

initially diminishing, then increasing.

NT

In the NT 'Israel' is clearly seen to be the church, consisting of those from all nations with faith – they will inherit 'in Jesus'

Israel : Jesus
 the nation

"True Israel":
 seen dimly

The turning point comes when the nation of Israel shrinks down to one person, Jesus, but he inherits God's promises and the real recipients of God's promises become those who belong to him.

LESSON 23 – FIRSTBORN FROM THE DEAD

COLOSSIANS 1

God's entire plan to rescue humankind, reverse the Fall and fulfil his promises hinges on Jesus. Without faith in him no one can benefit from what God is doing, as we saw in Galatians 3. However, many of the early churches were tempted to drift from him for various reasons. The Colossian church is an example of this. They are probably being tempted to turn back to Judaism, but this is not made explicit, and Paul focuses on the need to continue in Jesus and doesn't really attack what they're being tempted by (see 2:68). Paul is much gentler in this letter than he is in his letter to the Galatians, probably because the danger is less acute. The letter to the Colossians appears to be written more to prevent a problem than to correct one. However, in the process of persuading the Colossians to continue in Jesus, Paul gives us probably the greatest description of who Jesus is and what he is like that we have in the Bible. This means it is a significant passage because it is important for us to know as much as possible about someone so crucial in everything God is doing, and on whom our salvation and eternal life depends.

Read the passage.

1. Read Colossians 1 and briefly summarize each section

- Colossians 1:1-8
- Colossians 1:9-12
- Colossians 1:13-20
- Colossians 1:21-23
- Colossians 1:24-29

Observe the passage:

2. In 1:3-8, what does Paul thank God for and why is he thanking God for these?

- In 1:3-8, how do faith and love result from hope stored in heaven?
(Hint: Read carefully, Paul mentions two things.)

3. In 1:9-12, what is the main thing Paul prays for and, from the context, what does he mean by this? What does he hope will result from this prayer?

4. *Think it through:* How does what he prays for in vs 9-12 fit with what he gives thanks for in vs 3-8?

- *Apply it:* To what extent do you pray for the sort of things Paul does?

5. In 1:13-14, 20-23, what are the main things Paul says God has done?

- *Think it through:* What do each of these mean and why are they important? (Note: you'll need to consider what we've learned in the OT.)

6. In 1:13-22, what are we told about (a) Jesus' role in this creation, (b) Jesus' role in God's rescue of His people and the new creation, and (c) Jesus' relationship with God?

- *Think it through:* Why does Paul tell the Colossians all about Jesus?

7. According to 1:23-29, what is Paul's ministry?

- *Think it through:* To what extent do we share Paul's ministry?

- *Apply it:* To what extent are you doing so?

8. From 1:21-23, what is the one thing every Christian must do to inherit God's promises?

- *Apply it:* In what way does this command influence/impact your life and ministry today?

9. In Colossians 1, what is the main thing Paul works for, prays for, and is thankful for?

- *Think it through:* Why is this so important?

- *Apply it:* How does it affect your own priorities?

LESSON 24 – PERSEVERING TO THE END

HEBREWS 3 & 4

The letter to the Hebrews is a letter to yet another church being led astray by the claims of Judaism (as we've been seeing, this is one of the greatest of the problems facing the early church). There are three key differences between the various letters: (a) the Galatian and Colossian churches are Gentile Christians, while the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews appear to be ex-Jews who are being tempted *back* to Judaism; (b) the Galatians appear to be trying to *add* keeping the OT law to faith in Jesus, while the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews (and, to a lesser extent, the Colossians) are being tempted to turn away from Jesus altogether; and (c) different arguments are used in each of the letters to show their readers their errors. The writer of this letter has two main strands to his case. First, he explains how Jesus is the one through whom God is fulfilling all he promised, so it would be stupid to turn away from him. Secondly, he shows that all through the OT God wanted his people to persevere in faithfully living by what he had revealed to them, and the recipients of this letter must do likewise. In the course of his argument, the author gives us the clearest explanation in the Bible of what Jesus has accomplished, how this fulfils the OT, and what implications this has for our lives now. This is why it's important for us to study this letter.

