

Unfolding Grace

THE STORY OF THE BIBLE



Introduction

Every human loves an epic story. This is because – most deeply – we are all a part of one. The Bible tells one overarching story, and it's the true story of the cosmos. It's the story of God's **unfolding grace**. Every single person is born into this drama, and it is only as we come to know this story and its Author can we find our true identity and purpose.

The Bible came to us over a time span of centuries, with various authors of different backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, and socioeconomic status. This book was written using various literary genres, yet every part fits together into an understandable whole. It begins with the world as it was intended to be: mankind in perfect communion with their Maker, one another, and with the rest of creation. It culminates with God setting all things right and making all things new. And in between this good beginning and ever better ending, the triune God of love redeems sinners and sufferers with His grace.

The purpose of this study is to orient us or reveal to us over the course of this study the storyline of the Bible, and to do so with the Bible itself. It guides us with forty readings, each of which consists of about four chapters of the Bible. You can go through this in 40 days, or go at your own pace.

The readings will each include a brief introduction to keep us focused on God's unfolding plan as we read. They fill in the context, highlight key themes as they develop, and culminate in Jesus and the personal and cosmic salvation He brings.

Each day, after you read, there are questions for you to think through and answer to help you better grasp what is unfolding as you read through these passages. Take the time and work through those questions each day alongside your reading.

The goal of this study is to lead us to know the triune God of love through understanding His plan of redemption through the story of His Word. The Bible tells a drama of grace because our God is a God of grace. It is just who He is. This means that we know God better by seeing how He saves us. As we learn more about the Bible, we learn more about our God – He is the triune God of love who overflows with mercy for sinners like us.

As you read each day, meditate on the God of the Bible and how His story is unfolding before your eyes. Fix your eyes on His glory and love and pray that He would grow you in your understanding of who He is and what He has done through the storyline of the Bible. Regardless of where you are in your walk with God, this study is for you. By the end, our prayer is you would recognize and have a better sense of how the stories of the Bible arise a single, overarching story of God's unfolding grace.

Part 1
THE STORY BEGINS

GOD’S CREATION AND HUMANITY’S FALL

The Bible’s opening words direct us to the very beginning of the story of the cosmos. In these first chapters we learn how God creates all things and makes humanity in His image. We learn how he has made us to enjoy Him, love Him, and reflect His glory and goodness to the rest of creation by stewarding the created order. We learn that in the beginning there was no sin, suffering, pain, or sadness – everything was, as God declared on day six, “very good”. Humanity was in perfect communion and harmony with God, each other, and creation. This is a picture of *shalom*—peace—universal flourishing, harmony, and happiness.

But this story also reveals the fall of humanity into sin. Because humanity rejected God, the world is now broken, filled with sin, suffering, pain, and death. Life isn’t the way that it was intended to be.

Yet, it is in this moment of sin that God speaks a word of grace into the midst of our brokenness. He promises Eve will bear a son, and this son will crush the head of the serpent, which signals that God will reverse the consequences of sin and restore blessing and harmony too the cosmos. This is the very first promise of grace, the promise that will unfold throughout the rest of the Bible. It is this promise that will unfold from Genesis to Revelation: God’s plan of grace to restore mankind back into proper relationship with Himself where they can enjoy and reflect Him as they were made to do.

Read Genesis 1 – 4

THE FLOOD AND GOD'S COVENANT WITH NOAH

Although God makes everything good, sin enters into the world and corrupts everything and everyone. Death spreads to all people. The beginning of this story of the flood summarizes the world's condition: humanity steadily sinks deeper and deeper into spiritual darkness and moral confusion, grieving the very heart of God.

The story introduces us to the two realities that will be woven together throughout the storyline of the Bible: God's justice and God's grace. God is just, so He must judge sinners. Yet He also abounds in mercy and remains committed to His plan to rescue sinners and renew all things. Through the flood we see His devastating judgment; through His covenant with Noah, we see His abounding mercy. God carries Noah, along with his family, through the floodwaters of His divine wrath, then recommissions them to be fruitful and multiply under His blessing again.

God's covenant with Noah and creation sets the stage for the rest of the story. God shows that even though every generation of sinners deserves His just judgment, He will never again send a flood like this. Instead, He will patiently unfold His plan of incredible grace in the midst of this judgement-deserving world. As we will see, it will be through His judgment that God's salvation will be made available to the world.

Read Genesis 6 – 9

BABEL AND THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

God gives Noah and his descendants a fresh start. But it does not take very long for humanity to yet again, assert their independence from God. Men build a great tower to make a great name for themselves. But God interrupts their plans, confusing their language and dispersing them over the earth.

How exactly will God fulfill His promise of Genesis 3 to send the offspring of the woman to crush the head of the serpent? How will God restore to us the blessing of knowing and reflecting Him in a flourishing world? How will He bring grace to the now-scattered nations of the world? He begins by making a promise to one man, Abram. God promises Abram land, descendants, and blessing.

It will be through the descendants of Abram that the serpent-crushing Man will come, and through Abram, all the nations of the world, both Jew and Gentile will be blessed.

