

"In the Beginning . . . Beginning Again"
Overview Lecture 9/07/2023
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Last year we immersed ourselves in a study of Psalms and Proverbs, the only topical study we have in our curriculum. This year we're going "back to basics" and start at the beginning of the Old Testament. The first half of our study will cover the books of Genesis and Job: we call that "IN THE BEGINNING" and then the books of the Restored Kingdom when Israel was "BEGINNING AGAIN." Before giving you a little background on these books, I want us to step back even further and think about some real basics.

Why do we even study the Bible? Remember what Pilate asked Jesus, "What is Truth?" Jesus had told His disciples, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32) Knowledge of what the Bible says is freedom because it is the absolute truth from God. It teaches us that we can have freedom from the penalty of sin, which is spiritual death; we can have freedom from the fear of Hell and punishment; we can have freedom from trying to earn our way to heaven by performing good works. We realize we have freedom from a lot of things.

Conversely, we learn that we have freedom to do many things . . . to go directly to God in prayer; to walk in the newness of life empowered by the Holy Spirit given to indwell us; to live abundantly because our God loves us and provides for every need we have. The more we learn about what God has to say to us, the more a whole vista of new and exciting discoveries open up to us!

God's Word educates us, it liberates us and it invariably shows us that God's ways are so much better than our ways. The Word is living and active. It wasn't given just to satisfy our curiosity or perpetuate a history lesson, it's to conform you and me into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Many today hear the Word of God in some form or another from either a pulpit or radio or television, but there is a difference between hearing the Word of God and listening to God's Word. When we study the Bible we are in that "Speak, Lord, I'm listening" mode. What is He saying to you and to me?

For those of you who have been with us for even one year of this Bible study, you probably know more Bible than many Christians in pews today and certainly more than the average person you'll encounter on a day to day basis. Bible knowledge strengthens us during times of testing and trials; it equips us to detect and handle error and have discernment between the truth and a lie when we hear it. It is that grid that filters out our fears and gives us confidence in our daily walk with God.

You may have heard this before, but a quick review always bears repeating. The Bible is a progressive revelation of God's dealing with men. In the beginning He worked

through individual men called Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob — that’s a part of our study this year. Then in the book of Exodus God began to work with His chosen people as a nation composed of the twelve tribes of Israel. Eventually Israel wanted an earthly king, so God gave them what we call a United Kingdom under the leadership of Saul, David, and Solomon. When Solomon died, the twelve tribes divided and ten went to the North and had some 19 kings (all of whom did evil in the sight of the Lord). He eventually sent Assyria to conquer them and carry them off dispersing them among the nations. The two tribes of Judah and Benjamin left in the South had some 20 kings, but only 8 of them were termed “good” in God’s sight. The Babylonians were the ones who came and carried the Jews off into captivity for a period of some 70 years. Consistently throughout the period of the kings, God sent prophet after prophet to warn about the judgment coming and urging repentance. But the peoples’ heart was hard. (That’s why we neglect reading the books of the prophets, because they are mostly doom and gloom about approaching disaster. There’s no way to jazz up a study of men with a doomsday message. You can’t laugh off compromise or sin. God must be taken seriously!)

God was true to His Word and, after a period of seventy years, the Jews were allowed to return to their land from Babylon – that’s the “beginning again” portion of our study. The Temple was rebuilt, the laws reinstated and the walls around Jerusalem were built. Then a period of 400 years of silence from God.

The New Testament takes up the story when the silence was broken by the glorious birth of the Savior, God’s Son, Jesus Christ. The gospels tell the story of His life, teaching, death and resurrection. The book of Acts is the story of how the church got started; Pentecost when the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out; and the conversion of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. The remaining letters in the New Testament are full of practical and important information on how a Christian should live having been saved by God’s grace and the blood of Jesus Christ. Revelation completes God’s Word and tells us what will happen to mankind before the creation of the new heaven and the new earth.

