

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

MODULE 1: OLD TESTAMENT

TITLE	PAGE
Part 1 – Creation The nature of God, the creation of humankind, and an introduction to the message of the Bible	1.1
Part 2 – Fall Human beings reject God’s rule, with disastrous consequences	1.5
Part 3 – Justice and Grace God’s judgement on sin, the principle of sacrifice and God’s covenant with creation	1.9
Part 4 – Abraham: God’s People God calls Abraham and makes a covenant with him which passes through his family	1.13
Part 5 – Moses: God’s Law God adds His Law to His covenant through Moses, forming Israel into a nation	1.17
Part 6 – David: God’s Place God’s people king with His presence in the Temple	1.21
Part 7 – Prophets: God Speaks The role and message of the prophets and the hope for the Messiah	1.25
Part 8 – Exile and Return God’s preservation of His people and the return from exile to the Land	1.29



PART 1 - CREATION

- What is the purpose of the universe and of human beings?
- Is there a God, and if so, can we know what God is like?

Key concepts

Worldviews – What we believe about the nature of ultimate reality (our ‘worldview’) has implications for the way we should live. Everyone has basic beliefs about what is real and what matters, whether we think them through or live consistently with them. The following table summarises some worldviews people hold:

View of ultimate reality	Implications for human life
Naturalistic Atheism – there is no God and no spirit beings; the physical universe is all that exists.	We are merely physical, results of evolution; we live and die and there is no ultimate meaning.
Agnosticism – we cannot know for certain if there is a God.	We should just get on with this life in this world; we may (or should) consider whether God might exist.
Pan(en)theism – an impersonal spiritual power pervades everything that exists (‘god’ is everything or everything has god within it).	We are spiritual as well as physical; we need to discover and develop the divine essence within us or get in tune with the universe
Polytheism – there are many gods with power in specific places or over distinct aspects of nature.	We are spiritual and coexist with gods or spirits. We should do what is necessary to keep them at peace.
Deism – God, who is personal and separate from the universe, created the universe, but is no longer actively involved in it (there are no miracles).	We are spiritual and should worship God, but not in a personal relationship, as we cannot expect to hear God guiding us or be certain what God thinks.
Monotheism – one personal God, who created the universe, has intervened in history in special ways and can be known personally.	We are spiritual and physical, and we can experience God personally. God’s truth should direct how we live our lives (physical and spiritual).

Christianity – a monotheistic worldview centred on Jesus Christ, who Christians acknowledge as God living in human form, Saviour for all people and Lord over everything. Worldwide, more people identify with Christianity than any other religion. Christianity teaches that God is personal and can be known because He has made Himself known, especially through the Bible and the person of Jesus. God, having no body, is neither male nor female, but Christians normally use male pronouns to describe Him because the Bible describes Him as Father. The belief that one God created all peoples and that He has spoken leads Christians to believe that there is one truth about the universe and how we should live that everyone should know.

Christian – someone who acknowledges Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Many people identify as ‘Christian’ in name because their nation or family has a Christian past, but the original meaning of the word ‘Christian’ is a label for people whose commitment to Jesus transformed their lives and became their main identity.

Bible – the foundational text of the Christian faith containing 66 books written by over 40 different writers over 1500 years in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) and in various locations. These books are very different in style and content but fit together to tell one story. Christians believe the claims found in the Bible that its words come from God and, understood properly, should be believed and obeyed.

Jesus Christ – Jesus is a personal name meaning ‘God saves’; Christ (from Greek) is a title meaning ‘God’s chosen one’ (or ‘Messiah’, from Hebrew). Born in modern Palestine (then part of the Roman Empire) around 4 BC, He died near Jerusalem around 33 AD. Jesus was a great teacher reported to have performed many miracles. His teachings attracted a popular following but were opposed by some of the ruling elite of the Jewish people. They plotted Jesus’ death and persuaded the Roman governor to execute him by crucifixion (being nailed to a wooden cross). His followers claimed He returned to life within three days of His death and, despite great opposition, they spread the message about Jesus across the Roman Empire and beyond.

Church – this word is often used for a building where Christians meet. In the Bible, however, it always refers to people rather than a place. The Church is the community of all Christians across the world and throughout time, united in faith in Jesus by the Holy Spirit. This reality is lived out in many communities of Christians in different places who meet to worship God, to learn from the Bible and to serve others.

Genesis Chapters 1 and 2 – God and Humankind

The Bible tells the story of God and humankind. The Bible opens with the words, “In the beginning God ...”. There is no attempt to prove that God exists, just a statement that He does exist. Following those words, the first two chapters of Genesis (the first book of the Bible) tell us what God is like and how He intended the universe to operate. The account gives a special place to human beings, claiming that “God created man in His own image” (Genesis 1:27). Unlike every other living creature, God made human beings to know, worship and serve Him. There are similarities between God and man, but also important differences:

GOD	HUMAN BEINGS
Eternal, invisible, separate from the universe <i>“In the beginning God...”</i> (1:1)	Physical, limited to time, part of the universe <i>“God formed the man from the dust of the ground”</i> (2:7)
The creator <i>“... created the heavens and the earth ...”</i> (1:1)	Consumers – use and develop what God has made <i>“... they will be yours for food”</i> (1:29)
Personal – feeling and rational <i>“God said ... God saw ... it was good”</i> (1:28,31)	Personal – feeling and rational <i>“The man gave names to all the livestock”</i> (2:20)
Exists in relationships in community <i>“God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness’”</i> (1:26)	Made for relationships and community <i>“It is not good for the man to be alone”</i> (2:18)
Self-sufficient life-giver <i>“God ... breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”</i> (2:7)	Dependent living beings <i>“... and the man became a living being”</i> (Genesis 2:7)
Ruler over all through His word <i>“God said ... and there was”</i>	Stewards over creation under God <i>“... let them rule ... over all the earth”</i> (1:26)
Blesses and gives to man <i>“God blessed them”</i> (1:28)	Created innocent in relation to God <i>“The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame”</i> (2:25)

The universe as God originally created it was a place of perfect order and harmony. There was no suffering or death. Human beings knew their place within this system and enjoyed perfect harmony in every area of life:

1. Harmony with God – innocent before God in obedience to His commands.

God gave four commands to the man and woman. Three were positive:

- Multiply (1:28)
- Subdue the earth (1:28)
- Eat every seed-bearing plant (1:29)

Only one was negative: not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (2:17)

2. Harmony with one another – the husband and wife lived and worked together in trust and innocence.

- Man and woman were designed to be a team together in doing God’s work (2:23).
- Marriage was planned by God as the basis for human society (2:24)

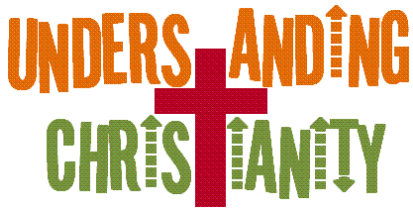
3. Harmony with the universe – man ruled over nature, developing and protecting it.

- Ruling over the fish, birds and land animals (1:28)
- Appreciating nature for pleasure and food (2:9)

Human beings were created to live with great freedom, but within limits set by God. God gave the first humans many privileges and choices, but He also gave one limit to their freedom, making them morally responsible before Him with a choice either to obey or disobey. There was one tree from which they must not eat. Human beings, according to the Bible, are unique and special. Only human beings are made in God’s image, meaning they are supposed to represent God to the rest of creation as they care for it and develop it under God’s rule. Only human beings can choose to reject God’s rule or to live in trust and obedience to Him.

SUMMARY: God’s rule was established in creation; human beings are free to obey or not

- God is the supreme, personal, spiritual being who created the Universe and takes pleasure in it.
- Human beings were created morally responsible before God, loved by Him and capable of knowing Him.



PART 1 – CREATION

DISCUSS AND APPLY

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. What are the dominant worldviews (beliefs and values about the nature of ultimate reality and human life) among people you know and in the society you live in?
2. What sets Christianity apart from other religious beliefs?

Read Genesis 1

3. How would you summarise what this passage says about God and what questions does it raise?
4. What does this chapter say about the nature of human beings and what questions does this raise?
5. What might the implications be for society of treating other people as created in the image of God?

Read Genesis 2

6. Why is it significant that God gave the first human beings a command to obey? What does this mean about the relationship between human beings and God?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- How would you describe your own 'worldview' (your basic beliefs about life and ultimate reality)? Do you live consistently with these core beliefs?
- Where did you get your worldview from (e.g., family / culture / education / popular media / personal ideas)? Do you think these are trustworthy sources?
- Are there any points in your worldview that seem inconsistent with your experience of life in the world? How does your worldview explain the goodness and evil that we see in human beings?
- Does the Christian worldview, based on God as creator and human beings as his special creatures, make sense to you? What questions does it raise and how might you seek answers to these?
- When did you first hear about Jesus Christ and what is your impression of Him? How does He fit within your worldview?

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

PART 1 – CREATION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

If there is only one God, why does God use the plural to refer to Himself in Genesis 1?

The Hebrew word translated ‘God’ in Genesis 1:1 is *Elohim*. According to Hebrew grammar, this looks like a plural word (the -im at the end usually indicates a plural), but the verb ‘created’ is in a singular masculine form, indicating that *Elohim* is singular. This is consistent with the rest of the teaching of the Old Testament that there is only one true God. The use of a plural noun indicates not that there is more than one God, but that this one God has all the powers that polytheistic religions attributed to distinct gods (e.g., of land or sky). In fact, the confession that God is only one is absolutely central within the faith of the Old Testament. It is clearly stated in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Listen, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” Christians, like Jews (and Muslims) believe that there is only one creator God.

Yet when God decides to create human beings, He speaks to Himself saying: “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us” (Genesis 1:26). What do the plurals here mean? Various suggestions have been made. Some say God is speaking to the angels, but how can human beings be made in the image of God and the angels? More plausibly, others suggest that God is using a ‘royal we’, referring to Himself in the first-person plural as a marker of His majesty. Many Christians, however, suggest that there is more here than just an indicator of God’s majesty. Perhaps there is a hint that God is more than a simple unity, but that within the unity of God are more than one person. Christians wonder this because when we read the teachings of Jesus we realise that He claimed to be God and also spoke about His Father who sent Him and the Holy Spirit who would come after Him as God. Christian theologians have used a non-biblical word to describe this: trinity.

We could not possibly see the truth that God is three-in-one just by reading Genesis 1 (or even by reading the whole Bible), but the plurals of Genesis 1:26 make sense once we understand this truth through Jesus. It also helps us to understand how the Spirit of God is referred to distinctly in verse 2.

Why the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

The two special trees in God’s garden are given names. One is quite simple – the ‘tree of life’ gives life to people who eat from it – but the name of the other is a little puzzling. We should notice first that it is not a tree of mixed good and evil – it is part of the completely good universe God created – but a tree that brings knowledge of these realities. This might mean two things:

- a) It could indicate that the man and woman as originally created were unable to tell the difference between good and evil – like little children. This interpretation seems incompatible with the fact that God gave them a law, making them morally responsible. In any case, in the Bible ‘knowledge’ seldom refers just to grasping truth with the intellect – it normally refers to experience as well.
- b) It might refer not to ability to understand the difference between good and evil, but the fact that they had not experienced both good and evil. This appears to be the correct meaning since after they ate the fruit, God says they had become like Him, knowing good and evil. This cannot mean the experience of doing both good and evil things since God does not do evil, but the experience of the effects of good and evil. God had already experienced the effects of the evil done by Satan when he rebelled against God and now human beings would experience it too because they have taken themselves out from God’s protection. By doing wrong they would know evil in their own experience and suffer as a result.

Are men and women equal?

The fact that the man was created before the woman might appear to indicate that men are superior to women, but the account does not support that claim. The phrase “I will make a helper who is just right for him” (2:18) could be translated as “a power who is his equal”. The point is that, unlike every animal, which is incapable of equalling the man as a divine image bearer and ruler over creation, the woman is equal to him in the task. Genesis 1:27 supports this point, emphasising that both men and women are created in God’s image. Men and women are fundamentally equal in status before God, but we are not identical. God made the two sexes with different biology and they need to work together in complementarity to accomplish God’s purposes.

- What went wrong with God's perfect creation?
- Why do human beings do wrong, suffer and die?

