



Travelling Together

Conversations along the way

Don Priest

Travelling Together

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Introduction

Travelling Together looks at aspects of the ways God's self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ informs our journey of endeavouring to live in love and hope by faith and with joy as the people of God.

Exploring biblical insights into God's relationship with creation and humanity, and the responses of people of faith, provides the context for these reflections. Understandings and appreciations of theologies of the triune God's presence among us in the humanity of Jesus inform and are informed by considering Jesus' sufferings, death, resurrection and ascension.

These ancient texts are best considered as theological reflections that included oral and written narratives shared and developed over many years. It is wise to work with their substance in their own contexts before considering perspectives from elsewhere in Scripture and other related documents. Biblical and theological studies provide opportunities to focus on worship confident that application to life situations flows readily from our relationship with God.

Travelling Together was written in the belief that the stories recounted by the Bible's authors provide valuable insights into trusting God and living meaningful and fruitful lives in ever-changing communities.

Travelling Together includes study series and some additional reflections. These series were shared in various settings, including camps and unassessed and unaccredited classes. They have been revised and, in several cases, expanded for this book. They are invitations for further exploration of their thoughts and themes by considering social, historical and theological contexts, forms of narrative and literature, and the reader's own experiences of life and faith.

The living God looks at passages using this or similar descriptions and explores some related ideas. The living God is seen in the Old Testament as the God who acts for the welfare of God's people, while in the New Testament this action is often related to the saving and restoring work of God as Father, Son and Spirit.

Nations and covenant considers God's covenants and presence through the tabernacle worship that is anticipated from the start of Genesis and detailed at the end of Exodus.

A series titled *Rhythms of life* which included *Songs of joy, lament and hope* based on several psalms is in the first collection of *Meditations on Resilience and Renewal*.¹ *Wonder, worship and work* reflects on aspects of daily life.

This book is the second of three similarly structured collections. *Living Love* includes series on themes from *Genesis and Revelation*, God's sovereignty (*God is*

¹ Don Priest, *Meditations on Resilience and Renewal*, vol. 1, (2022), 72–93.

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not up for re-election), *Knowing God*, *The deceit of evil and the mystery of God*, *Pathways of peace*, *Living in God's love and peace* (Ephesians), and *A symphony of light, life and love* (1 John). *Towards Eternity* covers studies on the sayings of Jesus from the cross (*One cross: seven sayings* and *Meditations on Jesus' crucifixion*) and Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (*From grave to glory*). Each collection finishes with several related reflections.

Travelling Together is a lay-person's journal, written and shared in the hope that it will encourage growth in community and understanding as we care for one other in this beautiful but troubled world. It is published as an expression of thanksgiving for the people and communities in which we lived and for the opportunities I was given to participate in their life and worship. I hope that reading this book encourages exploration of biblical themes and passages in their historical and theological settings, and that, in so doing, readers find encouragement, joy, peace and hope. I hope that reading my book deepens worship, encourages relationships, and enriches application to everyday life.

Don Priest
February 2021

The living God

The living God: creation and covenant

Eden, Noah, Abraham and Joseph

Word and breath

God's activity in forming and filling creation was in response to the word of God as the breath of God moved over the deep. Light, sky, clouds, oceans, dry land and living vegetation were created during the first three days described in the initial creation poem. The sun, the moon and living creatures, including humanity, were created on the next three days, completing God's 'very good' heavens and earth, and ushering in God's sabbath rest (Genesis 1:31).

The creation of humanity in the image of God established human society as a reflection of the divine community. Humanity's identity in God's creation makes best sense in their communion with God and in God's gifts and blessings to them of fruitfulness and abundance.

The second Genesis creation narrative describes God's creation of Adam's co-helper and companion: his 'bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh' (Genesis 1:23). He had been made from the 'dust of the ground' – from ground well-watered by the garden's streams – and only lived because of the breath God breathed into him (Genesis 2:7). Adam's creation and placement in Eden was because there 'was no one to till the ground'. Eve's creation within Eden was because it was 'not good that the man should be alone' *in this task of tilling and keeping* (Genesis 2:5, 15, 18). Adam needed a partner to realise his vocation: Eve was not inferiority to him, just as he was not inferior to earth's dust. The LORD created everything that was 'pleasant to the sight and good for food' and provided mineral resources to enhance their co-vocational life and sabbath-oriented rest (Genesis 1:9ff).

Eden's abundant provision also included the tree of death and the tree of life, so orienting their life for reciprocal activity, adoration and honour, and mutual giving and thanksgiving. The serpent's deceit in calling life death and death life, and its results in distorting and destroying relationships severed the first couple from the tree of life and their community together. To be eternally locked into their failure was never the divine plan.

Covenant and community

God's covenant purposes begin to emerge in these promises of fruitfulness and this tragedy of failure. Evil would be crushed, though at a cost, and Cain's nomadic absence from the presence of God would include security from immediate physical death. Cain's life in Nod meant offspring and settlement, while Seth's offspring sealed the initial formation of God's people, re-established after the death of the prophet Abel. We read of Seth's descendants, including Enoch, who 'walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him' (Genesis 5:24).

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Noah found grace in the LORD's sight at a time when God was grieved about his creation. We read that God's spirit would no longer dwell forever with humanity and life would cease without God's breath (cf. Job 34:14–15).

God's covenant with Noah re-established humanity's creational vocation. God's statement concerning the sanctity of life (which was linked to a creature's blood) was at the heart of God's promise to Noah, his descendants and all creatures. The covenant signature of the rainbow sealed God's promise to sustain living creatures against any divine retribution, even given any form of further human rebellion (Genesis 9:8ff).

God's creation would await its liberation: the liberation declared to the serpent, revealed in Abel's worship, evident in Enoch's life and sealed in the grace shown to Noah. God's gift of creation was affirmed in God's covenant gift to Noah. God's action in covenant revealed God's intention in creating, just as God's action in creation displayed God's covenant purposes.

Cain settled his family in the land of wanderings, but Abram was brought from his country, people and family to be a new family in a new home (Genesis 12:7, 13:14–17). God's promise to Abram was that nations who blessed Abram would themselves be blessed and nations who cursed Abram would also be cursed (Genesis 12:2, 3). These blessings and curses related to Abram's faith in God's mercy and grace (Genesis 12:7–9).

Melchizedek's priestly and royal blessing of Abram 'by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth' – who had delivered Abraham's community from their enemies – affirmed that God's declarations to Adam and Eve would be realised through God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 14:17ff).

Abraham's inheritance was assured by God's promise to be Abraham's shield and reward and in God's covenant declaration accompanying the smoking fire pot in the 'deep and dreadful darkness'. We are told that Abraham 'believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15:1–21). Abraham's testing on Mt. Moriah revealed his confidence that 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering' (Genesis 22:8).

Abraham's son Isaac was not this lamb, but Jesus declared to the religious leaders that their ancestor 'Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad' (John 8:56). Jesus was nominated by John the Baptist as God's Lamb who would remove the world's sin, and by a later author as being a permanent priest aligned with Melchizedek who would reign in Zion (Psalm 110, Hebrews 5–7). Jesus would not be sacrificed by God acting as Abraham intended to act but through the evil intentions of religious and political rulers.

When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers who thought he was dead, Joseph declared that 'God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors' (Genesis 45:7). Joseph's reunion with his

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beloved father, and Israel's words to his long-lost son that he 'can die now, having seen for myself that you are still alive' re-affirmed God's promises (Genesis 45:28, 46:3, 4, 30; cf. 32:22–31, 35:1–15).

Joseph's gentleness with his brothers taught them God's covenant mercy and that God works for good – for salvation – in events that others intentionally use to bring harm (Genesis 50:19).

Reflection

God sent his Messiah-Son Jesus in covenant mercy and grace to bear humanity's sins in his body on the cross and to heal us by his sufferings. Christ Jesus tasted death that those in his 'book of life' could receive the 'free gift of the water of life' and the healing and fruit of the tree of life in the new heavens and the new earth. Jesus' tree of death became a tree of life and what is now true by faith will one day be known 'face to face' (1 Peter 2:23–25; Revelation 7:17, 13:8, 20:12ff, 21:6, 27, 22:1, 19, 27; 1 John 3:1–3).

Moses and the Israelites – 1

Eagles' wings

In the face of the provocation of their own evil, and of the evil committed by those who opposed them, God's gracious mercy triumphed by redeeming and sanctifying them. They were given times of holy intimacy where they knew they had been carried out of Egypt 'on eagles' wings' and brought into God's presence. They knew their calling in terms of being God's 'treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation'. And they knew that this meant obeying God's voice and keeping God's covenant (Exodus 19:4–6).

Each of the ten commandments or sayings that outlined the characteristics of this covenant relationship was profiled as an 'I am ... you shall' statement, indicating that as surely as God had redeemed them, God would also bring them to the full living glory of this redemption. Each of these ten sayings promised blessings to the pure in heart and self-inflicted curses and judgements to the defiant and disobedient (Exodus 20:1ff).

They were God's gifts to God's redeemed community. Redemption would be ineffective and sanctification unachievable without them. These laws were not given as a legal tyranny or for bondage into a new slavery but as expressions of ways of living that would enable them to know freedom and to flourish. They were not heavy, burdensome words but were teaching them ways of life by giving instructions about sustainable lifestyles. They were testimony and witness to God's covenant as written statutes and ordinances indicating mutual divine-human accountability and outcomes. They were prophetic indicators of their destiny by God's covenant grace and mercy as God's royal priesthood and holy nation.

For your own well-being

The ten sayings described God's covenant character. God would provide for his people's wellbeing as they delighted in and loved him 'with all your heart and with all your soul' by 'walking in all his ways'. Their creator and covenant LORD God had 'set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples' (Deuteronomy 10:12–15).

Their worship was to image God by being fair and avoiding bribery, and by executing justice for orphans, widows and foreigners. God, after all, was their creator-father who rescued them from slavery in a foreign land and who cared for those who were vulnerable among them (cf. Deuteronomy 32:4–6).

They were therefore to keep God's sabbaths since they spoke of the initial creation and of their deliverance (Exodus 20:11, Deuteronomy 5:15). They were to honour God's name by teaching their children of God's grace, mercy and love. Life was to be honoured, just as God had created them and brought them to a new life away

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from bondage. Their faithfulness in marriage was to inform them that ‘your Maker is your husband’ (Isaiah 54:4f, Hosea 1:2ff, Jeremiah 2:1ff; 3:1–6, 20, Isaiah 1:21–23). All they owned was God’s personal gift to them. Their thankfulness for God’s loving mercy was their true witness to God, who was witnessing to all nations concerning his own being and action in his covenant with his people (Deuteronomy 4:5–8). Each person was to be at peace among God’s people and in God’s presence by living their lives in harmony with and dependant on God’s self-revelations.

They had heard the voice of the living God speaking out of ‘the fire, the cloud, and the darkness’. Fire, clouds and darkness indicated God’s covenant holiness and glory. The people, on hearing that God might speak to someone without that person perishing, knew of no example that confirmed this view:

For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive (Deuteronomy 5:23–27, cf. 1:30–33, 4:32–40, 5:1–5, 6:1–9)?

They decided that Moses should report to them what God told him and that they would listen and obey what they heard from him. They were commended for realising that they could only live with the help of a mediator between God and themselves. Life was precious and human failure was not lightly atoned. They were too often faced with the hardness of their own hearts and their need for the sacrifices that God had provided (e.g. Numbers 21:4–9, Leviticus 17:10–14, Deuteronomy 12:13–28, 21:22, 23).

Reflection

Moses’ longing for himself and his people was clear enough (Deuteronomy 4:21–40). He sensed that a greater prophet would come who would personify everything the law prescribed. Moses was a servant, while this coming prophet would be God’s Messiah-Son (John 1:14–18, Hebrews 3:1–6).

Moses was later described as a prophet ‘looking ahead to the reward’ that Messiah would accomplish (Hebrews 11:26; cf. 3:1–6, 11:23–28; Deuteronomy 18:15–22; Luke 9:28–36). This reward was God’s house, God’s sanctuary, the ‘city of the living God’ where the ‘assembly of the first-born’ live in communion with God. It was not just for Moses but for all God’s family (Hebrews 12:18–24, cf. 3:1–6, 8:1–13; Deuteronomy 7:6, 26:16–19).

An implication from the statement that the ‘LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe’ relates to the cultic worship practices of their neighbouring nations. Sacrifices that aimed to placate and ameliorate – to propitiate – hostile and angry gods who acted by revenge and malice were not welcome or necessary in worshipping the living covenant-God (cf. Luke 18:9–14).

Moses and the Israelites – 2

One God and one love

God's command to his people in Deuteronomy 6:4–9 instructed them concerning their true responses to God's redemption. It indicated God's relationships within himself and with his people, then and until his new creation was revealed. God's promises were 'to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments' and spoke of qualitative and quantitative fullness – they were seventy and had become a multitude. They were words about love for their children as well as for themselves:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

They were to treasure these words and to help their children memorise and understand them in the variety of situations that occurred in family life.

The *hearing* or *sh'ma* was four words: LORD, our God, LORD, one-alone. It was Israel's integrating statement as God's people. It indicated the integrity, integrality and unity of Israel's God. Only the LORD was their God: the LORD their God was the only God and was complete as God.

God's elective, free and holy love was expressed in God's covenant and called for their full response with all their hearts, souls, minds and resources (Deuteronomy 4:25–31, 10:12–21, 13:1–5). Their responses were to be their *only* priority, not even their *primary* priority, and not *one priority* among others. Their love for other people and their care for creation were to express and share this singular appreciative love of God: '... you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD' (cf. Leviticus 19:18).

The danger of forgetting the *sh'ma* was real and was best faced by reminding themselves of God's redemption while instructing the next generation. When their children asked about God's instructions, they were to remind them that God had *brought them out of slavery* so that God could *bring them into the promised land*. God's instructions were for their well-being and prosperity in this process and after they had settled in their new location (Deuteronomy 6:20–24).

The blessings that would be theirs by being obedient were substantial. To live by 'every word that comes from the mouth of God' meant receiving God's discipline and the harvest that it brings (Deuteronomy 7:12–8:10). God was testing them to mature and not punish them. Their trials would work to ensure that their trust was adequate for the task: they were to learn that having daily physical bread is one thing, while hearing God's word was quite another. God's goal was to ensure they were humble and not arrogant:

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He humbled you ... to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD (Deuteronomy 8:2, 3, also 1–20).

At the end of this discourse Moses instructed the people to ‘celebrate ... all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house’ by giving tithes. These celebrations were to acknowledge their history and God’s character and to provide for Levites, outsiders, orphans and widows (Deuteronomy 26:11, also 1–15).

Promised blessings

The people of God were to declare the covenant blessings and curses when they entered the promised land (Deuteronomy 27, 28). The different emphases on blessings and curses were in proportion to their hearts’ disposition. Blessings and curses were not simply about morality and immorality but indicated the way God’s covenant presence with them in gifts of grace, mercy and peace would impact their lives. The blessings were God’s holy and loving restorative promises (Deuteronomy 30:11ff, cf. 32:39; Psalm 1).

The converses to the curses give more detail on the blessings while the negatives of the blessings describe the curses. Since the blessings and curses provide details about what was contained in the ten commandments, the opposites of the last five commandments also indicate blessings.

The blessings and curses were consistent with God’s actions with Abel, Cain and Seth, with Noah and the nations of his era, and with Abraham and the priest-kings he encountered.

One message in this section of Deuteronomy is that God does not bless evil and so they were not to think that practising – and so blessing – evil would work beneficially for their welfare. Where the people endorsed evil, they were indicating divided love and split loyalty. God’s refusal to bless evil expressed God’s person and sovereignty. God was neither mechanical nor remote:

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

The ‘secret things’ included details about the times and seasons of God’s purposes while the revealed ones were not beyond them. The message Moses gave them was not too difficult for them, nor was it too remote from them but ‘is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity’ (Deuteronomy 30:11–15). The people were urged to be ‘strong and bold ... because it is the LORD your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you’ (Deuteronomy 31:7, 8).

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Not only had God not endorsed evil; God had also stood with them in their slavery to deliver them and was present with them in their Exodus to lead them:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Exodus 19:4).

The curses were signs and warnings about serving the LORD *joyfully and with gladness of heart* 'for the abundance of everything' they had been given (Deuteronomy 28:47, 48). True service was worship flowing from authentic love and obedience.

God told Moses at the end of Moses' life to compose a song and to teach it to the people as a witness against them should they indulge themselves and worship idols (Deuteronomy 31:19–21; cf. Exodus 15:1–21).

This song declared God as the perfect and faithful Rock who created, parented and redeemed his people: a people who 'are a perverse generation, children in whom there is no faithfulness' (Deuteronomy 32:1–43). It told of God being sovereign and never blessing evil; of God always abundantly providing for their needs. God's judgements were described as just and total and God's blessings as saving God's people, enabling them to share in God's own holy life of steadfast love, mercy, grace and peace (Deuteronomy 32:1ff, 33:26–29).

Reflection

Jesus summarised the *sh'ma* passage and the whole law as *loving God and loving neighbours* (Luke 10:27). The Sermon on the Mount commenced with blessings, blessings which correlate with Jesus' message at Nazareth about being anointed to bring the poor good news, to release captives, to restore sight to those who were blind, to release the oppressed and 'to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18ff).

Seeking Jesus' Father's kingdom would lead to all *these* things being added (Matthew 5:1ff, 6:32ff, 7:13–27; cf. Galatians 6:7–18). Every blessing is a warning of the consequences of defying the living God and all defiance implies a rejection of the reality and life of God's blessings. The Sermon on Mount impacted those present. Listeners aligned with the qualities indicated *were* blessed in that place and at that time. They indicated that they 'were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes' (Matthew 7:28, 29)!

Moses wanted the people to observe God's instructions diligently in the light of God testing them to know what was in their hearts. His emphasis on their need to realise that bread alone would not adequately nourish them resulted from his concern for their growth and maturity as God's people (Deuteronomy 8:3; cf. 2 Corinthians 6:1ff, Hebrews 3:7ff, 1 Peter 1:3ff, 2:19ff, 5:1–11; 2 Peter 1:3ff; Revelation 2:7 etc.). God was saying that God was going *his* way and that if they

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went any *other* way then failure would be theirs since everything they had was because God was with them (John 14:1ff; Acts 1:7; Deuteronomy 29:29).

God's way took Jesus to Golgotha, to the *place of curse, dis-grace and shame*, to where Cain and Cain's spiritual descendants lived, and to where God justified Abraham and his spiritual descendants by faith (Romans 4:1ff). God's new *exodus* was based on this transformation and transfiguration (cf. Luke 9:31).

If we haven't in our hearts *come out* of our places of spiritual slavery to *go in* to the realms of divine promise, then we will continually be exposed to all that needs God's healing gifts of grace and mercy and will be in danger of reacting for no valid reason. We are called to trust the God who will not fail us (Deuteronomy 31:6, 8; Hebrews 13:5). We are invited to celebrate and rejoice in God's blessings; to ask God to give, and then to receive and be thankful, and consider the needs of those who care for us and those who are strangers-aliens, widows and orphans.

Joshua, David and Elijah

Joshua and the people; Hannah, Ruth and Naomi

God revealed himself to Israel by redeeming and sanctifying them. God did this in his covenants with them, given through Noah, Abraham and Moses. These covenants affirmed his presence to his creation, and his intention to commune with his humanity as their God.

At the end of his life Joshua called the people together and explained that God had brought Abraham from idolatry to be the father of their nation. Joshua detailed the way God later rescued them from Egypt and brought them to the promised land. Joshua gave the people a choice: worship either 'the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are now living' or those which Abraham left behind 'beyond the River'. Joshua's family, by contrast, would 'revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness', free from idols of any source (Joshua 24:14–18). While the people wanted to serve the LORD, they needed reminding that true worship was a gift to be received with obedient hearts. The 'living God' who brought them to the promised land would 'turn and do you harm' if they practised idolatry (Joshua 3:10, 24:20).

Disobedience and judgements soon eventuated. God's provision of judges kept a semblance of national identity, with many doing 'what was right in their own eyes' (Judges 2:1–23, 21:25). No wonder 'the word of the LORD was rare' in the days of Samuel's childhood (1 Samuel 3:1), with those still faithful like Hannah and Elkanah, and Ruth, Naomi and Boaz, living in the intimacy, love and purity of God's covenant (1 Samuel 1:1–28; Ruth 1:16, 4:13ff).

Samuel and David

Samuel, the greatest of the judges, reminded them of Joshua's message by emphasising that the LORD was their helper (1 Samuel 7:3–17, cf. Genesis 2:18). The people rejected Samuel's views about governance. They were aware of his sons' lack of godliness and wanted a king 'like other nations' (1 Samuel 8:1ff). Leaders of both kinds could turn aside after gain, take bribes and pervert justice.

David's motives for tackling Goliath were mixed, as his brother noticed:

What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God (1 Samuel 17:26, cf. 17:28)?

David, believing that 'the battle is the LORD's', killed Goliath and the people defeated those who defied the 'armies of the living God' (1 Samuel 17:26, 36, 47). David's psalms were testimony to God's forgiveness, not only of his own many failures, but those of the nation (e.g. Psalms 23, 42, 63, 84). This forgiveness sustained him as king of Israel and evoked prophecies of a future anointed

prophet-priest-king who would herald the fulfilment of Israel's divine mission (2 Samuel 7:4ff; Psalms 2, 89, 110). David's song of thanksgiving in 2 Samuel 22 is full of his praises to the living God.

Elijah, Obadiah and Elisha

After Solomon's reign and his disobedience (1 Kings 11:1–13), God sent prophets as witnesses to his covenant with the people. Theirs was an awesome calling, one which exposed the people's need for God's mercy in his judgements, as well as declaring God's intentions to his rebellious people and their divided kingdom (1 Kings 12:1ff, 13:1ff).

