

Book Introductions: Genesis - Esther

Genesis is the book of beginnings. Four foundational events are followed by four generations of Patriarchs. God created everything with humanity as the pinnacle of creation. Humanity fell into sin, then came the flood and languages confused. God put Himself in covenant with one man to make him into a great nation, promising to bless all peoples through Him (12:2-3 are critical). In Genesis we see the entrance and influence of sin, but also the grace of God. The people try to help God's plan, but only make a mess – God's plan is simply to be trusted, it's all about His grace! Gradually the main characters increase in faith. Notice how God frames the book by using one man to deliver human life through the great flood, then again by using one man to deliver human life through the great drought in Egypt. One day He will use one man, the seed of the woman, to deliver from sin itself.

Exodus jumps forward four centuries. The extended family of Abraham is now a nation ready to be "born" out of Egypt. Israel is God's chosen nation, intended to present God to the world. Moses is God's man called to rescue Israel from Egypt. The first phase of the book sees God bring Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness. The second phase is concerned with God's requirements of Israel, including the Ten Commandments. God has brought his nation into the wilderness, but He goes with them and chooses to dwell in their midst in a special tent (tabernacle). What a privilege to have God dwelling with them! However, all is not well as the people violate their relationship with God by building and worshipping a golden calf. The book ends with God's fiery presence coming to dwell among His often undeserving people!

Leviticus does not move the story forward in time, but it gives us great insight into the holiness of God. God's people are to express their devotion to Him by righteous living and careful worship. It becomes very clear that God's righteousness demands blood, representing death, as payment for sin. The blood of animals is not the final solution, it will ultimately take the perfect sacrifice seen in the New Testament! Leviticus is important, but some find it a tedious read. Don't feel guilty if you move quickly through the book. However, don't miss the importance of personal and corporate holiness, the great truth of an atoning sacrifice that can bring humanity and God together (ch.16-17), the important call for readers to love their neighbours as themselves (ch.19), and the helpful description of the Jewish feasts that helps make sense of the Gospels (ch.23).

Numbers advances the story forty years. Israel is numbered twice in the book as one generation is replaced by the next. Although a relatively short journey away from the promised land, the nation wanders in the wilderness. The "exodus generation" express their grumbling attitudes and lack of faith at the prospect of entering the land. Their rebellion against Moses was really rebellion against the God who had led them out of Egypt and now dwelt conspicuously in their midst. God cares for their needs, but also confronts their rebellion, with many dying in various judgments. Once the dozen spies survey the land, the nation sides with the ten pessimists. The obstacles looked so big, but obviously their view of God was too small! So, God does not allow a hard-hearted and faithless generation to enter the land He had promised to Abraham, but instead prepares the next generation for this next move in His plan.

Deuteronomy is the farewell sermon of Moses. There is a definite contractual feel to the book. If the people are faithful to God by responding to His word, then their future in the land will be prosperous. But if they rebel and are faithless, they will suffer and eventually be removed from the land. Moses reassures them that ultimately God will remain faithful even if they should fail: future captivity would be followed by restoration. Notice how Moses reviews their history and restates the Ten Commandments (ch.5), then follows up with an emphasis on the motives that should drive their obedience – they are to love God with every dimension of their being: heart, soul and might (ch.6). The refrain to love God wholeheartedly rings regularly throughout the book. God is rich in love towards His nation and is jealous for the affection of His people. The book ends with the death of Moses and a leadership transition to his long-term assistant, Joshua.

Joshua had learned from Moses and now he steps into Moses' sandals. He leads the Israelites into Canaan, where they conquer and settle down in the land God had promised them. They learn that victory comes through faith in God and obedience to His instruction, not in their own strength and military might. The theme of faith in God sparkles throughout the book. Some display faith (Joshua, most of the time, Rahab of Jericho, elderly Caleb), but others don't (Achan, for instance). Joshua calls for faith in God by his life, and in the end, by his final message to the people that concludes the book.

