

Lesson 4

Old Testament History

Any serious Bible student must commit himself or herself to a careful study of Scripture. Searching the Bible for answers to questions or doing topical studies will suffice for awhile, but there is no substitute for reading through the Bible from beginning to end. Even though most of the 66 books that make up our Old and New Testaments were composed independently, only together do they tell the whole story of God's plan of redemption for mankind. Remember, ultimately God is the author of the entire compilation, and He meant each book to contribute to our understanding of how He works and what He wants to do in our lives.

These "Bible Overview" lessons are designed to give you an overall understanding of biblical events, but they should not be considered a substitute for reading through the entire Bible.

Read the following Bible passages and jot down the significant events in Old Testament history.

Psalms 77:11-78:72; 105:5-106:48

Acts 7:1-53

Nehemiah 9:6-31

The Pentateuch

The first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) are known as the “Pentateuch” (five-volumed book) or the “Book of the Law.” They are also referred to as “The Law of Moses,” since it was Moses who actually wrote all this information down (except, of course, for the account of his own death at the end of Deuteronomy). Since most of the events Moses recorded preceded him by thousands of years, he either committed to writing the oral tradition that had been passed down from generation to generation or these things were related to him directly by God.

In earlier lessons you read about the fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3) and the consequences it had for all mankind. It didn’t take long for sin to take root — the first murder is recorded in Genesis 4. By the time we get to Genesis 6, what was the condition of the people God had created?

Genesis 6:5-6

Because of the extreme wickedness of mankind, God chose to destroy all that He had made, sparing only one righteous man, Noah, and his family along with some animals. It should be obvious from the events so far that God does not tolerate sin and defiance. All through Scripture we learn that God punishes sin. But He also promised to take care of that sin problem (Genesis 3:15). In Genesis 12, God begins working out His plan of redemption of mankind. He chooses another righteous man — Abraham — to be the father of the nation that would one day bring Jesus Christ into the world. Write out God’s promise to Abraham found in

Genesis 12:2-3

What other promises did God make to Abraham?

Genesis 13:14-17

Genesis 15:1-6

Genesis 17:1-8

Notice that God didn't plan to bless only this family, but His intention was that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." God chose these people not to be the sole heirs of His blessing, but to be the vehicle through which His blessing would come to the entire world through Jesus Christ. But people would never understand the problem of sin or the need for a Redeemer unless God taught them. And so, God made Abraham and his descendants His special people, revealing to them who He was and what He expected, and giving to them tangible symbols that would someday help them to understand His plan of redemption.

"The remainder of Genesis is an account of patriarchal history, the beginnings of the nation of Israel... Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac (born to them in their old age), marries Rebekah, and they have twin boys named Jacob and Esau. Esau sells his birthright to his brother for a bowl of stew, and Jacob receives Isaac's blessing. Jacob (who is renamed "Israel" in Genesis 32:28) becomes the father of twelve sons, who became the heads of the twelve "tribes" of Israel. One of these sons, Joseph, is sold into slavery by his brothers, but becomes second in command over all Egypt and eventually saves his family from famine. The family of Jacob, seventy in all, then comes to settle in the land of Goshen, as a family favored by all of Egypt." [Patricia David, *Through the Bible* (Indianapolis: Wesley Press, 1995) p. 19.]

Read Genesis 35:23-26. Write out the names of the twelve sons of Jacob ("Israel").

Read these significant stories from early Israelite history and jot down some of your thoughts.

Genesis 19:1-29

Genesis 18:9-14; 21:1-7

Genesis 22:1-14

Genesis 27:1-40

Genesis 28:10-22

Genesis 32:22-31

Genesis 37:1-36; 39:1-41:40; 45:1-46:7

In the book of Exodus we learn that this family of 70 people had turned into a nation of 603,550 (not including women and children) in just 430 years. They were enslaved by a later king who didn't know about Joseph and who was afraid that they would join with Egypt's enemies. To ensure that they would not become any stronger, the king issued a decree that all the male babies born to the Hebrews (another name for the Israelites; from "Eber" in Genesis 10:21) must be thrown into the Nile River. Read Exodus 2:1-10. What Hebrew child was saved from death and grew up in Pharaoh's own palace? _____

Moses spent 40 years in the palace, then 40 years tending sheep in the wilderness. Read Exodus 3:1-22. Where was Moses when he encountered God? _____
Why did God appear to Moses? _____ What did God want Moses to do?

What did God reveal His name to be? _____

The story of the Exodus is the pivotal point in the history of the nation of Israel. God intervened in a special way on behalf of His people and delivered them out of bondage in Egypt. After ten plagues on the Egyptian people, the pharaoh drove them out of the land. Read about God's deliverance of His people through the Red Sea in Exodus 13:17-14:29. Jot down some notes about how God revealed Himself to the Israelites, what He did, and how they responded.

Three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites came to Mt. Sinai (also known as Mt. Horeb). Here God gave to Moses various commandments and regulations that would govern the conduct of His people. He also gave Moses specific directions for building the tabernacle where the Lord would be worshiped. Write out in your own words the "Ten

Commandments" that were inscribed "by the finger of God" on the two tablets of stone (Exodus 20:2-17).