In 1:1-2:4 the author says that Jesus is God's ultimate revelation, so we must not turn away from him. In chapters 3-4 he develops this argument, particularly its practical implications.

Read the passage.

1. Read Hebrews 3 & 4 and briefly summarize each section:

- Hebrews 3:1-6

- Hebrews 3:7-3:19

- Hebrews 4:1-4:13

- Hebrews 4:14-16

Observe the passage

2. In 3:1-6, in what ways are Jesus and Moses compared and contrasted?

- *Think it through:* What is the main point of this comparison? (Hint: see Numbers 12:6-8.)

3. What events do 3:7-19 refer to? What are the main points the author makes as he reminds his readers of these events?

4. What is the main point the author is making in 4:1-11?
 - *Think it through:* How does he show that the 'rest' he is referring to is something for Christians?

5. Which part of the exodus is the Christian life paralleled to in Hebrews 3:7-4:11?
(Note: This is the *only* part of Israel's history that the NT compares the Christian life to!)
 - *Apply it:* What lessons does this parallel have for us today? How does this affect your view of the Christian life?

6. From 3:7-4:11, what is the one key thing Christians must do to enter God's 'rest'?
 - What 3 or 4 specific instructions does the author give his readers to help them do this, and what do each of these mean?

7. What is the author's main point in 4:12-13?

- *Think it through:* How does it fit in with what was said in 3:7-4:11?
- From 3:7-4:13, how does God's word judge the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts?

8. What caused Israel in the desert to disbelieve God's word and rebel? (Read Exodus 17:1-7, Numbers 11:1-10, 14:1-12.)

- *Apply it:* What causes you to disbelieve God's word and rebel? What does this reveal about the thoughts and attitudes of your heart?

9. Hebrews 3:1-4:13 stresses *our* responsibility. In 4:14-16, what help is available to us, and how is this a help?

- *Think it through:* Why is the balance between our responsibility and God's help important and what does it mean in practice?

LESSON 25 – THE PERFECT SACRIFICE

HEBREWS 8:1-10:18

Judaism has great attractions (an impressive temple, priesthood, sacrificial system, and great OT promises) and the original readers of this letter appear to be in the process of being seduced by these. However, Jesus is infinitely superior to Judaism because he is the one to whom the OT points and in whom the OT promises are fulfilled. The author's primary means of persuading his original readers not to abandon Jesus is to show them just how superior Jesus is. So far he has shown that Jesus is a greater revelation than that contained in the OT (see 1:1-2:4, 3:1-6) and he is now in the process of showing that Jesus is a greater priest than the OT priests. Having established that Jesus is a sinless and everlasting priest (7:23-28), he moves on in our passage to deal with what Jesus accomplished as priest. This is the heart of his argument. As we've seen, the OT contains God's great promises, but no fulfilment. The promises *cannot* be fulfilled through Judaism because it contains no answers to Israel's sin. But now Jesus has come to bring about the fulfilment of all God's promises, and his success in accomplishing this, more than anything else, is the reason why it is folly to return to Judaism.

This passage is the Bible's clearest explanation of what Jesus achieved (how he fulfils what the OT pointed towards and how he enables God's promises to be fulfilled) so understanding it is crucial.

Read the passage.

1. Read Hebrews 8:1-10:18 and briefly summarize each section.
(Hint: Focus on the big ideas, don't get bogged down by all the details in this passage.)
 - Hebrews 8:1-13
 - Hebrews 9:1-10
 - Hebrews 9:11-28
 - Hebrews 10:1-18

Observe the passage:

2. What does 8:1-6 tell us about Jesus' high priestly ministry? How is Jesus the same as the Levitical priests (the priests of the Mosaic covenant) and how is he different?
3. In 8:6-13, what are the main ways in which the new covenant is better than the old, and what do each of these mean?

- When are the prophecies of 8:10-12 fulfilled? (Hint: 9:28, 10:13-14, 3:7-4:11)
4. What is the 'first covenant', and what does this passage teach has happened to it?
- *Think it through:* Did God make a mistake giving the 'first' covenant?
5. In summary, what are the 2 most important things mentioned about the new covenant?
- *Think it through:* Why does the author make these points here?
6. What are 2 or 3 main things that 8:1-5 & 9:1-12 teach us about the tent (tabernacle) and its significance?
- How is the place where Jesus ministers different?
7. According to 9:1-13, what are the OT sacrifices all about, and what do they achieve?