Satan – deception, temptation and sin (Genesis 3:1-6)

DECEPTION – *wrong beliefs about God and reality*

Unexpectedly, in the middle of God's good creation appears a shrewd creature questioning God's words. **The serpent** who tempted the woman was, according to the last book of the Bible (Revelation 12:9; 20:2) Satan, also known as the devil. This enemy of God was, like everything else, created by God as a powerful spiritual being, but he led many angels in rebellion against God and so was thrown out of heaven on to earth (see also 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). The conversation between Satan and the woman centres around God's word and character:

1. Satan **questions** what God had said (v1) – this might seem innocent, but his intention is bad.
2. The woman **distorts** what God said (v3) – she misquotes God's words, adding additional restrictions.
3. Satan **denies** what God has said (v4-5) – he says that rather than dying, if she eats the fruit she can become like God. This is not just a contradiction of God's words but an accusation about his character. Instead of a good, loving person, God is portrayed as a selfish spoilsport. The root of Satan's deception is the idea that human beings would be better without God, ruling over themselves.

TEMPTATION – *wrong judgements about actions and their consequences*

Having listened to Satan, the woman not focuses on the forbidden fruit. Verse 6 describes three ways in which the fruit appealed to her, which illustrate three aspects of all temptations to do what God says is wrong:

- a) *Good for food* – although she had plenty of fruits to eat, this one seemed even better than any of the others. A good desire (hunger) was misdirected towards something God did not intend it for. Desires can be directed in right ways, through obedience to God, or wrong ways, selfishly for our own pleasure.
- b) *Nice looking* – God made a beautiful world and He intends us to enjoy its beauty. There is, however, a danger when we find someone or something attractive that we begin to want to have it for ourselves and to possess it. When we find something pleasant we can either thank God for it or begin to worship it.
- c) *Giving wisdom* – we may think we will receive good results if we do something. We convince ourselves that our lives will become fuller, happier, or more complete. This is a lie we tell ourselves.

SIN – *wrong actions forbidden by God*

The woman obeyed the serpent and the man obeyed her. They decided to disobey what God had said, rejecting God's rule over them and claiming the right to decide for themselves. **They believed the lie that they could become their own gods, living life by their own choices and deciding right and wrong for themselves instead of by obedience to God's word and in relationship with Him.** The Bible uses a simple word to describe this rejection of God and rebellion against Him: **sin**. Human beings wanted to have complete control over their own lives, but they lacked the power to do it. Sin arises from deception and temptation and although it seems attractive it is destructive, bringing guilt, shame and death. Every human being has made the same choice our first ancestors made. We do wrong things because we believe wrong ideas about God and about life.

Results of sin (Genesis 3:7-23)

After eating from the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*, the man and woman knew evil as well as good. In this sense they had become like God (v22), who already knew what evil is, but unlike God they could not experience evil without being trapped and corrupted by it. Sin makes people slaves, powerless to avoid doing wrong even when they know what is good. Sin had immediate and profound results for the man and woman and for everyone who has lived since them. For this reason, this event is often called 'the Fall':

Harmony with one another broken – *fallen from innocence to shame (v7)*

They clothed themselves, attempting to hide the shame they felt. Honesty and trust in their relationship were broken as the man blamed the woman for giving him the fruit. Verse 16 suggests that conflict between the sexes, centred on a struggle for control, is one of the lasting consequences of sin.

Harmony with God broken – *fallen from trust to fear (v10)*

Shame before others (a major motivator in many cultures, especially outside the West) derives from a deeper problem: guilt before God. When God came to the Garden, the man and woman tried to hide because of fear of His judgement. The, when God confronts them, instead of admitting their wrong actions and accepting their guilt and need of forgiveness, they tried to pass the blame. Sin had destroyed their relationship with God. God acted in judgement and grace, banishing them from the Garden to prevent them making another wrong choice, eating from the tree of life and so living forever in separation from God (v22).

Harmony with the Universe broken – *fallen from blessing to curse (v16-19)*

God cursed the entire creation because of humankind's rebellion against Him, although notice He does not curse the human beings. Life in this world would no longer be free of trouble. There would be pain in ordinary processes of life – for women in childbirth (v16) and for men in work (v17-19). The natural disasters and diseases we now experience are results of this, and the ultimate result is death – our bodies will eventually return to the dust God created us from (v19).

Sin passes to all people (Romans 1:18-32)

Over many generations sin, which has affected every human being descended from Adam (Romans 5:12) affected human cultures in profound ways. Romans 1:18-32 describes this process in two stages:

1. The knowledge of God was replaced (v18-25) – WRONG WORSHIP

Instead of recognising the Creator, people deliberately rejected God so that later generations knew less and less about God. People began to worship the moon, sun and stars, or to make idols that look like animals or human beings. They created gods in their own image instead of worshipping the creator.

2. Society became increasingly sinful (v26-32) – WRONG ACTIONS

God allowed human beings to follow their desires, resulting in sinful actions that hurt themselves and other people. This wrong behaviour results from our rejection of God and cannot be solved without Him.

God's love and a promise!

As well as showing us God's judgement on sin, Genesis 3 provides evidence of God's continued love for humankind. There are two signs in this chapter of how God would bring about our restoration:

- a) **Clothes of animal skin (v21)** – God makes a covering for their shame from skin, presumably by killing one or more animals. This is the beginning of the concept of **sacrifices** covering for sin.
- b) **A promised rescuer (v15)** – God said a descendant of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, although his own heel would be bitten. Satan will not have everything his own way – there will be a fight back. This is both a general promise of hope for human beings, but also a specific promise of one rescuer.

Two ways to live – Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16)

Adam's first sons, Cain and Abel, show us the consequences of sin and the options of two ways to live:

- a) **Cain: disobedience** – Cain gave in to sin and made his own choices about how to live. His wrong worship (he did not bring the best of his produce to God), led to wrong judgements (rivalry with his brother), leading to wrong actions (murder). Even though God warned him, Cain chose to ignore what he knew about God, to rule over his own life and to murder Abel. This is **the way of disobedience** – rejecting God.
- b) **Abel: faith** – Abel worshipped as God expected, bringing the best of his flock to God. Although he also had inherited sin from his parents, he trusted in God to save him. This is **the way of faith** – obeying God.

Throughout the Bible we will find people who live each of these ways. Both Cain and Abel, and every one of us, inherited sin, but they made contrasting choices about how to live in response to God.

SUMMARY: God's rule ruined by human sin

- Human beings rejected God's rule. Wrong worship leads to wrong actions. This is called sin.
- Sin alienates us from others and from God, but God had a plan to rescue human beings.

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

PART 2 – FALL

DISCUSS AND APPLY

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. Do you agree that evil exists and, if so, where do you think it originates from?

Read Genesis 3

2. The serpent began by questioning what God had said. When do healthy questions about God become unhealthy?
3. The snake is an embodiment of Satan (the devil). What misconceptions about Satan based on popular culture are challenged by this and how does it say he works to oppose God's plan?
4. What convinced Eve to eat the forbidden fruit and to share it with Adam? Does this help to explain the basic problem with humankind?
5. How does Adam and Eve's initial reaction to their sin relate to people's experiences of guilt and shame?
6. How is life in the world different as a result of sin from what God originally designed?
7. What signs of God's love for human beings and hope for a different future do you find in God's words and actions in response to Adam and Eve's sin?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- How do you explain the fact that human beings are capable of such goodness (love for others, kindness, creativity etc.) but also such evil (deceit, hatred, murder etc.)?
- Can you identify with the steps towards sin outlined in this study as described in Genesis 3: deception (wrong ideas), leading to temptation (appeals to our desires) then to sin (wrong actions)?
- If you believe God exists, what is your impression of what He is like? Do you think you might have believed any lies about His character and how does this passage correct those?
- Do you recognise the connection between wrong actions and underlying wrong worship? What does this look like in your life personally and in the lives of people in your cultural context?
- Imagine yourself in the place of Cain – is there jealousy and rivalry in your life? What do you think God is saying to you and what do you need to do about it?

Where did evil come from?

Genesis 3 explains how evil entered human experience through rejection of God's rule. It does not, however, tell us how evil originated, as the serpent is already opposed to God's plan within God's perfect creation. Revelation 12 refers to a war in heaven between Michael (an archangel) with his angels and the dragon (identified as Satan) with his angels, which resulted in the dragon and his angels being cast down to earth (v7-9). Satan and the demons who work with him against God were, therefore, originally spirits who served God, and it seems that their fall was because of the same temptation Satan presented to Adam and Eve – rebellion against God and the desire to take His place. Being cast down to earth, God allowed Satan to have authority over it (he is described as the 'the commander of the powers in the unseen world' in Ephesians 2:2 and the 'god of this world' in 2 Corinthians 4:4), but Jesus' death defeated him (Hebrews 2:14) and Hell has been prepared for him and for the spirits who work with him (Matthew 25:41). Unlike human beings, for whom God made a rescue plan, there is no possibility of salvation for Satan or other evil spirits. Evil, then, is the result of rejection of God or disobedience to Him. It originates in the wills of creatures who reject God's will.

A talking animal – do you really believe that?

Some Christians may question whether or not Genesis 3 should be read literally and we must acknowledge that it is recounting a time before recorded history began. The talking serpent stands out because it is unusual and when we realise that it is not an ordinary animal, but an embodiment of the devil, it becomes less problematic. There is one other place in the Bible where an animal is said to have spoken (Numbers 22) and that is presented as an exceptional event as well. The Bible does record some supernatural occurrences, but they stand out as 'not the norm' and point to the involvement of some powerful spiritual power, either God or spirits in opposition to Him. This is no book of fantasy or fairy tales.

Why do human beings die?

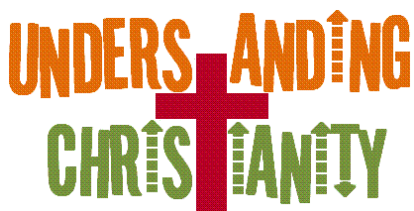
Death is introduced by God both as a judgement and as the consequence of sin (Romans 6:23), but in another sense it is a sign of God's mercy. To allow human beings to continue to live forever in sinfulness and rebellion against Him would not be loving. Death forces us to consider the purpose of life and what lies beyond it. It also creates the possibility of resurrection into a new life and new bodies which are free from sin and its consequences (see Part 23). Only through death do we come to new life and an ultimate cure for sin.

Since the Fall can we reliably know good from evil?

The Fall had a profound impact on the psychology of Adam and Eve – they were distrusting of one another and of God. The seeds of conflict and competition had been sown and bore fruit even in Cain and Abel, their sons. Sin is something we choose, but it also takes control of us, which the Bible describes as slavery (Romans 6:20). Sin darkens our minds, distorting our perceptions of right and wrong and removing the sense of shame we should feel at sin (Ephesians 4:17-19). Against this negative picture, Romans 2:15 says that God's law is written on human hearts and operates through the conscience to guide us to right and wrong. Human beings can often recognise truth, but when we harden our hearts against God this sense can be numbed or silenced.

Why did God accept Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's?

It may not be immediately obvious what the problem with Cain's sacrifice was, but there is a clue in the passage and some additional knowledge about the Old Testament sacrificial system given through Moses may help us (this was after the time of Cain, but Moses wrote Genesis and could assume his readers would know what kind of sacrifice God expected). The point in the passage is that Abel brought the best of his flock, whereas Cain just brought some of his harvest. God expects sacrifice to be the best we have, a principle that is repeated in the expectations in the Law of Moses. This carelessness was indicative of the fact that Abel came in real faith, whereas Cain did not. Faith means trusting God's words and obeying them. Genesis does not tell us what instructions God gave to the first human beings about sacrifice, but we can assume He gave some and that Cain was not obeying them. In any case, God gave him a chance to correct His sin and to be victorious over it (Genesis 4:6-7), but Cain gave in to it and became a murderer of his own brother.



PART 3 – JUSTICE & GRACE

- How will God respond to human sin?
- Can human beings overcome our sinfulness on our own?

Two contrasting families (Genesis 4:17-5:32)

Genealogies are important in the Bible because knowing where we came from reminds us who we are. After God dealt with Cain, he travelled the east where he began to have descendants who accomplish great things in terms of city building, culture and music (4:17-22). Genesis Chapter 5 then lists the names of eleven generations of Adam’s family through his third son Seth, ending with three sons of Noah. Importantly, the list describes Adam as God’s son, made in His likeness, and says that his own son was born in his likeness. To be human, and a divine image bearer, is to be descended from Adam.

There is a clear contrast between the family lines of Seth and Cain:

- Within Seth’s family, unlike Cain’s, people begin to call on the name of “the LORD” (4:26). It seems that this is when they began using God’s personal name Yahweh rather than just speaking of ‘God’.
- Compare the two men called Lamech (the only people in these genealogies whose words are recorded) – the one descended from Seth prophesied about relief to come from God through his son, Noah (5:29), whereas the one in Cain’s line boasted about his vengeful nature (4:23-24).
- The other person who stands out in Seth’s family is Enoch (5:21-23). He did not die but was taken out of the world by God because he walked with God. It seems most people (perhaps even in Seth’s family) did not have a good relationship with God and Enoch is an exception. He lived by the way of faith.