Elijah prefaced his declaration of a coming drought with 'As the LORD lives'. He testified that the 'LORD sends rain on the earth' and would provide enough food for the prophet, the widow at Zarephath and her son, and even revive her son from death (1 Kings 17:1–24, 18:1, 41–46; cf. Deuteronomy 26:12 about God's concern for widows, orphans and strangers).

Obadiah 'revered the LORD greatly' and hid one hundred faithful prophets. Yet he needed Elijah's assurance that 'the spirit of the LORD [of hosts]' who 'lives' would bring Elijah to meet Ahab (1 Kings 18:1–19). Elijah drenched (baptised) the altar on Mount Carmel with water three times, and God consumed (baptised) it with fire (1 Kings 18:20–40).

Elijah's statement that he was no better than his ancestors, and the still, small voice that followed the wind, the earthquake and the fire, focused him on who had won the victory on Mt. Carmel, and recalled the giving of the law to Moses (1 Kings 19:1–18; cf. Deuteronomy 5:22).

Micaiah was a true prophet who refused to flatter the king of Israel:

As the Lord lives, whatever the Lord says to me, that I will speak ... I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the Lord said, 'These have no master; let each one go home in peace' (1 Kings 22:14–17).

The story surrounding Micaiah's vision of the 'LORD sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him' planning the history of Israel and its kings was similar to Elisha asking God to show his servant the 'horses and chariots of fire' (1 Kings 22:13ff; 2 Kings 6:17). God's gift to the Shunammite woman and her husband of a son, God's bringing the boy back to life through the prophet and then later restoring her house, land and revenue after a famine powerfully witnessed to God's covenant purposes in the midst of a people under judgement through famines and foreign oppressors (2 Kings 4:8–37, 6:1ff, 7:1ff, 8:1–6).

Elisha's ministry was no solo effort. The 'company of prophets' and others who were with him were shown God's provision for their needs (2 Kings 4:1–6, 38–44). They were often involved in Elisha's ministry, though not always to their own

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well-being, as when Gehazi became leprous after giving Naaman a false message (2 Kings 2:3, 15–18, 4:12, 25, 5:10, 20–27, 6:1, 15).

A young prophet similarly added his own words on relaying Elisha's prophecy by telling Jehu that Jehu would as king fulfil Elijah's prophecy about Ahab, and whose words were used by Jehu in seeking to fulfil them (2 Kings 9:1ff).

Jehu's 'zeal for the LORD' illustrated the dangers of meddling with the word of the living God while not being 'careful to follow the law of the LORD the God of Israel with all his heart'. Sadly, Jehu 'did not turn from the sins of Jeroboam, which he caused Israel to commit' (2 Kings 10:1ff). As a result, 'In those days the LORD began to trim off parts of Israel' (2 Kings 10:32).

The death of Elisha, like that of Elijah, affirmed that God was present to his people (2 Kings 2:1–14, 13:14–21).

Reflection

The living God was 'God in Israel', prophesying of an altar and a sacrifice offered by his Son of whom the second Elijah was unworthy 'to untie the thong of his sandals'. This Messiah would 'baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire', having been first baptised by John in the River, anointed by the Spirit and attested by his Father's voice. Elijah, like Moses, looked for the fulfillment of the promises made by the living God (1 Kings 18:36; Malachi 3:1–4; Luke 3:15–22, 12:50; Hebrews 10:5ff, 11:23–28, 13:12ff; Romans 11:2; James 5:17).

Paul's comment on the Israelites in the wilderness applies equally well to today as it did in his lifetime and during the lives of the former prophets:

These things ... were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall (1 Corinthians 10:11–12).

The writer of the book of Hebrews thought along the same lines when writing about expressing thankfulness in awe-inspiring adoration for receiving God's unshakable kingdom for 'our God is a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12:28, 29).

God's kingdom is unshakable, but we can be shaken and will be until we long for the living God as a deer longs for the water-brook. Until we see the table God provides for us and are not afraid because we are in God's presence even when surrounded by enemies. Until God's communion with his people secures us and we know that God is faithful to all his creation and has his goal to bring it to its full blossom and renewal and to flood the heavens and the earth with his glory – the glory of seeing his family together and with him.

Isaiah and Jeremiah

Isaiah and Hezekiah

The relationships between prophets, priests (and other religious leaders) and kings reveal much concerning the presence of the living God with his people. Yet nothing seems to happen that is inconsistent with God's covenants, especially God's covenant with Moses.

God's deliverance and preservation of Hezekiah, and Isaiah's prophetic ministry were a little prior to the fall of Jerusalem. Hezekiah was a king of Judah who was seen as being like David in obeying and worshipping the LORD. But the nation was weak and at the mercy of its enemies. The taunts of one enemy, Sennacherib of Assyria, were based on his confidence in his own nation's gods (2 Kings 18:17–37; cf. Isaiah 36:1–22).

Hezekiah's prayer was indication of his faith with its mentions of cherubim highlighting the holy of holies in the temple, and of the *sh'ma* (Genesis 3:24; Exodus 25:18ff; Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 1 Kings 6:23ff):

O LORD the God of Israel, who are *enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone*, of all the kingdoms of the earth; *you have made heaven and earth*. Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock *the living God*. ... So now, O LORD our God, save us, I pray you, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that *you, O LORD, are God alone* (2 Kings 19:15–19, cf. Isaiah 37:15–20, italics added).

Isaiah prophesied of a Davidic ruler being a light during times of distress, 'gloom of anguish' and 'thick darkness'. This king would oppose the demons which 'chirp and mutter' and people who ask their gods about 'the dead on behalf of the living'. Isaiah spoke of 'the children whom the LORD has given me' as being signs from the LORD of hosts (Isaiah 8:16–9:7; cf. Hebrews 2:13). God's concern was the nations, and with fulfilling the words of his covenants.

Jeremiah and his lament

The 'idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field' while the LORD is the authentic living God and permanent ruler. Jeremiah worshipped the LORD as being incomparable. His message was that the living God created everything by words of wisdom and understanding while idolaters are foolish and ignorant in worshipping false images and breathless idols (Jeremiah 10:1–16).

Yet Israel did not want to be God's heritage and so had abandoned their youthful 'love as a bride' by exchanging 'their glory for something that does not profit', and by forsaking God as the 'fountain of living water' for 'cracked cisterns that can hold no water' (Jeremiah 2:1–13).

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God's judgements come with the LORD giving his people a choice between 'the way of life' by going into exile and 'the way of death' by remaining where they were (Jeremiah 21:8, 9). The promises in Exodus and Deuteronomy about settling in the promised land were reversed: remaining in the promised land meant death while survival required going into exile!

Jeremiah's intense pain in declaring God's word and in experiencing these judgements was great (Jeremiah 23:9–11). His lament was because of the ungodliness and wickedness of the prophets and priests.

Jeremiah quoted God telling the nation not to listen to the prophets as they were deluded in promising prosperity rather than calamity. God asked his people several questions, including:

- Who had stood in the LORD's council so that they could receive God's word and then proclaim it? God's assessment was that the prophets had gone out and declared God's messages without being sent and without God speaking to them. The people, according to God, would have repented of their evil if the false prophets had told the truth.
- Was the LORD God a long way away (and not filling the universe) or with them (and aware of what they were doing)? God's declaration was that he knew of the lies they were broadcasting using his authority:

What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Jeremiah was told that he was to respond to *their* question about 'the burden of the LORD' by telling them that they were a burden which the LORD would discard: 'And I will bring upon you everlasting disgrace and perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten' (Jeremiah 23:18ff).

Jeremiah also saw God's mercy in these judgements. He believed a time would come when a Davidic 'righteous Branch' who would be known by the title 'The LORD is our righteousness' would reign wisely, act justly and righteously, and enable God's people to 'live in safety'.

When this time came, the people would recall their exile more than their earlier Exodus (Jeremiah 23:5–8). Meanwhile, they were to build houses, live in them and have families while in exile. They were to seek the welfare of Babylon while living there for seventy years (Jeremiah 29:1–14). Then, amazingly, considering their evil, they would celebrate their return and

be radiant over the goodness of the LORD ... their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again (Jeremiah 31:12).

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Just as the LORD ‘watched over them’ in judgement, now he would ‘watch over them to build and to plant’ (Jeremiah 31:28). Despite great ‘lamentation and bitter weeping’ including Rachel’s refusal of sympathy about her murdered children, her descendants were to return from captivity with hope and joy (Jeremiah 31:15ff).

They would no longer believe themselves to be victims of their parents’ actions (or because of their circumstances) but would acknowledge that everyone is personally accountable before God for their own actions (Jeremiah 31:30).

Yet Jeremiah believed that no-one needed to die in or for their sins because God planned to make a ‘new covenant’ with them. God would write this new covenant ‘on their hearts’, forgive them and give them community. They would understand God’s love, follow God’s ways and be God’s people – whether they were socially, religiously, economically or politically important or insignificant (Jeremiah 31:27–34).

While none of the previous covenants had been too hard or too remote, the people’s response to this new covenant would be refreshing and reinvigorating because God would inscribe his law within them (cf. Deuteronomy 30:11ff; Jeremiah 32:27).

God confirmed this new covenant by correlating it with his ongoing sustaining of the immeasurable heavens and the unexplorable earth as its creator. Just as creation would be perpetually present to God, so God’s presence would always be with God’s people (Jeremiah 31:35–37, cf. Isaiah 54:1–10).

Reflection

Jeremiah believed that God’s law would come to the hearts and minds of the rebellious nation through a ‘righteous Branch’ who would faithfully shepherd them (Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15). God’s promise to Abraham of a son, Moses’ prophecy of a prophet greater than himself, David’s declarations of a messianic, king, priest descendant who would rule the nations, the messages in Isaiah of a child who would bring perpetual peace to David’s throne and of a suffering servant who would bear their sins revealed the way God would heal them from their *false worship* and their *lying prophets* who treated their *wounds as mere scratches* (Jeremiah 6–8).

The writer of Hebrews described a ‘better covenant’ in terms of Christ’s ministry in the sanctuary, of his current action now seated at the ‘right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens’ having ‘offered himself without blemish to God’, and of him purifying ‘our consciences from dead works to worship the living God’ (Hebrews 8:1–3, 9:11–14).

Jesus came to do God’s will and ‘offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins’ and now waits for the final defeat of evil. This work of the Spirit in Christ and of

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Christ in the Spirit is testified to by the Holy Spirit, brings forgiveness to God's people, writes God's way of life on our hearts and enables us to live righteously by faith (cf. Jeremiah 31:31–34; Habakkuk 2:4). We can be confident that we will receive the full inheritance of what God has promised as 'a great reward' (Hebrews 10:5–15, 36). Meanwhile, we are to 'hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful'. The author warns those who outrage the 'Spirit of grace' that 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Hebrews 10:19–31).

The book of Jeremiah records God's – and Jeremiah's – laments. The first section includes those in Jeremiah 2:9–19, 8:4–9:2, 14:1–10, 15:19–22, 17:5–18). While the book of Lamentations is sometimes attributed to Jeremiah, its author and date are unknown. Its structure is intentional, and its setting may have been liturgical. The suffering assigned to its author and to the citizens of Jerusalem is frequently mentioned (e.g. Lamentations 1:11, 19, 2:11–19, 3:43–54, 4:4, 9, 5:4, 9, 10) while the theme of hope is provided as an encouragement for those experiencing, remembering or expecting suffering (Lamentations 3:19–42, 55–58).

Ezekiel

In exile with God

Ezekiel saw four living creatures in a vision ‘when the hand of the LORD was on him’ while he was with other exiles (Ezekiel 1:3). The living creatures emerged from a bright, fiery cloud which came in a northerly stormy wind (cf. Genesis 1:2; Exodus 13:17ff).

They moved ‘straight ahead’ in perfect harmony ‘wherever the spirit would go ... like a flash of lightning’. A wheel was on earth beside each of them and moved with them ‘for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels’. Above them was a ‘dome, shining like crystal, spread out above their heads’.

Ezekiel heard ‘the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the Almighty’ and this introduced him to a ‘voice over the dome’ from ‘something that seemed like a human form’ on the ‘likeness of a throne’. God’s glory looked to him like fire and a rainbow (Ezekiel 1:4–28; cf. Genesis 9:8ff).

God’s commissioning of Ezekiel included showing him God’s glory leaving God’s temple. Ezekiel was made a guardian of life and death to the people of God by a revelation of God’s holiness. Ezekiel’s responsibility for speaking the LORD’s messages to them whether or not they listened was confirmed by being given a scroll containing ‘words of lamentation and mourning and woe’ (Ezekiel 2:10).

Ezekiel was told to eat this scroll and found it ‘sweet as honey’, though the experiences that followed were unpleasant because God’s people were ‘a rebellious house’ (Ezekiel 2:8–3:27). The descriptions of the siege of Jerusalem, God’s judgements on Israel for its idolatry, the disasters that followed and the ‘vile abominations’ conducted by the religious leaders involved Ezekiel being very present to what occurred (Ezekiel 4:1–9:11).

After a further vision profiling the departure of God’s glory from Jerusalem (Ezekiel 9:3, 10:1ff), further judgements on false counsellors led Ezekiel to ask whether God would ‘make a full end of the remnant of Israel’ (Ezekiel 11:13). God assured Ezekiel that God would be ‘a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone’ and would give them ‘one heart’ and put a ‘new spirit within them’ (Ezekiel 11:16ff).

God’s word came repeatedly to him with the introduction ‘As I live, says the Lord GOD’, and spoke of a judgement so severe that Noah, Daniel and Job would escape without anyone else (Ezekiel 14:1ff). Judah’s exile was outlined, false prophets were condemned, and the people were profiled as a useless vine and a deluded, lewd and adulterous bride (Ezekiel 12:1–16:58). God would re-establish them in their homeland despite their evil by bringing ‘low the high tree’ and making ‘high the low tree’ (Ezekiel 17:1–24, cf. 20:33–44).

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Ezekiel was told to stop using the proverb 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'. Ezekiel's problem was not that terrible consequences inevitably came from evil actions but that these awful outcomes did not absolve anyone from their immediate responsibilities. Using this proverb in the way Ezekiel had been applying it also masked God's judgements and his mercies. Ezekiel was to recognise that each person's failures ultimately lead to their own death since everyone's life belongs to God (Ezekiel 18:1ff).

Wicked people who repent would be declared righteous because God has no pleasure in their death. Righteous people who reject righteousness and commit 'the same abominable things that the wicked do' would however perish. God's advice was simple and direct. They should repent and reject ruinous evil and get themselves new hearts and new spirits – especially since they would be judged according to what they did:

Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live (Ezekiel 18:30–32, cf. 33:1–20; Jeremiah 31:27–30).

Ezekiel chapters 19 to 32 includes more prophecies against God's people as well as prophecies against other nations. The prophet's griefs and lamentations are evident throughout these descriptions, especially when recording his own sorrow regarding his wife's death (Ezekiel 24:15ff).

At home with God

The remainder of the book is in two main sections. Chapters 33 to 39 outline more judgements and describe promises of restoration while chapters 40 to 48 profile a new temple and give living arrangements for the returned exiles.

After re-emphasising earlier themes in the context of the fall of Jerusalem, contrasts are made between good and false prophets and shepherds (Ezekiel 33:23–34). God would be their authentic shepherd. He would bring them home and separate aggressive from vulnerable sheep. God promised to establish 'a covenant of peace' with them and their homelands which would enable them to live securely. God would 'send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing'.

God's 'covenant of peace' under God's Davidic shepherd-prince would enable environmental restoration and restore God's people (Ezekiel 34:23–26). Ezekiel was told to prophesy 'to the mountains and the hills, the watercourses and the valleys, the desolate wastes and the deserted towns' which had been devastated. He was to declare that God's people would 'soon come home' (Ezekiel 36:4, 8).

Renewal would come to the LORD's people who had profaned God's holy and great name and had been sent into exile. God would sanctify his name so that other nations would know that God was their LORD. This sanctification involved

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sending his people home from exile after cleansing them of idolatry and giving them new hearts and new spirits (Ezekiel 36:20–32).

They were to remember their previous wickedness with sorrow and regret. They were to remember with thanksgiving that God had cleansed them and caused them to live in their re-established communities and to rebuild their ruins:

And they will say, ‘This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified’ (Ezekiel 36:30–35).

Their national tribal divisions would be healed, and God’s sanctuary would be permanently established among them as confirmation of his everlasting peace-covenant with them. They would cease their apostasies and be the priest-nation of which God told Moses under this covenantal renewal (Ezekiel 37:15–28, cf. Exodus 19:4–6).

Ezekiel prophesied that their dry and scattered bones would come together and revive. God’s prophetic word would breathe life into their dead corpses and an army would arise under God’s true shepherd. Evil empires would fail and witness the return of God’s people to their homeland (Ezekiel 37:1ff).

God would reveal ‘his glory among the nations’ and display his holiness in the sight of many nations. These nations would then realise that God had sent his people into exile to purify them and would return them to their own land:

I will leave none of them behind; and I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord GOD (Ezekiel 39:21–29).

Ezekiel was finally given a vision of a new temple filled with the same glory of God that he had seen leave the temple. He saw water stream out from near the altar, ‘living creatures’ including fish thrive, food-bearing trees flourish alongside the widening river, new boundaries set in the land as the inheritance of those returning from exile, and a new city named ‘the LORD is there’. The life of the renewed people would be pure worship because they lived with integrity as the people of the living God who had brought about their national resurrection, renewal and revival (Ezekiel 40:1–48:35; cf. Genesis 2:4bff; Revelation 22:1ff).

Reflection

There are similarities between the introductory settings in the books of Ezekiel and Revelation. Both writers received celestial visions, both wrote what they were given, both were to share what they saw and heard, Ezekiel was in exile and John was imprisoned, ‘a spirit entered into’ Ezekiel and John ‘was in the Spirit’, and both Ezekiel and John fell on their faces (Ezekiel 3:24; Revelation 1:10). Both books finish with descriptions of God-given temples and of God’s people being with God.

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Ezekiel's outline of God's accountability of him as a sentinel or watchman and of the people as rebellious and set for exilic judgement until they repented needs careful consideration. Immediately preceding this disclosure Ezekiel was taken by the spirit to be *with* the exiles and 'sat there among them, stunned, for seven days' (Ezekiel 3:15; cf. Revelation 1:10). His perspective of rebellion and righteousness was not divorced from his sufferings *with* God's people and was not made from a position of power and privilege *over* them (cf. Matthew 18:1ff, 20:24ff, 22:34ff, 23:8–12; 1 Peter 5:1–11; Philippians 2:1–11; James 4:6–10).

God's offer to justify Cain required Cain's faith – Cain's willingness to 'do well' and trust God when offering sacrifices (Genesis 4:7). Ezekiel's message to God's people was that God was *with them* in exile waiting to bless faithful trust and to restore them by taking them home again (cf. Luke 18:9–14).

God's rejection of the parable Ezekiel had been using about eating sour grapes and children's teeth being set on edge was concerning an interpretation that absolved people of their responsibilities. Many aspects of the environments in which we find ourselves are inherited or external to us. This parable highlights our responses, and while our circumstances are issues, they are not valid reasons that enable us to escape accountability. Only God's grace can sustain us – that was God's message to Cain and through Ezekiel to God's people.

The descriptions of the new temple that would come with this further *exodus* reminded Ezekiel's readers and listeners of Eden and of the Genesis creation narratives with their implicit profile of creation and Eden as God's original dwelling places (cf. Luke 9:31; Revelation 19:1–22:21).

Daniel

Trust

The book of Daniel is in the Writings section of the Hebrew Bible rather than in the second group of Prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets). The book of Daniel is in two parts, each of which has different styles suggesting different dates of writing and/or editing.

Nebuchadnezzar

The first narrative in the book of Daniel records that Daniel was thought to be ‘without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king’s palace’. We read that God gave him and his three friends, all of whom were employed in government service, ‘knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams’ (Daniel 1:4, 17).

God enabled Daniel to understand the ‘mystery’ in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream by giving Daniel a night-time vision, for which Daniel blessed the ‘God of heaven’ for God’s wisdom and power in changing ‘times and seasons’ and in revealing mysteries. Daniel believed that his God ‘knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with him’ (Daniel 2:19–23).

This alignment of the ‘God of heaven’ with Daniel’s God is a key theme. The ‘God of heaven’ refers to the belief that a supreme divine being ruled over the tribal and national deities, each of whom had dominating power through rulers such as Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel identified the ‘God of heaven’ with his God, the LORD. His belief in the supremacy of his God was reflected in the identification of God’s covenant with God being creator and of their being God’s people and God’s creation (cf. Psalm 100).

This relationship between the gods is evident in the king’s response to Daniel’s successful interpretation of the king’s dream. Nebuchadnezzar’s response was that Daniel’s God was not only ‘God of gods and Lord of kings’ but that God had revealed mysteries to Daniel (Daniel 2:27).

Daniel’s friends were determined not to presume on their comforts or to compromise their integrity or faith when intimidated. God gave personal witness to Nebuchadnezzar from the furnace through the three ‘servants of the Most High God’ – and the presence of a fourth person with the ‘the appearance of a god’ – as well as by Daniel’s faithful interpretation of dreams. The alleged relationship between their God – called the ‘Most High God’ – and the idol-god the king had erected was again critical to the king’s decision (Daniel 3:24–30).

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After his season of insanity, Nebuchadnezzar 'blessed the Most High, and praised and honoured the one who lives forever'. He described God's reign as perpetual and indicated that God would achieve God's purposes in heaven and on earth

for all his works are truth, and his ways are justice; and he is able to bring low those who walk in pride (Daniel 4:34ff; cf. Psalms 115, 135).