More than 35 years ago, my stepmother, Thelma, was dying and I was still a relatively new Christian. My Dad and I were in the waiting room while she was undergoing surgery and we’d been told that there was virtually no chance of recovery, so we had to make a decision about life support. How blessed we were that Howard and Margaret Dix came to pray with us.

Before they arrived though, a woman whose child had been hit by a car came in. She sat in a corner crying and picked up a Bible. Not knowing where else to turn, she opened it to Genesis, read for awhile, then put it down when she came to the first long list of names. I was sad for her. Sad, and I must say, convicted. In my own grief, I couldn’t think of specific Scriptures to point her to. Yet in my own heart there was

peace because God's Word was in my heart and I knew, "He would never leave me or forsake me." (Hebrews 13:5) "God works all things together for good." (Romans 8:28) "I have gone to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2,3) "He who has the Son has life." (1 John 5:12) "Nothing can separate us from the love of God." (Romans 8:39) Bible study is so very, very important. We need to hide it in our hearts. I commend you for making a commitment to study God's Word this year.

The Bible has four things to give us: Revelation, Inspiration, Illumination and Application.

How many of you have ever made a serious study of the book of Genesis? Good. But even for you who have studied it, I think you'll get some new and fresh insights as we study it this year.

When we think of Genesis, we think of creation, don't we? As we studied last year in Proverbs 8:22-36, at the beginning of that chapter, the voice of wisdom is speaking and it makes reference to Christ in those particular verses. Listen.

- ²² "The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
- ²³ I was appointed from eternity,
from the beginning, before the world began.
- ²⁴ When there were no oceans, I was given birth,
when there were no springs abounding with water;
- ²⁵ before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
- ²⁶ before he made the earth or its fields
or any of the dust of the world.
- ²⁷ I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
- ²⁸ when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
- ²⁹ when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
- ³⁰ Then I was the craftsman at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,

- ³¹ rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.
- ³² "Now then, my sons, listen to me;
blessed are those who keep my ways.
- ³³ Listen to my instruction and be wise;
do not ignore it.
- ³⁴ Blessed is the man who listens to me,
watching daily at my doors,
waiting at my doorway.
- ³⁵ For whoever finds me finds life
and receives favor from the LORD.
- ³⁶ But whoever fails to find me harms himself;
all who hate me love death."

Do you find it surprising that wisdom was created even before the earth and the events that start the Genesis documentation? **Knowledge is education acquired; wisdom is knowledge applied.** More than anything else, our desire for you this year is that you learn to apply what you've learned to your daily walk with the Lord.

Now just a little background on the books we'll be studying.

Genesis is the first book of what is called the Torah or Pentateuch. "Pente" means five and the Pentateuch is the first five books of our Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). Traditionally Moses is credited as being the author of the Pentateuch.

Genesis is obviously a book of beginnings. After creation we come to the subject of the fall to sin and the depravity of man. We need to keep in mind that the definition of depravity is not that man is as bad as he can be, but that he is as bad off as he can be – totally and completely subject to the influence of Satan.

In 1788 Edward Gibbon published six large volumes titled The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. God condensed in six verses (Genesis 3:1-6) the Decline and Fall of the Human Empire.

It's suitable that our decorative theme to start our session is the apple. Eve ate it (or some fruit like it) and gave some to Adam who ate also. You know what happened: they hid their bodies as they realized they were naked; they hid from God because they were afraid; and they hid from responsibility . . . Adam blamed God and Eve, and Eve

blamed the serpent. Aren't we just like our original parents yet today? Sin changes everything. It always does. Do wrong and we want to hide in shame; we fear God's punishment and blaming others is always the name of the game. Maybe it's not even a person. The popular thing to do now is to blame it on being the product of our environment or society or past history.

I was recalling Max Lucado's book this summer titled A Gentle Thunder. In it he tells a story I think you'll like. (pp.105-107)

Two sons of the king brought their father a question. "Is a gentleman born or made?"