- What does 10:1-18 add to this?

 - What are the limitations of the OT sacrifices and what is the evidence of these limitations?
8. According to 9:1-10:18, what are the 3 or 4 main things Jesus' sacrifice of himself achieves?
- *Think it through:* Why is each of these essential?
9. Carefully observe: What two crucial things does 9:1-10:18 teach us about Jesus' ministry?
- *Apply it:* How should this affect the way you view the cross, and the way you live your life?

BRIEFING 9: THE FINISHED WORK

It is often said that Jesus has *begun* to fulfil all that God has promised. However, things are not this simple. Passages like Hebrews 9:26 & 10:12 state that Jesus' death has resulted in many of the key elements of God's plan now actually being *completed*, while passages like 2 Peter 3:3-13 indicate that other things are *little changed*, something confirmed by the lack of peace and prosperity in the early church. It is important to be clear about what is now finished and what we are still waiting for, because confusion on this issue has caused many heresies in the church's history. If we don't see what is completed, we will undervalue what Jesus has accomplished at the cost of his life and we'll end up trying to do what he has done (and will fail). Alternatively, if we expect things now that will not occur until he returns, we'll be disappointed and disillusioned. Sadly, many people have had their faith destroyed this way.

WHAT JESUS HAS FINISHED

What Jesus has done at his first coming is fully deal with the cause of the Fall, sin.

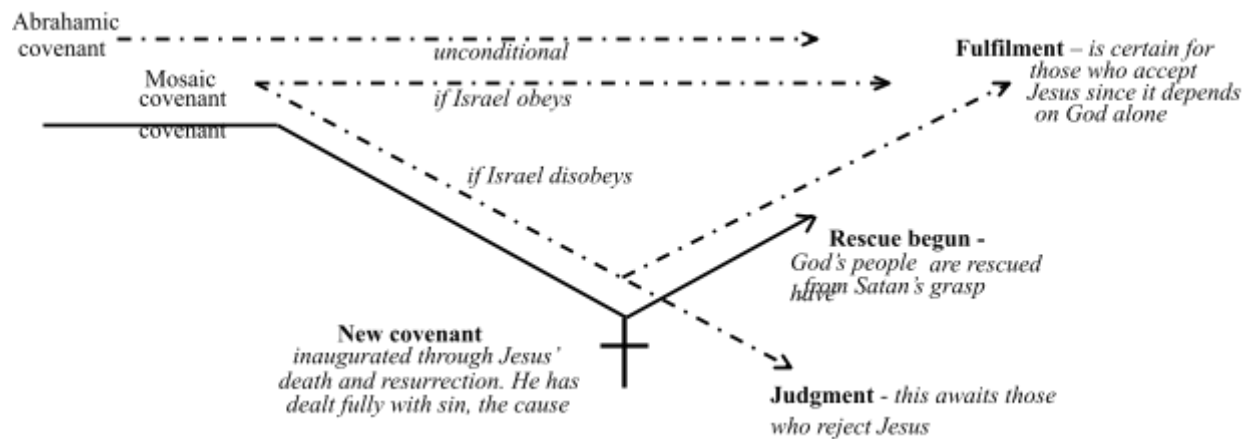
Dealing with the cause of the Fall dominates the Bible from Exodus 19 onward. Here, God reveals that his work of doing something about the *effects* of the Fall depends on the *cause* being dealt with. In the Mosaic covenant, Israel is given the task of dealing with the cause of the Fall, and the OT is an extensive study of how she totally fails. (Note: The Mosaic covenant itself is not a failure. Through it God achieves exactly what he intends, namely to reveal Israel's need for something better, and reveals more about himself and his plan to deal with the Fall.) God then reveals that he will deal with the cause himself through his divine, Davidic king. Now Jesus has come and has done precisely this.