You may already know the rest of the story. By the time Moses came down from the mountain, the people of Israel were already committing idolatry. God was ready to destroy them all and begin over again with Moses' offspring, but after Moses interceded on their behalf, God relented. The tabernacle was built and God met with Moses there face to face. The book of Leviticus contains many of the commands God gave to Moses concerning the Levites (the descendents of Levi who were to serve as priests in the tabernacle) and their duties.

Although God had planned for the Israelites to go immediately into the land of Canaan which He had promised to Abraham and his descendents, the people were fearful and didn't trust God. And so, they were sentenced to wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years (until the entire generation had died off). You can read all about it in the book of Numbers. At the end of the 40 years, Moses was buried by God, being denied the privilege of entering Canaan because of his own sin. Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell address, where he recounts their history, reminds them of the conditional nature of God's covenant with them, and warns them not to forget about God. Moses tells the people that God loves them and that they, too, are to love God with all their hearts, minds, and souls. This is the book that Jesus quotes from more than any other.

Write down some of the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience that were part of God's covenant ("agreement" or "testament") with Israel.

Deuteronomy 28:1-14

Deuteronomy 28:15-68

The Near Eastern World

The world to which God chose to reveal Himself (both during the time of Abraham near 2100 B.C., and the time of Moses around 1450 B.C.) was a polytheistic one. There were many “gods” worshiped by Near Eastern cultures: the gods of the sun and moon, gods of harvest and fertility, etc. Often these gods were viewed as capricious and unpredictable, forcing their followers to develop elaborate rituals, often frenzied and sensual, to appease them. These were religions devised by men, and as such they appealed to the basest desires of men. It is easy to see, then, why the Israelites and their new monotheistic religion — with a single God who was morally pure and holy, holding out an ethical ideal beyond human achievement — were rejected by the Near Eastern world. The concept of only one God was so novel and so contrary to their thought, that it is immediately obvious that this new religion was not made up by man — it couldn’t have been. It was indeed revealed by the one and only Lord God. People don’t create a religion they can’t live up to, and yet almost the entire Old Testament is the story of a people who failed to live up to the standard set forth by their God.

The Historical Books

Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther make up the historical books. They tell about the failure of God’s people to live up to His law and about their eventual banishment from, and return to, the land God had given them.

It was Joshua who was chosen to lead Israel into the land of Canaan after Moses was buried. God was with the Israelites and enabled them to divide and conquer the land, often in a miraculous way. According to Joshua 24:31, how was Israel characterized during the time of Joshua? _____

What warning had God given the Israelites concerning the conquest of the land?

Exodus 23:31-33

Exodus 34:11-12

Deuteronomy 7:16

Unfortunately, the Israelites did not obey the Lord and failed to fully drive the inhabitants of Canaan out of the land. In the book of Judges we find that Israel has been ensnared by the gods of the surrounding nations. Judges 2:10-23 serves as a summary of the book. Read it and write down what happened during this period.

Judges 2:10-12

Judges 2:14

Judges 2:16

The cycle of Israel sinning, being handed over to raiders as punishment, crying out to the Lord for help, and God sending a deliverer, or "judge," occurs over and over again in the book of Judges. Read the following stories about some of the major judges, then write down the name of the judge and who he or she defeated.

Judges 4:1-24

Judges 6:1-7:25

Judges 15:1-16:31

Four times in Judges it tells us that this was a time when Israel had no king; a time when everyone did as he saw fit (literally, did what was right in their own eyes) (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; and 21:25). Israel was supposed to be a theocracy — God was their King. But during this dark time they had no king, not even God. They followed their own evil inclinations and allowed the world around them to lead them astray, with disastrous results. God still demands to be King today. Jesus must reign on the throne of our hearts if we are His followers. When we do what is right in our own eyes, it leads only to defeat.

The Israelites finally realized that they needed a king, but they wanted a king just like the nations around them — a human king. With the book of 1 Samuel begins the period in Israel's national life known as the monarchy. The people chose Saul, a handsome man who was a head and shoulders above all the rest, to be their first king, and he was anointed by the judge Samuel. All this came as no surprise to God — back in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, He had predicted that they would ask for a king. Even though their request meant they had rejected God as their king, He made it clear that their king was still to be subject to Him.

Read 1 Samuel 13:1-15. How did Saul disobey the Lord and what were the consequences?

Because of Saul's partial obedience — which is always disobedience in God's eyes — Samuel was sent by God to anoint David as the new king of Israel. It was many years before David actually took the throne, but God continually blessed him and protected him from the jealous attacks of Saul. Read 1 Samuel 17:1-58 and summarize how God gave David victory over the Philistines. Can you see from this story why God called David "a man after my own heart"?

After Saul killed himself on the battlefield, David finally assumed the throne over all Israel. Second Samuel recounts David's successful reign. There was no idolatry in the land under David, and Israel's borders were pushed to its farthest point. Up until this time the people have been worshiping God in the portable sanctuary known as the tabernacle.

