

For the next several months, we're going to be looking at the stories of the Bible. Today we're starting in the book of Genesis and we'll eventually work our way to Revelation. The Bible is one book made up of many stories and in one way or another they all point toward Jesus, who is the center of all creation.

Today and tomorrow, we will be looking at the books of the Torah. The Torah refers to the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy which were written by Moses. These are also called the Books of the Law. You often find reference to the Law in the New Testament. When you come across that word, it is referring to the first five books of the Bible.

Let's begin. Genesis starts by stating, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." This may be the most important verse in the entire Bible, for it establishes that there is a God who is the creator of all that is. Acknowledging that there is a God is the first step toward trusting God. I mean, how can you begin to trust in something unless you believe that thing exists. Everything else in the Bible is based on the belief that God exists.

Having established the existence of God, the story continues with creation. I want to note that when we read the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, the question we should be asking in "why did God create all things?" rather than "how did God create all things?" The Bible is much more concerned about answering the why question than it is the how question. We'll see these two questions come up time and again as we work our way through the Bible and I believe we should always focus on why rather than how.

Part of the answer to the question "why?" in Genesis 1 and 2 is that creation demonstrates the goodness of God. At the end of each day, God saw that what he had made was good. When God made man and woman, he saw that it was very good. In a world torn apart by war, and famine, and disease, it is important to remember that the world which God originally created was very good. Unfortunately, that goodness was short-lived. In Genesis 3 we read about Adam and Eve's sin. That sin caused paradise to be lost and brought about all that is wrong into our world.

We cannot overstate the disastrous results of Adam and Eve's original sin, but I believe their second sin was just as damaging. The second sin was

blaming someone else for their sin, rather than taking responsibility for it. When God asked Adam if he had eaten from the forbidden tree, Adam could have said, "I did, please forgive me." Instead, he said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it." The woman, likewise, didn't admit to what she had done, rather she blamed the serpent. We'll never know what might have happened if they had been honest with God but I think the world would be a very different place if they had.

Much of the damage we see as a result of sin today, is rooted in the reality that people blame others for their sin instead of admitting that they sinned. This blaming leaves no room for forgiveness and leads to more sin. We see in the following chapters of Genesis this sin continuing to multiply, first with Cain killing his brother Abel and then getting so bad that God grieved that he had created humankind.

This leads us to the story of Noah. God had determined to cleanse the earth of sin by sending a great flood and God chose Noah and his family to repopulate the world after the flood. The story of Noah is told in chapter 6-9 in Genesis. This again is a story to ask the question why. Why did God flood the world and why did God save Noah and his family? Those are much more important questions than how did God flood the earth?

The story of the flood leads to one of the most important events in the Old Testament. That is the covenant between God and the entire earth. God promises never again to flood the world. This is the first covenant God makes with his creation and it reveals to us part of the nature of God. God is a God of promises. The rainbow is a sign of God's promise.

We will see this again as we look at the story of Abraham found in chapters 12-25. God's first promise to Abram, who would have his name changed to Abraham, was the promise that his descendants would have a land to call their own.

The second promise was that God would make Abraham the father of a great nation even though he was 99 years old when God made the promise and Sarah his wife had borne him no children. This promise carried with it a requirement, that all the male descendants of Abraham would be circumcised. Circumcision became the sign of God's promise. From that

time forward, up until today, circumcision for the Jews has been a sign that they are heirs to God's promises.

Because Sarah was barren, she gave Abraham her servant girl Hagar so that he would have an heir. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael. After some time, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. There was a great deal of jealousy between Sarah and Hagar and eventually Sarah convinced Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Ishmael would go on to be the father of those we call Arabs today. Isaac would become the father of the Jews. After around 4,500 years, the conflict between Sarah and Hagar and their children continues today.

Near the end of the story of Abraham God makes a strange request, that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham and Isaac set off to make a sacrifice to God but they don't take any kind of animal with them for the sacrifice. This confuses Isaac, but Abraham assures him that God would provide the sacrifice at the right time. When they arrive at Mt. Moriah, they build an altar out of stone, then Abraham does a surprising thing. He binds up Isaac and lays him on the altar. This may seem like a very strange thing to us, but we need to understand that in ancient times human sacrifice was common. Just before Abraham is about to plunge the knife into Isaac's chest, God stops him.

I think this story foreshadows Jesus' death on the cross. God did not withhold his only son, but allowed him to be sacrificed on our behalf.