From this point on, the story of Genesis focuses on one family. This is a reminder that the Bible is not intended as an account of all of human history, but of how God works out his plan for human beings. Seth’s family is the line through which the seed of the woman who will defeat Satan – the promised rescuer – will come.

God’s justice – sin must be judged (Genesis 6)

Genesis Chapter 6 tells how the human population grew rapidly but human sin also grew greater, causing pain to God’s hearts so that He decides to act in judgement. Even the family line of Seth did not remain untouched by this – they intermarried with Cain’s descendants (this is probably what v4 is referring to, although there are other explanations of what it might mean). Sin has consequences and **God is just and will not leave sin unjudged**. It is His right to judge mankind, as He is the Creator, and His judgement is based on truth since He alone sees all things – including the thoughts and motives people try to hide from others (v5). This basic quality of God’s character is fundamental to the biblical story. Sin is, first and foremost, a personal offence against God. Human beings have tried to declare independence from Him and live without His rule, but He remains in control (He is sovereign) and we cannot escape His judgement.

Against this dark background, verse 8 introduces some light. One man, Noah, was different. He found “favour” with the Lord. Noah was living by faith close to God (v9), but, in contrast, the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and full of violence (v11). This is a powerful demonstration of the two ways to live:

	Way of faith	Way of disobedience
People	Abel, Enoch, Noah	Society as a whole
Attitude to God	Walking faithfully and closely with God – obeying and worshipping Him	Corrupt – disobeying Him and worshipping other things
Actions	Righteous before God (doing what is right) and blameless before others	Violence

As we have seen before, **the problem root problem of sin is wrong worship** (alienation from God) and **wrong actions are a result of this heart problem**. The way of faith begins with worship of God (trusting that His will is best) and is worked out in right actions towards God and towards other people. It is not that God only loved Noah, but only Noah was seeking God and living for God. Only his life was approved by God. The message of the Bible is that God’s favour is undeserved by people, but that we can receive it through faith. Noah’s faith was demonstrated by his obedience to God’s command to build a boat (or ark) to save himself and the animals.

God's grace – salvation for sinners (Genesis 7:1-9:17)

The Flood was a dramatic event that changed the face of the earth, with massive volcanic activity (7:11-12) that may have caused mountains to rise and continents to separate rapidly. A canopy of water in the atmosphere is also said to have collapsed, perhaps indicating major climate change and rapid polar cooling. Most importantly, however, the flood is a reversal of the separation God made between the water and the dry land on the second day of creation (Genesis 1:6-7). Creation is being undone, but not completely. Amazingly, Noah, his family and the animals God brought to the ark were saved, spending more than a year in total on the boat.

Sacrifice and grace

After the flood, Noah and his family offered a **sacrifice** to God (they took more than two of the kinds of animals and birds approved for sacrifices). The theme of sacrifice began with the skins God provided to Adam and Eve and continued with the tragedy of Cain and Abel. Here we see, for the first time, the symbolism of animals dying in place of human beings. Noah knew he deserved to die like so many others and that his salvation was undeserved. God's salvation of Noah and his family is evidence of **God's grace – His undeserved favour towards human beings that causes Him to rescue us from sin**. His sacrifice expressed his faith in God and thanks to God for his salvation. This idea becomes clearer later in the Old Testament (see Leviticus 17:11), but there is a very important principle here: **sin can only be forgiven on the basis of sacrifice**. Animal sacrifices were, however, limited because they could never really pay for the sins of human beings – animal lives are not of equal value. They point to our need for a perfect sacrifice of a sinless person to fully pay for our sins.

A covenant with creation

Noah's sacrifice pleased God and He made a **promise** that He would never again destroy all living creatures in a flood. Rather, there will be a predictable cycle of days and seasons (8:22). God also spoke to the human beings He had saved, pronouncing a new beginning with the same command Adam was given to increase in number and fill the earth that, although without the hope of subduing the earth (compare 9:1 with 1:28). Instead, the animals will now fear human beings, although humans are also given a new freedom to eat meat, so long as it has no blood in it (9:3-4). Importantly, the sacred nature of human life, created in God's image, is re-emphasised and protected with the principle that murder is punishable with execution (9:5-6). Despite the effects of sin on human beings, we remain divine image bearers with a special God-given privilege and status.

In Genesis 9:8, these promises are bound together in the first **covenant** in the Bible. A covenant is a special relationship between God and others in which God promises some blessing, often commanding them to obey some laws in order to maintain these blessings. A covenant always has a sign to remind God and people of it.

Parties	Creation – Noah, his descendants and every living creature (9:9-10)
Promise	There will never be another flood to destroy the earth (9:11)
Commandment	NONE
Sign	The rainbow (9:12-17)

This covenant with creation gives hope that God will sustain His creation. It reminds us of God's care for all he has created, but also of how the fate of all creation is bound up with human beings

Origins of the Nations (Genesis 9:18-11:9)

Despite God's cleansing of the world through the flood and His covenant with creation, **the problem of sin had not gone away**. Noah acted foolishly, getting drunk, and his son Ham dishonoured his father and was cursed as a result. Chapter 10 tells how Noah's three sons became the ancestors of all nations, fulfilling God's command to multiply, but sin resurfaces in Chapter 11 as human beings try to make a great name for themselves by building a tower to reach into heaven. In doing so, they also refused to spread out as God had commanded.

This celebration of themselves met with God's judgement and He confused their languages to prevent them causing greater sin and to force them to scatter as He had commanded. The implication is clear: human beings, since the Fall, have an innate tendency to put themselves in God's place, worshipping their own greatness and serving their own desires. No human political system or social vision can correct this problem – only God can.

SUMMARY: God must judge sin, but He also wants to save sinful human beings

- God's justice means He cannot and will not ignore sin. He will judge sinners and punish sin.
- God's grace means He wants to forgive sinners, but this is only possible through faith and sacrifice.

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

PART 3 – JUSTICE & GRACE

DISCUSS AND APPLY

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. Where does our human desire for justice come from? Is it important that justice be done?

Read Genesis 6-9

2. How did the world come to be so bad that God decided to destroy it?
3. How long did the flood last for and what effect did it have on the earth?
4. Why are Noah and his family spared?
5. What is the nature of the covenant God makes in Genesis 9? Who is it with, what does He promise and what is the sign?
6. What changed for human beings (in terms of what God commands and permits) after the flood and what stayed the same as before it?
7. What does this passage teach us about God's concern for animals and their status compared with that of humankind?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- Does it seem fair to you that God should judge human beings for their sinfulness? Should anyone be spared from His judgement?
- Do you think you deserve God's judgement? Why or why not? Do you think we tend to justify our own wrong actions and deny the extent of our sinfulness?
- Why was Noah saved from the flood and what does it teach us about how we can be spared from God's judgement on our sin?
- Do the idea of God's grace and the principle of salvation on the basis of sacrifice seem odd to you? If they are true, what does it say about the value God places on you and the seriousness of your sin?
- In what ways does this section of Scripture support or challenge modern ideas about human being's relationship to the environment and to animals?

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

PART 3 – JUSTICE & GRACE

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Where did Cain get his wife?

People sometimes ask how Cain (and later Seth) could have children if they were part of the only family on earth. Genesis 5:4 refers to Adam and Eve having “other sons and daughters”. Some of the daughters may have become wives for Cain and Seth. This raises another question. Is incest not wrong and dangerous? It would not have been dangerous because of the lack of genetic mutations at this early stage in human history, but does that make it acceptable? There is a basic principle in the Bible that actions are only sinful if God has forbidden them. At this point of human history God had not prohibited incest as He did later (see Leviticus 18:8-18 and 20:11-21). It may (and should) seem odd to us to think of siblings marrying, but this was not a problem at the time we are reading about.

Did people really live to such great ages?

There is no doubt that the life-spans of the people listed in Genesis 4 are extraordinarily long by modern standards, from Lamech (777) to Methuselah (969). Some people may claim these ages as evidence that the Bible is mythological and fantastical, but we must recognise that there are no other elements of fantasy in this chapter. Other than the old ages, it is remarkably ordinary. Other people suggest that the ages are not meant to be taken literally and that they might be figurative, as numbers often are in the Bible. It is not, however, so farfetched to believe these people lived so long when we consider the following:

- **The human gene pool was purer** – few disease-causing mutations would have existed in these earliest generations after God’s perfect creation, so few people would die of inherited diseases or cancers;
- **There were fewer people** – there would, therefore, have been less competition for land and resources meaning that famine and drought would not have been causes of premature deaths;
- **There were probably fewer infectious diseases** – in modern times before the 20th century the biggest cause of death was infections, but these would not have existed in such great numbers at that time because few micro-organisms would have become harmful to human beings and the lack of overcrowding would make the spread of infections less likely in any case;
- **Ageing did not yet exist** – in Genesis 6:3 God, imposes a limit of 120 years on the age of humankind, presumably by altering their genes to introduce ageing. Without a genetic programme to age we could, in theory, live until we have an accident or incurable illness.

Was the flood really worldwide?

Some people suggest that the flood through which Noah was saved was only a local event. Perhaps it affected the whole region known to the author or, at least, the region where human beings lived. That is impossible, however, when we read the account again. It is clearly stated that the highest mountains were covered over (7:19) and that all land-dwelling lifeforms other than those animals and human beings on the ark were destroyed. As indicated in the notes for this study, the flood was not simply a minor inundation of water, but a major geological event that had a lasting impact on the planet and its environment.

Some Christian geologists suggest that the evidence of the fossil record and rock formations fits very well with this account. It could certainly explain why fossils of marine lifeforms are found even high up on mountains and how fossils could have formed through sudden burial under silt accompanied by intense pressures capable of forming rock. It might also explain the phenomenon of frozen animals in the tundra, since the sudden collapse of the water canopy surrounding the earth may have caused rapid cooling. All of this is, of course, strongly disputed by other geologists, but I am convinced that the biblical account of the flood is compatible with the evidence. It also finds parallels in the myths of many other ancient civilisations.

Does God cause natural disasters?

Genesis 6 clearly describes God as the direct cause of the flood, but it would be wrong to suggest that natural disasters are always ‘acts of God’. The Bible makes no such claim and, in fact, rejects simplistic claims that bad things are always judgements from God. Natural disasters are a result of life in an imperfect world and their impact is often exacerbated by poor human judgements. God should not be blamed for them.

- What does genuine faith in God look like?
- How will the plan for a rescuer work out in human history?

Abraham’s relationship with God

God calls Abram (Genesis 11:27-12:9)

Abram was born in Ur but when he was young his father, Terah, planned to move with him to Canaan (modern Palestine/Israel). For an unknown reason he stopped half-way, in a place called Haran (in the south of modern Turkey). The people of Ur worshipped many gods, but Abram’s family knew about the true God. God spoke to Abram, calling him to leave his home to go to a land He would give him. God made three promises to Abram:

1. to make Abram’s name great (contrasting with the builders of the tower of Babel, who aimed to make their own name great) by making his descendants into a great nation (12:2);
2. to bless or curse all other peoples on the basis of their response to Abram and his descendants (12:3);
3. to give the land of Canaan to Abram’s descendants (12:7a).

Importantly, when the word ‘descendants’ (or ‘offspring’) appears in these promises, it is an echo of the promised descendant of the woman who would defeat Satan (the Hebrew word is the same, meaning ‘seed’). ***It is through this man that God will fulfil the promise of sending a rescuer for sinful human beings.*** Abram obeyed God and left Haran accompanied by his nephew, Lot. Abram was following the ‘way of faith’ just as Abel and Noah had. He called on God’s name and worshipped Him through sacrifice (12:7-8).

Faith and disobedience (Genesis 15)

God’s promise to give Abram many descendants, including the promised rescuer, seemed impossible because he had no children and was growing old (v2)! Hearing the promise repeated, however, Abram trusted God. The important point here is who God is – the chapter begins with God calling Abram to trust him personally as his protector and provider. Abram takes God at His word and obeys His commands on the basis that He will fulfil His promises. Genesis 15:6, one of the most important verses in the Bible: ***Abram believed God, and He credited it to him as righteousness.*** Abraham was not righteous – he was sinful like every other descendant of Adam and Genesis records his faults honestly (e.g., Chapter 20) – but God counted his faith as righteousness. Through trusting in God, Abraham received what he did not deserve – right standing before God.