What do you think? he replied.

"I think a gentleman is born a gentleman," replied one son.

"I disagree," replied the other. "A man becomes a gentleman by training and discipline."

The king looked at his sons and issued a challenge. "Prove your case by presenting me an example. I give each of you a week to return with proof of your opinions."

And so the two sons departed in different directions. The son who believed a gentleman was made, not born, found his proof in a tavern. He'd ordered a cup of tea and was amazed when he saw that the waiter was a cat. This cat had been trained to stand on his hind legs and carry the tray in his forepaws. He wore a tiny uniform and hat and was proof that a creature could overcome his nature with training and discipline.

The first son had his example. If a cat can be changed, couldn't a man? So the prince purchased the animal and took him to the court.

The other son was not so fortunate. He'd searched the kingdom but was unable to find any support for his theory. He returned home empty-handed. What's worse, word had leaked about his brother's discovery. News of the walking cat made him doubt his convictions. But then, just hours before the two were to appear before the king, he saw something in a store window that made him smile.

He made his purchase but told no one.

The two sons entered the court of the king, each one carrying a box. The first son announced that he could prove a man could overcome any obstacle and become a gentleman. As the king watched, the son presented the cat, dressed in miniature court dress, who gave the king a tray of chocolates.

The king was stunned, his son was proud, and the court broke into applause. What excellent proof! Who could deny the evidence of a walking cat? Everyone pitied the second son. But he wasn't discouraged. With a bow to the king, he opened the box he had brought, releasing several mice into the court. Instantly the cat scampered after the mice.

The cat's true nature had been revealed, and the point had been made. A walking cat was still a cat. You can change his clothes. You can teach him tricks. You can give him a hat and train him to walk. And for a while he'll appear to be changed. But present

him with one thing he can't resist, and you'll be faced with an undeniable truth – a walking cat is still a cat.

The same is true with people. We can change our clothes. We can change our habits. We can change our vocabulary, our reading level, even our attitude. But according to the Bible, there is one thing we cannot change – our sinful state.

That is why we need a Savior, Jesus Christ; why we need the grace of God; and why God revealed His provision for that reconciliation in the opening chapters of Genesis.

Genesis chapters 1-11 is the beginning of the human race and includes the events of creation, the fall to sin, the judgment of the flood and the establishment of the nations. Genesis 12-50 is the beginning of the Hebrews – the chosen race. It's the account of men's lives.

I want to make mention here of Bible names. We're going to encounter a lot of them and we'll probably find them hard to pronounce or in a list that's all too easy to just skip over in reading. But remember these were real people. The more we see and try to say the names, the more we begin to recognize them when they appear in other Scriptures. Think about the genealogy that Matthew and Luke give to establish Jesus as Messiah. After this year you'll begin to realize that you know something about Perez, Tamar, Seth and Methuselah.

Genesis teaches us lessons about faith, obedience, marriage, child-rearing and perseverance. It teaches us about God's characteristics of faithfulness, mercy and sovereignty.

Genesis starts with creation and a garden. By the way, have you heard that there are two ways to look at creation?

The woman says "God looked at man and said "I can do better than that." A man says, "God created man and beast and then rested. Then He created woman and neither man, beast, or God has rested since."

Well, the book starts in a garden, but it ends in a coffin.

You know, maybe the Lord lets some people get into trouble because that's the only time they ever think of Him. That was not so of Job. Job is considered by many to be the oldest writing in the Bible. It is the beginning of the five poetical books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastics. When we think of Job it's usually connected with patience and suffering.