Read Genesis 10 – 12

ABRAHAM AND THE PROMISE OF ISAAC

Abraham and his large household travel from Ur to Canaan – the land of God’s promise. By now Abraham is aging and his wife Sarah is barren. How will God keep his promises to give them land and descendants and to bless the world through them if his wife cannot bear him a son? Although it looks like God’s plan faces an insurmountable obstacle, God calls Abraham and Sarah to trust Him. He will give them a son, Isaac, and through this son, God will bring blessing to the nations.

These chapters highlight a pattern in the Bible’s story: God is a God of **promise**, and His people are men and women of **faith**. God speaks a word of promise and his people trust him, and God counts it to them as **righteousness**. God accepts people not on the basis of their moral goodness, their own morality and righteousness, but on the basis of His mercy and grace.

Read Genesis 15 – 18

THE PROMISE TO ISAAC AND THE BLESSING OF JACOB

In story after story, we see God's faithfulness to His promise and His gentle cultivation of His people's faith. He shows His faithfulness by giving Isaac as a son. In response to God's faithfulness towards him, Abraham continually shows his trust in God's promise, even in the midst of trials and tests.

Genesis traces the Abrahamic promises through generations – from Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Rebekah, and to Jacob. With each generation in Genesis, God affirms His plan to multiply offspring and bless the nations through His people. He also overcomes great obstacles to prove His commitment to unfold His plan of grace spoken of in Genesis 3.

The overarching message is clear: God is committed to His purposes and nothing will stand in His way. His plan to bless the nations through this promised lineage is unstoppable. He will bring His grace into our sinning and suffering world. A Savior will come.

Read Genesis 25 – 28

ISRAEL COMES TO EGYPT

God's promises gain momentum as the narrative of Genesis unfolds. They pass from Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob, and now Jacob has twelve sons, these twelve will become the tribes of Israel. Yet once again, God's promises appear to be threatened. Joseph is Jacob's favorite son, which causes his other brothers to become jealous. In response, in their jealousy the brothers sell their Joseph into slavery in Egypt and tell Jacob (their father) that Joseph is dead. Yet God is still with Joseph, causing him to gain favor with the Pharaoh and to rise to the second-in-command in all of Egypt.

When famine comes on the land of Canaan, Jacob's only hope is to send his sons to Egypt to purchase grain. When the other sons arrive, they meet their long-lost brother and learn one important message in the process: God has been in control all along, planning for their blessing and keeping His promise alive.

Read Genesis 45 – 48

Part 2
GOD'S PEOPLE REDEEMED

ISRAEL'S OPPRESSION AND MOSES' CALL

Genesis introduced the first key movements in the Bible's story: the creation of God's good world, the fall of humanity into sin, and God's promise to send a conquering Savior to restore His blessing to the world. God advanced His promise with His covenant with Abraham: God would make this man into a nation, He would give them the land of Canaan, and **they would be blessing in order to be a blessing to all nations**. Worldwide blessing would come through this man's lineage – the people of Israel.

But Egypt's king enslaved and oppressed Israel. Weighed down by sin, burden, and injustice, God's people cried out to the Lord. How would God fulfill His promises? How would He show Himself to be the faithful God who is with and for His people?

As we find the answers to these questions in the Exodus story, we learn that what God does for Israel sets a pattern for a greater rescue to come. As God works to deliver Israel from their slavery in Egypt, He is providing Bible readers a picture of how He would one day rescue His people from a greater slavery, and a deeper problem – the power of Satan, the grip of sin, and the punishment of death.

Read Exodus 1 – 3

GOD'S JUDGEMENT OF EYGPT

God resolves to deliver Israel from the Pharaoh's oppressive rule, but He doesn't accomplish this deliverance quickly. Pharaoh is set against the Lord and His people, and the Lord decides to harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will not let Israel go. Why does God do this? Why does he not do the opposite and make Pharaoh's heart willing to release Israel?

God does this for a greater purpose: to teach Israel, Egypt, and the world that He alone is the one true God of the cosmos. He is not a weak, tribal, uninvolved deity. He rules over all of creation as a God of power, a God of justice, and a God of grace. The central purpose of the plagues on Egypt is to make this God unmistakably known.

Read Exodus 7 – 10

GOD'S DELIVERANCE OF ISRAEL

Israel finally arrives at her time of deliverance. The three events listed – the Passover sacrifice, the crossing of the sea, and the song of celebration – teach us something about what it means to be saved by grace.

The Passover teaches us that we are saved *from* God. God does not limit the final plague to Egypt alone; Israel too is under God's judgment for their sins. This means that the Israelites are not morally superior to the Egyptians. If they are to be saved from God's judgment, they need a substitutionary sacrifice.

Israel's crossing teaches that salvation is *by* God: as they arrive at the shoreline, they can do nothing but stand still, be silent, and trust the Lord alone to save them.

Israel then sings of how God has delivered them to bring them *to* Himself – to His mountain, His abode, His sanctuary. The ultimate goal of redemption is joyful worship.