Abram’s ageing wife, Sarai, did not, however, believe that God would fulfil His promise through her, so she gave her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to the 85-year-old Abram as a partner, hoping she would have a son as Abram’s heir (v2). When Hagar became pregnant she despised her mistress and Sarai blamed Abraham. Abraham refused to intervene, and Sarai mistreated Hagar. Hagar ran away, but God protected her and told her to return to her mistress, promising her descendants would be numerous (v10) and naming her son Ishmael (v11). Instead of trusting God, Sarai and Abram tried to fulfil His plan their own way.

God’s covenant with Abram (Genesis 17:1-22)

In Genesis 17, God reaffirms His promises to Abraham in a covenant (first made in Genesis 15:18):

Promises	Many descendants; blessing to other nations; possession of Canaan (v6-8)
Rule	His male descendants must be circumcised (v10)
Sign	Circumcision (v11)

To mark this covenant relationship, God renamed Abram. In the Bible, names often say something about people’s characters. Abram means ‘exalted father’, but Abraham means ‘father of many’. Sarai’s name, meanwhile, was changed to Sarah. This covenant is the basis of the remainder of the Old Testament story.

Isaac and Ishmael (Genesis 21:1-20)

When Abraham was 100 years old, Sarah finally had the promised son. They named him Isaac, meaning “he laughs”, because they laughed for joy and expected everyone else to laugh too (v6). Hagar and Ishmael mocked Isaac and Sarah insisted that Abraham send them away (v8-10), creating a rift between Isaac and Ishmael that continues even to today between their descendants, the Jews and Arabs. God continued to bless Ishmael (v20), but Isaac was the son of the promise through whom God’s promises would continue.

God tests Abraham's Faith (Genesis 22:1-18)

God tested Abraham's faith by asking him to do the unthinkable: kill Isaac as a sacrifice (v2). Abraham's obedience and his willingness to surrender his most precious thing showed his respect for God above all else (v12). In fact, God never intended Abraham to kill Isaac and prevented him from doing so, providing a ram to die in Isaac's place, reminding us again that God's covenant depends on sacrifice. Amazingly, God then intensified his promises to Abraham even further. What had started as promises (Ch 12) and then became a covenant (Ch 17) is now affirmed through an oath on God's name (v16). God does not need to affirm His words in these ways, but He does so to encourage Abraham's faith in a growing relationship of trust. Abraham becomes the primary biblical example of the way of faith (see Romans 4). From his life we learn that **faith means listening to God's words, trusting that He is faithful to do what He says, and acting in obedience.**

Abraham's family (Genesis 24-50)

Isaac – Abraham found Isaac a wife (Rebekah) from his extended family. Rebekah, like Sarah, struggled for many years with barrenness, but eventually she had twin sons (25:21). God repeated his promises to Isaac (26:1-5) and blessed him greatly (26:12) and he lived at peace with other peoples in Canaan (26:31).

Jacob and Esau – Isaac's twin sons were very different, and their story is complicated by parental favouritism. The elder, Esau, Isaac's favourite, rejected God by treating his birth right with contempt and marrying foreign wives who disrespected his parents (26:34-35). The descendants of Esau became the nation of Edom, which was often in conflict with Israel. Jacob, Rebekah's favourite, tricked Esau out of his birth right (25:27-34) and Isaac's blessings (chapter 27), but this deceiver's life was changed by two encounters with God:

- a) *Wrestling with God* (32:22-32) – God began to change this deceiver into a man who would trust Him. After wrestling with Jacob all night, God dislocated his hip, showing his supreme power and leaving him marked for life by a limp as a reminder, and changed his name to Israel, which means 'God struggles'.
- b) *Receiving the covenant promises* (35:1-15) – in response to a command from God to worship Him, Jacob purified his household, ridding it of idols, and acknowledged God's faithfulness. God affirmed that Jacob's descendants (the nation of Israel) would carry on the covenant relationship He had forged with Abraham.

Jacob's twelve sons – Jacob took two wives, sisters Leah and Rachel who, like Rebekah, were members of Abraham's extended family. He also had sons by two concubines since both his wives were barren and, like Sarah with Hagar, they gave their servants to him as surrogate mothers. These odd family dynamics contributed to rivalry between Jacob's twelve sons. Joseph, eldest son of Jacob's preferred wife Rachel, was his father's favourite. God gave him visions of his family bowing down to him. His brothers hated him and sold him as a slave. He ended up in Egypt, where through an amazing sequence of events God eventually made him chief ruler under Pharaoh. He used his position to rescue his brothers and their families from a famine and to show them God was in control (50:20). Jacob's sons' families became twelve tribes within the nation of Israel.

At the end of Genesis, a question arises: which son will inherit the promises? In previous generations this was clear – Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau. In one sense, all twelve of Jacob's sons inherited the covenant and its promises, but which would be the ancestor of the rescuer God promised to Eve? Joseph was clearly Jacob's favourite and his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, receive special blessings from Jacob (Chapter 48 – again the younger, Ephraim, receives the greater blessing). In Jacob's blessing to another of his sons, Judah, however, he says that his line would be kings and that a special king from his line will receive obedience from the nations (49:10). **Joseph's family will be important, but the promise of the coming rescuer continues through Judah.**

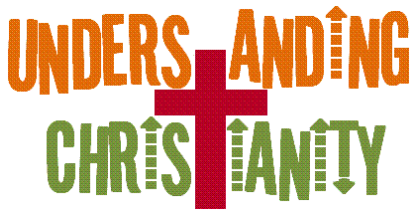
Genesis ends with God's promises to Abraham incomplete: a nation had been formed (the "People of Israel"), but they were living in Egypt, not in the land God promised. Notice the repeated patterns in each generation:

- difficulties conceiving children, so that sons were received as special gifts from God;
- elder sons passed over, with inheritance and blessing going instead to the younger brother;
- favouritism and conflict and a mixture of obedience and disobedience (faith and sin).

God is working out His purposes in a very ordinary (indeed a particularly messy) family through unexpected means. There is a pattern in the Bible of God working through weakness and subverting expectations.

SUMMARY: God's covenant with Abraham began His plan of salvation for people of all nations

- God promised to make a nation from Abraham through whom blessing will come to others.
- Salvation comes through faith like Abraham's: hearing God's words, trusting Him and obeying.



PART 4 – ABRAHAM: GOD'S PEOPLE

DISCUSS AND APPLY

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. What do you know about Abraham? Do you think he is a significant figure in history?

Read Genesis 15

2. The call not to be afraid because God is in control (v2) is very common in Scripture. How does this belief differ from the way many people live?
3. What does Abraham need to believe and what does it mean that God counted him righteous because of his faith (v6)?
4. The significance of the sacrifices Abraham made is that the person who walked between the halves of the animals was saying that if they broke their promise (violating the covenant that was bring 'made' or 'cut' as the verb in verse 18 literally means) they should be cut in half. In this case it was God who walked between the two halves. What does this say about God's commitment to Abraham?
5. Why does God delay the giving of the land to Abraham's descendants according to verse 16?

Read Genesis 35:1-15

6. What did Jacob do in response to God's call to worship Him and what were the consequences?
7. Why was it important to Jacob to mark these events with a pillar and a new name for the location?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- Do you believe that God is control and desires to reward you greatly? What would it look like for you to live more fully in line with this truth?
- Have you experienced any situations in life like Abraham's, when God's blessings seemed meaningless because of loss, pain or frustration? Does Abraham's example encourage you at all?
- What things might you need to give up to follow God's will? Are you sure these are sacrifices He would really expect and would it be worth it?
- Why do you think God so often subverted expectations by working through the younger son or by giving children to barren women? What does this say about who God is?
- Abraham was counted righteous by God because he believed, not because of his actions. Are you prepared to trust God as he did?

Did God show favouritism to Abraham and his descendants?

The Bible clearly teaches that God does not have favourites (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). He loves all people. The nation of Israel certainly has a special place in God's plan and God's love for this people was different than His love for others, in that He made a binding covenant with them, but this was not because He only cared about them. God chose the nation of Israel for three purposes:

1. **To show other nations His power and goodness.** Exodus 19:5 says Israel will be God's special treasure if they obey Him, but that all the world belongs to Him. In the next verse, God describes Israel as a "kingdom of priests", meaning they should collectively bring the other nations to know Him just as the priests within Israel did for the rest of the people. Other nations should look on at them and come to worship their God as a result. Other passages speaking about this role for the nation of Israel include Deuteronomy 4:6-8 and 1 Kings 8:41-43. This does happen at various points in their history with examples of people from outside Abraham's family becoming part of Israel or coming to know Israel's God.
2. **To receive God's words.** God had to entrust His words to people so that they would be written down and passed on through the generations. In the New Testament (Romans 9:4) we read that: "They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God's special children. God revealed his glory to them. He made covenants with them and gave his law to them. They have the privilege of worshipping him and receiving his wonderful promises." Without Israel we would not have the Bible today.
3. **To one day produce a Saviour for all nations.** The ultimate way in which all nations would be blessed through Abraham's descendants would be through the promised rescuer. In Romans 9:5, we read that: "from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ" (NIV). God's plan was to bring His Son into the world to be the Messiah and so He prepared the context in which Jesus would be born so that His actions and words would make sense within it.

God's special relationship with one nation, Israel, did not mean that He did not love the other peoples of earth. The Bible focuses on one nation because it was through them that God was working out His plan to save people from **all** nations. As well as people who weren't descended from Abraham who became part of Israel, the Old Testament describes some people who knew God and were not part of Israel (e.g., Melchizedek the priest who met Abraham and Moses' father-in-law Jethro), perhaps having received details about Him passed down from Noah's sons. On the other hand, not all of Abraham's descendants would be right with God and have their sins forgiven. Only those who walked, as he did, in the way of faith in God rather than the way of disobedience. Israel was not chosen for eternal salvation, but to receive God's words and bring God's salvation to all nations.

Does Abraham's offering of Isaac condone human sacrifice?

Many cultures in the ancient world practised human sacrifice, presumably believing that human life was of great value to their gods. The story of Abraham being asked to offer Isaac to God could appear to support this practice. In reality, the Old Testament is opposed to human sacrifice, forbidding it in the Law (Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:9-12) and describing it as detestable to God (2 Kings 16:3; Psalm 106:38; Jeremiah 19:4-5). Remember that human life is sacred according to Genesis. God did not really want Abraham to offer Isaac – He was testing his faith – so, in fact, the account in Genesis 22 is against human sacrifice, not in its favour.

What does it mean to say God credited righteousness to Abraham because of his faith?

God did not accept Abraham because of good things he did (Abraham was sinful like all human beings), but because he had faith in God. Abraham became the great example of saving faith in God according to Romans 4). God's salvation – His forgiveness for our sins and acceptance of us – is a free gift that we cannot earn, but it must be received through faith like Abraham's. When a person trusts God, they can receive the gift of right standing with God as Abraham did. Something they didn't have (righteousness) is credited to them, like a lodgement being made by someone else into your bank account to pay off your overdraft and giving you riches instead. All of this is only possible on the basis of sacrifice and, ultimately, animal sacrifices cannot really pay for our sins. We need a perfect, sinless person to take our place and that person is Jesus. His death was the sacrifice for Abraham's sins and for everyone else who has ever trusted in God for salvation.

- How can we know what is right and wrong?
- How would Abraham's family become a great nation?

God Raises Moses to Lead Israel

Genesis ends with Israel in Egypt under Joseph's protection. **Exodus 1** tells how, after Joseph died, a new Pharaoh (Egyptian king), feeling threatened by the growing Israelite population, forced them to work as slaves. As God foretold to Abraham, this would last 400 years (Genesis 15:13-16). The Israelites lost hope in God's promises, but God had not forgotten them. He planned to deliver His people from slavery, to take them to the land of Canaan, and to remind them how to worship Him through sacrifice. The man He would use to accomplish all of this was Moses (born around 1526 BC), whose 120-year life comprised three 40-year periods:

Growing up as an educated Egyptian – birth to age 40 (Exodus 2:1-10)

Born in Egypt at a time when the Pharaoh wanted to kill every male Israelite baby, Moses was hidden by his mother for three months until he was adopted by a princess and raised in the Egyptian palace as a prince.

Living in the Desert as a shepherd – aged 40-80 years (Exodus 2:11-25)

Moses never forgot his Israelite identity. Aged 40, he murdered an Egyptian who mistreated an Israelite and fled to the desert to avoid punishment where he lived for 40 years working as a shepherd and starting a family.