This leads us to Isaac. Like Sarah, Isaac's wife Rebekah was barren. Isaac prayed to God and God answered his prayers and she became pregnant with twins, Esau and Jacob. Esau the oldest of the twins was rightfully the heir of Isaac, but instead he sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of porridge. Jacob then tricked his father Isaac into giving him his blessing, thus becoming the heir of God's promises to Abraham. When Esau had realized that he had been taken advantage of by this brother, he was furious and swore to kill Jacob. Rebekah warned Jacob and he fled to his mother's brother Laban in Haran for safety.

Once Jacob arrives in Haran, he sees Laban's daughter Rachel and it's love at first sight. After just a month, Jacob agrees to work for Laban for 7 years if Laban will give Rachel to be his wife. After the 7 years had passed, Laban tricked Jacob and gave him his older daughter Leah as his bride as

was their custom. A week later, Jacob married Rachel and worked 7 more years for Laban. Like Sarah and Rebekah, Rachel was barren, but Leah gave Jacob 6 sons and a daughter. Because Rachel was jealous of Leah, she gave Jacob her maidservant to have children with. Then Leah did the same thing. After many years, Rachel finally became pregnant and Joseph was born. Lastly, Rachel gave birth to one more son, Benjamin. In all, Jacob had 12 sons. These became the 12 tribes of Israel which we will read about further on in the Old Testament.

God blessed Jacob and his flocks grew until he was very wealthy. Laban's sons grew jealous of Jacob's success, so God told Jacob to return home. On the way, Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord a whole night long and just before dawn, the angel gave him a new name, Israel.

Jacob would then meet his brother Esau and the two became reconciled. Jacob took his family and settled in the land of Bethel, where they lived for many years.

This brings us to the final main character of Genesis, Joseph. Joseph was always Jacob's favorite son, so he gave him a majestic multi-colored coat. This led Jacob's other sons to despise him. Things got worse when Joseph had two dreams. We need to remember that in the Bible, dreams are one of the main ways God communicates.

In the first dream, the brother's sheaves of grain all bowed down to Joseph's sheaf. In the second dream, Joseph saw 11 stars and the sun and the moon all bowing down to him. The meaning of both was obvious to all, that Joseph's brothers and his parents would one day bow down before him. This caused the brothers to be even more jealous of Joseph. Then one day when the brothers were out in the field, Jacob sent Joseph to check on them. When they saw him coming they said to each other, "Here comes that dreamer. Let us kill him and say that a ferocious animal killed him. Then we will see what becomes of his dreams."

But Reuben spoke up and said don't kill him, just throw him in a cistern. So the others agreed and torn Joseph's coat from him and threw him in a cistern. About that time, some slave traders passed by and the sold Joseph to them. They put goat blood on the coat and told their father that an animal had killed him. Jacob grieved mightily.

Meanwhile, Joseph was taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guards. God blessed Potiphar through Joseph and he prospered. However, things turned bad for Joseph when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and he resisted. She accused him of molesting her and Potiphar put Joseph in prison.

Even in prison, God blessed Joseph, and soon he was in charge of the prison itself. After some time, two of Pharaoh's officials were thrown into the prison, Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. Both had dreams which Joseph was able to interpret. Just as Joseph had predicted, the cupbearer was restored to his position and the baker was put to death.

Two years later, Pharaoh had two dreams which no one in his court could interpret. That's when the cupbearer remembered Joseph and he told him how Joseph was able to tell he and the baker the meaning of their dreams. Joseph was brought to Pharaoh and Pharaoh told Joseph his dreams. Joseph interpreted the dreams to mean that there would be seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of drought. He then told Pharaoh that he should find some wise men who could lead the people through these years. Pharaoh agreed and put Joseph in charge over all of Egypt.

Just as Joseph had foreseen, seven years of abundance was followed by years of want. The drought extended all around the middle east, so that it even impacted Joseph's brothers back in Palestine. They heard that there was food in Egypt so with their father's blessing, all of them except for Benjamin set out to buy grain.

When they met Joseph they failed to recognize him. Joseph accused them of being spies, but eventually released them to return home though Simeon was to remain in Egypt until the brothers came back with their youngest brother Benjamin.

The drought continued and once again the brothers wanted to go to Egypt to buy food, though they knew they couldn't without taking Benjamin. At first, Jacob refused to let Benjamin leave, but things got so bad he had no choice.

When they arrived in Egypt, they again failed to recognize Joseph. They bought grain and headed for home. But Joseph tricked them by putting a silver cup in Benjamin's sack. When it was discovered, the brother all

swore that there had to be some mistake, Benjamin would never do such a thing. Judah then confessed that it was their fault for God was repaying them for the evil they did to their other brother Joseph. Joseph could not take it any longer, he revealed his true identity to his brothers and they wept and embraced.

Eventually, the brothers returned to their homeland and brought their elderly father Jacob to live with them in Egypt. There they all prospered and grew into a great nation.