This pattern – that salvation is *from* God, *by* God, and *to* God – is at the heart of all the Bible. It finds its ultimate fulfillment in the greater deliverance through Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus comes as a sacrificial lamb to bear our punishment so that we might be restored in order to glorify and enjoy God forever.

Read Exodus 12 – 15

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ISRAEL

Israel's journey is difficult after crossing the sea – not because of outward threats and enemies like Egypt or surrounding nations, but because of enemies within. Their own difficulties lie in the reality of their own ungrateful and unbelieving hearts. They grumble against the Lord when they were hungry and thirsty, and even desiring to return to Egypt! Although they were freed from physical slavery, they require a deeper liberation of their hearts.

At Mount Sinai they enter into a covenant relationship with the Lord. The storyline of Exodus to this point teaches a critical lesson about the relationship between God's grace and His commands. God doesn't say to the enslaved Israelites, "if you obey my commandments, I will rescue you." Just the opposite: He first rescues them by grace, then teaches them how to properly respond to His grace towards them. First God's gracious acceptance, then He provides gracious guidance. **It is God's heartfelt and gracious acceptance alone that can liberate the heart to love Him.**

God's commands are also a gift to us. They show Israel how to fulfill her role as a "kingdom of priests" in the world. The commands show Israel how to live as a new humanity with a culture of love. They are to be a new Adam, representing God and reflecting His character to the world.

Read Exodus 18 – 20

THE IDOLATRY OF ISRAEL AND THE HEART OF GOD

God liberates Israel in three movements. He delivers them from slavery, brings them into a covenant relationship, and gives instructions to build a tabernacle (a portable tent) in order for His presence to dwell with them. This shows us that God delivers his people in order to dwell with His people. Redemption is ultimately for relationship.

But Israel's persistent rebellion creates a problem. How can this holy God dwell with such a wicked people? God's nature provides the answer: He reveals to Moses His "glory" – His radiance, His beauty, His weighty personal presence – by announcing that He is a "god merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. (Ex. 34:6)".

But there is a tension here. He is also a God of justice, for He "will by no means clear the guilty (Ex. 34:7)." How will this tension be resolved? How will He show mercy to sinners without compromising His justice? We will need to keep this question in mind throughout the rest of the Old Testament story. The tension will ultimately find resolution in one place: at the cross, where God shows mercy to sinners while upholding His justice by punishing our sin in Christ, His Son.

Read Exodus 32 – 34

ISRAEL'S JOURNEY AND REBELLION

At the end of Exodus, with Israel still at Mount Sinai, God graciously filled the tabernacle with His presence. This reminds us of the beginning of the Bible's story, when God dwelt with humanity in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were like priests, made to know and worship God. In this way, the tabernacle is symbolic of Eden. The tabernacle also anticipates the end of the Bible's story, when God will once again dwell with His people, this time for good. Israel's tabernacle is a symbol and foretaste of God's restored presence with His people.

God also gives Israel instructions for how this holy God could remain with them in the tabernacle. One way is through various offerings and sacrifices. Some of these sacrifices function in ways similar to the Passover lambs in the Exodus story – as substitutes. The priest puts his hands on the animal to symbolize the transfer of the people's sins to the animal. And then the animal dies so that the people may live. These acts point forward to the true and greater sacrifice to come, the sacrifice of Jesus.

With these gracious provisions, Israel sets out toward their new home in Canaan. But in the following story from Numbers we see that their hearts still have not changed.

Read Numbers 10 – 14

ISRAEL ENTERS THE LAND

Israel grumbles against God every step of the journey. Even so, when they grumble from thirst, God gives them water. When they demand food, He provides manna. When they complain about the manna, God sends them quail. Grace, grace, and more grace.

Then Israel reject God's guidance and refuse to enter the land of Canaan. Their deepest issue is their distrust and dislike of the Lord. Like every person since Adam and Eve, their hearts are curved away from the Lord. Therefore, God makes that first generation wander for forty years until a new generation comes of age.

The book of Joshua tells the story of this second generation's entry and their conquest of the land of Canaan. We must keep three truths in mind when considering this conquest: (1) These are not human-initiated battles. Israel is only to carry out specific orders from the Lord. (2) God is judging these nations because of their history of oppression. His justice is being brought to bear against human injustice. (3) God is impartial – if any Canaanites repent and trust the Lord (as Rahab does), they are spared; if any Israelites rebel against God, they are judged just like the other nations are.

Read Joshua 1 – 4

Part 3
GOD'S KINGDOM ESTABLISHED

ISRAEL'S CYCLE OF SIN AND RESTORATION

As part of God's plan to rescue sinners and restore creation, He promised to make Abraham's descendants a great nation and to give them the land of Canaan. The book of Joshua shows how God begins to fulfill these promises. Israel's peace in this land is called "*rest*" because God blesses them with his protection and presence.

This reminds us of Eden, when humanity was at rest in the garden, experiencing *Shalom* in the presence of God. Canaan is even described as a place of flourishing like Eden. When Israel comes into the land, God is partially restoring the last blessings of Eden.