Leading the nation of Israel – aged 80-120 years (Exodus 3 – Deuteronomy 34)

Aged 80, God spoke to Moses from a burning bush on Mount Sinai, calling him to lead His people. Moses felt inadequate to speak to Pharaoh, but God confirmed His power by performing miracles and used Moses greatly.

God delivers His people

Faith in God's promises restored (Exodus 3; 4:27-31)

God revealed Himself to Moses, showing him His unchanging nature in the image of a burning bush that was not consumed and explaining the meaning of His covenant name (Yahweh – 'the LORD' in English versions), which derives from the phrase 'I AM', indicating God's eternal existence and absolute self-sufficiency (3:13-15). The Israelites struggled to believe God was speaking again, so He performed miracles through Moses as signs to confirm He had sent him and reminded the Israelites of His covenant promises and the richness of Canaan (3:8).

Judgement and sacrifice restored (Exodus 7-12)

Pharaoh refused to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt. God gave nine powerful signs to show His power over all the 'gods' of Egypt with their supposed spheres of control, but Pharaoh refused to listen and "hardened his heart" against God. God warned He would give one last sign and judgement on Pharaoh and Egypt, killing the firstborn son in every family. To be spared, the Israelites must kill a lamb without physical defects and sprinkle its blood on their door frame before eating its meat dressed ready to travel. God spared people in every house with blood on the door frame (Exodus 12:12-13) – His destroying angel 'passed over' these homes. 'Passover' became the most important annual festival for Jewish people and the basis of their calendar (Exodus 12:2).

God delivers the people through the sea (Exodus 13:17-14:31)

Pharaoh finally allowed Moses to lead the Israelites towards the land of Canaan but changed his mind and sent his soldiers to pursue them. The Israelites were trapped between mountains on either side, a sea in front of them and the Egyptian army behind. Using a powerful wind, God formed a dry pathway for them to walk through, raising the water into walls on either side, and returned the water on top of the Egyptians when they followed. With Passover, this was God's great deliverance of Israel, which they would always remember.

God gives His Law through Moses

After leaving Egypt, Moses again met God on Mount Sinai. God gave Moses the Law that would form Israel into a nation under His rule. It contains over 600 individual commandments and prohibitions including: principles for personal behaviour; regulations for sacrifices to be conducted by priests (who would come only from the descendants of Moses' brother, Aaron) in a special tent called the Tabernacle; and instructions for life together as a nation, including how infringements should be punished. The Hebrew word usually translated

'Law' is *Torah* and literally means 'instruction'. Faithful Israelites received it gladly as God's loving guidance for them. God's Law for the Israelites served three purposes:

1. **Revealing God** – the Law shows that God is “The God of compassion and mercy ... slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). He is holy and just, so cannot tolerate sin, yet He wants people to know His love for them. The Tabernacle, located in the middle of their camp, represented God's home at the centre of the nation ruling over them (this position was usually for a king's tent). By obeying the Law the nation of Israel could also fulfil its calling to be a kingdom of priests, making God known to the other nations and bringing them to Him (Exodus 19:6). Other nations would observe how Israel lived in response to their vastly superior Law and realise the God who gave it them was great (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).
2. **Guiding behaviour**– the Israelites were expected to live together in harmony on the basis of the law and its standards would make them into a nation of justice and compassion. The Law is an expression of God's love for His people, guiding them away from harmful behaviour and to live as a reflection of His character.
3. **Revealing sin and offering forgiveness** – no one could read the Ten Commandments honestly without realising they fall short of God's standard. The Law showed individuals their sin and called them to respond in faith. God lived among them, but their sin still separated them from Him. The Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle, where God's throne was on top of the ark of the covenant (a special box containing stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments) could only be entered once per year by the High Priest, on the Day of Atonement, bringing a sacrifice for the sins of the nation (Leviticus 16). The sacrifices reminded them that sin deserved death and could only be forgiven through shedding of blood (Hebrews 9:22).

After Moses gave God's Law to the Israelites they promised to obey it. Moses sprinkled them with the blood of a sacrifice to mark this occasion (Exodus 24:3-8), renewing the covenant with Abraham through sacrifice.

The most famous portion of the Law is found in **Exodus 20:1-21**. Having reminded the nation of their deliverance from Egypt (19:3-6), God calls them to obey Him in response to His love for them. He gave Ten Commandments, which can be separated into two groups: four regulate their relationship with God, calling them to worship Him alone without idols, revere His name and commit one day per week to focus on Him; the other six regulate relationships between people, forbidding sins like lying, murder and adultery. The tenth commandment is noteworthy, because it forbids coveting (desiring in a faithless and discontented way) of neighbours' possessions, showing that the issue of sin is not only in actions, but also in attitudes. The two groups of commandments hold together two basis responsibilities: to love God and to love others (Jesus summarised the Law in these two principles in Matthew 22:24-40). As we have seen, sin is wrong worship leading to wrong actions, but **the Law commands right worship resulting in right actions**. We cannot love others until we love God first, but we cannot claim to love God if we do not love others.

Forty years in the desert (Numbers and Deuteronomy)

The journey from Egypt to Canaan should only have taken a few weeks, but the people who left Egypt refused to trust in God and repeatedly complained against Him. When twelve spies sent by Moses reported back about the inhabitants of Canaan, most were intimidated by these enemies. The people did not trust God, so God said they must wander in the desert until all the adults who had left Egypt were dead. The only exceptions were Joshua and Caleb – the only two spies who remained faithful to God (Numbers 13-14). Even Moses was forbidden from entering Canaan because he disobeyed God (Numbers 20). The generation who came out of Egypt thanked God when He did great things for Him but complained and rejected Him, even asking to return to Egypt, when they were hungry and thirsty, even though God provided food and water in supernatural ways (water from a rock and bread-like 'manna' and quails to eat). Their faith was never genuine (Hebrews 3:7-19).

Moses led the people for 40 years wandering in the desert until he died in around 1406 BC. His last words challenged the new generation to obey God's Law when they entered Canaan, saying God would bless them for faithfulness and curse them for disobedience, ultimately by removing them from the land (Deuteronomy 28-29). This generation, unlike their parents, trusted God. **True faith trusts and obeys God even when situations are difficult, remembering what God has done and His promises**. God calls us to surrender our lives to His rule, not to come on our terms and simply for our own benefit.

SUMMARY: God formed Israel into a nation by redeeming them and giving His Law

- Moses was God's leader to bring Israel out of Egypt and to receive God's Law for their national life
- The Law reveals God's perfection and human sin as well as God's love and the way of sacrifice

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

PART 5 – MOSES: GOD'S LAW

DISCUSS AND APPLY

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. What principles of right and wrong guide your life? Do you think any of these should be universally binding on everyone and, if so, why?

Read Exodus 3:1-22

2. What does this passage teach us about who God is?

Read Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-21

3. Why is it important to realise that God's Law (instruction) was given to Israel **after** He had rescued them from Egypt and carried them to Himself (19:4)?
4. Why does God make Israel His special nation (19:5-6)? What task will He give them?
5. What does the content and ordering of the 'Ten Commandments' in Chapter 20 tell us about God's expectations for human beings? Do these seem reasonable and good to you?

Read Deuteronomy 4:1-9; 6:1-19

6. What is the heart of Old Testament religion according to these verses?
7. What does God say will happen if the people do not obey His commands and what will happen if they do?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- Why do you think it was so important for Israel to know that God's rescue of them came before His call to them to obey? What does this say about God?
- Reflecting on how Moses' experiences over his first 80 years prepared him to serve God as leader in Israel, how might your experiences so far in life be used by God if you give your life to His leadership?
- Are there any of the Ten Commandments you struggle with accepting? What does that tell you about yourself and can you see why this commandment would be good for you?
- How does what you know about the Law of Moses show you what God is like, reveal your own sin and need of forgiveness, and guide you as to how to live? What response do you need to make to God?
- What does Israel's complaining in the desert after God rescued them from Egypt tell us about human sinful nature? Why do people so often complain against God and not recognise His good gifts to them?

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

PART 5 – MOSES: GOD'S LAW

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What exactly is the significance of the name 'Yahweh'?

Yahweh is the personal name God told Moses to refer to Him by (Exodus 3:13-15). It derives from the Hebrew phrase translated 'I AM' introduced by God in the same passage. This title expresses the fact that God has always existed, without beginning or end, and that His existence does not depend on anything outside Himself – unlike every other living thing, which receives life as a gift from God, He is utterly self-sufficient. The name Yahweh was not new in Moses' time – people began to use it much earlier according to Genesis 4:26 – but its recovery was important. God is not impersonal and vague, but relational and knowable.

In English translations of the Old Testament, the name Yahweh is expressed with the word Lord in capitals: 'the LORD'. The reason for this is that Jewish people, taking the commandment against misusing God's name (Exodus 20:7) substituted Yahweh for the Hebrew word Adonai, which means 'Lord', so that they would not read the divine name aloud. One result of this approach was that there is some uncertainty over how to pronounce the name. Biblical Hebrew is written without vowels, so the name really consists of four consonants: YHWH (יהוה in Hebrew script). The lack of verbalisation of the word meant that the memory of which vowel sounds belong between the consonants was lost. In older English writings the name is written as Jehovah, whereas most scholars now think the correct pronunciation would be Yahweh.

Can we really believe the accounts about miracles in Exodus?

Modern people who live with confidence in science may struggle with accounts of miracles in the Bible. Exodus is the first time we read of many miracles being performed through people (in contrast to the smaller number of unusual events in Genesis, which are all done by God without a human agent). The category of 'miracle' is a modern one, indicating an event that seems to transcend the normal, regular laws of science. People who believe nothing exists beyond the natural world will reject the possibility of the 'supernatural', although we should recognise that the frontiers of science in quantum physics are less certain about what is possible than older science. When we accept the existence of God and other spiritual powers that cannot be measured or simply defined using scientific methods, events that we call 'miracles' or 'supernatural' become possible.

The Bible does not contain miracles on every page. Throughout most of the history it records people live lives that we would recognise as 'normal' today, although they were often more aware of the actions of God and other spiritual powers than modern people. There are only three periods when miracles become common: firstly here with Moses and Aaron; secondly in the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha; and thirdly in the time of Jesus and the apostles. Each of these marked points when God was doing something new and authenticating it through these powerful acts. They are usually called 'signs' in the Bible as a result, since they point beyond themselves to God. Miracles can also be counterfeited by evil spirits (as in the case of Pharaoh's 'magicians') and the real test is whether the words that accompany them correspond to God's revealed truth. For Christians, miracles point to the existence of God, but so does the fact that we recognise them as unusual. If there is no creator, why is the world orderly, and where do scientific laws come from if there is no lawgiver?

Does the Law of Moses still apply today?

The Law of Moses was given to Israel as a nation in its entirety to guide their lives in faithfulness to God. The New Testament teaches clearly that it was fulfilled in Jesus and that Christians no longer serve God through adherence to it but through the leading of the Holy Spirit (Romans 7:4-6). The ultimate purpose of the Law was to prepare people for Jesus and having fulfilled that purpose it is no longer binding on God's people (Galatians 3:23-25). This is not to say that God's standard of right and wrong has changed – in fact, the Spirit always leads us to act in ways that are in keeping with the Law and many of the commands of the Law about personal behaviour, including nine of the Ten Commandments (the exception being Sabbath) are repeated in the New Testament. Many people find it helpful to distinguish three aspects of the Law that are not separated in the Old Testament but help guide Christian behaviour: moral laws, reflecting God's unchanging standards for human behaviour (repeated in the New Testament); civil laws, guiding the nation on its collective life and no binding after Christ since God's people are no longer called to be a theocratic nation; and ceremonial laws (the Temple and sacrificial system) which have passed away because Jesus offered one sacrifice for sins forever.

- How did the nation of Israel finally enter the promised land?
- Who was David and why is he important in God's plan?

Settling in the Promised Land

The conquest of Canaan [Joshua]

Around 1405 BC, the people of Israel, now led by Moses' former assistant, Joshua, entered Canaan, crossing the River Jordan on dry land as their parents had crossed the sea leaving Egypt. The conquest of Canaan took many years. God commanded the Israelites to drive out the nations who lived there and kill any who remained because these people were very sinful, and God wanted to keep the Israelites free from their influence (Deuteronomy 9:4-5). Unfortunately, the Israelites did not obey these commands completely, leaving some enemies undefeated. These survivors would be a repeated negative influence over the Israelites, leading them towards sin and idolatry. The book of Joshua finishes on a high note, stating that God's promises had been fulfilled (Joshua 21:43, 45). Israel was now a great nation living in the land He had promised under His law.