Belshazzar

Daniel's interpretation of the writing on the wall included Daniel referring to 'the Most High God' and Belshazzar's exaltation of himself 'against the Lord of heaven' (Daniel 5:23)!

Darius

When Darius' leaders wanted to destroy Daniel's reputation as a government leader, they were confronted by Daniel's loyalty and integrity. Their strategy to undermine Daniel involved them setting up a situation where his belief in his God's law would conflict with the king's governance (Daniel 6:4, 5).

Their plan seemed to work when Daniel was tossed into the den of lions for praying to his God. The king called him the 'servant of the living God' when Daniel was removed unharmed from the lion's den 'because he had trusted in his God'. Daniel witnessed to the king that God had sent God's angel to protect him because he had not done anything wrong.

The king's response was to testify that Daniel's God was 'the living God' who endures forever and whose reign and realm were permanent (Daniel 6:20–26).

The emphasis on Daniel's faithfulness and trustworthiness connected with him being found blameless in both the presence of the living God and Darius. Daniel's integrity resulted from his faith which was expressed by his actions rather than resulting from them. This relational dimension was also evident in his witness to the king about his God and God's angel (Daniel 6:22).

Hope

While Daniel chapter 7 belongs to the second section of the book, it concludes the Aramaic part which began in Daniel 2:4b. The rest of the book of Daniel is written in Hebrew. The second section is in three parts: two set of visions with Daniel's prayer between them.

First set of visions

The editor(s) and/or author of the second part of the book assigned these dreams to the beginning of Belshazzar's reign. God revealed his sovereign purposes and judgements to Daniel in these visions. They affected not only the nation of Israel and its release from judgements, but every nation and the spiritual powers that infest them.

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The destruction of the four beasts which emerge and ‘speak words against the Most High, ... wear out the holy ones of the Most High, and ... attempt to change the sacred seasons and the law’ was in God’s hands (Daniel 7:25).

Daniel is described as seeing an ‘Ancient One’ seated with snow-white clothing on a throne which was alight and had burning wheels. This ‘Ancient One’ had hair like pure wool and fire streamed from this One’s presence. A great multitude served this One as the ‘court sat in judgment, and the books were opened’ (Daniel 7:9, 10).

Daniel watched as ‘one like a human being’ appeared before this Ancient One and received permanent ‘dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him’ (Daniel 7:13, 14).

This reign was both singular from the human-like being and plural as victory came by the Ancient One passing judgment in favour of the Most High’s ‘holy ones’ who ‘gained possession of the kingdom’ (Daniel 7:22, cf. 7:26, 27).

Daniel’s prayer

Daniel was reading the book of Jeremiah at the start of Darius’ reign over the Chaldeans (Daniel 9:1). Daniel noticed how long Jerusalem was predicted to be ruined and the people exiled. Daniel’s subsequent prayer reveals his heart and declares that what had happened and was to occur was consistent with God’s covenantal and creational self-revelation.

Daniel’s prayer worshipped God as ‘great and awesome’ and faithful in keeping covenant and steadfastly loving those who love God and follow God’s instructions. God’s people, by contrast, had committed evil and had not lived according to God’s plans and purposes. God therefore had been righteousness while ‘open shame’ had overtaken God’s people.

Daniel then prayed according to the revelation about God given after the incident involving the golden calf and according to the testimonies of the prophets (Daniel 9:4–9; cf. Exodus 34:6, 7).

Daniel described the nation’s calamity in terms of the outcomes predicted by Moses. God’s people had not entreated ‘the favour of the Lord our God’ or turned from their iniquities by ‘reflecting on his fidelity’ (Daniel 9:13).

Daniel then reminded God of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt through the Exodus and prayed for God’s forgiveness and mercy because of God’s own being (Daniel 9:19). Daniel’s prayer enlarged on the themes in Daniel’s earlier prayers (Daniel 6:10, 11).

Second set of visions

After more prophecies involving great sufferings and anguish, national and personal resurrection and deliverance awaited those who remained faithful:

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Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever (Daniel 12:1ff).

Daniel was to go his way in peace and quiet and await his reward.

Reflection

The naming of God as ‘the Most High God’ or ‘the God of heaven’ in the first half of the book of Daniel changes in the second section. While ‘the Most High God’ is mentioned several times in chapter 7, God is called ‘the Ancient One’ on a number of occasions and is not named as ‘the God of heaven’ in this half. Daniel’s prayer in chapter 9 is in Hebrew and uses God’s covenant name ‘the LORD’ several times. These textual indicators help point to the literary genres used and to when the two parts may have been written.

The early stories are non-trivial, and the final visions are not for calculating history schemes (Daniel 12:1ff; cf. Acts 1:8)! Their themes are reminders of human frailty and the way beastly arrogance, ambition and anger at personal, national and religious levels leads to abuse, destruction and failure. The profile of God caring for humanity and one like a human person present to them by being synonymous with them significantly highlights various Hebrew and Jewish perspectives. This framework correlates in many ways with Isaiah’s suffering servant themes, Jeremiah’s new covenant promises and Ezekiel’s outline of the characteristics of good shepherds – who, unlike false shepherds and false prophets, do not engage in obsequious servility by self-virtue signalling at the expense of the vulnerable and disempowered.

The Gospel narratives of Jesus as Son of Man and the Pauline perspectives on Jesus in Philippians 2 and other passages present a God-with-humanity and God-for-humanity who died as a human person caring for and loving humanity.

The references to God’s mercy and Daniel’s qualities are linked and portray Daniel as a person of faith. Not only did he fulfil Jeremiah’s injunction that exiles were to build residences in Babylon and to seek the city’s welfare, his faithfulness to God and his compassion for his people caused him to pray as he did (Daniel 6:10, 11, 9:1ff; cf. Jeremiah 29:1ff).

The book’s finale summarises its theme: the living God was God of the living and the God of the dead. God was the resurrection God of their exile and Exodus, with Daniel’s answer to the king’s question as to whether the living God had saved Daniel indicating the hope promised to all of God’s people.

The safest place in Babylon seemed to be walking in the furnace with someone having the ‘appearance of a god’ (Daniel 3:24–27). Being called the living God’s servant witnessed to a divine reign that transcends the domination of human empires (Daniel 6:20–28; cf. Psalm 22:12, 13, 21).

The minor prophets – 1

God's love

Hosea, Amos and Micah prophesied before the fall of Israel. Hosea lived in the northern tribes, Amos lived near Jerusalem and Micah lived at the same time as Isaiah (cf. Jeremiah 26:18, 19).

Hosea

Hosea believed that God would restore them after judging them. Two seasons of exile would be followed by one of revival so that God's people could live in God's presence. Hosea's plea was that the nation would therefore

press on to know the LORD; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth (Hosea 6:1–3).

Although called God's beloved son, they had behaved like an unfaithful, idolatrous and adulterous wife (Hosea 2:1ff, 11:1ff). Yet God made a 'door of hope' for them and spoke tenderly to them when they were under judgement (Hosea 2:15). They would forever know God's righteousness, justice, steadfast love and mercy and would be known as 'children of the living God'. They would be taken 'in faithfulness' and would 'know the LORD' (Hosea 2:19, 20, 1:10, 11, cf. 6:1ff).

Amos

Amos was not a religious or a political leader (Amos 3:8, 7:14–17). He prophesied of God 'setting a plumb line in the midst of my people' before their high places and sanctuaries were destroyed because of their evil (Amos 2:4–4:13). Self-satisfied leaders were encouraged to compare themselves with their neighbouring nations (Amos 1:1–2:3, 5:18–7:13, 8:1–9:10).

Amos was neither detached nor despairing about their impending suffering. As well as lamenting the upcoming disasters, he prophesied of God raising up 'the booth of David that is fallen'. His message from the LORD was of a time when they would live permanently in their land, rebuild their cities and receive abundant provisions from their labours (Amos 9:11–15).

The nation was under judgement for its self-seeking arrogance which ignored their creator God and led to immorality and social injustice (Amos 8:9ff, 9:5ff). Amos pleaded with them to 'Seek good and not evil, that you may live', to 'Hate evil and love good, and establish justice'. If they failed to do this then their celebratory songs would become wailing dirges. God longed for justice to 'roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5:6–9, 14–24).

Micah

Micah prophesied of judgement coming on God's people, after which God would shepherd them, with their king leading them (Micah 2:12, 13). Their king would come from one of Judah's smallest tribes and would have ancient origins (Micah 5:2). Micah declared that, contrary to self-serving prophets, he was full of power, strength, justice and the LORD's spirit to announce the failures of the God's people (Micah 3:8, 9).

He went on to prophesy of a day when God's people and many other nations would forever follow the LORD's ways. Nations and people-groups will go to God's house to learn God's ways; ways which were very different from those practised in Micah's days. They

shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken (Micah 4:1–6).

These changes would only come because God, unlike everyone else, would not need to maintain his disapproval of them because he would 'cast all our sins into the depths of the sea'. This Exodus motif about God's incomparable qualities correlates with God's emphasis on his requirements of them:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:6–8, 7:18–20)?

God's mercy

Joel and Obadiah most likely also prophesied before the fall of Israel, as did Jonah (2 Kings 14:25).

Joel

Joel's descriptions of agricultural devastation may be of an actual natural disaster or possibly of upcoming political invasions. Either way, he saw a plague of locusts converting 'the garden of Eden' into 'a desolate wilderness' and that nothing would escape their military intensity (Joel 1:1–2:11).

God was somehow involved in this 'day of the LORD', urging them according to God's covenant with Moses to come back to him by rending their hearts rather than their clothing:

Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God (Joel 2:12–14; cf. Exodus 34:6, 7)?

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This prophetic *perhaps* heralds Joel's invitation that God's people unite and ask God to spare them lest they be ridiculed by their neighbours (Joel 2:15–17). God's response was that they could rejoice because of God's jealousy for his land and his people and that they would never again be ashamed.

Joel declared that God would repay them for the devastation caused by the locust plagues and that God would vindicate them with early and later rain and with abundant harvests (Joel 2:18–27).

God's action after this would be even more dramatic:

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit (Joel 2:28, 29).

This outpouring of God's spirit was identified with their national restoration and with God's judgements of other nations, especially those that ravaged God's people (Joel 3:1–21).

Obadiah

Obadiah concluded his brief prophecy against Edom by longing for the day when God's people would return to God's city and the LORD would reign over them (Obadiah 1:21).

Jonah

Jonah reads as more of a carefully constructed story designed to inform readers and listeners about a particular message than a literal report.²

God taught Jonah that it was better to live in God's mercy than to die in his own anger. Jonah learned that God's mercy was for all creatures of 'the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land', whom Jonah worshipped as 'a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing' (Jonah 1:9, 4:1–11, cf. Exodus 34:6, 7).

The foreign sailors and the Ninevites were more aligned with worshipping the LORD than Jonah (Jonah 1:9–16; 3:1–10). There may be a message here that if God welcomed these people, then God would also spare his own people.

² Although Jonah begins like other prophetic books, it contains little historical detail, does not mention Israel or Assyria, describes Jonah as disobedient and God only speaking to Jonah. The picture language and hyperbole used also suggest the book is primarily a carefully designed story.

The minor prophets – 2

God's joy

Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah prophesied before the southern kingdom was overtaken and destroyed.

Nahum

Rather than Nineveh being spared, Nahum foresaw its judgement and Judah's restoration. Nahum declared that 'the LORD is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him' (Nahum 1:7).

Habakkuk

Habakkuk, a little like Jonah, explores a theme more than records prophecies. It commences with Habakkuk, before the exile, seeking to understand how God could be 'silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they' (Habakkuk 1:13, cf. 1:5, 6). Habakkuk wanted to reconcile God's holiness with God's apparent blindness to the Chaldean's evil.

God's response was for Habakkuk to 'Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith' (Habakkuk 2:4). Their doom would come, but it would not be immediate. Habakkuk, in writing of the troubles that awaited evildoers, included two statements about God:

But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea. ... *But* the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him (Habakkuk 2:14, 20, italics added)!

The prophet's prayer reflected his knowledge of and faith in God and God's covenants, even in seasons of barrenness and desolation (Habakkuk 3:1–19).

Zephaniah

Zephaniah saw 'the great day of the LORD' approaching (Zephaniah 1:7ff, 14ff). His declarations seem similar to God's warnings to Noah (Zephaniah 1:2ff; cf. Genesis 6:11ff, 8:20–9:17). God's judgements, according to Zephaniah, would impact their enemies as well as Judah (Zephaniah 1:1–3:8).

Zephaniah prophesied that the LORD would purify the nations who would then harmoniously serve and worship God. The shame and fear of God's people would be removed, and they would cease being arrogant or deceitful. Their anguish and grief would be replaced by joyful songs when they saw that

The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.

God would be their ruler, bring them home and make them 'renowned and praised among the peoples of the earth' (Zephaniah 3:14ff).

God's grace

The last three of the minor prophets prophesied after the return from exile. Haggai and Zechariah lived at the same time.

Haggai

Haggai is called 'the prophet' and 'the messenger of the LORD' (Haggai 1:1; 2:1, 10; cf. Ezra 6:14). Haggai and Zechariah focused on rebuilding the LORD's Jerusalem temple and restoring its ministry. Haggai urged God's people to compare their own homes with the lack of repair to God's temple. He believed that the LORD was with them and had 'stirred up' their spirits (Haggai 1:12–15). The people were to be courageous because just as God had enabled the Exodus, so God's spirit would dwell with them, remove their fear and achieve greater glory. God would again 'shake the heavens and the earth', overthrow nations that opposed him and access their national treasures.

Zechariah

Zechariah's prophesy that the temple would be rebuilt 'not by might, nor my power, but by my spirit', and that this reconstruction would be accompanied with shouts of 'Grace, grace to it', is included in a series of visions. This grace meant God's removal 'of the guilt of this land in a single day' (Zechariah 4:6, 7, 3:9, cf. 1:7–6:8).

As with Haggai's prophecy, the temple's latter splendour would exceed its former glory and many nations would identify themselves with the LORD 'on that day' and be God's people. God would live among them and confirm that Zechariah had been sent to them (Zechariah 2:9, 11).

After encouraging the people about God doing the humanly impossible by saving and blessing them, Zechariah highlighted God's presence with them. Zechariah believed that peace would be sown and would bring fruitfulness to the land and its citizens. He encouraged them to tell the truth to each other and to make religious, legal and civil decisions that were authentic and which would cause peace to flourish (Zechariah 8:12, 16).

The book of Zechariah has two main sections like the book of Daniel, with the second part comprising two oracles which may have been written later and which use apocalyptic descriptions. In the first one, God's servant, the 'Branch', is a humble king who rides 'on a donkey'. He conquers violent oppressors, commands 'peace to the nations' and reigns 'from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth'. God liberates 'prisoners of hope' from 'the waterless pit' through him because of God's covenant blood (Zechariah 3:8, 6:9ff, 9:9ff). God, unlike the false shepherds, cares for his flock, has compassion on them and opposes those who mistreat his people (Zechariah 10:3, 6, cf. 11:4–17).

A second oracle declares that God

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will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on [God's people], so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

A fountain will open for God's people to wash away their evil and its idolatry on the same day that God pours out God's spirit.

God's people will call on God's name after the violent execution of God's shepherd and God will answer them and claim them as his people. They will respond when this happens by declaring the LORD as their God (Zechariah 12:1–13:9). The book closes with an apocalyptic account of God's victory. God's people live securely and keep God's appointed festivals, and 'living waters' flow out of Jerusalem as God's resettled Eden (Zechariah 14:8).

Malachi

Malachi outlined God's opposition to the priests who despised God's name by their impure sacrifices. God's covenant was a covenant of life, well-being and peace, which called for reverence for God. It came from God as their creator and father. Although God's people did not know God's covenant love, God opposed their 'divorce' from him (Malachi 1:1–2:17).

God declared his delight in his covenant messenger who would purify God's people until they 'present offerings to the LORD in righteousness' and God's blessings were poured out (Malachi 3:1–18).

The answer to God's question about 'who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears' was clear. The 'sun of righteousness' would rise 'with healing in its wings', the wicked would be overthrown, and Elijah would be sent 'before the great and terrible day of the LORD' and families would be reconciled (Malachi 4:1–6).

Reflection

These twelve minor prophets provide a rich exploration of Hebrew and Jewish perspectives on God's love, mercy, joy and grace. Their promises were not realised in the centuries that followed. Violence by and against God's people as well as between them wrote a tragic account of suffering and oppression.

The Gospel accounts describe Jesus preaching and practicing a non-violent response as the reign of God by the Spirit of God. His gospel also involved suffering but brought God's reign to humanity by his death and resurrection. The New Testament explores his radical interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is God's testimony against religious and political oppression, including by Christians. It is God's invitation of love and truth into the reconciling life-giving grace, mercy and peace of God in Jesus Christ by which creation is liberated along with all humanity.

Questions for reflection and sharing

1. Being human was defined at creation in terms of relationships with

- God, as creature to creator.
- creation as humanity's home.
- God and creation as a community and family.

Select one of the covenants (with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David or Jeremiah) and consider the ways that covenant declares God's promise to restore and renew these relationships. Also, select one of these relationships and examine it in the light of each of the covenants.

2. Each of the covenants declare God's intentions to bless God's people. What were these blessings and in what ways were they given?
3. Select one or more accounts from Israel's history and discuss the ways in which God's actions in these accounts were consistent with God's covenant promises to bless God's people. Consider aspects of the covenants with Noah, Abraham and Moses.
4. God is called the living God. Share ways in which your study of this theme has helped you know God better and understand more clearly the ways in which God acts. Explain how you have found various passages to be helpful – either as encouragement or correction, or both!
5. In what sense can God's judgements be understood as healing judgements. Discuss with reference to God's covenant promises.

The living God is the fountain of life

Living water but empty cisterns

God's offspring

While God's glory is 'above the heavens', God is also personally present with the youngest children. In fact, God silences those who oppose his revelation of his majestic name 'in all the earth' not by supreme force but by giving babies and young children voices. In the tenderness and intimacy of early life there is an ordained place of praise which is God's defence against God's enemies.

God cares for humanity, crowning it with 'glory and honour' beyond all other parts of creation – implying that if creation was any less magnificent, humanity would be inadequately crowned! God watches over humanity including when we suffer (Psalm 8:1–9; Job 7:12–21).

Questions about humanity find answers in the abundance of God whose residency is not in human shrines and who does not need human assistance to survive. This divine wealth is evident in every person's life and is affirmed in every human breath – as well as in the diverse residency of humanity across the whole earth having descended from a single ancestor.

Paul declared that God's intention in allocating each of us unique times, seasons and locations was that we would search for God and somehow locate God, eventually discovering that the God who is is other than us and

not far from each one of us. For 'in him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring' (Acts 17:22–31).

Paul pointed out that God is other than God's creation, and that God continually and personally gives of and from God's own being to us and to God's creation. Humanity's seasons and circumstances are not robotically determined but occur in the context of the mystery and wonder of God's divine presence. We are structured to commune with God as God's 'offspring'. This is possible because God's appointed human judge-redeemer has been raised by God from the dead. Humanity, curled in upon itself in self-absorption, is given freedom to find God not in abstract remoteness but in personal proximity.

James wrote that God, as 'Father of lights', gives every generous and perfect gift without wavering in God's purposes. God's intentions involve renewing and rebirthing God's creation 'by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures' (James 1:17, 18).

The fountain of life

Psalm 36 declares that God 'is the fountain of life'. God's steadfast love, faithfulness and righteousness are as vast and complete as God's creation and as majestic as God's judgements and salvation. This psalmist declared that everyone 'may take refuge in the shadow of your wings' and 'feast on the abundance of your house'. The songwriter rejoiced that God quenches human thirst 'from the river of your delights' and that 'in your light we see light' (Psalm 36:5–9).

Defying and denying God's precious steadfast love is a self-flattering, deceitful pretence that God does not notice or hate the deep self-exalting, arrogant transgressions of human hearts (Psalm 36:1ff, cf. Psalms 46 and 65).

'Israel was holy to the LORD, the first fruits of his harvest', his bride, devoted to him (Jeremiah 2:3). Yet, similar to Psalm 36:1ff, God declared that his people had swapped God's glory and abundance for their own dismal and futile self-praise. They had not only opted for their own self-glorification; they had insisted on it even when it was obviously not refreshing or sustaining them – they had rejected God as 'the fountain of living water' and had dug 'cracked cisterns that can hold no water' (Jeremiah 2:11–13).

They were calling trees their fathers and stones their mothers. They were acting with unrestrained lust having forgotten that they were God's bride: 'My people have forgotten me, days without number' (Jeremiah 2:27, 32).

Jeremiah's quote of God pleading to the heavens to be shocked and 'utterly desolate' about their exchanging divine glory for futile idolatry and adultery contrasts their rebellion with the God-given dignity ascribed to humanity by a psalmist. That poet sang of humanity as incredible in the light of God's celestial handiwork and of it being coronated with the 'glory and honour' of overseeing the welfare of God's creation (Psalm 8:3–6).

God wanted Jeremiah's contemporaries to come home to the fountain of living water and to abandon their broken reservoirs. No wonder the prophet quoted the LORD saying that the rebellious were cursed for turning away from God and trusting in themselves: 'They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes'. Those who trust the LORD, by contrast,

shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit (Jeremiah 17:5–8).

Jeremiah concluded that the human heart must be 'devious above all else' to be so perverse and beyond reason to abandon the LORD as the fountain of living water (Jeremiah 17:9–13).

Reflection

We were created from dust watered from an abundant stream and will return to dust. We are creatures of dust who live and pass away like grasses that are refreshed in the morning and which fade and wither by the end of the day (Genesis 2:6, 7, 3:17–20; Psalm 90:5, 6; cf. Job 34:14, 15; Psalm 33:5, 104:29, 146:4).