Yet Israel echoes the bible's opening chapters in another way: like Adam and Eve, they distrust and disobey the Lord. The book of Judges shows that Israel continually does "evil in the sight of the Lord" (Judges 2:11). God promised that if they did not trust Him and love Him, they would eventually be exiled from the land, just like Adam and Eve were banished from the garden.

This following narrative shows Israel's downward decline of distrust. yet this spiral into spiritual chaos ultimately serves to magnify God's mercy. Even though Israel's sin warrants swift judgement, God proves that he is patient and long-suffering.

Read Judges 1 – 4

ISRAEL NEEDS A KING

Israel has a repeating pattern: (1) they commit idolatry; (2) God punishes them by handing them over to their enemies; (3) God graciously raises up a judge to rescue and restore them; and (4) Israel abandons the Lord – again – after the judge dies. Even the judges who deliver Israel fail. They do not combine their military leadership with moral integrity. Therefore, Israel spirals further into spiritual, moral, political, in social chaos. Israel provides a window into the human condition throughout the ages: without God's mercy and restraining grace, we will spiral into deepest darkness.

Israel's unraveling in the book of Judges is uncomfortable and painful to watch. It leaves us asking questions: is there any hope? Will Israel remain in the land, or will God exile them like humanity was exiled from the garden? Can anything, or anyone, end this downward spiral?

This final section of Judges subtly points the way forward with a repeated refrain: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." If God's plan of grace is going to continue to unfold through Israel, the people will need a king.

Read Judges 17 – 21

ISRAEL RECEIVES A KING

The book of Judges ended with the line, “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Israel needs a king to help them love, follow, and return to God.

This is not entirely unexpected. God promised that a descendant of Eve would crush the Serpent’s head – He would defeat evil and restore God’s blessing to our broken world. Genesis shows that this King would come through Abraham’s line, and ultimately through Judah’s tribe.

This leads to the surprise in the next story: when Israel asks for a king, God disapproves. Why? Because God looks on the heart and discerns the people’s motive. They do not want God to rule them through a faithful king; they want to rule themselves through a king, “like the rest of the nations” do.

Yet the Lord graciously provides a king anyway. Astonishingly, Israel *rejects* God by requesting a king, yet God grants one to bless them (and the world) in the end. This is how God works: He folds even our rebellion into His plan to do us good. He eventually does it again through the cross of King Jesus, where humanity’s rejection of God results in lavish grace for all who receive it.

Page after page, the Bible unfolds the story of God’s unswerving commitment to bless us in spite of our rebellion against Him.

Read 1 Samuel 7 – 11

THE REJECTION OF SAUL AND ANOINTING OF DAVID

Israel receives what they ask for: a king “to judge us like all the nations”. Saul is tall, attractive, and wealthy. Yet, while he embodies the world’s values, he lacks fundamental inward realities, the virtues that matter to God: humility, trust, and resolute obedience to God. Saul’s failures teach us to long for a *better king*.

After the Lord rejects Saul, the prophet Samuel privately anoints David as the next and future king. Although Israel prefers Saul, God looks on the heart. And so, He chooses a humble shepherd.

Nothing contrasts the value systems of God and the world like the narrative of David and Goliath. This is not about how to take on the “giants” that stand in the way of our dreams. It is about the weak versus the strong, faith versus arrogance, the living God versus lifeless idols. This well-known story is ultimately about God rescuing His helpless people through His Spirit-anointed, faith-filled, Serpent-crushing warrior-king.

David pictures how God will ultimately rescue His people through Jesus’ death, resurrection, and soon return. The cross looks like weakness to the world, but it is the victory of God. It looks like defeat, but sin, death, and Satan are crushed beneath the crucified and risen King.

Read 1 Samuel 15 – 17

THE COVENANT WITH DAVID

Rather than acknowledge David as the next king, Saul grows murderously jealous. David runs for his life in what is known as his long stretch of wilderness years. Yet the Lord repeatedly delivers David from Saul's hands. While Saul plunges headlong into moral and spiritual decline, David gains the trust of the people of Israel. After Saul's death, David becomes king. His life establishes a pattern that the greater Davidic King (and all who follow him) will one day fulfill: first suffering, then glory.

David soon brings the Ark of the Covenant – the symbol of God's kingly presence – to Jerusalem. This makes a statement: David is not Israel's ultimate king – God is. David is to be like a new Adam, an ideal Israel, a son of God who rules with justice and peace.

In the following story God promises that David's dynasty will never end; his throne will endure forever. Over time Israel anticipates not only an endless succession of Davidic kings but ultimately one eternal king – the King who will reverse the curse and fulfill all of God's promises. He will unleash the Abrahamic promises of blessing for all nations.

From this point onward the hope of the world is tied to this promise. The Davidic covenant towers as a highpoint in the Bible's storyline.

Read 2 Samuel 5 – 8

KINGDOM ESTABLISHED THROUGH SOLOMON

David is a generous and just king, but he shares the same sinful nature as the rest of humanity. He commits adultery with Bathsheba and then tries to cover it up by plotting the murder of her noble husband, Uriah. When the prophet Nathan confronts David, God grants David deep and true repentance. God forgives him and renews him by grace.