Israel's calling to make God known to others was fulfilled in this period as a Canaanite prostitute called **Rahab** who, having heard about God's actions for Israel, hid Israelite spies (Joshua 2). She was spared from the destruction of her city, Jericho, and subsequently joined the nation of Israel (Joshua 6).

The period of the Judges [Judges; Ruth]

After Joshua died (around 1380 BC), the nation was leaderless. The people began to worship the false gods of the Canaanite peoples and over three centuries they experienced a repeated cycle of sin, judgement and deliverance. When they disobeyed God, He allowed other nations to oppress them, but each time they called out to God to save them, He graciously raised a ruler to deliver them. These leaders, called Judges, usually led only part of the nation. The Judges were fascinating people (thirteen are named in the book of Judges). Many were not good examples of obedience to God, but God used them despite their faults.

The prime example of faith in this period was a woman named **Ruth**. A native of Moab (descended from Abraham's nephew Lot), she remained loyal to her dead husband's mother, Naomi, and joined the nation.

The last judge and the first king [1 Samuel]

Samuel was recognised by the whole nation as a Judge and a prophet (1 Samuel 3:20). He was a good leader and served God well, but in his later years appointed his dishonest sons as co-leaders. Jealous of other nations, the people thought a king would unite them and make them stronger, so they insisted that Samuel appoint one (1 Samuel 8). Samuel consulted God, who said the people were rejecting Him with their request and told Samuel that a king would oppress them, making himself rich through their hard work. Samuel warned the leaders of Israel, but they still insisted, so God guided Samuel to a man from the tribe of Benjamin called Saul.

The problem was not with the principle of having a king, but the kind of king the people wanted. God had given Moses instructions that future kings must recognise God as the true king and lead the nation to obey His Law (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). Kings in Israel were not to be powerful rulers over people but examples of faith and upholders of God's Law. The people's request, by contrast, betrayed their trust in a man rather than God.

Saul ruled for 40 years (1050-1010 BC). He was strong and handsome (1 Samuel 9:2), exactly the kind of king the people wanted. His reign started well, but he later disobeyed God because of pride and fear of peoples' opinions (1 Samuel 13:1-15). God rejected him and said another man would replace him (1 Samuel 15:24-29).

David - a Man after God's own heart

The man chosen by God to replace Saul was David (reigning 1010-970 BC), who came from Judah, the tribe Jacob prophesied that kings and the promised rescuer would come from. David was also descended from both Rahab and Ruth – non-Israelite women who came to worship Yahweh. Samuel anointed him to be king when he was a young boy working as a shepherd for his father (1 Samuel 16). He demonstrated faith in God by killing Goliath, a huge Philistine who had mocked Israel and God (1 Samuel 17). Initially, Saul welcomed David into his palace, but he became jealous of his military successes and pursued him for many years. David refused to harm God's anointed king, even though he had several opportunities to kill Saul.

Eventually, Saul was defeated by the Philistines and died (1 Samuel 31). David was made king over Judah (2 Samuel 2) and later united the whole nation under his rule (2 Samuel 5). David defeated many of Israel's enemies, expanded its territory, and wrote many songs of praise (Psalms). He was Israel's greatest king and set the standard against which later kings were measured. **God renewed His covenant with Israel through David, promising that his descendants would be kings forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16).** This continued Jacob's blessing to Judah which said his family would be kings. The promised rescuer would come from Judah and from David's family line. Later prophets foretold a future king from David's line who would be even greater than David.

God described David as a "man after His own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). David was far from perfect – he committed shocking sins, even committing adultery and arranging for the woman's husband to die in battle (2 Samuel 11) – but always returned to God. His psalms can teach us how to have a relationship with God like his:

- **Psalm 139** – God is all-knowing (v1-6) and all-present (v7-12) and has plans for us as His creatures (v13-18). We should, therefore, ask Him to search our hearts and show us our sin and His will (v19-24).
- **Psalm 51** – realising he had sinned, David sought God's forgiveness (v1,2,7,9). All sin is foremost against God, God's way is always right, and sin is part of us from our birth (v4-5). We must, therefore, ask God for a new heart that is pure, sincerely intending to change (v10-13). As David says, sacrifice is the only hope for forgiveness, but it is pointless unless the heart is repentant but (v16-19)
- **Psalm 23** – David described his close relationship with God using the picture of a shepherd's care for his sheep. The LORD: supplies all his needs (v1-3a); guides him through life (v3b); comforts and protects him in difficult times (v4); gives him fulfilment, dignity and victory (v5); and can be trusted in this life and after it (v6). If we trust in Him, we can depend on God to lead us, protect us, and provide for us forever.

Jerusalem and the Temple

Jerusalem was a stronghold of a tribe called the Jebusites until King David conquered it in around 1003 BC and made it his capital (2 Samuel 5). It is also called *Zion* or the *city of David* and came to represent the place of God's rule over His people. David planned to replace the Tabernacle with a permanent building in Jerusalem where God could be worshipped through sacrifice. He brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6), showing that his reign was under God's rule, and prepared foundations for a great Temple, but God would not allow Him to build it (1 Chronicles 28:3). That was not to be David's part in God's plan.

The one God chose to build the Temple was David's son Solomon, who became king after him and reigned from 970 to 930 BC (1 Kings 5-6; 2 Chronicles 2-7). Solomon's Temple was built in the same pattern as the Tabernacle and took seven years to build (around 956-950BC). It was an immense building decorated with gold and precious stones. The Temple and its sacrifices were maintained by the members of the tribe of Levi, paid for by an offering of one tenth of the income of the other tribes. The Temple system teaches us about God:

1. **He is holy** – God's presence was in an inner room (the most Holy Place) separated from the sinful people;
2. **He is loving** – God wanted to live with His people and be known by them despite their sin;
3. **He can forgive sin only based on sacrifice.**

Solomon was given great wisdom by God – much of it recorded in books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes – and in his early years he was a great king with immense wealth. He did not have to fight wars because his father had been so successful in war. At the height of Solomon's reign, the nation of Israel was at its most powerful. Other nations (e.g., the Queen of Sheba – 1 Kings 10:1-13) glorified God because of Israel's prosperity and Solomon's wisdom. The promises to Abraham were fulfilled (1 Kings 4:20-21). At the dedication of the Temple Solomon prayed: "Praise the LORD who has given rest to His people Israel, just as He promised. Not one word has failed of all the wonderful promises He gave through His servant Moses" (1 Kings 8:56).

Sadly, this picture of harmony would not last. Solomon's reign started well, but he had a great weakness – he loved many foreign women and allowed his many wives to worship false gods. God decided to judge him, but because of David's faithfulness He promised to wait until after Solomon's death, when He would divide the nation, leaving only a minority under Solomon's son (1 Kings 11:9-13). God had fulfilled His promises, but the problem of sin remained, and Solomon was clearly not the promised rescuer from David's line.

SUMMARY: God's people settled in the promised land under God's king

- The covenant with Abraham and Moses was extended to David, whose family would be kings forever.
- David's faith in God is an example of recognising sin, repenting for it and trust God as shepherd.

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. Where do you or other people you know get your sense of significance from?

Read 2 Samuel 7

2. Why did David's want to build a permanent house for the ark of the covenant (verses 1-2)? What does this say about David's view of God?
3. What does God remind David of about the history of Israel and what does He promise to the people at this point in their story (verses 4-11)?
4. Just as God had cared for Israel and brought the nation from obscurity to significance, so He had done for David. Why might David's history as a shepherd have been a good starting helpful for his role as God's king?
5. David cannot build a house for God (that task will belong to his son), but God promises to build a different kind of 'house' for David – a dynasty of kings. What promises does God make concerning David's descendants and what kind of relationship does He say He will have with them (verses 11-16)?
6. What kind of relationship with God does David's prayer reveal (verses 18-29)? How does this prayer serve as an example of the right attitudes to have towards God?
7. According to David's prayer what made him and Israel significant?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- Do you struggle with the idea of God commanding the Israelites to take the land of Canaan and drive out its people? Does God have the right to make a decision like this?
- The period of the judges demonstrates the pattern of Israel crying out to God in times of trouble but forgetting Him when times were easier. Does that reflect your attitude to God in any way?
- The choosing of David reminds us of God's knowledge of people's hearts. What does God see in your heart? Does His choosing of David and promises to him give you any encouragement about God's view of you?
- David, despite his great achievements, saw himself as a sinful man in need of God's forgiveness and a weak sheep in need of a Shepherd. Is that how you see yourself? If not, why not? If so, how should you respond?
- What lessons can you learn from Solomon, a gifted man who served God well but then was distracted away by his own desires and the influence of women he loved or lusted after?

Was it because of his ancestry or qualities that God chose David?

David was the son of a man called Jesse, who was a descendant of Judah, making him a suitable fulfilment of the prophecy within Jacob's blessing of Judah that the sceptre would not depart from his family (Genesis 49:10). The choice of David as king does, however, exemplify the same pattern seen in Abraham's family (Part 4) of God subverting expectations. David was the youngest of eight brothers and his father saw him as relatively insignificant (1 Samuel 16). His ancestors also included some unorthodox people, especially three women who are worthy of note: Tamar, who was neglected by her father-in-law Judah after her husband died and had to pretend to be a prostitute to force him to give her a son (Genesis 38); Rahab, the Canaanite woman who sheltered the spies sent by Joshua to her city of Jericho (Joshua 2); and Ruth from Moab who stayed true to her mother-in-law Naomi after her husband died (Ruth). David grew to be a man of exceptional qualities as a military leader, a composer of songs of praise and a ruler, but when God chose him it was a demonstration of His grace and power as well as of His knowledge of the hearts of people (1 Samuel 16:7).

How can a good God use bad people?

The historical accounts in the Old Testament should be read with caution. They contain many examples of imperfect people (after all there were no other kind of people) used by God to accomplish His purposes. We should only take them as examples to follow if the text tells us God approved of them or if their actions align with His Law. God is sovereign – He rules over everything – and He can use flawed and even evil people to accomplish His eternal purposes. This was true in Abraham's family, in the judges and kings of Israel, and in the surrounding nations who often opposed Israel. This does not mean God approves of these people – He will judge all people fairly according to His standards – but that He is always in control through every situation.

Why is Jerusalem such a famous and contentious place today?

Jerusalem has special significance in the Bible. David made it his capital and Solomon built the Temple there. It was close to the city that Abraham had offered his son Isaac to God (Genesis 22). The psalms refer to it by the name Zion as God's city, from which His glory shines, for example Psalm 48:1-2: "the city of our God, which sits on his holy mountain [...] is high and magnificent; the whole earth rejoices to see it! Mount Zion, the holy mountain, is the city of the great King!" The fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple in 586 BC were a provoked great mourning for the Israelites (see Lamentations) and indicated the final collapse of a kingdom that had long been in terminal decline. The glory of God, that had been in the Temple, departed from the city with the people's rejection of God's covenant (Ezekiel 11:22-25). The prophets expressed their love for the city (e.g., Isaiah 62) and spoke of the Messiah coming to Jerusalem riding on a Donkey to reign on David's throne (Zechariah 9:9) and of the restoration of the city (e.g., Isaiah 44:21-28; Zechariah 2).

Many of the significant events in Jesus' ministry occurred around Jerusalem, especially His confrontations with the religious leaders and the events of Holy Week (Part 15). It was also in Jerusalem that the Church was born as the apostles received the baptism in the Holy Spirit and from there they began to spread the message about Jesus (Part 18). The writer to Hebrews describes the people of God as "Mount Zion [...] the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22) and Revelation 21 describes John's vision of the bride of the Lamb appearing like a city. In this 'new Jerusalem' the people of God from Old and New Testaments are united as one (verse 12 says the gates bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, while the foundations bear the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb according to verse 14). There is no Temple in the new Jerusalem because God and the Lamb inhabit the whole city (v22).

Jerusalem has been a very significant place throughout history and continues to be in the headlines often today. The main reason for this is that it is a significant place for three of the great religions of the world. Jews revere it as a holy place, especially the Wailing Wall, which is the main remaining wall of the Temple (the western wall of the enclosure it was located in). Christians have many significant sites in it associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Muslims also revere it as their third most holy site because they believe Muhammad had a special revelation from God there. There are, of course, political complications to this as both the modern state of Israel and the Palestinian authorities claim the city as their capital.

- What happened to the kingdom of Israel after Solomon?
- Who were the prophets and what was their message?