Jesus' finished work can be looked at in three ways:

- Jesus has inaugurated God's new covenant. We are now in a completely new regime, one where dealing with the cause of the Fall is totally dependent on God not us (Hebrews 9:15).
- Jesus has fully dealt with sin. He died as a perfect sacrifice so all our sins are forgiven (Hebrews 9:14-15), rose from the dead to give us new life, and he has given us God's promised Spirit (John 16:7-11) so we will one day be sinless.
- Jesus has rescued us from Satan and his dominion. Satan is a crucial part of the cause of the Fall, since he originally ensnared Adam and Eve and has held humankind captive ever since. We've been rescued from his kingdom and he has no control over us (Col 1:13).

The fact Jesus has fully dealt with sin (the cause of the Fall) shows just how important the cross is. It is the turning point of the whole of God's plan, the thing that solves not simply the biggest problem in the world, but the problem that has totally shaped the world and that lies behind every other problem. We need to value and rejoice in it far more than we do.

The diagram of how the covenants relate and how the cause of the Fall is dealt with is complete:



WHAT IS NOT YET COMPLETE

The thing Jesus doesn't do at his first coming is deal with the effects of the Fall.

In fact, he barely begins to tackle these. The only indications of him dealing with the effects are that his miracles indicate that he *can* deal with them, and he gives the Holy Spirit which is a foretaste of the new creation (but even this is a foretaste of only one or two of the blessings of our relationship with God, see Romans 8:15-17).

The NT's picture of the position of the Christian in this world is that we are like Israel in the desert (Hebrews 3-4). We're completely out of 'Egypt', but we do not yet have any of the promised land. We can view the situation as follows. When God rescued his people from Egypt, he gave them the Mosaic covenant both to show that a) the cause of the Fall needs to be dealt with before the effects can be, and to show that b) human beings can't deal with the cause of the Fall themselves. Now that both these points have been amply demonstrated (even if not always learnt), God 'begins again' from the point where his plan came to a standstill the first time (in the desert at Mt Sinai). God inaugurates a new covenant to fulfil and replace the Mosaic covenant and he picks up his plan to deal with the effects of the Fall from Mt. Sinai. However, there is a plot twist in God's plan. In the 1300 years since God inaugurated the Mosaic covenant, he has been revealing that the rescue he is actually working on is the rescue from the Fall, not Egypt; he is rescuing us from *Satan's kingdom*, not Pharaoh's, and he is rescuing us for a *new creation*, not Canaan.

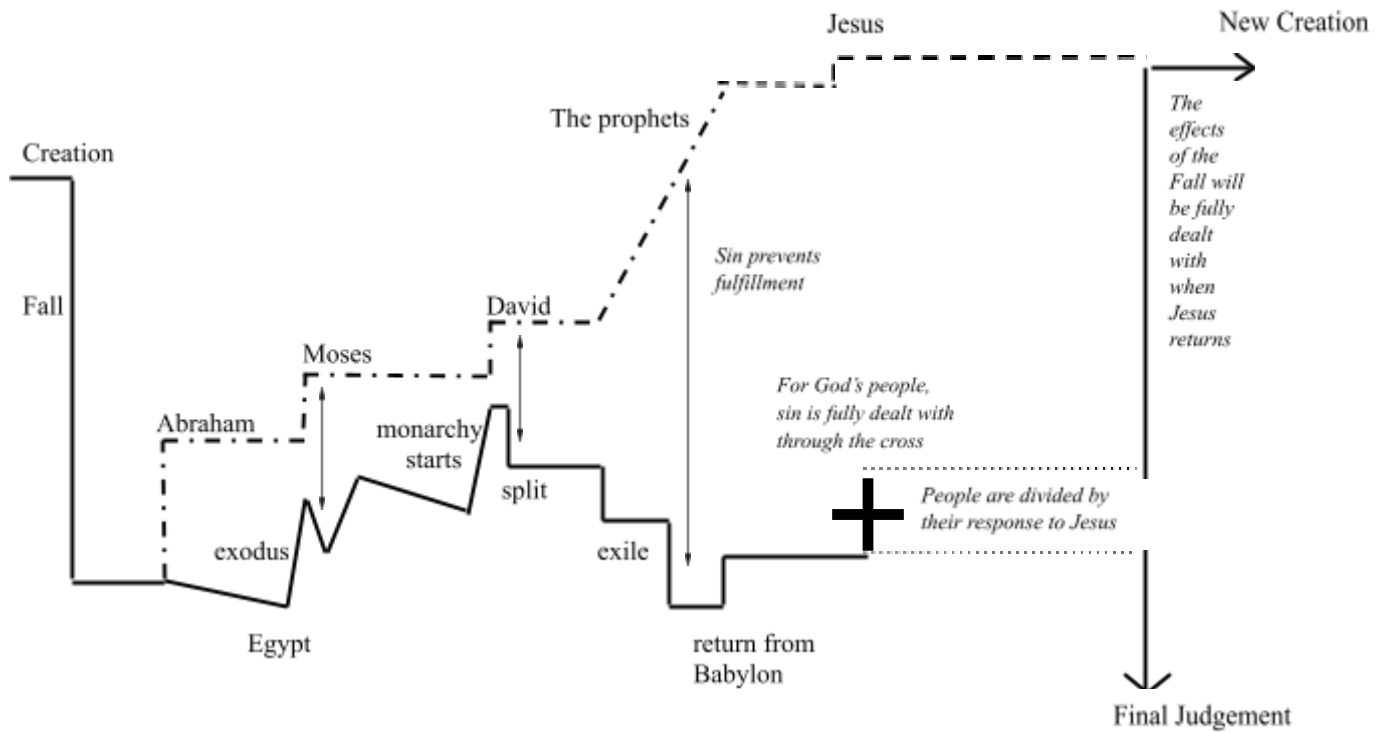
There are two major implications of the fact that we are still "in the desert":