Judges covers the disappointing generations after Joshua died, but before they requested a king. Without godly leadership, everyone "did what was right in his own eyes" and trouble followed. The people were complacent in the good times, grew apathetic toward God, sinned, suffered at the hands of a foreign invader, cried out to God who would then provide deliverance through a leader (a "judge"), only for the nation to slide into apathy and sin again. Time and again God rescues them with an unlikely individual, but the nation keeps on growing colder toward God. (Notice the repeated cycle of sorrow in Judges: sin – slavery – "save us!" – single servant saves them – some blessing – "so what?" – sin again!) The broad picture may be discouraging, but the narrative moves quickly and is an exciting read. Judges contains memorable stories such as Deborah's defeat of Sisera, Gideon's use fleeces to try and get out of what God was asking him to do, and Samson's philandering escapades. In Judges we learn how dangerous complacency and apathy can be for God's people, but we also learn what kind of people God uses. It's easy to think we need to be brainy, beautiful or beefy before God will use us, but God uses those who are foolish and weak in the world's eyes to do His work (and He gets the glory!)

Ruth is a short romantic story is set in the times of the Judges, when everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. A Jewish family leaves the land because of famine and heads to Moab, where things just go from bad to worse. After three deaths, Naomi is left with two widowed Moabite daughters-in-law. Ruth accompanies Naomi back to her home in Bethlehem, showing her commitment not only to Naomi, but also to Naomi's God. Naomi is transformed from bitterness to joy as God works in Ruth's life to bring her to a new husband – Boaz. As a relative of Naomi, Boaz took on the role of "kinsman redeemer," claiming not only the land, but also the foreign bride as his own. At the end we discover how Ruth sits in the royal line of David, her great-grandson.

1st Samuel – The books of Samuel and Kings cover the story of Israel’s monarchy from its beginning through to the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 587BC. 1 Samuel tells the story of three key people: Samuel, the last judge and a prophet who anoints the first two kings of Israel – Saul and David. The stories of Saul and David overlap as David rises and Saul declines. Saul had it all externally; he was the kind of king the people wanted. But Saul had no real heart for God. David was a man after God’s own heart, a man who loved God. Despite the constant threat from jealous Saul, David is protected and the book finishes with Saul and his son, David’s dear friend, Jonathan, dead. In this book we see the importance of character, even over skill. We see the danger of wanting to be like the world around, and worse, the danger of serving God without having a heart for Him!

2nd Samuel – The two books of Samuel were originally one book. The story of David continues. His reign progresses well, taking Jerusalem as his capital and then seeing the ark of the covenant arrive. Now God’s presence could dwell with His people in their capital city! David makes plans to build God a temple in Jerusalem. But God refuses and then, remarkably, makes a very special covenant with David. David’s greater son will one day be an eternal ruler over all the world, with an everlasting dynasty (see ch.7). From the dizzying heights of God’s overwhelming promise, however, David soon falls. Just four chapters later, David sins with beautiful Bathsheba, then to cover his tracks he has his faithful friend Uriah killed. Confronted for his sin, David is broken before God and repents. Nevertheless, he reaps what he has sown as his family seems to implode during the subsequent chapters. The book ends with a reflective appendix to the life of David.

1st Kings is really only the first half of the book of Kings (like Samuel, it was originally one book). Apart from Saul, every king’s reign is covered by these two books, starting with the final days of David. 1 Kings traces David’s dynasty through his son, Solomon, and beyond – not only giving a record of history, but also demonstrating God’s faithfulness to His promise and demonstrating the results of faithlessness on the part of God’s blessed people. Solomon started well (from 971BC), seeking wisdom and building God’s temple. But his life is a warning to us all of the dangers of not guarding our hearts and relationships. After Solomon, things seem to go from bad to worse. During the reign of his son Rehoboam, the kingdom is divided by Jeroboam. Now there were two kingdoms; Judah in the south and the rebellious counterpart, Israel in the north. This northern kingdom, Israel, was less loyal to the LORD, although both nations struggled to be faithful to God. The progress of the two nations is presented through the actions of their kings. As the leaders go, so go the people. Since the kings were mostly unfaithful, God introduced the heavy-hitters, the prophets. Elijah in 1 Kings, then in 2 Kings, Elisha. They confronted the sin of both nations, but the northern kingdom in particular. God affirmed their ministry through many supernatural signs (this cluster of the miraculous is second only to the time of Christ and his apostles).