The Kingdom Divided and Defeated (1 Kings 12-22; 2 Kings)

After Solomon's death (930 BC) the kingdom was divided into two and the majority of the people rejected David's descendants as kings, just as God had said to Solomon. The two kingdoms were:

Israel (or Ephraim) to the north

Ten of the tribes, the most powerful of which was Ephraim (fulfilling Jacob's prophecy in Genesis that this tribe, from Joseph's younger son, would be strong), chose a man called Jeroboam as their king. He established a new capital in Shechem and, afraid that people who went to Jerusalem to worship God might be tempted to return their loyalty to David's dynasty, set up two golden calves for his subjects to worship (1 Kings 12:25-30). This rejection of God for personal political gain set the tone for the future of the northern kingdom. Over the next 208 years, it was ruled by 29 kings from nine different families (none from the family of David), none of whom worshipped Yahweh alone. Israel's capital city later moved to Tirzah and later still to a new city built by King Omri, called Samaria. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom was defeated by the Assyrians – a ruthless empire based in Mesopotamia – and many of its people were taken away to other lands, never to return although some who were faithful to God fled into the southern kingdom, so the ten tribes were not lost altogether.

Judah to the south

The tribe of Judah, soon joined by Benjamin, remained faithful to Solomon's son, Rehoboam, who continued to reign from Jerusalem. Over 344 years the kingdom of Judah was ruled by 19 kings and one queen, all from David's dynasty. It was smaller and usually weaker than its northern neighbour, but some of its kings were faithful to Yahweh and it had the Temple system of worship. Over time, however, the people of Judah also began to worship of idols and failed to enact the just laws God had given through Moses. Despite the efforts of some good Kings like Josiah (2 Kings 22-23) to restore the nation to God, the general trend was away from Him. Assyria was replaced by the Chaldeans, who ruled from Babylon, as the dominant power. Some nobles from Judah were exiled to Babylon in 605 BC and 3000 people, including king Jehoiachin, were taken in 598 BC. Finally, in 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, bringing the southern kingdom of Judah to an end (2 Kings 25:1-26).

The Prophets

Who were the prophets?

The prophets were people who spoke words from God to God's people, challenging them to trust in Him and to be faithful to their covenant relationship to Him. The first prophets in the Old Testament were advisors to the kings, calling them back to God when they sinned (e.g., Nathan with King David in 2 Samuel 12), but as the kings departed from God the prophets increasingly spoke to the common people. The key figures in this turning point were Elijah and his successor Elisha, who served God and confronted the evil king and queen Ahab and Jezebel in the northern kingdom around 875-797 BC (1 Kings 17- 2 Kings 13). Their ministry was accompanied by great miraculous signs, but the people would not return to God despite all of this. Elijah came to represent all of the prophets. Later prophets were commanded to record their messages in books, creating 16 books of the Old Testament named after prophets (Isaiah to Malachi).

The Old Testament prophets came from different backgrounds – some were ordinary people (e.g., shepherds and farmers) others held significant positions (e.g., officials or priests) – but all were called specially by God to speak for Him. They did not speak their own words, but words that God gave them without overriding their personalities (see 2 Peter 1:21). The prophets often used imagery, for example describing Israel as an unfaithful wife breaking her marriage promises to God her husband. God had rescued Israel, and loved her faithfully, but, like an adulterer, she kept on leaving Him for other gods. The prophets did not fully understand the significance of the things they said. Some of their words were simply for the people of their time, but in other cases they knew that God was revealing something special for the future (1 Peter 1:10-12), especially when they wrote about the future rescuer from David's line. Many prophets were rejected by the people and even killed because people wanted to live their own way rather than God's way (Luke 11:47-51).

What did the prophets say?

The prophets spoke God's words to the people, but within their writings are two types of revelation from God:

a) Present warnings and encouragements

Before the fall of Israel and Judah, the prophets (e.g., Joel, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Habakkuk) warned God's people to repent of their sins of idolatry and failure to obey the just standards of God's Law or they would face God's judgement in exile. Some also prophesied about God's future judgement on the enemies of God's people (Obadiah against Edom, Nahum against Assyria and Zephaniah against all nations). One prophet (Jonah) was given a message to call the Assyrians to repentance. His story gives an insight into the reluctance of many Israelites, including Jonah, to accept that God might love and forgive other nations. As the exile became inevitable (there no longer remained an opportunity to repent), prophets like Jeremiah were given words to prepare those who would listen for what was coming and what faithfulness would look like. After the return from exile, the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi encouraged the people to rebuild the Temple.

b) Future predictions

Scattered among their messages for the present, many of the prophets also spoke promises from God for the future. A few of these are fulfilled within Old Testament history, but many looked forward to a coming rescuer who came to be known as the Messiah (meaning the anointed or chosen one – in Greek this is 'Christ') or to the establishment of God's rule across the whole world. Many of these prophecies envisage the inclusion of people from other nations along with the Israelites in the blessings of God (continuing God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him).

Prophecies about the Messiah

Prophecies about the Messiah, or promised rescuer, are found in many prophetic books and also in some of the psalms David wrote. They include two major, contrasting images, which are exemplified below:

A] The Conquering King – many prophecies speak of a great King descended from David who will defeat God's enemies, rescuing His people from them, and rule justly forever on David's throne.

David's prophecy – Psalm 110

God speaks to David's Lord (David's King), honouring him at God's right hand (verse 1). This King will rule from Jerusalem (v2-3), will be a priest (v4) and will be agent through whom God judges the nations (v5-7).

Isaiah's prophecy – Isaiah 11:1-10

A new branch will arise from David's family (v1-2), a king who will obey God, ruling in absolute justice (v3-5). In His kingdom the curse that resulted from sin will be undone – there will be harmony for human beings with creation, with one another, and with God as this king draws all nations to Himself (v6-10).

B] The Suffering Servant – many other prophecies speak of a servant of God who will be rejected by the people, suffering and dying as a sacrifice for sins.

David's prophecy – Psalm 22:1-18

Despite His faithfulness to God, this man will be forsaken by God (v1-5) and mocked by others (v6-10). He will experience extreme thirst at a time when He is surrounded by His enemies (v11-16) and his hands and feet will be pierced as His enemies cast lots for His clothes (v17-18)

Isaiah's prophecy – Isaiah 52:13-53:12

The Servant will be highly exalted (52:13), but first He will be disfigured (52:14) and rejected by God's people (53:1-3). He, although sinless Himself, will suffer for the sins of others and will be silent when He is tried (53:4-9). His death will make many people right with God (53:10-12) and after He has died He will see the results of His suffering and be honoured for it (53:11, 12).

The obvious question when comparing these two images is whether they speak of one person or of two different people. How could one person be both a powerful, conquering king and a powerless, suffering servant? Who could fulfil such prophecies in any case? Who could embody such power and justice and who could be sinless and become a sacrifice for the sins for others? Who would God's promised rescuer be?

SUMMARY: God spoke to His people through prophets, calling them to be faithful to Him

- The prophets were ordinary people given words from God, but they were often ignored and rejected.
- The prophets' writings foretell that God's rescuer will be a conquering king and a suffering servant.

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. Do you believe that God speaks to people today? How would you know if a message that seemed to come from God was really from Him?

Read Isaiah 6

2. What does this passage reveal about who God is and what God is like?
3. What does Isaiah's response to his vision tell you about what happens when people encounter God and what does God's response (through the seraph in verses 6-7) say about our need and God's provision?
4. What does this chapter tell us about the nature of a prophet's ministry?

Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12

5. How will people respond to this servant of God?
6. What will the servant do for God's people and what is God's plan through this?
7. What will God do for His servant in response?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- Why do you think that idolatry was so appealing to the people of Israel even though they had God's Law and prophets warned them of its consequences? Why do we often prefer idols to God?
- Do you think people still tend to reject God's words when they are inconvenient for them as Israel did? Do you think you might have this tendency?
- Do you think God has the same kind of love for you and relentless commitment to you that He showed to Israel when He repeatedly spoke words of challenge and encouragement through prophets?
- Do you believe God has a good plan for the future? Do you agree with the vision of the Old Testament prophets that the world can only be set right when God comes to rule it directly through the Messiah?
- The prophets warned of God's judgement but also held out a promise of forgiveness for those who turn to God. How does this challenge you personally and what response do you need to make?

What does ‘Messiah’ mean?

‘Messiah’ is a Hebrew word meaning literally ‘the anointed One’. The Greek equivalent is rendered into English as ‘Christ’, a title usually used by Christians for Jesus. In Israel there were three kinds of people who served God who were at least sometimes anointed when they were appointed to their office: kings, priests and, at least occasionally, prophets (in 1 Kings 19:6 Elijah is told to anoint Elisha as his successor as a prophet). It is generally agreed that this physical anointing with oil (poured on the head) was a symbol of the person’s anointing with the Holy Spirit to empower them to fulfil the task God had given. In some psalms (2:2; 132:17) and in Daniel 9:25-26, the term Messiah is used to speak of someone who would come in the future to make God known. The term is used to refer to all the prophecies about a future Conquering King in David’s line. The reference in Daniel 9, however, refers to the Messiah being killed, associating it with atonement for sin, and Isaiah’s prophecies about God’s servant also speak of suffering raising the question whether there would be one Messiah or two.

Christians believe Jesus is God’s Messiah – His anointed or chosen one. There is a strong tradition in Christian thinking of describing the anointing of Jesus for all three Old Testament offices. He is certainly described in the New Testament as both a king and a priest – unusually, since the kings in Israel were from Judah while priests came from the tribe of Levi – but He also spoke God’s words in the same way the prophets had done and He is described in Hebrews 3:1 as God’s authorised messenger (or ‘apostle’) to us. Many Jews today expect a future coming Messiah and Christians believe they have missed the fact that the Messiah has already come in the person of Jesus. Muslims also speak of Jesus as Messiah (their holy book the Qur’an calls Him *Isa al Masih* in Arabic), although they have no explanation of what this means.

Are the Conquering King and the Suffering Servant the same person?

The terms Conquering King and Suffering Servant are widely used to describe the two strands of prophecies found especially in Isaiah (I am not sure who originally coined the terms). Jewish scholars had different opinions about whether these two strands of prophecy would be fulfilled in one person, or whether they were speaking about two different people. By the time of Jesus most Jewish people expected the Messiah to be the Conquering King, but not the Suffering Servant, because they could not imagine how someone who was obedient to God suffering in the way described for the Suffering Servant in passages like Isaiah 53. During His lifetime on earth, Jesus fulfilled the prophecies about the Suffering Servant (for example, Psalm 22 describes His crucifixion and Isaiah 53 explains its spiritual significance). The Study Aids for this module contain a chart showing a sample of how He fulfilled 25 of these prophecies, many of them beyond His control. The accuracy of Old Testament prophecy is an amazing proof of the truth of the Bible. Jesus also claimed, however, to be God’s promised King and spoke of a future time when He would fulfil the prophecies about the Conquering King’s victory over God’s enemies and establishment of God’s eternal kingdom on earth. The title ‘Conquering King’ clearly relates to Jesus’ anointing as king, while ‘Suffering Servant’ relates to His ministry as a priest, offering Himself as a sacrifice for sins.

Did the prophets understand they were speaking words from God about the future?

The Old Testament prophets clearly believed that they were not speaking their own words, but the words of God. They emphasise the fact that their words came as ‘oracles’ (revealed messages) from God and often prefaced their words with a statement that God was speaking or wrote in His voice. The New Testament affirms that the prophets were writing words that were given by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:20-21). To falsely claim to speak words from God was a serious offence in Israel and claimed prophecies were to be recognised as genuine by their alignment with the Law of Moses and the fact that predictions came true (Deuteronomy 18:15-22). What was not clear to the prophets, however, was which of their words were only for the present or for the immediate future and which were for the longer-term. In particular, they had little sense of the separation between the first coming of the Messiah as Suffering Servant and His second coming as Conquering King. They knew their words had future significance and that there would be a future Messiah, but the details of how the pieces fitted together or the timing of their fulfilment were not revealed to them (1 Peter 1:10-12).

- Why did the kingdoms of Israel and Judah disappear?
- How were the Jews in the land by the time of Jesus' birth?

God's Control Over History

God judges His people

The collapse of Israel and Judah may seem like God's plan for his people had failed, but God had warned them as they entered Canaan that they could only live there as long as they were obedient to His covenant (Deuteronomy 28:1,15,64). Israel was not faithful to the covenant in three major ways:

1. **Idolatry** – many began to worship false gods of the surrounding nations, sometimes alongside Yahweh;
2. **Hypocrisy** – some continued to sacrifice to God, but, in reality, their hearts were far from Him;
3. **Injustice** – the nation failed to follow God's just laws, oppressing the poor and marginalising foreigners.