David's great desire was to build a temple for the Lord. But, since David was a man of war, the privilege of building a temple was passed on to his son and heir, Solomon. Instead of David building a house for God, God intended to build a "house" (a dynasty) for David. Write out God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:16.

What do these New Testament verses reveal concerning the throne and the offspring of David?

Luke 1:32-33

Romans 1:2-4

Revelation 3:7

Revelation 22:16

David's son, Absalom (who had killed his brother for raping his sister), attempted to usurp the throne and was eventually killed by Joab, the commander of David's army. First Kings tells the story of how the throne was given to David's son, Solomon (the son of Bathsheeba, with whom David had committed adultery), even though David's other son, Adonijah, had tried to set himself up as king. Although God offered to give Solomon anything he asked for, Solomon chose wisdom. According to 1 Kings 3:7-14, what did God give him?

Solomon's most notable achievement was building a beautifully ornate temple for the Lord after the pattern of the tabernacle. People came from all parts of the world to see this temple and to hear Solomon's wisdom. What do these verses say about Solomon's wisdom, wealth and fame?

1 Kings 4:29-34

1 Kings 10:1-9

1 Kings 10:23-24, 27

But because Solomon allowed his wives to lead him astray into idolatry (all 700 of them along with 300 concubines), God caused the kingdom of Israel to be torn in two following Solomon's death. You can read about it in 1 Kings 11:1-13 and 12:1-24. Ten tribes in the north became "Israel," with their capital at Samaria, and the two southern tribes of Benjamin (Saul's tribe) and Judah (David's tribe), were collectively known as "Judah" and kept Jerusalem as their capital. In the years that followed, there was much conflict between Israel and Judah. It was during this time that the prophets Elijah and Elisha performed many miracles as they declared God's message. Other prophets were sent by God to declare imminent destruction and to urge the people to repent: Isaiah, Amos and Hosea to the northern kingdom and Joel and Micah to the southern kingdom. (You can read the messages they delivered from God in the Old Testament books that bear their names.) In the accounts of the kings who ruled over these two kingdoms, it is interesting to note that no good king ever ruled over Israel. Each one was more wicked than the one before. And Israel was consistently guilty of idolatry. Finally, when God could tolerate their sin no longer, He allowed them to be captured and scattered by the ruthless Assyrians around 722 B.C. (Read 2 Kings 17:1-41.)

Although many of the kings in Judah were evil, there were some good kings who tried to lead the people out of idolatry and back to God: Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah. The prophets Jeremiah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah all prophesied during the reign of Josiah. But even though there were some limited attempts at reform, the results were not enough. All the curses of the covenant that you read about in Deuteronomy 28 came to fruition. The Assyrian Empire that had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel by this time had been overtaken by the Babylonian Empire. In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, took his first captives from Jerusalem into exile. Among them were Daniel and his friends. Anyone with any kind of skill was taken in 597 B.C., including Ezekiel. Then finally, in 586 B.C., Jerusalem was captured and every important building, including the temple, was burned. A few poor people, including the prophet Jeremiah, remained in Jerusalem, but everyone else was taken off to Babylon in exile. Once again, we see that God doesn't tolerate sin. His people had to learn that lesson. Sin always results in physical punishment and banishment from the presence of God.

According to the following verses, why was there cause for hope even though the entire nation had been destroyed?

Deuteronomy 30:1-6

Lamentations 3:21-26, 31-33

Jeremiah 25:8-14

Jeremiah 29:10-14

The events in the books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Esther all took place during the period of exile. In 539 B.C., the Babylonian Empire was superseded by the Medo-Persian Empire. The new king, Cyrus, issued a proclamation in 538 B.C., allowing all captives, including those from Judah, to return to their homelands. Ezra tells us that only 50,000 Jews returned to Judah with Zerubbabel. Their primary goal was to rebuild the temple of the Lord, but it took the urging of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah for them to resume the building project when it was delayed. Almost 70 years after its destruction, the temple was finally completed, but it was far less glorious than the original temple built by Solomon.

Ezra was a man dedicated to the study and teaching of the law of God, and King Artaxerxes sent him to Jerusalem for the express purpose of teaching God's laws to the people and helping them to obey. According to tradition, Ezra instituted the synagogue worship, helped formulate the Old Testament canon, and even wrote Psalm 119. About 13 years after the events of Ezra, Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem from the Persian king's court to lead the people in rebuilding the walls around the city, which was vitally important for protection. Because of his able leadership and much prayer, the wall was rebuilt in only 52 days. Malachi prophesied during this time and, together, he, Ezra and Nehemiah helped the people to confess their sins and renew their commitment to the Lord. What do these verses teach about genuine revival and how it is obtained?

Nehemiah 8:5-6

Nehemiah 8:8-9

Nehemiah 9:2-3

Nehemiah 9:33

Nehemiah 10:29

Even though the people of Israel were slaves in their own land, there was still hope for them. Because they took responsibility for their sinfulness, confessed, repented and committed themselves to obedience to all the Lord's commands, God promised to restore them and to still be their God. He wasn't finished with them yet. Old Testament history ends around 430 B.C., but God's plan of redemption was far from over.