

Bible Course 2 and 3: Covenant (2 – Genesis 12) & Passover (3 – Exodus 12)

And so we come to the third week of our journey through the story of the bible. The bible is a big book, so even in 8 weeks we can only paint the big themes in broad brush strokes – but by picking out the key milestones, we can tell the incredible story of Scripture.

Over the first two weeks we've told the story of Genesis via the two themes of Creation and then Covenant. It all starts with God – which is important to say: God isn't a human construct which we gradually gain an awareness of – 'In the beginning, God...' The bible is first and foremost a book about God, not about morals or history or our development as human beings, though we see all those things too.

And at the beginning, in creation we see the start of God's divine plan, that the universe is His and we see something of God's personality – not just creativity, but goodness and love. We also see how humans are made in the image of this God: how this gives us special characteristics but also special responsibilities. The first 11 chapters of the bible set out all the big themes which direct the rest of the book, and also the rest of human history: God's perfect world, scarred by human selfishness, but also with the first promises of rescue and redemption.

Then in chapter 12, God earths those promises in a concrete way: he gives a special blessing to a particular human: to Abraham. God promises that if Abraham will be faithful to him, going where He leads, then he will form a new people who will live in a new land under God's blessing. But the blessing is not just for Abraham and his descendents – '*all people* on earth will be blessed through you'.

As we saw last week, a covenant is a promise based on love – it's more than a contract, because its commitment is unconditional. If one party breaks their promise, the covenant can be renewed in a way that a contract can't. Abraham has his ups and downs – he keeps passing his wife off as his sister, and he gets his slave pregnant because he worries that God won't fulfil His promise through Sarah. But ultimately he is faithful – and God is faithful too: giving Abraham the son he promises, as well as land and blessing. God renews his covenant with Abraham several times: in chapter 15, 17 and 22 – and when Abraham dies the blessing passes to his son Isaac, then to Isaac's son Jacob who God renames Israel, which becomes the name of God's people.

Even in that name, there's a deeper meaning: Israel means 'he struggles with God' – so we get a hint of what life for this covenant people will be like.

God also makes it clear that what happens next is not an interlude to the divine plan. Jacob's family gets driven to Egypt by a severe famine and settles there. As early as Genesis 15, before Abraham even *has* a son, he warns him that his descendents will spend a long time as slaves in a foreign country, and when Joseph gets sent there by his brothers, he himself also attests that God's hand was in it: 'You meant it for evil,' he says to them in the last chapter of Genesis, 'but God intended it for good.'

So Genesis ends with God's people in Egypt, and for the next 400 years the Jewish population grows so that Pharaoh now sees it as a threat to his own people, the Egyptians. And so the persecution begins. In chapters 1 and 2 of Exodus Pharaoh tries to practise genocide, killing Jewish sons at birth and increasing the conditions of enslavement. But thanks to some godly midwives and God's unseen hand, the Israelites continue to flourish.

And then comes the decisive moment. God calls Moses – a Jew with a royal Egyptian upbringing – to lead the rescue of his people. He appears to him on Mount Sinai, where later God will give his people the Law (Horeb and Sinai are the same mountain) and commissions Moses to go back and tell Pharaoh to 'let my people go'. Pharaoh refuses and we then see the sequence of plagues. Several times Pharaoh promises to free the Israelites – and several times he goes back on his word. So the plagues continue, ending with the final and most catastrophic of all: the death of the firstborn sons. This is the famous Passover – as the angel of death *passes over* the land, and God institutes the commemorative meal which every Jew will then celebrate annually for the rest of history.

We read it just now, and there's so much we could say, but in a few minutes what matters for our story here is the symbolism of it. How is Israel spared the judgement of God? Through the blood of the lamb. The blood is smeared on the doorframes of Israelite houses and the angel sees it and passes over. **The blood of the lamb saves the people.** Not the meal, or the various rituals – all of which are important and all have meaning: the bitter herbs and salt water remind them of the tears of slavery, and so on. But it's the blood of the sacrificial lamb that saves them.

Why does this matter? The bible is *one story*, and all roads lead to Jesus. All of these foundational stories and themes of the Old Testament all point to him and are all fulfilled by him. The New Testament picks up each of them. Take **the theme of Creation**: when humanity falls, who is the True Human who bears God's image and shows us what our humanity was supposed to be like? Jesus. St Luke structures his genealogy to tell us that he is the true heir of Adam, and St Paul uses the same language in Romans – Jesus is the true Adam who restores humanity to its true potential.

Or **the theme of covenant**: what is the eternal sign of God's promise of love to his people? Again, the New Testament makes it clear: Jesus is the author of a new covenant, a new promise for the whole world.

And now Passover. How are people saved? Through the blood of the Lamb. It's the story the Jewish people tell each other every year (and note how important it is – it sets their calendar and it's the one meal which God commands the whole people, every single Jew, to celebrate) – but again it has its eternal fulfilment in Christ: 'See the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' That's what John the Baptist cried at the start of St. John's gospel as he saw Jesus coming.

And on the cross, Jesus, the lamb of God, saved his people – not from physical slavery, but from the slavery of our selfishness, our sin (to use the word the bible uses), the curse that we took on ourselves in Eden to go our own way and find ourselves separated from God. Or as Jesus himself put it in John 8: 'Everyone who sins is a slave to sin – but if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.'

And it is in our version of the Passover meal – what we now enact in bread and wine (and it doesn't matter what you call it – Agape Meal, Lord's Supper, Communion, Eucharist, Mass – it's all versions of the same thing) – in our Passover we see all these themes come together:

Jesus the true Adam, the one human who can act as our perfect lamb, without fault or blemish

Jesus who tells his disciples round the table, as St Matthew puts it: *'This is my blood of the covenant* (or the new covenant in my blood, to use Luke's words) which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.' Whenever we share bread and wine together and remember Jesus' death, we tell the story of the covenant, of God's eternal, unconditional promise to bless his people.

And notice how *it is the blood of Jesus which now saves the people*. *'This is my blood.'* Not just the Passover, but the whole sacrificial system of the Jewish people is now fulfilled in the one true sacrifice – the lamb of God whose blood saves the people.

The story of Creation, of Covenant, of Passover – all re-enacted as we share bread and wine together. It's a shame we're not doing it today – but next week, or whenever you share it next, maybe do more than reflect on how much Jesus loves you, though of course that's the heart of it, and always will be. **Think of how our great God keeps all his promises**, how the whole incredible story of Scripture hangs together and finds its fulfilment in a simple ritual which points to the One who makes all things new – Jesus Christ, the hero of the story from first to last.

I'm out of time: but as we welcome people to our crafts today or go out to share Jesus' love at Milton Court, let's carry these truths with us, because our God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. **Amen.**