- We do not yet experience God's new creation, rather we are still waiting for this (Hebrews 9:28, 1 Peter 1:3-6). God is committed to creating a new heaven and a new earth (where all the effects of the Fall are dealt with) and to place his people in it. He has done everything necessary for this to happen by dealing with the problem of sin, but the Bible's great promises of blessing are not ours yet. If we think they are we may be disillusioned and give up on Jesus. Alternatively, we may water the promises down to

match what we are experiencing, and this is just as bad, since it is to turn aside from the hope which is so central to genuine, biblical faith (Colossians 1:5, Hebrews 11).

- We are currently in the desert and so life will often be uncomfortable. Israel found the desert even less comfortable than Egypt in many ways, and Christians will too. Like Israel, we do not yet have the promised blessings, nor can we have the things this world offers (Numbers 11:5). Our next study will show us more of what life in the “desert” is like and how we are to live while we’re in it.

The diagram of God’s plan shows that we still far from experiences all his promises, but that his people are rescued from sin through the cross and all that is left to do is persevere in waiting.



LESSON 26 – LIVING BY FAITH

HEBREWS 10:19-12:4

The original recipients of this letter are being tempted and coerced to turn away from Jesus and to return to Judaism. The author is pointing out the folly of this by explaining how great Jesus is and what great things he has achieved. First, he is God's son who has given us God's final revelation of himself and, secondly, he is a perfect, everlasting high priest who has successfully dealt with sin, inaugurated God's new covenant and opened the way into heaven. Interspersed between these theological arguments, he exhorts his readers to keep going and not give up. In fact, the whole letter has one key focus: *they must persevere in their faith*. They are "in the desert": rescued from Satan's dominion, but not yet in the new creation. Like the Israelites in the desert, their greatest need is to keep going to the promised land and not to doubt God just because things don't yet appear much better than they were "in Egypt".

In the passage we are now studying, the author both exhorts his readers to persevere and gives them a theological reason for persevering, but this theological argument is somewhat different to the ones he has used so far. It is important for us to understand his arguments and listen to his exhortations because we are in the same position as the original readers. We, too, are "in the desert" and we need to be clear about our position and about how we should live now and why.

Read the passage.

1. Read Hebrews 10:19-12:4 and briefly summarize each section:

- Hebrews 10:19-25
- Hebrews 10:26-39
- Hebrews 11:1-40
- Hebrews 12:1-4

Observe the passage:

2. How is Jesus' ministry summed-up in 10:19-21, and what does this mean?

- In 10:22-25, what are the 2 or 3 key things the author says Christians should therefore do?