Yet this moral failure is a turning point. Much like the sin of Adam and Israel before him, David's sons commit grievous sins, and one of them even plots a conspiracy to overthrow him. The flaws of David leave Israel longing for a true and better king. With this in mind, the opening pages of 1 Kings set our attention on Solomon, the next king in the line of David.

In Eden, we saw God's people in God's place, enjoying God's presence and reflecting God's rule. By partially reestablishing these blessings under David and Solomon, God creates a picture of the true Kingdom he will one day fully restore to our world.

Read 1 Kings 1 – 4

THE TEMPLE BUILT BY SOLOMON

Israel has come a long way since her slavery in Egypt. The kingdom looks more and more like Eden. Like Adam and Eve, they are God's people in God's land and are blessed with God's presence and good commands. By partially reestablishing for Israel the lost blessings of Eden, God creates a picture of the true Kingdom he will one day restore in our world.

Solomon's rule is the high point for Israel's kingdom in the Old Testament. In place of the tabernacle, Solomon builds a temple in Jerusalem as the symbolic place of God's presence. It is filled with echoes of Eden: open flowers, lampstands shaped like trees, the presence of God with His people. This temple, like Eden, is where heaven and earth meet. Even with all its beauty, there is still a veil that separates God's holy presence from sinful mankind.

But this is only a partial and largely symbolic restoration of God's kingdom. The temple is a symbol-filled model that reminds us of Eden and looks forward to a new creation, a new and better Eden, where God will dwell with his people in paradise.

Read 1 Kings 6-9

Part 4
GOD'S KINGDOM DECLINED AND PARTIALLY
RESTORED

THE KINGDOM DIVIDED

God brings Israel to a climax with Solomon's reign. God fulfills His promise to Abraham, he multiplies Israel as the sand on the seashore and establishes them in their land. He gives their king unmatched wisdom. He makes the temple in Jerusalem the symbolic place of his presence, where Israel can seek his forgiveness and favor. Even attracts other nations are attracted to this nation and their mighty God – the queen of Sheba leaves astonished by Solomon's realm.

But this upward trajectory does not continue. It is at this very point that Israel's kingdom begins to unravel. Although God blesses Israel with a glorious kingdom, the people's hearts persist in unbelief, idolatry, and rebellion. Solomon and Israel turn from the Lord, continuing a centuries-long pattern of sin.

The united Kingdom of twelve tribes swiftly divides and declines from here. The Lord is unswervingly kind to them, but the problem of rebellion runs deep. Israel's story shows that no amount of material blessing can make a sinful heart love God. This world needs a true King and new hearts. That day will come with Jesus, but Israel first must enter into a season of judgment for their sin.

Read 1 Kings 11 – 14

JUDAH EXILED

The kingdom of Israel swiftly divides after Solomon's death. The ten Northern tribes split from the two Southern tribes. This creates two kingdoms – the Northern kingdom, called Israel, and the Southern kingdom, called Judah.

The Northern kingdom of Israel declines rapidly. Rather than following a Davidic king, they follow a succession of unfaithful kings. Rather than worshiping the Lord in the temple, the people worship idols in shrines scattered throughout the hills. After two hundred more years of astonishing patience, God eventually judges them with exile. The Assyrians conquer and carry many Israelites away in 722 BC. The southern kingdom of Judah also declines, but at a slower rate. The next narrative shows how God eventually uses the superpower Babylon to send Judah into exile in 586 BC.

Exile means leaving the place of God's special presence and blessing. Israel's exile repeats Adam's original exile from Eden and pictures humanity's continuing exile from God. Ever since Adam's exile, every human is separated from God and is a stranger in this world.

But there is hope: the God who rightly sends us out is the God who will one day bring us home through Jesus.

Read 2 Kings 21 – 25

EXILES RETURN AND BUILD THE TEMPLE

During Israel's decades-long exile, the prophet Jeremiah tells them to pray and seek the peace of their foreign city. They are to confess their sin, lament its consequences, and hope in God's promises. The God who wounds is the God who heals, so they must put their hope in him.

After several decades God raises up a Persian king named Cyrus to defeat the Babylonians and send God's people back home.

The few exiles return as a broken people to a broken land with a broken temple. They begin to rebuild the temple, but face opposition from non-Jewish people who have settled in the land. Many weep at the laying of the new temple's foundation because it is a mere shadow of Solomon's glorious temple.

Read Ezra 1 – 3

Part 5
THE HOPE OF RESTORATION

THE HOPE OF A NEW EXODUS

God sends Israel prophets throughout their decline, exile, and partial return. The prophets' twofold message is of both warning and hope – warning of judgement and hope of salvation.

Isaiah shows that God's future acts will be like his previous acts. The prophet sees God's prior redemption through the Exodus as a pattern for the future, pointing forward to a greater redemption to come.