Our home is not simply with the dust in which we in our ‘secret sins’ have trusted. God is eternal and is humanity’s home in every generation. It was God who breathes the breath of life into humanity so that we become living beings (Genesis 2:7; Psalm 90:1–3, 8).

The writers of Proverbs warned us to keep our hearts with all diligence and vigilance, for from them life’s springs flow. Wise words are ‘life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh’ (Proverbs 4:22, 23). Wisdom is inbuilt into God’s creation (cf. Proverbs 8:22–36):

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence (Proverbs 10:11).

The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, so that one may avoid the snares of death (Proverbs 13:14).

The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, so that one may avoid the snares of death (Proverbs 14:27).

Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain are the righteous who give way before the wicked (Proverbs 25:26).

Out of the depths

Being human and human being

To be human is to be the LORD's, to receive God's righteous abundance in green pastures, beside still waters and in the darkest valleys of death. It is to be anointed with oil, to overflow with God's goodness and mercy at God's table, in God's presence, even among those who hate us (Psalm 23:1–6).

It is to cry to God for forgiveness from 'the depths', because, if he 'should mark iniquities, who could stand'. It is to 'wait for the LORD', to hope in his words of steadfast love which have the power that redeems us from all our iniquities. This daily, reverent waiting is more than a desperate cry for help. It is essentially human to seek God from 'the depths', to rely continually on being refreshed by God's faithful love and to hope for God's attention with reverence and awe (Psalm 130:1–8).

It is to exchange barren and desolate idol-worship for God's abundant, ever-flowing living water (cf. Jeremiah 2:11–13, 7:21ff, 8:11ff, 9:1ff, 17:13).

It is to wait 'patiently for the Lord' to be rescued from 'the desolate pit [and] the miry bog', and to walk securely on stable ground. It is to praise God with God-given new songs. It involves avoiding pride, idolatry and God-appeasing sacrifices and doing God's will according to God's heart-inscribed ways and not by self-driven initiatives (Psalms 40:1–8, cf. 50:7ff).

It is to long for God, 'for the living God' 'as a deer longs for flowing streams', and to do so even in the face of the tears that come with the taunts of those who say: 'Where is your God'. It is to be vindicated by God's light and truth and to trust God and come 'to the altar of God' with praises, 'with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving'. It is to have God as our 'exceeding joy' and to know God commanding *God's own* songs to be present to us in the nights of darkness, disquiet and distress.

To be truly human, to know fullness of human being, is to 'wait patiently for the LORD' for deliverance and to put his new songs in our mouths. It is to know that deepest of all communions where 'deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts' and to be flooded by 'all your waves and your billows' (Psalms 42:1–43:5, cf. 36:1).

This psalmist's view of humanity was not of humanity as vessels passively filled but of deep calling to deep, and then of people overflowing with God's overflowing (cf. Proverbs 10:11, 13:14, 14:27, 25:26). This psalmist believed there was a song to be sung *and* a community in which to participate (Psalm 42:4). This and other psalms were laments and solaces, as well as songs of joy and praise. As mentioned, these songs are *God's* songs:

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O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your ... dwelling. Then I will go ... to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God (Psalm 43:3, 4, cf. 42:8).

At home in God's house

God's steadfast love is 'better than life'. No-one else can satisfy; everything else is barren and as dry as a parched desert. Joy nourishes the heart by looking upon God in God's sanctuary – in God's creation – and by meditating on God's help in the nights. This communion involves a profoundly personal intimacy: 'My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me' in the 'shadow' of God's 'wings' during quiet night-time meditations (Psalm 63:1ff).

The home that the 'living God' provides is God's 'dwelling place'. It includes accommodation for sparrows and swallows and so any day there is preferable to years anywhere else – especially when compared to living where wickedness is occurring (Psalm 84:1–12).

Those who travel to God's sanctuary are elsewhere described as being like trees planted by rivers and unlike the chaff blown away by the wind (Psalm 1:3, 4, cf. 84:6).

God's people know that their thankfulness to God is because the LORD has delivered them. God 'knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust'. This knowing, this remembering of our creational gift of flourishing human goodness, is one with God's compassion and kindness, and God's mercy and grace in forgiving our sins. It is God's sovereign, parental covenantal care for what *God* has made. It is *God's* breath that enlivens humanity and *God's* spirit that creates and renews humanity and all creation (Psalms 103:1–22, 104:1–35 (note Psalm 104:27–30), 107:1ff).

God parents orphans, protects widows and leads thirsty people to 'streams in the desert' while rebels persist with living in parched lands. A psalmist's response was to bless 'the LORD who daily bears us up; God is our salvation' (Psalm 68:5, 6).

Ezra's testimony after the exile was that, despite the defiance, disobedience and presumption of God's people, that God's covenant with Moses remained valid even after God's people's disobedience in the wilderness

You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst (Nehemiah 9:16–21).

Reflection

The joy of God's salvation and the pain of his judgements testify to God's everlasting mercy, grace, goodness and steadfast love evident in Jesus enduring the cross with its open hostility and shameful contempt. God's discipline is not a

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reason for suffering but evidence of God's intentions to preserve and mature us when they inevitably occur. The 'peaceful fruits of righteousness' flourishing from being subject to God as 'Father of spirits' are life-giving and life-sustaining (cf. Hebrews 12:1ff).

The narratives in Psalm 1 and other passages are not profiling a cold-hearted and robotic world running on some type of divine automaton. God's presence is not a transactional response to good and evil, but a relationship saturated in divine and human mystery as is evident in Hebrews 11:36–40:

Others suffered ... of whom the world was not worthy. ... Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

When the temple-sanctuary-tabernacle of God is not safe, as was very often sadly the case in biblical times, and is still the case for many today, creation remains God's ultimate dwelling place and sanctuary. The Old and New Testaments both move rather seamlessly between physical structures dedicated to worship, personal and corporate mutual abiding, and creation as our God-given home which we share with all God's creatures while living in God's presence.

Rivers in the desert – 1

Created for abundant fullness not empty futility

An evening liturgical prayer asks ‘merciful God’ to be present

and protect us ... that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this fleeting world, may rest on your eternal changelessness; through Jesus Christ our Lord’.³

The preacher in Ecclesiastes declared that although all events are transient and apparently without purpose, they have contrasting appropriate seasons. God ‘has put a sense of past and future [eternity] into [human] minds’, but humanity ‘cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end’. The best thing people can do is to ‘be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live’ and to see eating, drinking and finding pleasure in their work as God’s gifts. This verdict is set in the context of the stability and permanence of God’s awesome actions (Ecclesiastes 3:11–15).

Human life ‘under the sun’ is ‘a chasing after wind’ because everyone is made from dust and returns to it when they die – and who knows whether those who come after us will be wise or foolish (Ecclesiastes 2:11, 17–19, 3:20).

The preacher cautions that while everything ‘under the sun’ appears to lack ultimate purpose, that this assessment is exclusively earthy. God, by contrast, is in heaven and whatever God does is permanent. This earthy-only perspective means that nothing is ultimately anything and everything is finally nothing. We bring nothing into life and take nothing from our toil with us:

Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth (Ecclesiastes 3:14, 20, 21, 5:2)?

This seemingly closed worldview contains a crucial clue: our ‘days of adversity’ serve as reminders of God’s sovereign purposes ‘under heaven’ in times of joy and pain. True wisdom does not flow logically from under-the-sun observation; it is ‘deep, very deep; who can find it out?’ Natural logic does not explain our lives (Ecclesiastes 3:1ff, 5:15, 7:1–14, 24).

We are called to fear God to whom we are all accountable recognising that sentences against evil are ‘not executed speedily’ and human hearts are ‘fully set to do evil’. It is best to be joyful in our various daily labours and to live aligned with those poor wise people who know this reality is more significant than being great leaders, even though the wisdom of those lacking resources is rarely recognised (Ecclesiastes 7:11, 24, 8:11–13, 9:7–18).

³ *An Australian Prayer Book*, (Sydney, NSW: Anglican Information Office, 1978), 33.

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We are therefore to leave judgement to God and to know that God will bring judgement in God's time. We are to 'remember our Creator' all our lives until

the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 8:11–13, 11:9, 12:6, 7).

The framing commentary was that true wisdom involves fearing the justifying God. That is 'the whole duty of everyone'. God straightens crookedness and wise people are content to let God's wisdom unfold rather than being dominated by material prosperity (Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14, 7:11–14).

While we are created for fullness and search for it incessantly, fullness is only known in God's judgements and mercies. The preacher's constant references to eating and drinking are signs of the truth he declared. We do not live by bread alone. While God made us upright and straightforward, we search for and devise many devious schemes. The 'golden bowl' requires divine supplies, not those of our own self-elevating design (Ecclesiastes 7:29, 12:6).

Times of refreshment

The prophet Isaiah declared that those who abandon the LORD are like dying oak trees and waterless gardens. He later added that 'the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' when a 'shoot' comes from 'the stump of Jesse' on whom the spirit of the LORD will rest. This earthy fullness will herald a new era for God's creation and people where righteousness, equity and faithfulness bring about the demise of evil. The flourishing of those previously poor and the ennobling of those who were meek will result *from* God's fullness and not be its cause!

God's people will joyfully 'draw water from the wells of salvation' and express praise and thankfulness when God's comfort replaces his disapproval. God's salvation will encourage them to trust and know God's approval and will lead to them being strengthened and sustained (Isaiah 1:28–30, 11:1–9, 12:1–6).

Righteous leaders will arise and will be like

a hiding place from the wind, a covert from the tempest, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.

Meanwhile, the palaces of unrighteous rulers will be forsaken, populous cities will be abandoned until

a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.

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This outpouring of God's spirit will anoint righteous leaders and renew God's people and establish peace, serenity, security, trust and righteousness (Isaiah 32:1–20). Everlasting joy will replace 'sorrow and sighing' because

waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

The revelation of God's glorious majesty, the renewal of God's creation, and the return of the redeemed in holiness, are all part of one divine restorative act of grace and mercy (Isaiah 35:1–10).

Reflection

What strengthens silver cords? What keeps golden bowls, pitchers and cistern wheels from breaking? What fills them before our dust returns to the earth from which it came, and our breath returns to our God who breathed our breath into us? The frame-writer's answer was that when all is considered and reflected on that we should fear God and follow God's instructions

for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:6–14).

One main message in Ecclesiastes is that humanity is created for fullness and that this fullness is God's gift and is not humanly manufactured. Nonetheless, human enterprise is to be enjoyed, aligned with life's seasons, and done fearing God and being aware that God validates our actions in God's own time and according to God's own purposes (cf. Genesis 15:1ff; Romans 4:1–25).

Life's uncertainties and struggles were familiar to Paul when he encouraged the Corinthians not to despair. The treasures in their 'clay jars' came from the gospel light of Christ's glory as God's image – a light shining out of darkness from within their hearts. They, like Paul, were

always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ... So death is at work in us, but life in you (2 Corinthians 4:1–12).

Isaiah's declarations about God's anger being averted, God comforting his people and them joyfully drawing water from salvation's wells are foretastes of many New Testament passages (e.g. Luke 18:9–14; John 4:13, 14, 7:37–39; Acts 3:17–26; Romans 3:21–26; 1 John 2:1, 2, 4:7–10; Hebrews 2:5–18, 12:1ff).

Rivers in the desert – 2

Rivers and fountains

Human empires are ultimately short-lived before they wither and disperse when God ‘blows on them’ and sends them storms. By contrast, God’s word is permanent, and God nourishes his people as their shepherd without ‘fainting or growing weary’.

The LORD’s spirit needs no external direction, advice, wisdom or energising. God’s redemptive and restorative actions are in harmony with his creational activity as everlasting God and as creator. God’s intentions align with his own being. He empowers and strengthens those who are weak and struggling:

they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:1–31).

The second half of Isaiah interweaves this renewal of God’s people and God’s creation with prophecies concerning the *outpouring of God’s spirit* and *God’s suffering servant* who, with God’s spirit upon him, brings ‘justice to the nations’. Israel’s ‘Holy One’ promised to respond to the parched thirst of the destitute by opening rivers on barren mountains and hills, by creating fountains in valleys, by making pools of water in wildernesses, and by forming springs of water in parched lands.

Trees will flourish in wildernesses and deserts so that everyone will recognise and acknowledge that this recreative regeneration of people and land was the LORD’s generous gift. The alternatives are described as delusional and pointless, and their idolatrous images, in contrast to God’s creative and recreative spirit, are nothing more than empty winds (Isaiah 41:14–20, 29).

The first servant song follows and links God’s chosen servant ‘in whom my soul delights’ with the anointing presence of God’s spirit. This song and the song that ends chapter 40 bookend God’s affirmation of Israel and Jacob as Abraham’s offspring whom God had not abandoned (Isaiah 41:8–10).

God’s servant mirrors the God who empowers the faint and who renews those who wait for the LORD. God’s servant exemplifies those profiled as recipients of God’s sustenance and energising in that he acts faithfully and does not ‘grow faint or be crushed’ (Isaiah 40:28–31, 42:1ff).

Justice comes to nations ‘in the earth and the coastlands wait for his teaching’. People have breath and spirit *and* are built for righteousness because of God’s creative initiatives. Covenant renewal, healing and liberty are God’s gifts:

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them (Isaiah 42:1–9, cf. 10–20).

The ends of the earth

These 'rivers in the desert' would be God's refreshments for those he selected to acknowledge his provisions. These people would abandon and forget their previous mindsets since God would 'do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it' (Isaiah 43:18–21)?

No one else could save them from God's judgements upon them for their idolatry. Only God had created them and 'called them by name'. Only God would command the north and south to release them from captivity. Only God would bring their offspring from the east and the west. Only God would bring them from the ends of the earth. The God who created them would be the God who would redeem them *by being with them and among them*.

The waters, rivers and fires of judgement would be replaced with healing and forgiveness, 'For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour' (Isaiah 43:1–28).

This flooding of desolate and parched land with water is linked with God pouring out his spirit upon their descendants and blessing their families. They would be God's witnesses and would testify that 'there is no other rock', no god among the nations who is both first and last. This was the miracle of their Exodus from Egypt and would be the essence of all God's future miracles (Isaiah 44:1–8; cf. Nehemiah 9:16–21; Psalm 105:38–41).

If they had listened to the LORD their God who had taught and led them for their benefit, then their prosperity and peace 'would have been like a river, and [their] success like the waves of the sea'. If they had heeded God's instructions then they would have been refreshed in the deserts, but the wicked lack peace and prosperity. Despite all this deafness, the LORD's redemptive message to all the earth and its nations remained the same (Isaiah 48:17–22, cf. 26:3)!

While God's servant believed his labour had been in vain, he still trusted God to achieve God's purposes. God's response was that his grace would enable his people to bring light to the nations. God's promises of salvation were given to Israel not only for Israel but for all humanity and so were to be taken to people living in the most remote parts of the earth. God's people would be a covenant to them and

They shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them (Isaiah 49:1–26).

When this happened, God's heavens and earth would rejoice because the LORD had given comfort and shown compassion to those who were suffering and distressed (Isaiah 49:13).

All these promises relate to the very great exaltation of God's suffering servant who would startle nations by growing up before God like a *young plant* emerging from

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a *root* out of parched earth. There was, however, enough nourishment of spirit in that new growth to defeat God's enemies since God's servant would be struck down and afflicted and counted with lawbreakers in wearing the consequences of their failures (Isaiah 52:13–53:12, cf. 50:4–7).

Although God's ways are not ours and are as different as the heavens are from the earth, the LORD would be merciful to and pardon those who seek him. God's invitation, indeed, God's command, was for anyone who was thirsty to come to God to drink his living water, to seek the LORD while they still have strength to find him, and to call out to him while they know he is nearby.

As sure as seasons come and go, the harvest of God's word will achieve the purposes for which God sends it:

You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song ... for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off (Isaiah 55:1–13).

God's people were urged to stand up and be radiant because the LORD's light and glory had risen and would forever shine upon them – replacing their need for daylight or moonlight! Their times of mourning, grief and sorrow would finish because they

are the *shoot* that I planted, the work of my hands, so that I might be glorified (Isaiah 60:1, 19ff, italics added).

The 'spirit of the LORD is upon' God's servant and God's servant-people as the 'year of the LORD's favour' is proclaimed and mourners are comforted and given hearts filled with praise 'to display his glory'. Ruins will be rebuilt and 'everlasting joy shall be theirs' (Isaiah 61:1–7).

Reflection

The renewal of creation and God's family was significant for the apostle Paul when writing to the Roman church. Paul linked the renewal the Holy Spirit brings with the sacrificial ministry of Jesus and their adopted relationship with God in which they addressed God as 'Abba! Father!' (Romans 8:18–39).

John the Baptist had preceded Jesus' ministry and had linked the outpouring of God's Spirit with the coming of Messiah's reign and God's forgiveness of sins (Matthew 3:1–17; Luke 3:1–22; John 1:19–34, 3:22–36).

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount commenced with Jesus blessing those who were spiritually poor and who were hungry and thirsty for righteousness and peace, along with any who were mourning, meek, merciful, pure in heart and those who were being persecuted. Matthew later recorded Jesus' invitation for weary and burdened people such as these to come to him for rest. Jesus had prayed about the

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way his heavenly Father revealed God's wisdom to infants and had earlier reflected on John the Baptist's ministry (Matthew 5:1ff, 11:2–29).

The book of Revelation begins with a vision of Jesus whom John declared 'loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood'. John saw 'one like a Son of Man' while 'in the spirit on the Lord's day' and wrote of Jesus urging the seven churches to listen to the Holy Spirit. The testimony of the redeeming Lamb, the prophetic witness of the Holy Spirit and the revelation of Jesus' 'God and Father' are all inter-related (Revelation 1:1–3:22). The book of Revelation concludes with the 'river of the water of life' flowing through the city of God and of nations being healed by the fruit of the tree by its edges. The 'throne of God and of the Lamb' are again linked with the Holy Spirit, who, with the Lamb's bride, call on Jesus to come. Jesus' affirmative response concludes the book (Revelation 22:1–21)!

Every knee will bow

Glory to the righteous one

Isaiah wrote that the ‘earth dries up and withers’ and ‘lies polluted under its inhabitants’ because they ‘have broken the everlasting covenant’. Isaiah stated that in making the earth desolate, God ‘will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants’ regardless of their religious, social or economic status. The ‘curse that devours the earth’ was depicted as the LORD’s action against the people’s treachery (Isaiah 24:1–13).

The prophet, in distress, broke off describing God’s judgements to profile ‘songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One’ being sung from the earth’s extremities (Isaiah 24:14–16a). After highlighting these joyous doxologies, Isaiah continued his lament song-poem about treachery and terror replacing truth and trust using creational metaphors. The earth is completely broken, shattered in pieces and trembles violently. It wobbles like an alcoholic, is unstable like a hut and is ready to topple over never to stand again because of its wickedness. The LORD of hosts’ reign will overthrow all evil anywhere in creation (Isaiah 24:16b–23).

Isaiah praised God for God’s restorative mercies upon which God insisted in opposition to the ruthless brutality of God’s enemies. God’s resolution would be such that when God’s purposes were achieved,

strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. *When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled* (Isaiah 25:1–5, italics added).

The songs of praise Isaiah heard were ‘of praise, of glory to the Righteous One’ and relate to the banquet God will give when ‘he will swallow up death forever’ and when ‘the shroud that is cast over all peoples’ will be totally removed. Universal misery and disgrace will be replaced by joyful festivity and music being heard from all directions (Isaiah 24:14–16a, 25:6–9).

One song of praise speaks of the God-ordained-peace given to those who trust him, of the way God’s edicts teach that this trust produces righteousness, of the deadly wickedness of the idolatry of God’s people, and of God’s victory over death by being merciful to the vulnerable (Isaiah 26:1–19):

- Those who have steadfast minds and trust the LORD forever as an everlasting rock will be given peace.
- The LORD will decree peace for those who acknowledge that their achievements are divinely sourced and given even when other rulers besides

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God have dominated them. These people know that judgement, death and destruction ultimately come to those who persist in doing evil.

- God's people will celebrate dead corpses being resurrected and coming alive as their nation is renewed:

O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

Only in the LORD

The second section of Isaiah elaborates on the nation's return from the exile predicted in the first part of the book (e.g. Isaiah 35:1–10). The LORD is the only God 'from the rising of the sun and from the west' and declared that: 'I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things' (Isaiah 45:6, 7). God insisted on being recognised as the creator of the heavens and the earth, and that, unlike ignorant inanimate idols, God did not speak secretly or in dark places nor did God tell his people to find him chaotic disorder (Isaiah 45:18–20).

God, according to this prophecy, was not only the *only* creator, God *and God alone* was a righteous saviour. Only *this* God would save God's people. Only *this* God had true strength and integrity. Only by *this* God's deliverance would God's people be victorious and free of shame:

By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear' (Isaiah 45:21–23).

It was on this basis that trouble for those who battle against their creator by making idols was announced. God was not the author of the evil experienced by those who opposed God *and* God would not endorse or nourish those generating counterfeit and counterpart narratives that opposed God's righteous and good creative and saving actions.

God creates light and darkness but does not do evil. The distress that God causes is the pure action of his justice and purity, and his proclamation of his divine purposes and integrity (Isaiah 45:7–10, 24).

It is the same God who judges and recreates, however strange it may seem to us. God's actions are unified and may appear unusual and unfamiliar when not seen from the perspective of God's insistence on not being like those who oppose him (cf. Isaiah 28:21, 22). God's one action takes history to a banquet where death's shroud will have been removed not by God being apart from humanity and acting from afar, but by God's tender care for the poor and needy. It is God's insistence on acting this way that transforms the heavens, the earth and humanity, and which leads restored humanity to sing and glorify 'the Righteous One' by the way they live aligned with God (Isaiah 24:14–16a).