Israel, called by God to know Him and make Him known to the nations, was failing. God acted in judgement and to purify His people, using the powerful nations of Assyria and Babylonia to achieve this aim (2 Kings 17:1-23; Jeremiah 22:8-9). God had not failed or forgotten His promises, but His people had been unfaithful. Three nations ruled over the ancient Near East successively and were used by God to accomplish His purposes:

Assyrians	1100-625 BC	The northern kingdom was exiled during their reign (722 BC);
Chaldeans (Babylonians)	625-539 BC	The southern kingdom (Judah) was defeated by them in 586 BC;
Medo-Persians	539-330 BC	The Jews returned to Jerusalem during their reign (see below).

God preserves His people

During the exile many people who stayed in the land grew far away from God. Some intermarried with other peoples settled by the Assyrians around the city of Samaria, becoming a people called the Samaritans. Some of those who were taken to Mesopotamia assimilated with their captors, but some remained faithful to God. They longed to return to the land God had given them and rebuild the Temple (see Psalm 137). God showed His grace by persevering this faithful remnant of His people during their exile in a number of ways:

- **David's family preserved** – King Jehoiachin of Judah (exiled in 598 BC) found favour with Nebuchadnezzar's successor, allowing David's family line to continue (2 Kings 25:27-30; Jeremiah 52:31-34).
- **Faithful prophets** – despite opposition from the people, God's prophets spoke His words faithfully to anyone who would listen in Judah. Through Jeremiah he told them that the exile was inevitable, that they should live peaceably in Babylon, seeking its prosperity, that He planned to prosper them, and that the exile would only last for 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10-14). Through Daniel, God gave insights into the timing of His plans and assured His people of His ultimate victory. Through Ezekiel, He gave visions of a glorious future when the Spirit of God would live in His people.
- **Israelites in high positions** – several young men from Judah, including the prophet Daniel, were taken to Babylon in 605 BC and became high officials in Babylonia and influenced its kings, making God known to them. Around 460 BC an Israelite woman, Esther, became queen of the Persian Empire and used her influence with the king to save her people from a plan to annihilate them.
- **Changes in imperial policy** – the policy of the Assyrians was to move around whole populations to wipe out national identities, meaning that the godless northern kingdom was permanently destroyed. The Chaldeans had a different policy, only removing elites from their own land and permitting more diversity, allowing people from Judah to maintain their identity. Finally, the Persians followed a more devolved approach to empire, permitting many faithful Israelites to return to their own land. God was working through these shifts in power to accomplish His purposes in history for His people.

God reveals His plans

Several prophecies contain details of God's plans, showing how He was in control of history:

- **The king who would allow the return (Isaiah 44:28-5)** – around 100 years before Jerusalem fell, God told Isaiah the name of the Persian king who would allow the Jews to return to their land. Cyrus would not worship God (45:4-5) but would permit the Temple to be rebuilt (44:28).

- **The duration of Judah's exile (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10-14)** – through Jeremiah, God revealed that Judah's exile would last 70 years. Jeremiah was writing in 606 BC, and the first exiles returned to Jerusalem in 538 BC, almost exactly 70 years later (Ezra 1:1).
- **Successive imperial powers (Daniel 2)** – Nebuchadnezzar dreamt of a statue with five parts representing four great powers that would dominate the Near East beginning with his own: the Chaldean head of gold; the Medo-Persian chest and arms of silver; belly and thighs of bronze indicating the Greek speaking rulers beginning with Alexander the Great (330-146 BC); and the Roman Empire represented by legs of iron (146 BC – 476 AD). The statue's feet of iron mixed with clay represented the disintegration of the Roman Empire and the disunited European powers that would follow. A great stone fell and hit the statue's feet, crushing the entire statue, indicating God's eternal kingdom replacing human kingdoms (Daniel 2:44).
- **The duration of foreign rule (Ezekiel 4:5-6)** – God told Ezekiel His people would be under His judgement for 430 years. Beginning in 598 BC, when Jehoiachin, the last truly independent king of Judah, was taken to Babylon, 430 years brings us to 168 BC, the year when a revolt against their Greek rulers began which would lead to an independent Jewish kingdom ruled by the Maccabeans.
- **The dates of the Messiah (Daniel 9:20-27)** – Daniel received a message from an angel called Gabriel while he was praying, as the faithful Jews in Babylon often did, for the city of Jerusalem. Gabriel told Daniel a period of 490 years (70 'sevens' of years) would be special for the Jews, during which their sins would be removed through atonement and righteousness restored (v24). This period would begin with a decree allowing the people to rebuild Jerusalem and after 483 years the Messiah ("a ruler – the Anointed One") would come (v25). He would be killed, apparently achieving nothing, and afterwards another ruler would destroy Jerusalem (v26). The decree to rebuild Jerusalem was made by the Persian King Artaxerxes in 457 BC (Ezra 7:12-26). Adding 483 years to this date brings us to AD 27, close to the time when Jesus Christ began to speak publicly. Daniel's prophecy leads us directly to Jesus, God's promised rescuer!

Return from Exile

As Isaiah prophesied, the Persian king Cyrus, who conquered Babylon in 539 BC, permitted God's people (now called 'Jews') to return to their land and rebuild the Temple. He also returned the gold and silver items stolen in 586 BC by Nebuchadnezzar. Faithful Jewish people returned to Jerusalem in three waves:

Date	Jewish Leader	Number	Mission	References
538 BC	Zerubbabel, heir of King David	50,000	An altar established, sacrifices recommenced and the Temple rebuilt by 518 BC	Ezra 1-6
458 BC	Ezra, priest and expert in the Law	2,000 men and families	The Law reinstated and taught to the people, with temple officials and priests at work	Ezra 7-10
445 BC	Nehemiah, official in Persia	Small group	Walls of the city rebuilt and the people enacting social justice and worshipping God faithfully	Nehemiah

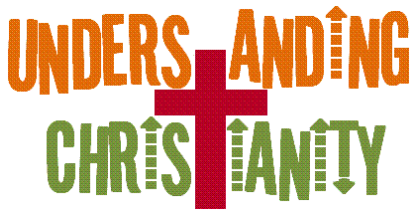
The priorities of the people are clear: sacrifice to God came before their own protection! God had purified His people. The survival of the nation of Israel throughout history despite such opposition is a great indicator that the Bible is true. No other nation has kept its identity for so many centuries despite so much opposition.

The Old Testament closes around 430 BC, with the Jews in the promised land, worshipping Him through sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem, but under the rule of foreign kings. Faithful people within Israel had received and preserved God's words for future generations. At times (especially under Joshua, David and Solomon and through Daniel) the nation had shown God's greatness and goodness to other nations and brought blessing to them. Ultimately, however, the nation failed to keep the covenant and even though they returned to the land, the promises to Abraham were not fulfilled. They were a small nation and the knowledge of God was confined largely to themselves. God's promised rescuer was still awaited.

The very last words of the Old Testament (Malachi 4:1-6) speak of the coming day of God's judgement and promise that the "Sun of Righteousness" would arise on people who were faithful to God (v2). The Messiah is clearly in view. Before He comes, however, there would be a forerunner like the prophet Elijah (v5). This 'cliff-hanger' leaves us wondering when God's conquering king and his suffering servant would come.

SUMMARY: God purified His people through the exile before bringing them back to the land

- God worked through powerful nations to judge, preserve and purify His people.
- The timeframe and mission for the coming rescuer was revealed through the prophet Daniel.



PART 8 – EXILE & RETURN

DISCUSS AND APPLY

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. Do you think human history tells any overarching story? Might God be working out His purposes through the rise and fall of nations?

Read Daniel 9

2. What does Daniel discover and how does he discover it (verses 1-3)?
3. Daniel was living in exile far from Jerusalem, having been taken to Babylon in his youth. What does his prayer tell us about the reason why the Israelites had ended up there (verses 4-14)?
4. What does Daniel ask God to do and why does Daniel think God should do it (verses 15-19)?
5. What do Gabriel's words in verses 20-23 tell us about the relationship between God and His people?
6. What do we learn from verses 24-27 about the work God's Anointed One must do and the timing of his coming? Who do you believe this Anointed One was?
7. Daniel 7 suggests that the Bible explains God's story behind human history (Daniel looks back to Moses and Jeremiah and receives words about the future). Do you believe this could be so?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- Do you see the sins that plagued Israel – idolatry, hypocrisy and injustice – in our society today? What about in your own life?
- God led Israel through the humbling experience of exile, so they could be purified in their worship of Him. Do you think God might do something similar in the lives of individuals today? Is that fair or good?
- Do you struggle to believe that God is sovereign over human history and international affairs? Would the ancient Israelites have struggled that way in their time?
- Based on your understanding so far, what do you think the Bible reveals as the true story of humankind and God's purposes for us? Is this different from what you believe or what the media portrays to us?
- Do you believe that Jesus could have been the fulfilment of the programme for history God revealed through Daniel and of the prophecies about God's conquering king and suffering servant?

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

PART 8 – EXILE & RETURN

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Could prophets really have predicted future events with such accuracy?

This question is not unlike the question addressed after Part 5 concerning the possibility of miracles. Many people struggle to believe that prophecies could have predicted the future. Some scholars of the Bible claim the prophecies about people like Cyrus (in Isaiah) and the world kingdoms (in Daniel) indicate a late date for these books or were added to them after the events. Their basis for this is, ultimately, that they cannot accept the possibility of predictive prophecy. This creates huge problems for the prophecies contained in the New Testament and other Old Testament prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled. It also cannot explain the accuracy of Daniel's prophecies about the timing of the Messiah, since Daniel cannot have been written or altered after the time of Jesus.

Once we accept that God exists and is actively involved in human history, the problem is resolved (even if it remains difficult for us to believe from our modernistic mindset). God gave these words to the prophets and they contain truths that only God could know. This is the essential nature of the Christian faith. It is not based on human reason or opinion, but on truth about God, His actions in history and His plans for the future, revealed by God in human words through human people. It is, fundamentally, a prophetic religion telling us things we could not know unless God had told us them.

Is God still in control of international affairs?

The Bible consistently describes God's rule over human history. He is the one who raises kings and nations and makes them fall and who determines the extent of their power (Daniel 2:21; Acts 17:26). No human being can occupy a position of authority without His permission (Romans 13:1). As explained in the Q&A after Part 6, this does not mean that God approves the actions of these rulers and peoples, but that He uses them to accomplish His greater purposes. At times in the Scriptures God's people struggled to understand how this could be – most notably the prophet Habakkuk who struggled with God's plan to use the Babylonians to judge Judah – but the message of the Bible is consistent – God is sovereign. The book of Daniel, in particular, emphasises God's sovereignty over the great empires of his time and beyond. From a human perspective they may look powerful and God's people may appear puny by comparison, but God is at work through everything. This confidence in the eternal purposes of God is also seen in the New Testament, for example in Romans 8, where the apostle Paul says that God works in everything for the good of His people (v28) and that nothing, including powers on earth, can thwart His loving plan for them (v38-39).

All of this means that we can say with confidence that God continues to work through the rise and fall of nations and civilisations today. We must, however, be wary about jumping to conclusions about what God's purpose is in all of this. Like Habakkuk, we may get a surprise if God told us. Many Christians believe there are some details in biblical prophecy about world events that must happen before the return of Christ, but we would be wise not to be dogmatic about details and to remember that no one knows the date. What we can be certain of is that God's purposes will not be defeated. Revelation provides a glorious insight into the battle that rages behind human history between God and Satan but shows clearly that though the Lamb who died (Jesus), God will be victorious and will bring human history to a very good conclusion.

Why were the people called Jews after the exile?

The term 'Jew' is a contraction of Judah since the people who returned from exile had come from the southern kingdom of Judah. The name Judah itself means either 'praised' or 'submission' and Jews were people who gave praise to Yahweh as they submitted to His Law. The words Jew and Jewish are not used in the Bible until the time of the Exile (before that the people are more properly called Israelites). The Jewish religion today is not the same as the Israelite religion before the exile. In part this reflects developments during the exile, when the reading of the Law became more central, the sacrificial system was not in operation, and the practice of meeting in houses of prayer called synagogues developed. These changes were compounded when the Romans destroyed the restored Temple in AD 70 and as the Jews lived scattered among other nations rather than in their own land. Modern usage of the word 'Jew' is complicated by the fact that it can refer either to the ethnic group descended from the biblical Jews (and ultimately from Jacob) or to an adherent of the religion.