In the Exodus, God freed Israel from slavery and spared them from judgment through the Passover sacrifices. Through Isaiah he promises an even greater deliverance – not just from physical bondage in Babylon, but from spiritual slavery to sin and death. And God will restore not merely Israel, but all the nations. This redemption will reverse the curse of Genesis 3 and return us back to God.

At the center of this salvation is God's "Servant." This is a title for Israel, but it also refers to a singular person: one ideal Israelite. The Servant will live the faithful life Israel (and humanity) has failed to live, die as a sacrifice for sins, and then rise again in victory. Through this Servant, God will bring salvation to believing Israelites, and then all nations.

Jesus eventually arrives as this Servant to redeem us from our exile and restore us back to God's presence. And he does it as Isaiah has promised: through a faithful life, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection.

Read Isaiah 52 – 55

THE HOPE OF A NEW CREATION

Isaiah shows that God's plan for redemption is not just for Israel but for all nations. And the hope is not just for a renewed Canaan but for the new heavens and earth.

The following text from the end of Isaiah's prophecy confronts us with the sinfulness of Israel and all people. We have all rejected this good God. Because of this, we must embrace the sobering images of God's judgement for what they are – pictures of what we all deserve to endure apart from Christ. It is through our frank confession of sin that we open ourselves to God's grace. God looks to the humble and contrite in spirit.

Yet, in this text, we also hear God's incredible promise to return to His people and renew creation.

And perhaps the most shocking thing is the Lord's heartfelt exuberance about His plan. He will rejoice – rejoice! – over His people. He delights in the contrite. He exults over the repentant. He honors the humble. And He gladly moves history toward an Eden-like new creation in which His people will live with Him forever.

Read Isaiah 63 – 66

THE HOPE OF A NEW COVENANT

God chose Israel to be like a new Adam and Eve, planted in the Eden-like land of Canaan. He entered into a covenant relationship with them. God had already redeemed them by His grace, and in Canaan, He promised to continue blessing them if they would trust, love, and obey Him. But Israel broke this covenant from the start.

So, God reveals a spectacular promise through the prophet Jeremiah: a new and better covenant. The first covenant's problem was that Israel could not keep it because many of their hearts were diamond-hard. But now, God promises to forgive them and write His law on their hearts. He will take it upon Himself to ensure that everyone in the new covenant will know Him and walk in His ways. Everyone in the new covenant will have full forgiveness, soft hearts, the Spirit's presence and power, and a true and permanent relationship with the Lord.

Jesus brings the fulfillment of this new covenant promise on the eve of His crucifixion when He raises a cup and says, "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many (Matt. 26:28)."

Read Jeremiah 30 – 33

THE HOPE OF NEW LIFE

Through the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, God promises a new exodus, a new creation, and a new covenant. Ezekiel adds the promises of a new shepherd-king and new resurrection life.

Israel is like a flock of sheep, with oppressive shepherds as leaders. But God will come to seek and save the lost. He will gather and feed them. He will shepherd them through a new and better Davidic King.

Israel also needs new life. They are spiritually dead; the judgment of exile is itself like a judgment of death. They are separated from God, the very source of life and love. Like the rest of humanity, they need new hearts. They need a new spirit. They need spiritual life. And they are utterly incapable of doing this on their own. So, God promises to do what only He can do: breathe new life into them and raise them from the dead.

Only a God on unlimited power *can* do this, and only a God of infinite grace *will* do it.

Through the prophets, God reveals that history is moving toward a day when God's people will be resurrected and renewed.

Read Ezekiel 34 – 37

Part 6
THE DAWNING OF THE KINGDOM

JESUS' MINISTRY BEGINS

The Old Testament tells the true story of the world, but the Old Testament lacks an ending.

This story begins with God's perfect kingdom in Eden. Even after our first parents reject God, he responds with grace. He promises to send a Savior to crush the head of the serpent, an act that will reverse the curse and restore God's blessing. God develops this promise through covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. By the end of the Old Testament, we are waiting for someone to succeed where Adam and Israel have failed. We are waiting for a true and better prophet, priest, and king. We are waiting for a new exodus, a new creation, a new covenant. We are waiting for the Lord himself to come with His Kingdom.

The Gospel of Mark announces that Jesus fulfills all of these ancient promises and expectations. He is the long-awaited King and the Lord God Himself. And he declares, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel (Mark 1:15)."

Mark shows us who Jesus is and what He has come to do. Mark sets our eyes on Jesus. He invites us to trust Jesus, receive his forgiveness, and follow Him.

Read Mark 1 – 4

JESUS' MINISTRY CONTINUES

Mark focuses on Jesus' identity and how God's kingdom dawns through Him. We see Jesus roll back the effects of the curse – forgiving sins, healing sicknesses, and relieving suffering. He casts out demons and befriends sinners. In all of this, He provides a foretaste of the coming renewal of all things.

Those who trust and follow Jesus become His new people. They are a new Israel, His new family of mothers and brothers and sisters. They are able to understand His parables, which teach the truth of the Kingdom's arrival: although many expected God's kingdom to break into the world with all its fullness, Jesus compares it to a tiny seed planted in the ground, which slowly grows into a large plant. His kingdom is *already and not yet* here – it has dawned but is not yet here in its fullness.