The declaration:

For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!)

not only refers to the size of the earth's population, but to the shame or exultation that will come when 'to me every knee shall bow'. Those who quarrel with their maker will be disgraced by their idols, whilst those God renews will know righteousness raining down and salvation springing up (cf. Isaiah 42:9, 43:19, 44:4, 45:8). Those who turn to God and are saved will acknowledge the uniqueness and sovereignty of the LORD who forms light and creates darkness, who brings prosperity and creates disaster.

God did not create a chaotic world in which his word was hidden. God's message is only hidden from the wicked, and then only until their confusion makes them ashamed enough to seek and find him. God's 'everlasting salvation' is the triumph and glory known by his people for all eternity. Free from shame, they kneel in worship with thankful hearts (Isaiah 45:15–25). The renewal of all things is the work of God's Spirit, of God's sweeping away 'transgressions like a cloud' (Isaiah 44:1–8, 21–22, cf. 42:1ff). *God's* victory is *our* salvation (cf. Isaiah 28:14–19).

Reflection

Various psalms contrast raging nations with faithful worship. Those profiling thanksgiving and praise often have creational contexts (e.g. Psalms 2 and 100).

Examples of defiance and praise in the New Testament include the crowds on Jesus' entry to Jerusalem and the changes that happened to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road. Jesus' non-violent ride into Jerusalem was accompanied by joyful praise about heavenly peace and glory, to which Jesus' reply lamented the people's blindness to 'the things that make for peace' (Luke 19:28–44).

Jesus offered a peace that worldly power structures were unable to provide and declared that his peace 'conquered the world' (John 14:27, 16:33). This peace was the fruit of his thirsting for the living God and his declaring the accomplishment of his conquering work; of him singing songs of lament and praise as he died on the cross (John 19:28–30).

Jesus did God's will as priest and sacrifice, freeing humanity to live in creational fullness. The two 'verses' Jesus sang in the dryness and desolation of death were heard and resonate down through history. God's people hear his song of his pure delight in freely giving divine grace. They kneel before him in adoration and go out in the fullness of the Spirit to tell the 'dwellers in the dust' to arise and sing for joy, and to give 'glory to the righteous one' (Hebrews 10:5ff; Philippians 2:1–14; Genesis 1:1ff; Isaiah 24:16, 26:19; cf. Acts 8:1ff, 9:1ff, 22:6ff etc.).

Living waters shall flow

Leaves for healing

When the day of the LORD comes, the mountains, hills and riverbeds will bring abundant fruitfulness to the land and ‘a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD and water the Wadi Shittim’ (Joel 3:18; cf. Genesis 2:10ff).

The book of Zechariah describes ‘living water’ flowing from Jerusalem on ‘that day’, half to the west and half to the east in both summer and winter. That day will be when his LORD God comes to reign over the whole world with all God’s ‘holy ones’. Zechariah linked ‘that day’ with the *Shima* by declaring that the LORD and his name would be ‘one’ when that day arrived (Zechariah 14:5b–9; cf. Deuteronomy 6:4).

Joel’s prophecy speaks of God dwelling in his sacred mountain city, Zion, and of the heavens and earth shaking while the prophecy in Zechariah depicted the Mount of Olives splitting when God stood on it on ‘that day’ (Joel 3:16, 17; Zechariah 14:4, 5, 10ff). Joel’s mention of strangers being excluded (presumably because of ungodliness rather than ethnicity) may be understood in terms of Joel’s prophecy of God’s spirit being poured out on all humanity including strangers (Joel 2:28, 29).

Ezekiel prophesied water flowing from near the altar in the temple. Although no tributaries are mentioned, the river gets deeper and wider, and teems with living creatures. The river freshens salty sea water, while also providing salty marshes. Along its banks are an abundance of trees whose

leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing (Ezekiel 47:1–12).

Ezekiel saw these trees when returning along the riverbank as he was told to do. His prophecy describes a vision of true worship in a restored temple which was again filled with the LORD’s glory (Ezekiel 43:1–5, 44:4, cf. 10:1–22).

The expression ‘on that day’ is used more than a dozen times in the final oracle in Zechariah (Zechariah 12:1ff). This prophecy describes the LORD giving Jerusalem victory over its enemies and pouring out

a spirit of compassion [grace] and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

This mourning involved repenting of idolatry and rejecting false prophets and unclean spirits. Cleansing from immorality and its associated unclean spirits

would come on ‘that day’ when a fountain would open for the people’s purification (Zechariah 12:10–13:2).

An earlier section of Zechariah included a prophesy describing guilt being removed from the land in a single day and of the LORD saying to Zerubbabel that God’s grace would succeed in achieving God’s purposes ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit’. Grace [compassion] would be the theme of the rejoicing worshippers when the temple was restored and when God’s people would live peacefully under their vines and fig trees (Zechariah 3:1–4:10 cf. 12:10).

God’s grace to and compassion for his people was in God giving the blessings of his outpoured spirit; his gifts of living water to heal and restore his people. God would do this not simply in the face of their rejection of him, but by revealing to them the ‘one whom they have pierced’ – by revealing ‘*me*, the one they have pierced’ (Zechariah 12:10, cf. NIV, ESV, italics added).

The early and the later rain

Joel spoke of a series of massive plagues where invading locusts devastated the land. These plagues represented either natural disasters or an invading nation destroying everything until ‘joy withers away’ from among them. Joel called for ‘a solemn assembly’, such was the intensity of the destruction that was coming – a ruin so substantial that land which was like ‘the garden of Eden’ would become ‘a desolate wilderness’ (Joel 1:12, 14, 2:3, cf. Ezekiel 36:35 where the opposite occurs when God’s spirit is poured out and the people receive a new heart and a new spirit to replace the stone heart and unclean spirit; also see Malachi 3:11).

These terrors were understood as God’s judgements, given to provoke his people to return to God with all their hearts. Since God ‘is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing’, Joel believed that God may possibly relent and ‘leave a blessing behind him’, even a thank offering for his anticipated salvation (Joel 2:11–14).

Joel saw that while God’s pity would follow God’s judgements, God’s mercy would be known because of God’s character and not because of their repentance: ‘Who knows ...?’. Joel prophesied that God’s response involved sending early and later rains to fill dry rivers, to give an abundant harvest, and to repay them for the locust’s destruction. Even *soil* would not be afraid and would rejoice with delight at the LORD’s achievements. God’s people would be well fed and would praise LORD their God for God’s wonderful treatment of them (Joel 2:14, 18–26; cf. Genesis 3:17).

God’s removal of shame from his people would herald God pouring out his spirit on all flesh, and of their prophetic visions and dreams:

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young

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men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

This prophetic ministry concerns the ‘great and terrible day of the LORD’ and God’s gift of salvation for anyone who calls on his name (Joel 2:28–32, italics added).

God’s salvation was not for their sake ‘but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations’ (Ezekiel 36:16–23). God reveals his holiness to the nations by redeeming his people. Those from *all* nations who ‘worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and [who] keep the festival of booths’ or tabernacles will survive God’s judgements and receive God’s blessings (Zechariah 14:16–19; cf. Psalm 2:1ff). Intimations about the Passover and Pentecost now move to the festival of Tabernacles where God is God *with* God’s people and with them forever in God’s refreshed creation.

Reflection

Ezekiel explored the nexus between salvation and regeneration in terms of altar and river. The New Testament highlights this relationship when reflecting on Jesus’ death and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. John’s Gospel makes these same links in Jesus’ discussions with Nicodemus and the woman at the well.

It was on *the final day* of the festival of Tabernacles that Jesus attended that he stood in the Temple and called out his invitation to thirsty people to come to him and to drink living water. Those who took up his offer would have ‘rivers of living water’ flow from their hearts according to promises in their Scriptures:

Now [Jesus] said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37–39, note John 4:21–24 concerning the coming *hour*).

Paul’s unfinished sentence about sin and death coming into the world ‘through one man’ and death spreading to everyone because of sin is an example of the way that sin and purification is considered in the New Testament. Paul may have been intentionally inferring that, just as death came and spread, so holiness came into the world through one person bringing life to everyone who believes because of that one person’s holiness (cf. Romans 5:12).

Paul’s thoughts about one person and many people may be thought of as expanding on the one-and-many themes of the Old Testament prophets. Paul reasoned further that God’s freely given gifts are *unlike* humanity’s lawlessness because while many perished as the result of one man’s law-breaking,

much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many (Romans 5:15).

The struck rock and living water

Spring up, O well!

The crisis at Marah occurred three days after the crossing of the Red Sea. God used a piece of wood to sweeten Marah's bitter water. The people came to the twelve springs and seventy palms at Elim after God declared that he would heal them and keep diseases from them, but these promises assumed that they would 'listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in his sight' (Exodus 15:22–27). Careful listening would lead them to behave appropriately.

After further complaints about the adequacy of God's care for their physical needs, God provided manna from heaven to sustain them. They were to gather as much as they needed with

some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed (Exodus 16:17, 18).

When they found no water to drink at Rephidim, they tested God's patience, provisions and purposes by quarrelling with Moses about whether the LORD was present with them. Moses named that place Massah and Meribah because of the people's dissent.

By commanding Moses to strike the rock while God was standing in front of him on the rock and then making water flow from the struck rock, God was declaring himself to be their true rock and the water of life as God's gift of himself to them. This gift was in the context of their anger against God which Moses was symbolically bringing to God (Exodus 17:5, 6, cf. Malachi 3:8–15).

When, at Kadesh sometime later, there was again no water, the glory of the LORD appeared to Moses and Aaron. They were told to gather the whole congregation (and not just the elders as at Massah and Meribah), to take the staff and to 'command the rock before your eyes to bring water'.

Moses was to speak to the rock this time rather than strike it. Moses spoke of 'we' bringing water from the rock, struck it again twice, and was forbidden from leading the people into the promised land. Moses *was* commanded to 'bring water out of the rock for them' and to provide for the people and their flocks and herds; but he was to do so by speaking to the rock and trusting God to reveal his holiness to the people. Moses was angry with both God and the people and did not remain under the covering of the God's glory (Numbers 20:1–13, cf. Isaiah 53:4–12 and Exodus 15:26).

Moses continued onwards wanting to travel along the 'King's Highway' after God had told him he would not complete their travels to the promised land (Numbers 20:17). After avoiding one battle, the death of Aaron and a subsequent conflict, the people again complained about God and Moses as they complained about their lack of food and water and the 'miserable' manna. The LORD responded by sending serpents among them. Only those who looked at a bronze snake hoisted on a pole would be healed. There were many snakes making many bites with only one pole with one bronze serpent set in place to heal everyone (Numbers 21:1–9).

When they arrived at a well where God promised Moses water, they sang 'Spring up, O well! – Sing to it'. On this occasion, in contrast to Rephidim, God pre-empted any complaints by the people by telling Moses to bring them to one location where God would give them water (Numbers 21:16–20).

You gave your good spirit ...

Israel's Exodus experiences were not easily forgotten, especially in the context of their return from exile in Babylon. Nehemiah recorded Ezra recounting God's mercies while the people stood for a quarter of a day before confessing and worship the LORD for the same length of time. Ezra commenced by declaring the *Sh'ma*, by proclaiming God as creator of the heavens and the earth and by affirming that God had chosen Abram.

Ezra then outlined the LORD's response to his people's distress in Egypt by delivering, protecting and leading them on the best route to the promised land. Ezra mentioned God coming down and speaking with them on Mount Sinai and giving them bread from heaven to eat and water from a rock to drink.

Despite their rebellion, Ezra insisted that God was still the same God who had revealed God's-self to Moses: willing to forgive, gracious, merciful, patient and longsuffering:

You gave your good spirit to instruct them ... Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell (Nehemiah 9:6–37).

The second half of Isaiah profiled the same narrative. God would redeem them, and they would flee exile with shouts of joy and sustenance in travels just as their ancestors had done. They would know peace and prosperity 'like a river ... like the waves of the sea' unlike 'the wicked', even though their history was one of disobedience and defiance (Isaiah 48:20–21).

The last chapters of Isaiah reinforce these thoughts. God's gracious and praiseworthy actions had saved them even though they had 'rebelled and grieved his holy spirit' – the same holy spirit who had been with them in their earlier Exodus. Rather than relying on 'Fortune' and 'Destiny', God's servants would eat, drink and rejoice without shame because God was about to recreate his world into

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one where people live long lives in settled accommodation and enjoy fruitful harvests from their efforts (Isaiah 63:7–14, 65:11–16).

The writers of some of the psalms recall God's deliverance of his people from Egypt under Moses (e.g. Psalm 105:38–45; cf. Genesis 15:13, 14).

Another psalm declared the LORD as a great God and ruler over all other gods. Since the LORD was the creator of the land and oceans and 'the rock' of their salvation, they should joyfully worship God rather than harden their hearts against their 'Maker':

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand (Psalm 95:1–11, cf. 100:1–5).

Another psalm confesses the people's sins in the context of God's everlasting goodness, mercy, grace and love. Moses, the psalmist declared, 'stood in the breach' before 'God, the saviour' when the people rebelled, so ensuring God turned 'away his wrath from destroying them'. The psalmist's list of failures includes them making the LORD angry at the waters of Meribah, where 'it went ill with Moses on their account; for they made his spirit bitter, and he spoke words that were rash' (Psalm 106:21–33).

The next collection of psalms begins with a reminder that failure was not the last word. While desolation comes to the wicked, abundance is given to those who are wise and 'consider the steadfast love of the LORD' (Psalm 107:33–43). The psalmists and other writers knew that life does not follow a simple transactional prosperity-punishment trajectory based on this duality. They recognise life's complexities *and* believe that God can be trusted and obeyed in the middle of the uncertain ways life unfolds.

Reflection

Psalm 95 connects 'loathed' by God with exclusion from God's sabbath rest. The letter to the Hebrews cites this psalm in linking the renewal and refreshment that God had provided in creation with God's promises for those who are later identified as citizens of 'the city of the living God' (Psalm 95:1–11; Hebrews 3:7–4:11, 12:22).

The bookends of this commentary on sabbath rest emphasise that God was not to be understood using anger-acceptance or loathing-love transactional dualities. Jesus, as 'the apostle and high priest of our confession', was faithful to God as both son and servant, as builder as well as building. His 'great high' priesthood was authenticated on earth and in heaven and provides mercy and grace in troubled times from 'the throne of grace' – a divine throne which is not of *wrath and grace*. Human accountability is measured and determined by God's mercy and grace in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 3:1–6, 4:12–16).

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It is as if the letter to the Hebrews provided a commentary regarding Moses – and then Jesus – standing ‘in the breach’ before God at God’s initiatives (Psalm 106:23; cf. Hebrews 2:5–18, 8:1–10:18, 12:18–24).

Paul pointed the Corinthians to a life of spiritual nurture and nourishment that was both similar and dissimilar to the Exodus and warned them to learn lessons from those earlier travellers (1 Corinthians 10:1–33).

These and other passages highlight that Jesus did not react in anger while under duress on the cross like Moses did by striking the rock when faced with the people’s rebellion in the wilderness. We are left in awe and amazement at Jesus’ cry of dereliction when experiencing the horror of ecclesiastical and political hatred without any divine rescue or amelioration (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

God’s renewal of all things, so carefully explained throughout Scripture, encourages us to pray:

Spring up, O gracious and merciful Fountain, pour down your Spirit from on high, dear God, and let the fountains of the deep be opened again in and by the name of your Son Jesus, our Saviour and Lord.

It also encourages us to ‘test’ God with true hearts and calm spirits by bringing full ‘tithes’ into God’s storehouses and see whether God will again shower blessings on his creation (Malachi 3:1–4:6).

The word of the living God

Hearing the voice of the living God

The Israelites were told in the wilderness that the word of God was not a supplement to bread, but its source, and was evidence of God's presence with them as deliverer, sustainer and destiny. The manna from heaven, the water from the rock, their victories over their enemies and their inheriting of the promised land were to teach them to live 'by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD'. The law given at Sinai was God's living word to them since 'the LORD spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly at the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, and he added no more' (Deuteronomy 5:1–6:9, 8:1–20, 10:12–22).

In each of these passages it is evident that not only did God not leave them *where* they were, God did not intend to leave them *as* they were. They were to mature by retaining God's words in their hearts, by sharing them with their children and by profiling them on their buildings. They were to do what was appropriate and good in the LORD's sight by ceasing idolatry and obeying God's instructions so that things might work out well (Deuteronomy 6:6–9).

They were not to be arrogant and self-absorbed, forget God's deliverance of them from slavery or embrace idolatry but were to 'remember the LORD your God' because it was God who would confirm his covenant with them by continuing to cause them to prosper (Deuteronomy 8:1–20).

A third exhortation urged them to answer what God required of them in terms of fearing the LORD God, walking 'in all his ways', loving and serving God with all their hearts and souls, and keeping God's commandments and decrees for their well-being. The context for these responses was that God had not only created everything but had uniquely selected their ancestors and their ancestor's descendants to love 'out of all the peoples, as it is today'.

They were to remember that God was 'mighty and awesome' and not biased or open to bribery, and that God 'executes justice for the orphan and the widow' and 'loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing'. Their behaviour was to be patterned on the fact that the LORD their God had caused a large community to grow from their seventy ancestors who originally travelled to Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:12–22).

As well as being written on two stone tablets, they were told that God's word was not remote but 'near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe'. Obeying God's living word meant loving the LORD their God while loving God was living in and obeying God's word. These themes enlarged on earlier ones in Deuteronomy and inverted human efforts at quietening spirits and

appeasing God. God had taken the initiative and the people were given the opportunity to respond (Deuteronomy 30:11–20).

Receiving the spirit of the living God

The people had been concerned that if they heard God's voice then they would perish. Moses replied that while God agreed with them, that God would provide a prophet like Moses for them from among them and that God's prophet would tell the people everything God told him to say. The people would be accountable to this greater prophet and false prophets would perish (Deuteronomy 18:15–22).

Joshua later gave the same message. To listen to what the LORD their God was saying was to know that 'the living God' was among them – though while Joshua's expectations of God's plans may seem to be aligned with earlier instructions, God's promises to Abraham about blessing the nations provide another perspective (Joshua 3:10).

The story of God's anointing of seventy elders to assist Moses and of Eldad and Medad also having the spirit of God rest on them provides insights to the relationship between hearing God's word and receiving God's spirit (Numbers 11:16–30). A prophet like Moses would be someone anointed with God's spirit like Moses. The presence of the LORD meant the presence of the spirit of the LORD and references to God's spirit indicated God's presence. The close connection between God speaking, God's presence and God's spirit is evident in God's explanation to Moses about the seventy elders having God's spirit placed on them. To have the spirit on them was to hear God's word and to hear God's word was to have the spirit on them:

I will *come* down and *talk* with you there; and I will take some of the *spirit* that is on you and put it on them (Numbers 11:17, italics added).

Moses' response to Joshua's concern about Eldad and Medad was enlarged on in Joel's later prophesy about the outpouring of God's spirit on all humanity

before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved (Numbers 11:17; Joel 2:28–32).

None of this divine action happened in secret:

Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy (Amos 3:7, 8)?

God did not 'speak in secret' or without achieving what he said (Isaiah 45:19, 55:12). To use God's name falsely and to declare what God had not said was to bring judgement on oneself and those who listened (Jeremiah 44:26ff, Ezekiel 14:9ff).

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The delusions and deceptions of the false prophets proved fatal. They were negligent in treating the wounds of God's people carelessly and falsely declared peace. They had not 'stood in the council of the LORD' so they could 'see and to hear his word'. Their pretence assumed God did not 'fill heaven and earth', and so could not see their 'secret places'. God's word was wheat, unlike the straw of the false prophets. It was 'like fire, ... like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces'. God's true word leads to repentance while the false prophets 'pervert the words of the living God' and bring 'everlasting disgrace and perpetual shame' (Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11, 23:16–40).

Being revived according to God's word

Once commissioned by God, God's prophets see and speak God's word (e.g. Jeremiah 1:1–13, Amos 7:10–8:3). They know the 'living God and the everlasting King' and glory in his wisdom (Jeremiah 9:23, 10:10). Their hearts are one with the psalmist for whom this word was 'a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (Psalm 119:105):

My soul clings to the dust; revive me according to your word ...

Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways ...

This is my comfort in my distress, that your promise gives me life ...

I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word ...

Plead my cause and redeem me; give me life according to your promise (Psalm 119:25, 37, 50, 107, 154, cf. 1:1–6, 19:1–14).

When the LORD's hand came upon Ezekiel and took him by the LORD's spirit to the middle of a valley full of bones, Ezekiel knew that the bones were dreadfully dry because the LORD's word had come to them in judgement. Only God knew whether such dead bones would live again. Only the prophetic 'word of the LORD', spoken in God's spirit, would bring life to the bones. To have God's spirit was to be made alive again; to return home from exile knowing that the LORD had spoken and acted not only in judgement but in resurrection (Ezekiel 37:1–14).

God ensured that forsaking him only brought the 'dust of death'. God would not honour himself, his creation or his people by giving his glory to shame. God's grace removes that shame, revives God's people and fulfils God's glorious purposes for them and for creation (Hosea 6:1–3).

Reflection

The repeated biblical witness is that God has taken the initiative regarding humanity's need for deliverance and renewal. The New Testament focuses this initiative on the human life of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. The consistent message, communicated in a wide range of ways, is that while humanity can't be saved *from* God, it can be saved *by* God-in-Christ-Jesus.

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Jesus does not save us from God; Jesus leads and brings us to God – and does so with and by the Holy Spirit according to God's will. Humanity does not need to quieten or ameliorate a hostile God before it can communicate with God: 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19). Paul profiles the removal of shame by reminding the Roman believers of Moses' message of the proximity of God's word to them (Romans 10:5–21; cf. Deuteronomy 30:11ff; Psalm 19:1ff).