Chuck Swindoll breaks it into five sections:

Chapters 1-2 Introduction to the suffering
 Chapters 3-31 Discussion of the suffering
 Chapters 32-41 Correction in the suffering
 Chapters 42:1-6 Submission under suffering
 Chapters 42:7-17 Restoration from the suffering

But we're also going to learn some lessons about counseling others, discerning truth, and be reminded that God is indeed God. When it comes to the advice the friends give, we'll be taking big chunks of Scripture to get the big picture of the counsel Job received. It will be more reading than question answering. Since Job is a book of poetry, and many of us are not accustomed to reading much poetry, it may help to read the lesson Scriptures aloud. We don't want to get bogged down in bad advice or opinions. Don't be afraid of Job, you're going to find a new appreciation for this book of the Bible.

When we think about Beginning Again, there's something of an air of anticipation. Start fresh, don't make the same mistakes, a new chance to succeed. We make New Year's resolutions on January 1; we start a diet on Monday (for some of us that's 50 Mondays a year); even coming to Bible Study opening day/night is a fresh commitment to the study of God's Word.

The Restored Kingdom study is about the Jews returning to the land from Babylon after 70 years of being captive, which had been prophesied by the prophet Jeremiah. (Jeremiah 25:11) The first colony of Jews made the trip under Zerrubbabel and the Temple construction was begun. (Ezra chapters 1-6) The second colony of returning Jews came under the leadership of Ezra. Here was a man devoted to God's Word. He read the Mosaic Law to the people and called for social reform. (Ezra chapters 7-10) Ezra is reputed to have assembled most of the books in the Old Testament.

Nehemiah was serving in the court of King Artaxerxes when he heard that those who were back in Jerusalem were experiencing great trouble. So he asked the King for permission to go and help them rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

In the Hebrew manuscripts Ezra and Nehemiah appear as one book. In almost every great endeavor there are great people. Some are Type A upfront people like Nehemiah. Here was a man who wore the hats of a cupbearer, a hard hat project manager and a governor. The principles of motivation he demonstrated are still used by modern businessmen today.

Ezra was the Type B, behind the scenes but essential to the Jews success. He was not afraid to take a stand for what was right and godly. We're going to learn that

ungodliness is the sin against the person of God and unrighteousness is to sin against the will of God.

Even though I said that some avoid studying the prophets, we need to look at Haggai and Malachi, contemporaries of Nehemiah and Ezra. These are small books in the Minor Prophets that have relevance to the reconstruction project. The people began to put their own priorities before God's priorities, and they were called out for that.

The theme of Haggai is "it's time to finish what has been started." Haggai's style is to motivate by contagious enthusiasm and rebuke against indifference. The overriding principle in Haggai is getting back on track when in a backslidden condition. Think any of us can use that?

In Malachi the people were slumped into economic depression, they complained against God, refused to pay tithes/offerings, and social injustice was the rule of the day. In these four short chapters there are eight sarcastic questions the people asked God.

- 1) How have You loved us?
- 2) How have we shown contempt for Your name?
- 3) How have we defiled you?
- 4) Why?
- 5) How have we wearied You?
- 6) How do we return to you?
- 7) How do we rob You?
- 8) What have we said against You?

Malachi's mission was one of affirming God's love, rebuke and hope. Again, do you think that's going to hit home at all for us?

We'll close with the stirring book of Esther. A love story complete with evil villain, poetic justice and a happy ending. It may even cause you to ask yourself, "Why am I here. . . now . . . in this time and this place?"

As always, we remind you of the answer to the question, "how do you eat an elephant?" One bite at a time. It may sound like an overwhelming serving of Scripture, but one lesson at a time. By the time we're done (and for some of you will actually seem too short), it will be amazing how clear the bottom line has become for you once explained.

In your lesson packet there are a few introductory pages that we'd like you to pay attention to: The Guidelines for Members, The Guidelines for Devotions and a List

of Memory Verses. I'm going to ask Maggie Fitzpatrick, my co-leader, to go over those with you. Just one more thing.

I want to ask you to carefully and prayerfully consider the question on lesson one that asks you what your goals are for this year. It may be as simple as to attend regularly, complete the lessons, make new friends or something very personal. Please set that goal because we'll ask you in May how you did in achieving it.