Jesus eventually asks his disciples the question He asks every one of us: “who do you say that I am? (Mark 8:27)” As we read the following narrative, we must conclude that Jesus is either deceitful, deluded, or the One who is the Christ, the Son of God, the long-awaited Serpent-crushing Savior-King. Through Jesus' words and actions, the Gospels show us that Jesus is God Himself come to rescue us and restore all things.

Read Mark 5 – 8

JESUS' JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM

“Who do you say that I am? (Mark 8:27)” This may be the most important question Jesus asks, and thus the most important question for each of us to answer.

According to Jesus the correct answer is “the Christ,” which acknowledges Him as the promised royal Messiah. Although Peter answers correctly, he does not really understand what Jesus has come to do. Peter expects a king without a cross. He does not yet see that Jesus must fulfill the pattern of King David’s life: suffering before glory, a cross before a crown.

As Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, Mark shows Him to be Isaiah’s prophesied Servant. Jesus must “give his life as a ransom for many.” If anyone would follow Him, one must admit one’s need for forgiveness. Sinners need to be reconciled to God. Sinners need their King to die for their sins.

Jesus also teaches His disciples what it means to follow Him. The life of discipleship is the way of the cross. It is a way of life in which service is greatness, sin is resisted, and suffering is expected. It is a life in which we deny ourselves for a greater treasure: Christ himself.

Read Mark 9 – 12

JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION

God promised that Eve's descendant would crush the head of the serpent, but not without a cost. The serpent would crush His heel in the process. Many Old Testament sacrifices picture this cost. They show that God would not just erase sin; He would atone for it. Isaiah prophesies that a Servant would come as the ultimate sacrifice – to live the faithful life we failed to live and die the death we deserve to die.

In the story of Jesus' final hours, Mark emphasizes two aspects of these events: their historical reality and their theological significance. As a historian, Mark draws attention to what actually happens, noting details and citing eyewitnesses throughout. Yet he also writes with literary subtlety, leading us to see theological significance in these events. Jesus gives his life as the ultimate Passover sacrifice for sin. Jesus cries out, "Why have you forsaken me? (Mark 15:34)" as he experiences our ultimate exile. He takes the condemnation only we deserve so that we can receive the blessing only He deserves.

And then, just as Isaiah promised, this servant rises in victory. Jesus rises at the dawn of a new day, the start of a new week, the beginning of the new creation.

Read Mark 13 – 16

Part 7

THE GOSPEL SPREADS AND ALL IS MADE NEW

THE CHURCH'S MISSION BEGINS

History turns on the hinge of Jesus' death and resurrection. And the book of Acts shows how, as a result of those events, the world has never been the same. Jesus' resurrection shows that his death was not a failure but part of God's victory. It means Jesus is the world's true king. The new creation has dawned, our exile is ended, and the way back to Eden is open.

The book of Acts is Luke's historical account of how the risen Christ spreads the Gospel to all nations through His Spirit-empowered people. Jesus sends His disciples to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth". This order is not arbitrary – Isaiah promised that God would first restore Israel, then the nations, to Himself.

Acts shows us men and women finding deep joy in Christ, true community in the Church, and fruitful mission in the world. When we trust in Jesus, we become participants in God's story of unfolding grace. We are empowered to share the good news that Jesus is King and that all are welcome by grace through faith.

Read Acts 1 – 4

THE CHURCH MULTIPLIES IN JERUSALEM AND BEYOND

Jesus commissions his disciples to go, but he also insists that they wait. They cannot accomplish the mission of Jesus without the power of the Spirit. We cannot explain the spread of the gospel by mere human brilliance or strategic thinking. The global church can be explained only by the Word of God being proclaimed by the people of God in the power of the Spirit of God.

The Spirit comes on the day of Pentecost to fill God's people as the new temple of God presence. He comes to empower God's people and to carry out God's mission. Immediately after Jesus pours His Spirit on the Church, Peter proclaims the Gospel and three thousand people are saved. They believe and are baptized. These first Christians demonstrate real discipleship: they devote themselves to sincere worship, true community, and gospel mission. They also endure incredible suffering with unshakeable joy.

The next part of Acts shows how the gospel continues to spread beyond Jerusalem to "all Judea and Samaria." (Acts 1:8)

Read Acts 5 – 8

THE GOSPEL BEINGS TO SPREAD TO THE GENTILES

When the Spirit falls on the day of Pentecost, it sends waves of grace outward in every direction. The church in Jerusalem quickly grows from 120 to 3,000 to 5,000. The gospel spreads outward from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria. But God's plan all along – just as he promised Abraham – has been to bless all nations *through* Israel. Now that these Israelites are trusting in the Messiah, it is time for a largely Jewish church to spread the gospel outward. It is time for the gospel to spread to the “ends of the earth (Acts 1:8),” to every people group on the planet.