The book of Hebrews presents God's new covenant as even more holy than the Mosaic one. Having linked Psalm 40 with Jesus' sacrificial death and Jeremiah 31 with the Holy Spirit's testimony, readers and listeners are urged to persevere and not 'shrink back' because righteous people 'live by faith' (Hebrews 10:1–39; cf. Habakkuk 2:1ff). This message is re-emphasised after the list of faithful people.

Perseverance is powerful because Jesus pioneered and perfected our faith by enduring shameful crucifixion because of the joy that would come to him and those who believed in him when he was enthroned at God's right hand. We can be thankful for being able to live securely and permanently under God's reign in God's reborn family (Hebrews 12:1–29).

This message comes to us because one greater than Moses received God's Spirit without limit as God's Word and sends us out with God's word and God's Spirit. Linking the ministry and presence of the Holy Spirit with Jesus makes the prologue in John's Gospel a statement about the Holy Spirit as well as about Jesus as the Word of God. It is this link that is clear at Pentecost when hearing the word of God by the Spirit of God correlated with receiving the Spirit of God on hearing the word of God.

Moses' great declaration was fulfilled at that Pentecost – and that Pentecost is repeated every time anyone is reborn (Acts 2:1ff; John 3:1ff). The gifts of God to the people of God by the Son of God with the Spirit of God are to the glory of God as 'Father of orphans and protector of widows' and home-giver of those who are homeless and hopeless (Ephesians 4:1–16; Psalm 68:1–11).

The dust of death and the glory of the LORD

The dust of death and the floods of despair

Psalm 22: From despair to delight

The psalmist understood being forsaken by God in terms of God not answering his cries for help. He said he had been put to shame and was near death. His prayer was that he wanted the LORD to be near him and to deliver him since the LORD had been his God from when he was born and had been the God in whom his ancestors had trusted. His graphic description of his distress was that

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death ... My hands and feet have shrivelled; I can count all my bones.

His distress was witnessed by his enemies whose gloating glares were accompanied by them gambling over his stolen or discarded clothing (Psalm 22:10–21a). He described God as being deaf to his requests for help even though God was holy and had been enthroned on the praises of God's people over many generations. He had reached a place of dire desolation and dryness. The fact that he addressed God in this way indicates that he still somehow believed God would listen to his requests for help.

Something unknown about his health and/or circumstances changed because he went on to announce that God had rescued him. Something had altered since God was no longer hidden from him and so he was no longer forsaken and abandoned. He believed God had heard him and that God's presence and spirit were with him. He was so in awe of God for God's deliverance that he declared that he would proclaim and praise God's name as LORD to his family and to his community from the centre of their gathered community (Psalm 22:21b–24).

He ascribed his new-found praises to God and indicated that his personal response was that he would always live for the LORD. He declared God's concern for the poor and for anyone who seeks him and believed that the LORD rather than God's enemies reigns because in the end we will all bow before God when our time comes to return to dust (Psalm 22:26–29).

The psalmist's understanding of *all* included *all* the nations over whom God was sovereign: '*all* the ends of the earth' and '*all* the families of the nations' will learn about, remember, serve and worship the LORD (Psalm 22:27–30).

Psalm 69: From despair to delight

A similar scene is described in Psalm 69 where that psalmist was being overwhelmed and left exhausted and dehydrated by a deluge of deep muddy water. He could hardly open his eyes to continue to look for God, saw himself as being

hated and wrongly accused by innumerable enemies who expected him to pay for what he did not steal (Psalm 69:1–4).

Although aware of his failures, he believed he had been unfairly criticised and made to feel ashamed for God's sake rather than his own. He believed he was being victimised because of his eagerness and enthusiasm for the house of God and that those who mocked and ridiculed God were treating him the same way:

Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink (Psalm 69:9, 20, 21).

Yet, as with the psalmist of Psalm 22, he believed God would rescue him from drowning and perishing at the appropriate time and in God's abundant steadfast love. His salvation meant judgement would come to his enemies because they were persecuting those God had 'struck down, and those whom you have wounded, they attack still more' (Psalm 69:13, 14).

God, he declared, would hear songs of thanksgiving from hearts that loved God's name and declared God's goodness – as well as songs of lament from people in those situations which the psalmist had described. He believed that God would hear the needy and revive the oppressed, and that, while sacrifices might demonstrate God's salvation, they would not produce it. Humility and honour matter more than ritual and profile with true human praise being accompanied by creation's responses to God's mercy and goodness (cf. Psalm 40:1ff, 51:1ff).

The glory of the LORD

Moses' intercession for the people of God when they rebelled after hearing the report of the spies concerning the promised land focused on asking God to forgive them according to God's steadfast love. The LORD's response was that, yes, he would forgive them and that the whole earth would be full of the LORD's glory – meaning that God's glory including forgiving those who opposed God (Numbers 14:19–21).

The message conveyed to the people was that however deep their shame and however broad its consequences, the glory of God was greater, his holiness more significant and his love more embracing. While God would remove their shame and lead them to the land God had promised, God would never endorse or sanctions their evil.

Habakkuk's prayer was in the context of coming exile, an exile caused by empires Habakkuk saw as more corrupt than the people of God. His prayer for revival indicated his knowledge of God's holy glory, of God's judgements and God's salvation. He remained hopeful even when 'rottenness enters into my bones' and the creation around him was desolate (Habakkuk 3:16).

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God's salvation would be great, and God's judgements were to be seen in the context of three clear contrasts. Firstly, righteous people would rely on faith rather than actions and efforts even though they might be ruined and destroyed by others more violent and less righteous than they were:

Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith (Habakkuk 2:4).

Secondly, while devastation and destruction inevitably follow evil and wickedness and nations wearying themselves for no benefit or gain,

the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14).

Lastly, the idols of the nations have no breath, no life, and no words; and they speak no truth, show no love and bring no liberty,

But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him (Habakkuk 2:20)!

This silence would not come from coercion or domination but from reverence and awe at God's majestic deliverance and salvation.

The witness of these biblical authors was that just as Israel's tabernacle and temple were filled with God's glory, so God's glory would be over all the heavens and the earth. This divine glory was frequently described in terms of God's grace, mercy, kindness, love, goodness and holiness acting to forgive, reconcile and restore humanity – especially those most at risk from human power structures, including people lacking social connections and material possessions, and particularly any widows, orphans and those from other ethnic groups (e.g. Exodus 34:6, 7, 40:34–35; 1 Samuel 2:1–10; 1 Kings 8:11; 1 Chronicles 16:7–26, 29:11; 2 Chronicles 5:13, 14, 7:1–3; Psalm 8:1ff, 29:1ff, 57:11, 69:34–36, 86:9; Isaiah 6:3; Ezekiel 44:4).

Reflection

God's confidence in sustaining creation is based on God's redemptive actions while God's redemption depends on God's faithfulness as creator. Descriptions of the dust of death and torrents of water starkly profile human suffering and raise critical questions about divine purpose and character. When these writers spoke of desolation and abandonment, they invariably looked for the presence of God speaking in the centre of these distressing situations. There would be no word and no spirit without this divine presence, and no recovery and no reconciliation in its absence. While deliverance called for full human engagement and resourcefulness, somehow the mystery of God identified suffering and not prevention as a more likely indicator of this divine presence with troubled humanity.

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Central to their narrative about God was God's faithful, truthful and abundant goodness, mercy and lovingkindness. These and similar qualities meant that God would never endorse anything which opposed God's being and person. It also meant God would position God's being in the centre of distress and disaster to reshape and restore what was fractured and broken. Ends then become beginnings – death leads to new life, to God's life shared with God's people always leading them to God's goal.

The New Testament centred these perspectives in Jesus as Messiah and divine Son, anointed by God's Spirit to achieve God's plan for God's creation. The worship that comes to those embraced by this revelation – and who embrace God-in-Christ – is where God's heart and mind are found. It is where God's love for God's people is found – where we learn that God's Son lives beyond his death and loves us so that we can live beyond death in this life and the next. Jesus spoke of and actualised a resurrection, not a resuscitation.

Jesus' abandonment was his identification with us. His presence with forsaken humanity was so that divine glory could again fill humanity as God's dwelling place, so that the dust of death would be inundated by the Spirit of life and not be washed away like a sandcastle in a raging storm.

God's refusal to call holy that which is ungodly and profane means God does not give God's glory to that which is shameful: what God will and does do is bring glory *out of* the centre of that which is shameful because that is where God-in-Christ has gone and continues to go to find us (2 Corinthians 4:1–6).

Questions for reflection and sharing

1. Share what it means for us to keep our hearts with all vigilance and diligence, 'for from [them flows] the springs of life' (Proverbs 4:20–27). In your answer reflect on Jeremiah's lament concerning Israel's rejection of God as the fountain of living water. In what ways do you see Jesus' teaching about trees and their fruit relating to this statement (e.g. Matthew 7:15–19, 12:33–37).
2. Select a psalm such as Psalm 36, 42–43, 63 or 84, and share the writer's understanding of God as the fountain of life. Indicate something of what you think that meant for the author and what it means for you.
3. Explore the world views set out in the book of Ecclesiastes from the perspective of God as the fountain of life.
4. The prophecies in Isaiah describe God's redemption of his people, God's renewal of his creation, God's pouring out of his spirit, and the ministry of God's servant. Outline ways that these themes interrelate with each other in the light of God as the fountain of living water.
5. Retell the story of the woman at the well from the viewpoint of a believer in Jesus living in Samaria. You can assume that this person was well read in the Hebrew Scriptures.
6. What did Jesus mean when he said he was thirsty during his crucifixion? You may want to link his statement with his earlier declaration about rivers of living water flowing from those who believed in him (John 7:37–39).

Revival

Inheriting what God has promised

The frequent exhortations in the early sections of the letter to the Hebrews include various concerns (Hebrews 2:1, 3, 3:1, 12, 13, 4:1, 2, 11, 16, 5:2). A lengthy passage follows describing the need to re-learn ‘the basic elements of the oracles of God’ (Hebrews 5:11–6:12, ‘elementary truths of God’s word’ NIV). These basic truths came – along with deeper ones – as heavenly gifts, as a sharing together of the goodness of the word of God in the Holy Spirit.

Those receiving the letter were to remember that they had learned about God’s salvation from those who heard the Lord Jesus during his earthly life. These people witnessed God’s testimony to Jesus by God’s gifts of various signs, wonders and miracles – by God’s ‘gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will’ (Hebrews 2:3–4).

Those sending this letter wanted its recipients to demonstrate the same care and thoughtfulness as these first Jesus people so that they would always know a ‘full assurance of hope’ and imitate other believers who inherit God’s promises ‘through faith and patience’ (Hebrews 6:11, 12).

A further exhortation urged them to approach God ‘in full assurance of faith’ with an authenticity coming from cleansed hearts, sincere consciences and purged bodies (Hebrews 10:22).

They were also to not waver in the hope they confessed

for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke [and encourage] one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together (Hebrews 10:23–25).

They were warned not to spurn the Son of God or to insult ‘the Spirit of grace’, but to recall their previous sufferings, ‘abuse and persecution’ and ministry:

Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised (Hebrews 10:35–39).

Their ongoing endurance was to be based on a God-given assurance that those whom God calls righteous live by faith while swamped by diabolical evil.

This background is a rich mine which unearths treasures central to a vibrant living faith. These truths are crucial when we consider our need for revival.

The sovereignty of God in suffering and salvation

Those to whom this letter was written had endured considerable suffering and were inclined to drift into religious formalism. The quote from Habakkuk encouraging living by faith came from a prophet perplexed that his nation’s exile

by means of a pagan empire would result from God's sovereignty. Habakkuk had been concerned whether the same confidence in God was possible during suffering and persecution as was affirmed in times of abundance. He was contemplating whether God was sovereign in seasons of evil as well as in good ones.

Revival is not simply a length of time free from the consequences of human rebellion where we are able to enjoy the good things of God. Life is not a choice between a revival *or* a riot so much as both a revival and a riot. This reality is present evidence of the mystery of God's personal involvement at every point of human history. It indicates God's pleasure in being displeased with the death of the wicked while insisting that crookedness fails and faithfulness is life-giving. Living in these truths about God – as those subsequently listed as faithful had done – is identical with not shrinking back and losing faith and hope in God (Hebrews 10:39).

This letter teaches that our salvation is possible and necessary *because* God is sovereign in God's universe, and that God's reign confronts humanity's deep, stubborn rebellion (cf. Hebrews 3:7–4:13). Those who read this letter can learn of the way that God not only recognises our human plights but displays sovereignty in rescuing humanity (cf. Hebrews 6:13–20).

No revival on a silver plate

This letter profiles the era in which it was written as one of judgement. The gifts of the Spirit, for example, were confirmations given to ensure that careful attention was paid to 'so great a salvation' (Hebrews 2:3). Being revived did not mean having a season in which to satisfy one's spiritual selfishness. It did not involve a time for receiving spiritual signs as nothing more than divine advertisements of a future celestial paradise. Anything dramatic about them related to an urgent need to 'go on to maturity' where the sacraments and the Spirit-given results of Pentecost would be in their correct restorative and reconciling perspectives.

They were being asked questions like those posed by a modern poet: 'Do you ever wonder just what God requires? You think He's just an errand boy to satisfy your wandering desires'.⁴

The cross is creation's crucial centrepiece

The cross was and is not a God-given amulet or charm. It was and is not an incantation provided to achieve humanly desired results aimed at appeasing our consciences or pleasing our spiritual appetites. It is the crux of creation and the core reality in human experience. It is that event which makes sense of what occurs in this universe. The faithful high priest who was sacrificed on the altar of human pride and ambition was and is of an eternal priestly order. He has secured an

⁴ <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/when-you-gonna-wake/>.

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‘eternal redemption’ and a permanent deliverance. He has ‘offered himself without blemish to God’ through the eternal Holy Spirit by the outpouring of his own blood. Human consciences can be cleansed from deadly actions so that people may serve and ‘worship the living God’. God’s community can now live in the confidence that what Jesus Christ did is effective in the heavenly Holy Place beyond this creation and in the complex uncertainties experienced in this fragile and faulty life (Hebrews 9:11–28).

This Son, through whom the universe was made, has ‘provided purification for sins’. He was the one who radiated God’s glory and who, by God’s grace tasted ‘death for everyone’ in order ‘to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people’ (Hebrews 1:2–3, 2:9–18).

He reveals that God’s covenant with him, and us, is stronger than death and more secure than the creation. He declares that our adoption into God’s family is at God’s initiative and results from his life, death and resurrection. This bonding of us to God and God to us is crucial to everything we know and do as God’s people (Hebrews 9:24–28, 12:2, 22–24, 13:9–16, 20, 21).

By God’s Spirit and God’s Word

Those receiving this letter were encouraged not to focus primarily on their emotions, intellects or activities. They were exhorted to use these abilities to develop conscious appreciations of God’s personal and community promises. They were, for example, to consider the extent to which

the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, [would] *purify our conscience from dead works* to worship the living God (Hebrews 9:11–14, italics added).

This letter goes on to address the recipients as the author’s friends, telling them that because they were confident that Jesus’ shed blood and body meant they could enter the heavenly sanctuary knowing that the risen Jesus is ‘a great priest over the house of God’, they could now

approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts *sprinkled clean from an evil conscience* and our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19–22, italics added)

The letter concludes with a request that its recipients prayed for them: ‘we are sure that we have a *clear conscience*, desiring to act honourably in all things’ (Hebrews 13:18, italics added).

Christ, as God’s divine word came of, and from, God and works powerfully and majestically with the Holy Spirit to equip those faithful to God’s mercy and grace for life now and in the ‘city that is to come’ (Hebrews 13:14).

Everything mentioned about Jesus in this letter is underlined by the initial declaration that God ‘has *spoken* to us *by a Son*’ while everything written about him is closely linked with the Holy Spirit who speaks, shares, indicates and testifies – as well as being the one through whom Christ ‘offered himself without blemish to God’.

God’s conversation and the Holy Spirit’s testimony write God’s reconciling covenant life in our hearts and minds (Hebrews 1:1–3, italics added, 1:5ff, 2:1–4, 3:7–14, 4:12–13, 5:7, 6:4–6, 9:8–14, 10:15–18, 10:29).

The integrity of love

The faithful were those who lived by faith – rather than those who sought to achieve loyalty by their own efforts – and who were given great resources. Jesus was equipped by his atoning sacrificial death ‘to help those who are being tested’ and sympathises with their predicaments. He provides ‘a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul’ and intercedes having been ‘exalted above the heavens’. From there, Jesus defeats his enemies and enacts God’s new covenant, bringing forgiveness and alignment to those who were sinful and lawless (Hebrews 2:16–18, 4:14–16, 6:19, 7:26, 10:11–18).

This life of trust called for perseverance and integrity rather than survival by devising cunning means of coping, as with Esau and others (Hebrews 10:19–25, 12:14–17, 13:1–9). Drifting away was the result of letting the world-system around them squeeze them back into its own shape (cf. Romans 12:1ff).⁵

They were to endure trials as discipline and as evidence they were God’s family, just as the Son of God ‘learned obedience’ from his sufferings (Hebrews 12:5–13, 5:7–8). His crucifixion taught not primarily of suffering, but of faithfully being God’s family (Hebrews 2:5–18, 11:1–38, 12:1ff).

God’s treatment of them as family served as a commentary on the father-son and wisdom narrative poems in Proverbs 1–9, and in this instance particularly Proverbs 3, where this relationship is profiled. The ancient sages wrote of the father urging his son to remember and keep his instructions as they would give him a long and rewarding life. This advice included maintaining loyalty and faithfulness, and fully trusting and acknowledging the LORD rather than simply going by his own instincts and perceptions.

Fearing the LORD, for the father, meant avoiding evil and being healed and refreshed in life’s difficulties. Honouring the LORD meant being generous to other people, while accepting the LORD’s discipline and correction would confirm the LORD’s love (Proverbs 3:1–12).

⁵ Cf. *New Testament in Modern English, The*, trans. J. B. Phillips (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960).

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Jesus similarly told of the way his heavenly Father delights to reveal himself to those to whom his Son reveals him. Jesus then invited his listeners to take his yoke of sonship and its discipline as the recipe for relief from weariness and for the realisation of rest (Matthew 11:25–30; cf. Hebrews 3–4).

Discipleship of this kind involved willing participation in God's family. It meant that God's true life would enrich and enable Jesus' followers while they cared for each other and those around them, including during their sufferings. The letter to the Hebrews sees God's discipline as beneficial and that it helps God's family 'share in his holiness', so producing 'a harvest of righteousness and peace' (Hebrews 12:10, 11 NIV).

The advice that they should willingly subject themselves 'to the Father of spirits and live' focused on being revived and producing an abundant harvest – a harvest of eternal and not only temporal significance. The author's exhortations were based on these goals (e.g. Hebrews 12:12, 13; cf. Proverbs 4:23–25).

These themes are further developed in the last sections of the letter to the Hebrews. The people of faith were a community of hope (Hebrews 9:27–28, 10:23–25) who were to

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

Seeing revival

Seeing the revival that was among them even in times of suffering and distress involved 'receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken' and included an ongoing and thorough reformation and renewal (Hebrews 12:28). It required a re-awakening to who God is and to what God is doing. This was not optional but was an urgent necessity. The warnings and their blunt references to the Israelites in the wilderness set the scene for the pleas that they heard the one 'who warns from heaven' (Hebrews 12:25).

God will not abandon his own integrity, truth, faithfulness, goodness, holiness and love on any grounds, but rather works by those qualities to bring deliverance and peace in his own grace and mercy. The fountains of God's rich and glorious holiness and love flow to us and enable us to live among the true people of faith who were 'commended for their faith' even though they 'did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect' (Hebrews 11:39–40).

Nations and covenant

Nations and covenant – 1

Creation: new and renewed

A wind from God

Creation was the initiative and action of God. When God created the heavens and the earth ‘a wind [spirit] from God swept over the face of the waters’ (Genesis 1:2). A psalmist explored this thought further when blessing the LORD ‘my God’ for God’s greatness, honour and majesty in creating the universe. This poet declared that all creatures – including humanity – look to God for their food in each season and that they are amply provided for:

When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit [wind], they are created; and you renew the face of the ground (Psalm 104:1–30).

Having created the heavens and the earth as a ‘formless void’ by divine direct action, every creation event that followed occurred by God’s words and commands. There is a clear contrast between the face of the deep being covered with darkness and the action of God’s word on the days that followed.

The silence of the poet who wrote Genesis 1 about God’s initial creation being by God’s word amplifies the significance of the spoken word of God on the following days, and no doubt points to a powerful word of initial creation from God; a word effected and then enriched by and through God’s spirit:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth (Psalm 33:6).

In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds (Hebrews 1:2).

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible (Hebrews 11:3).

Form and fullness

The six days of creation profile the poet’s insights into the form and fullness outlined in the first two verses. These days are in two groups (days 1 to 3 and days 4 to 6) and three pairs (days 1 and 4, days 2 and 5, and days 3 and 6). The first group of three days outlines the form of the creation while the second group informs about the fullness of creation (cf. Genesis 1:1):

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Form	Fullness
1 Light and darkness	4 Lights of day and night
2 Sea and sky	5 Sea and sky creatures
3 Sea and land with vegetation	6 Land creatures including humanity

Three blessings are given in this poem: one for each of days five to seven. God blessed birds and fish on the fifth day, humanity (and by implication terrestrial creatures) on the sixth day, and the seventh rest day, hallowed day or sabbath. Each blessing relates to fullness, filling and fruitfulness; with the seventh day blessed with holiness and without any mention of morning or evening.