- What does he mean by these and why is each a crucial response to what Jesus has done?
3. What is the sin that the author is warning his readers about in 10:26-39?
- What is the author encouraging his readers to do instead and what reasons does he give them to do this?
4. How does the author's discussion of faith in chapter 11 follow from what is in 10:19-39?
- *Think it through:* Why does the author refer to so many OT characters and how would this have helped his original readers?
5. What is 'faith' according to 11:1?
- *Think it through:* What does this mean?
 - Use Abraham as a 'case study' to further understand faith. Read 11:8-12 & 11:17-19. What 3 or 4 things did faith involve for Abraham? What do each teach us about faith?

- What does 11:13-16 add to this explanation of what faith involves?
6. *Think it through:* In 11:32-40, why do some people who have faith enjoy good things in this world (11:32-35a) while others who have faith do not (11:35b-38)?
- *Apply it:* So, how should a Christian respond to things going (a) badly or (b) well?
7. What is the author exhorting his readers to do in 12:1-4 and what does he mean by this?
- *Think it through:* What do these verses add to what we have seen so far in this study?
8. *Apply it:* How does this passage's explanation of what Biblical faith is challenge you in...
- (a) your view of what the Christian life is all about...
 - (b) your aspirations and desires?

LESSON 27 – THE NEW CREATION

REVELATION 20:11-22:6

God's plan for the whole of history is to put right what went wrong at the Fall and to rescue his people from Satan and this fallen world. In fact, as we've seen over the year, he's going to do far more than simply restore the world to what it was in Eden. He will create a wonderful new heaven and new earth. We are now nearing the end of this plan, but the last part of the plan, the new creation itself, will only happen when Jesus returns. Until then we must live by faith, waiting patiently, and looking forward to it, just as Israel in the desert was to look forward to Canaan. Because it hasn't yet occurred the Bible can't record it, but it does give us a few glimpses of what it will be like, particularly in the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation has two main ingredients: (a) it forewarns Christians of the difficulties that will come in the period from Jesus' ascension to his return in order to help them to persevere, and (b) it reveals more of what the new creation will be like so Christians will look forward to it and live in hope. The passage we are studying is part of the latter category, and it is the greatest glimpse of the new creation in the Bible. It is the parallel for us of the spies' report that Israel received when on the edge of the promised land (Numbers 13, with the difference, of course, that John has nothing negative to say). It is worth noting that Revelation is a 'picture book', painting bold and vivid scenes, and many of the measurements and details are symbolic rather than literal.

Read the passage.

1. Read Revelation 20:11-22:6 and briefly summarize each section:

- Revelation 20:11-15

- Revelation 21:1-8

- Revelation 21:9-27

- Revelation 22:1-6

Observe the passage:

2. When will the judgment of 20:11-15 occur?

- Who will be judged, and on what basis?

- On what basis will anyone avoid being thrown into the lake of fire, and what does this mean?

- What is the significance of death, Hades, & the devil (20:10) being thrown in the lake of fire?

- *Think it through:* What clues does this give us as to why God's judgment is necessary?

3. According to 20:11 & 21:1, what will happen to this 'first' creation? What does this mean?

- *Think it through:* From what we have seen over the year, why does this have to happen?

- *Apply it:* How should this influence the way we view the creation we're now living in?

4. Read Genesis 3, and compare it with this passage. To what extent are each of the things that went wrong at the Fall put right in the new creation?

- *Think it through:* What is the significance of this?

5. How is the new creation similar to the first (described in Genesis 1-3) and how is it different?

6. What were the main things promised to Abraham? (Lesson 4: Genesis 12:1-7 & 15:1-7 & 17:1-8) In what ways are these promises fulfilled in the new creation described in Rev 21:1-22:5?

- What were the main additional things promised to Moses, David and through the prophets? In what way are these promises fulfilled in the new creation?

7. Are you surprised in the way that any of the promises are fulfilled?

- *Think it through:* From what we've seen over the year, how can it be explained?
- *Apply it:* How does seeing the way all these promises are fulfilled in the new creation affect your understanding of what God is doing in the whole of the Bible?

8. *Apply it:* How has this passage challenged your view of what heaven (new creation) is like? How should this affect the way you live?