In the next cluster of narratives Luke shows how the gospel begins to spread to the Gentiles. These stories – the conversion of Paul, the vision of Peter, the Spirit's falling on Gentiles, and the multi-ethnic church in Antioch – all testify to the outward movement of the Gospel. Jesus is for everyone: Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, religious and irreligious, rule keepers and rebels.

Read Acts 9 – 12

THE GOSPEL CONTINUES TO SPREAD

Paul's conversion highlights the heart of Christ and the riches of his grace. Paul – also known by his Hebrew name, Saul – is a violent persecutor of Christians. Yet Jesus loves him, brings him to faith, forgives him, and transforms him. Paul's life displays the power and grace of God – if there is grace for a rebel like him, there is grace for anyone.

Jesus also commissions Paul to spread the gospel to the Gentiles. But Jesus also warns that Paul's ministry will include suffering. As Paul preaches the gospel of a suffering savior, his own life and ministry will begin to look like that Savior.

The rest of Acts shows Paul's three main journeys. On his first journey he spreads the gospel, makes disciples, and plants churches across Asia Minor. On his second journey he strengthens those churches and then makes disciples and plants churches in Europe. His third journey leads him back to Jerusalem, where he is attacked, arrested, and then sent to Rome. Through it all, he fulfills Jesus' commission to bear witness to Christ's grace and to suffer for his name.

The first of these three journeys begins here.

Read Acts 13 – 15

THE GOSPEL EXPLAINED

The arrival of God's kingdom through Jesus is the center around which everything in the New Testament turns. The gospel accounts show the kingdom's arrival through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In Acts, God's people spread the good news of King Jesus, make disciples, and plant churches. Letters, such as Ephesians, encourage believers to know Christ and live all of life in light of His gracious reign.

The most prominent letter writer in the New Testament is the apostle Paul. He is a pastoral missionary who visits and writes to local churches in order to encourage them in their faith. Ephesians is compact, yet comprehensive. It is doctrinal and practical, accessible and deep. It shows us how the gospel impacts every facet of life.

This first half of Ephesians celebrates the blessings of salvation that we receive in Christ. It shows us how the triune God is an overflowing fountain of joy and blessing and kindness. It shows us how the Father has blessed us in the Son by the Spirit. It shows us His gracious plan to unite all things in and under the Kingship of Jesus.

Read Ephesians 1 – 3

THE GOSPEL APPLIED

The first half of Ephesians celebrates the gospel blessings of our salvation. Christians have been chosen, adopted, forgiven, and made alive in Christ. They have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone. God has revealed His plan to unite all things in and under the Kingship of Jesus. Jews and Gentiles are united in Christ as a new humanity. They are filled with the Spirit as God's new temple.

The second half of Ephesians now shows what difference this makes in our lives. The first half celebrated Gospel theology; the second half urges Gospel living. It shows how a life of ever-deepening faith in Christ transforms us to become like Him. Faith makes us humble, gentle, and patient. It creates a unified and Christlike gospel culture in churches. The gospel applies to our relationships, our vocations, our sexuality, our money, our families, and every other corner of our lives.

God's grace in Jesus is the foundation and motivation for this new life. We do not obey in order to receive God's blessings; we obey because we already have them.

Read Ephesians 4 – 6

THE KING SPEAKS TO HIS CHURCHES

Ever since sin entered into the world, God began unfolding his plan of grace to redeem the world. We have traced His promise to send a Savior who would renew humanity and the world. And now Jesus has come for us and for our salvation. He has taken our curse of death upon Himself and come out the other side, freeing us to die to our old selves, and walk in newness of life.

As we now wait for Him to return, our mission is to follow Christ, be like Christ, and to make, disciples of Christ. But what kind of lives and churches should we be cultivating? What is Jesus' vision for His people? We do not have to wonder. The apostle John received a symbolic vision of the risen Christ. He is the exalted King, and yet He is present with His people. And He has a message for His churches.

Through seven messages, we hear Christ's vision for how he wants Christians to live and think and love. We hear His vision for what local churches should care about and be committed to. And Jesus' messages to the churches of old are still true and relevant for us today because the challenges they faced remain the same challenges that we face today.

Read Revelation 1 – 3

THE RETURN OF THE KING AND THE RESTORATION OF ALL THINGS

God made and blessed us, but we walked away. Nevertheless, He is now bringing us back again. When sin entered the world, God began unfolding His eternal plan of grace. He would send a true and better Adam to defeat evil, reconcile people to Himself and one another, and renew all things.

The history of Israel was a shadow of these good things to come. Israel was like a new humanity, living in an Eden-like land. They were to enjoy God's temple-presence and reflect His good rule. However, like Adam, they failed and were exiled from God's good land.

Now Jesus, the second Adam and true Israel, the true sacrificial Lamb, has reconciled us to God and to one another. And He will come again to set all things right and make all things new.

Yet Revelation holds out before us two distinct futures. Those who reject God will be condemned to eternal exile. But all who trust God's mercy in Christ will receive His eternal welcome in this new and better Eden. There will be no more sin, no more death, no more tears. In this place, for age upon age God will show us the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Read Revelation 19 – 22

The story of the Bible is *your* story. Step into it. Live in it.