All human history finds its meaning and destiny in this day of sacred rest. When, for example, Jesus commissioned his disciples, the 'all the earth' indicates that his command was for fullness for all the earth (Matthew 28:16–20). God's rest day heralds the era of human activity as vocational life flowing from resting, and then resting, in the divine rest!

God's image and likeness is plural, as with the implication of a divine 'us'. It may give more than a hint of a parent-family relationship between God and humanity as, for example, in the family likenesses that are described in Genesis. God's image and likeness is to participate in a fruitful filling of creation in relationship with God while God continually forms and fills creation!

This poem profiles every human action as worship and service, as a love-offering to God, a sacrifice of thanksgiving in the gladness and joy of being human in God's creation. There is participation in God's holiness in this abundance. Humanity is created as a priestly people living in the reign of God, hearing and obeying the prophetic word of God. Worship, honour and hearing is in, through and by the Spirit of the living God. Divine-human communion is not otherwise labelled, nor is God called covenant-God or LORD until the second account of creation. Covenant is nonetheless an unstated name for this love-communion. Works are the relational consequence of living communion and community, not their requirement. This life is divinely initiated, and freely given, and human freedom is willing participation in the divine plan and gift.

Many psalms explore creational themes and sing worship to God as creator-redeemer-restorer, including Psalms 8, 19, 24, 65, 100, 111–113.

Life and death in Eden

Communion and alienation

While two trees are mentioned in verse 9 of Genesis chapter 2, the tree of life is not identified in verses 16 and 17. Freedom is linked with obedience rather than choice and true life is to be found in communion and community. Human identity is best understood in terms of image and likeness, and image and likeness refer to interdependence and not independence.

The two trees do not represent good and evil, but communion and alienation, other person centredness and selfishness, freedom to be oneself in service to God and other people and slavery to oneself and others in so-called freedom for oneself. They represent life in the Spirit and life in the flesh, true faith in God and false arrogance about oneself.

Several realms of human participation are nominated in this narrative. Human-divine communion and worship is at the centre, in and from the reference to divine rest that concludes the first creation account and acts as a bridge to this second description. Human-human communion is known in and flourishes from mutual participation in knowing God and God's purposes in creation. Human-creation interactions express these human-divine and human-human communions to creation and respond to creation's testimony to its God.

The writer states that 'there was not found a helper as [the man's] partner'. Eve declared that she had 'produced a man with the help of the LORD' when Cain was born (Genesis 2:18–20, 4:1). Just as God was helping humanity – and by implication humanity was God's helper in creation – so the woman and man were to help each other. The relationship of God with humanity would be reflected in the marriage of a woman and a man. Helping was not servility but mutuality and being helped was not about power and control but about identifying new opportunities for ongoing, fresh, responsive helping. The woman was flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones, with all humanity living by God's breath of spirit-life. The man and the woman were embraced as full-image and complete-likeness by God's relationship with them. Their pre-fall marriage was permanent and included one spouse. There is no exploration in the narrative about the social man-woman complexities that might result from creational diversity or human failure.

The external relationship of God beyond God's-self with humanity becomes most intimate within humanity as God's image and likeness. The fruit of this intimacy in parent-children relationships points back to the nature of divine communion within God himself. God's over-flowing fullness does not leave humanity away or awry from God but brings humanity into communion with God through God's word and in and by God's spirit. The diversity of community is evident in the unity of vocational life; the diversity of vocational life explores the unity of the community: As with God, so with his image and likeness!

Abundance and pride

The story of Eden comes after the account of God's seventh day of rest with the author's declaration that 'Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, with all their multitude' (Genesis 2:1) God had declared the last day of creative work to be 'very good', emphasising the announcement of goodness that God made on the previous five days and profiling humanity's creation as God's image and likeness. Human dominion was not domination but development – working with God with and within creation to ensure God's creation was fruitful, flourishing and abundant in all the seasons that were ahead.

The author's reference to 'generations' links with the theme of seven days. Generations and descendants are significant terms in Genesis as they relate to intended fruitfulness and fullness (e.g. Genesis 2:4, 5:5ff, 7:1ff, 9:12ff, 10:1ff, 11:10ff, 15:5ff, 17:7ff, 25:19ff, 26:1ff, cf. 49:1ff). The generations of the people of God through Seth seemed numerically few but God promised them fullness while Cain's generations seemed many but faced great alienation, conflict and separation (e.g. Genesis 4:17–24, 6:5–7, 11:1–9).

God's holy sanctuary of Eden was on a hill or mountain with rivers flowing out to water the earth. Just as its rivers rose from the ground, so God's breath came to fill humanity. The man was placed in Eden after being formed and was given the woman in Eden. She was not less than him and under his feet; she was not over him from his head, but with him, from his side. She was his glory in God and from God as gift. He was her source but not her author and certainly not her ruler (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:11, 12). Authority and glory were in inseparable partnership: each person was each other's glory and each one was authorised to give the other glory in acts of cooperative mutuality. There was a mutual interpenetration of persons, an unfathomable mystery of revelation and a searching of each other in delight and joy. The 'not ashamed' is a rather large understatement, typical of these two chapters, and reflects the impossibility of language to capture the essence intended.

Because of the breath of God's being, human marriage was different to the animals. They do not marry; whatever genders they have. Human fullness comes as the human male-female family explores the treasures of Eden and follows – flows with – the rivers of God to the ends of the earth.

The temptation reversed the created order, but the LORD still called Adam first. Shame replaced glory, alienation replaced intimacy, and blame replaced praise. God knows good without being evil. Everything is subject to God; God is subject to no-one. God insists on God's own way of relating, according to God's promises. The serpent is cursed, with demonic rebellion to be crushed by a human offspring. Human toil, strife and futility become ever-present realities in which divine mercy and grace emerge to renew and restore.

Cain and Abel: hate and hope

Sacrifices of praise

The background of the story of Cain and Abel is their parent's disobedience, where relational death occurred, and the physical end of life changed (cf. Jeremiah 31:29ff; Ezekiel 18:2). Adam and Eve's communion with God ceased being pure and blameless. Eden could no longer be entered as one would need to pass its guards and their deadly weapons even if Eden's location could be identified! The new Eden is, however, not closed, nor are its gates locked (Revelation 21:25–27). 'Those who conquer will inherit these things': one must survive death and resist evil to enter this eternal sanctuary – and do so by drinking 'water as a gift from the spring of the water of life' and by eating 'the twelve kinds of fruit' from the 'tree of life' (Revelation 21:6, 22:1, 2)!

With the initial defiance of Adam and Eve, death was yet to reach its climax, but that sad outcome would eventuate. The LORD gave them animal skins for covering, and naked innocence was replaced by guilty ignorance. Only the arrogant pretend that humanity can redeem itself by itself without relating to God and apart from being thankful to God for God-given abundance in creation. This was the pride of Cain and his descendants. It also proved to be the source of the failures of Seth's descendants.

Sacrifices of praise now needed to include some form of atonement. Eve had been given a revelation that this would be through her offspring as a gift, just as creation was a gift. Sacrifices in Eden meant offering thanksgiving to God for the blessings of creation. They included acknowledging God's goodness and participating in the sanctity of their communion with their LORD. After their exile from Eden, they must also contain restorative, redemptive and reconciliatory elements responding to God's initiatives of mercy and grace (cf. Psalm 24, 49, 51; Luke 18:9–14).

Sacrifices of peace

Abel and Cain went about their creational vocations of keeping and tilling. We are not told why God rejected Cain's offering. Sin does not force God's hand: God continues to act according to God's own being and purpose. It seems clear that Cain was not living in the love of God (1 John 3:11, 12). To live in hate is to be 'from the evil one' and that leads to violence and murder. Not living in love means doing evil.

God urged Cain to do well. God's encouragement was not focused on works. God was advising Cain to do well concerning sacrifices. David later wrote a psalm reflecting this theme:

The LORD answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you! May he send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion. May he remember all your offerings, and regard with favour

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your burnt sacrifices. May he grant you your heart's desire, and fulfil all your plans (Psalm 20:1–4).

Cain would receive divine approval and care; his countenance would be lifted up and he would be at peace by sacrificing this way. Sin was simply not trusting God for mercy and grace. Evil actions and thoughts come from disbelief.

A forgiven Cain would be dead to sin and alive to God (cf. Romans 6:1ff), otherwise Cain would be overcome by sin, according to God's message about the trees in Eden. Cain, the first son (cf. Genesis 3:15), wanted to defeat evil by himself, of himself. His perception of evil was that of the tree of death.

Abel's sacrifice brought him fullness of glory and uplifted countenance presumably because it was a love-gift to God affirming his love for those around him. Cain, according to John's first letter, was given over to evil and aligned with 'the evil' one when murdering his brother:

And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous (1 John 3:11, 12).

This passage suggests that Abel loved his brother, and that Abel's deeds were good and righteous. Goodness and righteousness have to do with faith and not works, and with discernments about right and wrong derived from faith.

Abel's sacrifice was not only a prayer to God for his own mercy, but for mercy for his brother, for his parents, and for all humanity. People of faith are always concerned for the needs of those around them (cf. Romans 9:1ff). God's question to Cain reminded Cain of God's concern for him, and of the truth that love for God meant love of others (cf. Matthew 19:16–22, 22:34–40).

God declared Abel righteous and that his sacrifice was acceptable:

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks (Hebrews 11:4).

Abel looked to God for mercy and 'hoped for ... things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1). Abel hoped for a word from God to deal with his very visible failures; an unseen divine word like that which created the universe. This second word was first given to his parents as God spoke to the serpent (Genesis 3:15).

There is a 'new covenant' with a mediator who 'speaks a better word than the blood of Abel' (Hebrews 12:24). The tree of life still bears fruit and the river of life still flows! God is still in his temple. Somehow, what the serpent meant for evil, God meant for good (cf. Genesis 50:19). We cannot enter Eden alone, but Eden can come upon us (Revelation 21:2). Like the thief on the cross next to Jesus, we can be taken into God's eternal paradise (Luke 23:43).

From Seth to Noah

Seth's son and Cain's city

Even after Cain had murdered his brother, God protected Cain from the full fury of Cain's evil. Cain's two sacrifices – of grain and of his brother Abel – compounded his problem and revealed more of the mercy of God.

Cain left the LORD's presence and moved to a land of wandering, east of Eden. He saw himself as a 'fugitive and a wanderer on the earth' and went to the place of coming, to the east, but not to the throne of help in times of need (Hebrews 4:16). Yet the LORD's presence never left Cain (cf. Genesis 4:15). Cain built a city and named it after his son. Livestock were kept, music was played, and technology was developed. But peace was lacking, and violence and anger were rife. His city was a hollow shell compared to the life of worship God gave in Eden, with the riches to be explored and developed using the resources God made available. God would be the 'builder and architect' of an eternal city which comes from heaven (Hebrews 11:10).

Cain's descendants were his image and likeness (cf. Genesis 1:26–28). Humanity had been created to fill the earth with divine love and faithfulness, but the descendants of Cain filled it with violence (Genesis 4:24, 6:5, 11–13; cf. Psalm 49). Their violence was part of a desperate attempt to secure their own destiny by their own efforts. True security comes through faith and is received as a gift, removing the need or desire to boast in one's own achievements, or to defend what seems to be one's territory or identity.

God provides Seth as a second person of faith. The birth of Seth's son led people to 'invoke the name of the LORD' (Genesis 4:26, cf. 4:17). God's name in this passage is the same as used in Eden, and later indicates God being full of steadfast love and mercy, yet not ameliorating impenitent sinners (e.g. Exodus 34:6, 7).

The genealogy that follows begins with a summary of the creation of humanity in the first creation poem:

This is the list of the descendants of Adam. When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them 'Humankind' when they were created (Genesis 5:1, 2, cf. 1:26–28).

Seth was the likeness and image of his father Adam, and, by implication, also of his mother, Eve. Cain and Abel are not named here. The true humanity of faith after Abel's murder would be found through Seth's descendants.

Walking with God

Enoch 'walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him'. Lamech called his son Noah, 'saying, "Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed this

one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands” (Genesis 5:21–30). A second truncated list of descendants starts with the writer declaring that ‘Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah [like Enoch before him] walked with God’ (Genesis 6:9, cf. 3:8ff, 17:1 and 5:1, 10:1ff, 11:10ff).

The description of divine sons and human daughters may point to the children of faith being caught up in fertility cults and their evil angelic powers, rather than being true to God’s parenting. Whatever the case, the words of God in Eden that eating the forbidden tree defied God’s own spirit are emphasised. The three ‘LORD’ statements that follow identify human wickedness, evil thoughts and divine regret (Genesis 6:1–8, cf. 1:2, 2:6–10). The contrast with Noah being righteous and finding God’s grace and favour bookends this account of human violence and divine grief (Genesis 5:28–32, 6:8ff).

The writer of Hebrews noted that Noah ‘condemned the world [by building his ark] and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith’ (Hebrews 11:7). The flood, described polemically as an intentional divine response to human wickedness, reversed the order of Genesis 1. It was followed by the renewal of the original creation mandate (Genesis 9:1ff, cf. 5:1ff). There was continuity and discontinuity. The original gift of creation, renewed once with Seth, was renewed again with Noah. Just as sacrifice after Eden involved mercy and grace, so God’s blessing of Noah covered death.

The significance of God establishing his covenant with Noah is clear:

- The context relates to the flood and God’s judgement on humanity’s delight in evil. Noah enters the ark and is saved, and God declared that he would not send another flood (Genesis 6:18, 9:11, 12)
- The establishment of the covenant was an act of grace. What was so by gift from initial creation is now maintained in Noah as a ‘new’ Adam (Genesis 9:1ff), carried in the ark through judgement. The original gift was effective again because of God’s grace and mercy.
- The covenant with Noah was also between God and the earth and all living creatures (Genesis 9:12–17). The rainbow was God’s signature on this covenant. God was intent on creation reaching fullness through his word and spirit.

From Noah to Abraham

Covenants of grace and mercy

God's covenant with Noah and the creation makes explicit what is implicit in the first two creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2. God's covenant with Noah embraces God's people in who God is and what God is doing in and with what God had created. This divine statement, given in the face of human evil and wickedness, was God's grace-mercy gift to enable humanity to be in ongoing communion with God's-self. It was from this communion with 'the LORD' that God's original creational intention for form and fullness was to flow afresh and bring abundance and fullness to creation and human societies.

The biblical narrative identifies two streams of humanity. The descendants of Cain, judged in the flood, find their relational offspring in the emerging nations descending from Noah. Noah is not presented after the flood without faults, and the way his sons responded to his failings was imaged in their descendants. These patterns were not mechanical or automatic. People of faith are described as imperfect and reliant on God's covenant grace and mercy.

The family listings delineate these nations. The spreading out reflects the dynamic nature of the creational mandate. Little is said of Japheth and his descendants, while Ham's descendants include nations that demonstrated hostility to God and God's people. Nimrod hunted 'before the LORD', his hostility was up-front and in God's face, it was open aggression against God (Genesis 10:9). The original city of Cain found its successors in Babel, Nineveh and other cities in Nimrod's empire.

While Ham's descendants are listed without comment, the listing is broken for the story of the tower of Babel. A direct lineage is traced from Shem to Abraham, though we learn later that Abram was an idolater (Joshua 24:2). The link back to Abel and Eden seems very slender and is based on trusting God.

Promises of communion and community

Babel was built using the best available resources. People interacted through one language and with common words. Using technology creatively and communicating well can be consistent with the original creational mandate. Their motivation and the goal of their activities was opposed to that mandate.

Their city was to reach heaven; they were to build it; they were to make a name for themselves; they were to keep together and not be separated. All these ambitions were against God's intention: God's city comes from heaven to earth; God builds it; God's name is glorified; God's focus and priority is on sending out, sharing with others and enriching and enabling the environment.

God's judgement confused their language, scattered the people and destroyed their goal. God's intentions still operated despite their actions. Pentecost was later to reverse Babel's scattering and confusion. Pentecost would establish a community according to God's eternal plan to build his city and provide a home for his people. God scattered the early Babylonians as judgement; God protected and prospered the early Christians as they were dispersed under the hostilities of the later Roman 'Babylonians'.

God revealed his glory to Abraham and Sarah – one man and one woman among many nations (Acts 7:2ff). Their faithful obedience when Abraham was 'as good as dead' and Sarah was 'barren' began a family as numerous as sand or stars (Hebrews 11:8–12; Romans 4:17–22). When God informed Abraham that Abraham and Sarah would have a son, 'Abraham fell on his face and laughed', questioning whether a couple of their age could become parents (Genesis 17:17).

When the LORD appeared again to Abraham, this time through three men near 'the oaks of Mamre' for whom Abraham and Sarah provided hospitality, Sarah laughed as well – and then felt vulnerable for her response, just as Abraham had presumably been! God's response was to ask Abraham whether anything was 'too wonderful for the LORD' (Genesis 18:13, 14). Sarah's response when their son was born was that God had

brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me. ... Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age (Genesis 21:2–6).

Abraham had left his 'country and [his] kindred and [his] father's house' (Genesis 12:1ff) to go to a land that God would show him and to be made into a great nation. This nation would be so great that those who joined with God in blessing Abraham would also be blessed. Abraham therefore became a blessing to these nations, reversing the reversal that applied to Cain's and Nimrod's violent descendants. The curse under which they existed was emphasised and intensified by the LORD's promises to Abraham and Sarah.

God's promises to Abraham further outlined the creational and restorative intentions that were detailed in the covenant God 'established' with Noah after the flood – which was in turn set in the context of the tragic events in Eden. God's original covenant lines of marriage, vocation and sabbath, evident in the first creation narratives, are explored and explained in God's promises to Abraham and Sarah of land, home, and family (cf. John 1:10, 11). God's promises are more than adequate to fill the earth through the fruitfulness that comes with God's blessing of God's creatures. The seemingly successful efforts of fallen humanity cannot prevail against God's purposes. Rebellious empires tumble and fall, while God sustains God's creation forever.

Abraham and Melchizedek

The name of the LORD

Abram 'built an altar to the LORD and invoked the name of the LORD' on arriving east of Bethel (Genesis 12:8). The LORD had appeared to him already at 'the oak of Moreh' at Shechem where Canaanites were living (Genesis 12:6). The LORD reaffirmed that he would give that territory to Abram's offspring, so restating God's original call of Abram.

Abram needed much grace to cover his failures and remain faithful while living among the surrounding nations. His mistreatment of Sarai in Egypt where he went during a famine was repulsive to Pharaoh. His abuse was one of many failures towards wives and other women living in the context of the hospitality provided by privileged patriarchs including Abraham, Moses and David.

Abram's return to Bethel provides a pre-figuring of the later Exodus under Moses (Genesis 12:10–14:24, cf. 15:13–16). Abram's nephew Lot was quick to choose the plains of Jordan which were 'well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD' (Genesis 13:10). But Lot's journeying eastwards suggests more than a reminder of Cain's life after murdering his brother.

The citizens of Sodom and the cities nearby were 'wicked, great sinners against the LORD' (Genesis 13:13). Abram and his family seemed alone among the evil around them, especially when Lot and those among whom he lived were taken captive (Genesis 14:1–16). Yet Abram was to discover something fresh of the riches God has in store for his people after helping rescue Lot and defeating 'Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him' (Genesis 14:17).

The maker of heaven and earth

God was present to Abram through 'King Melchizedek of Salem ... priest of God Most High' (Genesis 14:18). The emergence of Melchizedek from outside of the lineage from Abel seems to contradict all that had been written in Genesis so far, but God's image in humanity is more substantial than the sinful dynasties of failed families and parents.

Whatever changed about sacrifice with the sin of Adam and Eve, the essence of sacrifice was in God's communion with his people (cf. Genesis 12:7, 8). The fruit of all but one of the trees in Eden was to be eaten and drunk in God's presence. Living in Eden was to enable nourishment of body and spirit. Melchizedek represented this Edenic life to Abram as king and 'priest of God Most High'. Melchizedek's royal, priestly blessing addressed Abram from God and facilitated Abram's response to God (Genesis 14:17–24). Yet Melchizedek was more than a mediator: he was a proclaimer of good news and a participant in creational and restorative blessings (cf. the testimony of the writer of the book of Hebrews about Jesus in Hebrews 2:10–13).

Travelling Together

The blessing *of Abram* by Melchizedek ‘by God Most High’ designated God as the ‘maker of heaven and earth’ (Genesis 14:19). Beyond all the boundaries of Abram’s lineage stands the same message that God proclaimed to Noah: God had not and would not shrink back from God’s original creational purpose. God’s promises will be fulfilled by God’s grace and mercy, working through those who receive God’s covenants by faith. Unless redeemed humanity defeats evil, evil has a last taunt against ‘God Most High’, the ‘maker of heaven and earth’ (Genesis 14:19, cf. 3:14).

The blessing *of God* by Melchizedek identifies that God was acting not only as creator but deliverer. God had participated in Abram’s efforts to rescue Lot and defeat his enemies. Abram’s tithing to Melchizedek acknowledged God’s goodness and mercy as both creator *and* deliverer. It was these truths that the LORD reinforced with Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great’ (Genesis 15:1). God’s message to Abram provided Abram with reassurance that Abram would have offspring and would inherit land.

Grace does more than take us to Eden, grace is better understood as Eden coming to us (cf. Revelation 21:1ff). Melchizedek acted this way by bringing bread and wine to Abram rather than receiving them from Abram! Their meal reveals that the royal dynasty given to Abram recognises the wider plan of God for all nations and people groups. God’s plan goes to the heart of every culture and all worship. It relates to the prophetic word made explicit in the priestly ministry that God gives. This word is God’s gift of righteousness to those who believe him and his promises, promises that, by nature of the situation in which they are given, seem unrealisable (Genesis 15:1–6).