2nd Kings – The heavy hitting prophets continued to confront the sin of the two kingdoms. Elijah was replaced by Elisha. The author of the book continues to give the kings their “grades” – either pass (“did what was right in the eyes of the LORD”) or fail (“did evil in the sight of the LORD”). Overall the numbers are not impressive: the southern kingdom had only eight good kings out of twenty, the northern kingdom had zero good kings in nineteen! As God had promised back in Deuteronomy, if His people were not faithful to His covenant with them, then they would be disciplined by being removed from the land. In 722BC, the Assyrians came and scattered the northern kingdom of Israel. The southern kingdom lasted just over a century longer, before the Babylonians defeated Judah and took the Judeans into exile, then burned Jerusalem to rubble (586BC). The glory of the kingdom God had given to David lay in ruins after just four centuries. How sad to see the devastating results of faithlessness and hearts hardened toward God. Now how could God’s promises to David be fulfilled? As ever, it would have to be a God thing!

1st & 2nd Chronicles really go together, but were divided at the point of the transition from King David to King Solomon. In the Hebrew order of books, this one would come at the end of what we call the Old Testament. The books offer a history from Adam to Cyrus’ decree at the end of the seventy years of exile. However, everything before King David is covered by genealogy (perhaps showing how anyone associated with God and His city are important). While focusing on the same period as 2 Samuel and the books of the Kings, Chronicles offers a different perspective on the history of David and Judah under his successors. The concern here is more with the community than the personal affairs of the leaders or prophets. So David’s sin and family scandals are barely noticed. However the importance of the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle, and the Temple are reported in some detail. The spiritual and political welfare of David and his dynasty in Judah are a major concern. It is the right worship of God and His honour that seems to motivate the writer with his focus on priestly aspects of this history. Interestingly, in the Hebrew ordering of the books, the Old Testament ends with the return from exile still a prospect, rather than a partial reality as in our contemporary ordering of the Old Testament. When will the exile be over? When will God’s purposes be resolved?

Ezra is the first half of a book now split into Ezra and Nehemiah. After the exile, a relatively small number of Jews took the opportunity given to them to return to the land. The leaders of the people had to face the tasks of rebuilding the temple and protecting the city. They also had the greater challenge of shepherding the hearts of the people. These were tough days to lead the Jewish people, because opposition was rife both from within and without. Yet in the midst of the tensions, God providentially provided support from the Persian kings Cyrus and Darius. Ezra’s part of Ezra-Nehemiah is concerned primarily with a review of the reconstruction of the Temple, and then with major tension over the issue of intermarriage. While rebuilding provides one level of challenge, peoples’ hearts provide the greater challenge for a leader. Have the Jewish people learned the lesson of the exile? Have they turned from the sin that led them into such strong divine discipline, or is intermarriage with other nationalities an indication that they are still prone to slide into idolatry. Ezra takes the strongest possible action to make sure idolatry is really a thing of the past.

Nehemiah is the second part of the story of the people back in the land after the exile. Ezra focused on the reconstruction of the Temple, but Nehemiah focuses on the reconstruction of the city wall. Again the leader discovers that projects are much easier to lead than peoples' hearts. For a moment there seems to be a breakthrough as the people celebrate the autumn feasts with Bible reading, explanation and significant response. Yet as the large-scale repentance is described, the book ends with Nehemiah still struggling to lead as a shepherd of the hearts of the people. Would there be lasting fruit in the nation? The silent years between the end of Old Testament history and the coming of the Messiah suggest not. The people of Israel would need a greater leader than Nehemiah to address the deeper issues they faced.

In **Esther** the hero of the book goes unmentioned, but not unseen. God is never named in Esther. After the exile was over many Jews chose to stay in the Persian heartland, rather than taking the opportunity to return to their homeland. The two main Jewish characters, Mordecai and Esther, are woven into a web of intrigue and threat from the nasty Persian character, Haman. While God may be forgotten by His people, they are not forgotten by Him. Esther's riveting ten chapters weave a tale of intrigue, comic timing and apparent coincidences through which God continues to prove Himself faithful to His people. Esther becomes Queen, and with Mordecai's prompting she is able to help avert a near disaster for God's people at the hands of Haman. Take the time to read the story straight through in one sitting. God is clearly at work, even behind the scenes!

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