The encounter of Abram and Melchizedek recapitulates everything from the dawn of creation to Adam and Eve’s sons, Abel and Seth, and then with Seth’s descendants, including Enoch and Noah. God’s covenants with Noah and Abram, and Abram’s meal with Melchizedek, set the scene for the remaining narrative in Genesis, and ultimately for the New Testament witness to Jesus, including that so vividly detailed in the book of Hebrews.

Two covenants

Renewing creation and humanity

God's covenant with Noah related primarily to God's intention to continue as faithful creator. The flood narrative describes God remembering Noah and the creatures with him, and that just like at the dawn of creation,

God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters gradually receded from the earth (Genesis 8:1, 2).

The spirit and peace themes are reinforced by Noah twice waiting seven days and twice sending a dove which returned to Noah with 'a freshly plucked olive leaf' after its second flight (Genesis 8:11). It is not surprising to find references to 'the inclination of the human heart [being] evil from youth', to creatures fearing and dreading human violence, and to the explicit requiring of 'a reckoning for human life' when hostilities occurred. This accountability existed because 'in his own image God made humankind' (Genesis 8:20–9:6).

These post-flood implications of God's faithfulness as creator are detailed in the context of Noah's burnt offering sacrifices. Earth would not be cursed 'because of humankind', with God declaring that while

the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease (Genesis 8:21, 22).

This covenant conversation with Noah is bookended by God first telling Noah to leave the ark with his family and all the creatures and ends with God informing Noah that God was establishing an everlasting covenant with Noah, Noah's descendants 'and with every living creature' that had been with Noah. God's covenant was that the destructive inundation from which Noah had been saved would not be repeated. God's signature of this perpetual covenant was in setting his 'bow in the clouds' (Genesis 9:8–17).

Being a faithful creator means renewal for the suffering creation and great redemption for sinful humanity (cf. Romans 8:18–24; 1 Peter 3:18–22, 4:19).

Renewing humanity and creation

This redemption comes into rich focus with Abraham, but not apart from the accounts of creation established and renewed. God's reckoning righteousness to sinful Abram – and to everyone who would bless Abram – revealed new depths of grace not previously explained. God fulfilled the promises God had already given by cutting a covenant with Abram as Abram's shield and reward (Genesis 15:1–21). God's making a covenant with Abram reinforced God's previous message

about violence and sacrifice when God established his covenant with Noah and the creation.

The twin promises that God would bless Abram by giving him land and by Abram's descendants becoming a great nation are described in more detail in this context (Genesis 15:1–11, cf. 12:1ff, 13:14ff). Abram and Sarai would have a son, they would die peacefully, and their descendants would inherit the land after the relevant nations declined because of iniquity (Genesis 15:12–21).

As with their earlier journey to Egypt, they used their own logic in attempting to fulfil God's promises about having an heir. God's promises were not cancelled by Ishmael's birth, and included God caring for Hagar, Ishmael and his descendants (Genesis 16:1–15, 21:8–20; cf. Galatians 4:21–5:1).

These events relating to Ishmael make Abraham's treatment of Sarah with both Abimelech and Pharaoh even more tragic (Genesis 12:10–20, 20:1–18). Sarah was *his* wife; she was the mother of the faithful nations that would come from God's promises to Abraham. Paul later says Sarah 'corresponds to the Jerusalem above', to the city of God which is the bride of the sin-removing Lamb of God. Despite his betrayals, Abraham saw Sarah as a new Eve, a covenant 'mother of all living', by faith (cf. Genesis 3:20; Galatians 4:26–31; Revelation 19:6–8, 21:1ff).

God revealed himself again to Abraham in between these two betrayals:

I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous (Genesis 17:1, 2).

Abram was to trust God to fulfil God's promises rather than himself as *exalted father*! God was nominating faith rather than works as the basis for their covenantal relationship. *Abraham*, the *father of a multitude*, was to affirm this faith-relationship by circumcising 'every male among you' – a masculine only cutting that tacitly acknowledged women's childbirth pains and relational vulnerability (Genesis 17:1–14, cf. 3:16). This faith response later became tragically twisted into a self-justification ritual (cf. Romans 2:25ff, 4:1ff; Galatians 5:2ff, 6:11ff; Ephesians 2:11ff).

Sarah was no longer to be treated as *Sarai*, a *princess*, but with dignity and honour as *Sarah*, a *noblewoman*. Abram's denigrating of her with Abimelech and Pharaoh was unacceptable and not appropriate for any woman, let alone one of her substance and significance. God twice discussed Sarah's infertility, emphasising her decency and status on both occasions (Genesis 17:15–22, 18:1–15). Abraham, previously called an *exalted father*, and now to be known as the *father of a multitude*, was now to call Sarah *noblewoman* – a *woman of great faith* and the *mother of a multitude*:

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God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but *Sarah shall be her name*. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. *I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her* (Genesis 17:15, 16, italics added).

Fruitfulness within God's restorative covenant with Abraham would therefore result from living by faith (cf. Genesis 1:28, 12:2, 13:16, 15:5). This covenant fruitfulness was vastly different to the failure of evil at Sodom and Gomorrah, and the escape of Lot and his daughters (Genesis 18:16–19:38). The contrast between true and false abundance was clear.

The meal Abraham shared with his visitors at the oaks of Mamre, like that between Abraham and Melchizedek, revealed rich covenant blessings. It pointed to the judgements experienced by those who defy God's grace and mercy (Genesis 14:21–24, 18:16–33). God's covenant is all of grace, and Abraham was to

charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him (Genesis 18:19).

Sarah and Abraham's responses when Isaac was born acknowledged that God's covenant purposes and promises would be fulfilled (Genesis 21:1–7).

Extra notes: Selected references to covenant

I will *establish* my covenant ... (Genesis 6:18, italics added to these texts).

I am *establishing* my covenant ...

I *establish* my covenant ...

... never again shall all flesh be *cut off* by the waters of a flood ...

This is the sign of the covenant that I *make* ... (Genesis 9:11–13).

I will *remember* my covenant ...

I will see it and *remember* the everlasting covenant ...

This is the sign of the covenant that I have *established* ... (Genesis 9:15–17).

On that day the LORD *made* a covenant ... (Genesis 15:18).

I will *make* my covenant ...

I will *establish* my covenant ... for an everlasting covenant ...

I will *establish* my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant ... my covenant I will *establish* ... (Genesis 17:2–22).

The Hebrew word for *made* in Genesis 15:18 reflects the context of cutting and is different from the word *make* in chapter 17. Genesis 17:1–22 also includes references to covenant where God said to Abraham that 'This is my covenant ...'. Italics have been added to all the above references.

Abraham and Isaac

True and false sacrifices

The account of Abraham and his visitors at the oaks of Mamre is followed by a series of sordid and brutal events including the wickedness and depravity of Sodom leading to its destruction with Gomorrah, the events by which Lot's sons were born, and Abraham's deception of Abimelech about Sarah. This saga of Abraham and Abimelech ends with Abraham praying for Abimelech and God healing Abimelech's 'wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife' (Genesis 20:17, 18).⁶

This testimony to God's gifts is a segue into the birth of Isaac:

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him (Genesis 21:1, 2).

Although Abraham had many possessions and servants by the time God tested him by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac at Mt. Moriah, Abraham still owned no land. To lose Isaac meant voiding the clearest expression he and Sarah had that God would fulfil God's promises. This loss would have been very significant for Sarah who never saw any land ownership as Abraham first purchased land for her grave after she died (Genesis 23:1–20).

The words of 'the angel of the LORD' to Abraham that 'now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me' point to the link between fatherhood, image and likeness themes (Genesis 22:12). Together with the earlier covenant narrative where God cut covenant with Abraham, these events showed Abraham rich depths concerning God's mercy and grace in God fulfilling God's promises.

Abraham declared that on the 'mount of the LORD it shall be provided' (Genesis 22:14). Whatever Abraham knew of sonship and humanity being created in the image and likeness of God; Abraham understood that God provided the sacrifice just as God provided his son Isaac. Abraham and Isaac learnt that child sacrifice was not on God's agenda – not then, not later and not ever – and so was not in God's involvement in Jesus' crucifixion.

The words of the angel and the provision of the ram relate to Jesus' response to the religious leaders when they questioned him. Abraham's children would, like Abraham, respond with joy and faithful obedience on hearing divine truth –

⁶ This statement is readily read as blaming Sarah rather than as recognising her vulnerability and Abraham's deceitful, dishonest and dishonouring manipulation of her as his marriage partner.

Travelling Together

especially when it was communicated to them by Jesus! The religious leaders' intention was to murder Jesus, a crime not aligned with Abraham's story:

Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad. ... Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am (John 8:56–58).

Abraham knew that God was redeemer and provider in all things. Jesus would be sacrificed by these religious leaders and not by a vengeful deity (John 18:14).

We read that 'the LORD blessed Abraham in all things' in Abraham's old age (Genesis 24:1). These blessings were especially evident in the provision of a wife for his son Isaac. The faith of Abraham and his servant were secure during this process, as were Laban and Rebekah's replies. Isaac's response was clear:

Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death (Genesis 24:67).

Strengths and struggles

At this point we learn more about Isaac. Of the three patriarchs he seems least significant. Yet his faith in God and his father when his father took him to Mt. Moriah was remarkable. The picture of father and son walking together to the place where the altar would be built is very tender (Genesis 22:7–10).

Rebekah's obedience in becoming his wife and sharing Isaac's grief concerning his mother's death was in the context of the message shared by Abraham's servant (Genesis 24:10–67). Isaac's love for Rebekah, despite betraying her as his father had betrayed Sarah, is again seen in his prayer for her to conceive (Genesis 24:67, 25:21, 26:8).

Isaac and Rebekah were married for twenty years before their twins were born. The struggle between the Jacob and Esau from before their birth reveals more of the mystery of God's purposes (Genesis 25:20, 26).

After Esau had sold his birthright to Jacob, the LORD told Isaac to stay where he was living 'as an alien' during a famine rather than go to Egypt. God also confirmed that the covenant promises God had made with Abraham applied to Isaac (Genesis 25:29–26:5, cf. 12:10–20). Isaac prospered as God had promised and acknowledged this as God's provision (Genesis 26:12–33). Yet his estimate of his own death was rather early (cf. Genesis 31:41, 35:27)! His unsuccessful effort to bless Esau rather than Jacob, 'because [Esau] was fond of game', went against God's promise and exposed Esau's lack of regard for God's purposes (Genesis 25:23, 28, 27:1–40).

Travelling Together

The account of Jacob and Esau relates not only to the way Esau's birthright and blessing were transferred to Jacob, but to the way Jacob, the quiet man, learnt more of what was involved in trusting God (Genesis 25:27, 27:1–40).

The book of Genesis records detail about Jacob and Esau's families. Rebekah and Isaac send Jacob to his mother's father's house to find a wife, Esau marries Ishmael's daughter, Laban and Jacob part company with little joy, and Leah's daughter Dinah is raped by a Hivite prince. Some of Esau's descendants, the Edomites, are listed, and the sad story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar is told (Genesis 27:41–28:9, 30:25–31:55, 34:1–26, 36:1–43, 38:1–30).

Extra notes: An overview of the story of Abraham

The story of Abraham includes these passages on God making his covenant with him:

- The call of Abram (Genesis 12:1–3).
- Confirmation of Abram's call (Genesis 13:14–18).
- Cutting the covenant (Genesis 15:1–21).
- The everlasting covenant and circumcision (Genesis 17:1–14).
- The two promises of a son to Sarai/Sarah (Genesis 17:15–22, 18:1–15).
- The command to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1–19).

Two other passages are closely related:

- The encounter of Melchizedek and Abraham (Genesis 14:17–24).
- Abraham's plea for those righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16–33).

Details of Abraham's life are in this covenant context:

- Their journey to Egypt (Genesis 12:10–20).
- The separation of Lot and Abraham (Genesis 13:1–13).
- The rescue of Lot and other people (Genesis 14:1–16).
- Ishmael's birth (Genesis 16:1–15).
- Abraham, Abimelech and Sarah (Genesis 20:1–18, 21:22–33).
- Isaac's birth and Hagar and Ishmael's departure (Genesis 21:1–20).
- Their family tree and Sarah's death and burial (Genesis 22:20–23:20).
- Abraham's last years (Genesis 25:1–11).

The conclusion of the story of Lot is also included:

- The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1–29).
- The awful origin of Moab and Ammon (Genesis 19:30–38).

Jacob's family

Jacob, Rachel and Leah

Jacob stayed at Bethel after Isaac had blessed him and sent him away to escape Esau and find a wife (Genesis 27:41–28:5). Jacob dreamt of a ladder reaching from heaven to earth, with the angels of God going up and down. God indicated to Jacob that the promises God had made to Jacob's father and grandfather would also apply to Jacob. God told Jacob to

know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you (Genesis 28:15).

Jacob's response that Bethel was 'none other than the house of God, ... the gate of heaven' was accompanied by Jacob's promises that the LORD would be his God, that Bethel would be the location for a 'house of God', and that Jacob would give a tithe of his possessions to God. Any doubts he had about inheriting these blessings were dealt with in this encounter with God (Genesis 28:10–22). His surprise discovery that 'Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!' was more than a comment on the place where he slept! It is likely that the angels moving up and down the ladder revealed to him that the nations and tribes around him were in God's hands (cf. John 1:51).

Jacob meeting Rachel has parallels with Abraham's servant finding Rebekah. Jacob's love for Rachel (cf. Genesis 24:67) led to seven years of service to Laban, and to the problem of Leah being unmarried! Marrying two wives in a week was followed by another seven years of work for Laban. During this time, the LORD gave Leah four sons, through whom she hoped to win Jacob's love, while Rachel remained childless (Genesis 29:31, cf. 30:15).

After six sons by Leah and two each by Bilhah and Zilpah, 'God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb' (Genesis 30:22). Identifying Bilhah and Zilpah as Rachel and Leah's maids downplays the requirement that they were required to bear Jacob's children. After returning from Laban, Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin (Genesis 35:16–26). Joseph's integrity was at a great personal cost and contrasts the breaking of marriages in Jacob's family (Genesis 35:22, 38:1ff, 39:1ff).

The LORD blessed Laban and Jacob during the years Jacob served Laban. This exposed their short-comings and surfaced many tensions in their relationship. It was in this context that the LORD told Jacob to return to the land of his family and that God would be with him (Genesis 31:3). Their departure was hardly very honourable (Genesis 31:19–21). Rachel's stealing of her father's household gods was doubly against God's will (Genesis 31:22–35).

Travelling Together

The covenant Jacob and Laban made at Mizpah is a sad comparison to the covenant of God under which they were living. Nonetheless, God did not cancel his promises, but implemented them according to his purposes with those involved (Genesis 31:43–32:2).

Jacob meets Esau

Although Jacob dreaded meeting Esau, his concerns proved unfounded. It seems Esau was more focused on Jacob's arrival than on his own birthright. Jacob was aware that the LORD had blessed him and that he was not

worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies (Genesis 32:10).

It was on this basis that Jacob asked God to deliver him from his brother Esau. But Jacob was to wrestle with God and not his brother on his return (Genesis 32:22–32)! The return to the promised land – to something of a new Eden – meant reconciliation with Esau and a deeper relationship with God.

Jacob's demand for a blessing revealed both his lack of confidence that God would fulfil God's promises based on Jacob's character as well as a willingness to ask God to bless him because of who God had revealed himself to be. Human failure met divine promise in Jacob's faith-encounter with God. Jacob's wrestling led to a change of name and a change of character. He was no longer Jacob the supplanter but Israel, indicating that God had prevailed and not Jacob (Genesis 32:24–32)!

God gave witness that he was with Jacob even though Jacob's household gods were hidden and not destroyed. Jacob returned to Bethel and God again told him that he was now to be called Israel (Genesis 35:1–15). After the deaths of Rachel and Isaac, the second part of the story of the family of Jacob covers over a quarter of the book of Genesis (Genesis 37:1ff)!

Questions for reflection and sharing

In reflecting on these questions, remember to be alert to different perspectives on the passages covered in these notes, including where significant themes were briefly passed over or not considered.

1. What can we learn from the two trees in the garden of Eden and the events that follow about humanity's relationship with God?
2. What do we learn about fruitfulness by reading Genesis 17:1ff in the light of Genesis 1:28 and other references to fruitfulness in Genesis?
3. What are we to understand about sacrifice from the Genesis story?
4. What can we learn about creation and covenant from the story of one selected person in Genesis?
5. 'Themes of image and likeness feature strongly in Genesis, especially in terms of parenting'. In what ways do these ideas and their inter-relationships in Genesis shape our understanding of God's fatherhood?
6. What may we learn about God and God's relationship with humanity from God's creation of man and woman and the first human marriage?
7. 'Human initiative in Genesis leads to disaster, while God's plan brings many blessings'. Explain in what ways this is seen as true or false in Genesis. In what ways does this inform our understanding of God's covenants?
8. What does Genesis teach us about God's covenant and creation? In what ways are they related in the plan of God?
9. In what ways is God concerned about the nations in Genesis?
10. Is Noah or Abraham a new Adam and is Sarah a new Eve? In what ways does this affect our understanding of these ancient stories.
11. Reflect on the theme of blessing in Genesis, especially in chapter 1 and the covenant promises given to Noah and Abraham.
12. Select any passage from Genesis and reflect on ways of sharing your choice with someone that you know or some group in which you may be or become involved.

Nations and covenant – 2

Joseph

Jacob and Joseph

The story of Jacob is in two sections. The first part of Jacob's story from his birth through to the death of his father Isaac, prepares Jacob for what happens in the story of Jacob's family. This second part of the narrative has Jacob 'settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien' and God giving his son, Joseph, dreams which indicate a greater divine purpose for his family (Genesis 37:1, 2, cf. 25:19ff, 35:27ff).

Joseph's 'bad report' to his father about his brothers as a seventeen-year-old, his father's greater love for Joseph than for his other children, and Joseph's account of his dream to his brothers produced a hostile family environment (Genesis 37:2). Reuben's accommodation to his brothers' hatred of Joseph and Judah's treachery in selling Joseph while Reuben was absent resulted in the apparent death of Joseph and his slavery in Egypt. Jacob's ongoing grief for Joseph with his declaration that he would 'go down to Sheol to my son, mourning' sets the scene for the events that followed (Genesis 37:35). Joseph's dream was to prove more potent than the mischief of his brothers and the trials he suffered in Egypt!

After the tragic story of Judah and Tamar, we learn that 'the LORD was with Joseph, ... and that the LORD caused all that he did [in Potiphar's house] to prosper in his hands'. Potiphar noticed that the LORD was with Joseph, but still accepted his wife's false accusation about Joseph (Genesis 39:2, 3). Joseph's faithfulness in refusing the seductions of Potiphar's wife contrasted with his brothers' immoral behaviour before and after sending Joseph away (Genesis 35:22, 38:1–30).

Joseph and Pharaoh

The LORD was with Joseph in prison and 'showed him his steadfast love', giving him 'favour in the sight of the chief jailer' (Genesis 39:21). The presence of God with Joseph in these adversities is emphasised a third time:

The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison ... The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper (Genesis 39:22, 23).

It took two more years of imprisonment before Pharaoh's chief cupbearer, imprisoned with Joseph, remembered Joseph's interpretation of his dream about a vine with three branches. The chief cupbearer, restored to Pharaoh's service according to Joseph's interpretation, mentioned Joseph to Pharaoh, setting the scene for Pharaoh's request that Joseph interpret Pharaoh's dream.

Travelling Together

Whatever the failures of Joseph's brothers, Potiphar, Potiphar's wife, and the chief cupbearer, God's destiny for Joseph was now being further realised. Joseph and Pharaoh knew God's favour, and God's mercies spread across Egypt, with many people saved from the seven years of famine that followed. Joseph had believed that 'the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about' (Genesis 41:32; cf. Romans 8:28).

Pharaoh's submission to God brought prosperity to the whole nation in preparation for the adversity ahead. What had been previously true for Joseph in Canaan, in Potiphar's house, and then in prison, was now shown to be true in Egypt. Strange as it must have seemed to him, each season of adversity provided a pathway to a new season of abundance!

Joseph's story occupies nearly one quarter of the book of Genesis! Abraham had gone to Egypt in a time of famine, while, in a later famine God told Isaac not to repeat Abraham's journey (Genesis 12:10, 26:1, 2). Jacob was faced with not only losing Joseph, but also with the loss of Simeon and Benjamin in this famine (Genesis 42:36). Joseph and Benjamin were Jacob and Rachel's sons.

Rachel, like Sarai who told Abram to 'go in to my slave-girl' Hagar, gave her maid Bilhah to Jacob as Rachel had not yet conceived. Leah followed the same pattern, enslaving her maid Zilpah to Jacob after Leah ceased bearing children.

Joseph's birth by Rachel was a turning point for Jacob who then asked Laban to approve him going back to his own homeland. Rachel described Joseph's birth in terms of a gift that ended her being blamed for having no children and indicated her wanting to have more children – a longing that was to become very poignant (Genesis 30:22–24).

Benjamin's birth came after the family had returned to Bethel, and after Jacob's encounters with God and his brother Esau, and the rape of Leah's daughter Dinah. Rachel died during her labour and 'Jacob set up a pillar at her grave' near Bethlehem (Genesis 35:20). Jacob had deeply loved Rachel and had served Laban for two seven-year sequences so that he could marry her – the first seven years had 'seemed to [Jacob] but a few days because of the love he had for her' (Genesis 29:20).

Judah's plea to Joseph as a ruler in Egypt for his brother Benjamin's release was therefore a significant event for Judah, Joseph, Benjamin and their brothers – as well as for their father, Jacob (cf. Genesis 35:22b–25). Judah's request led Joseph to reveal his identity and do so knowing that Judah had sold him to the Midianite traders (Genesis 37:25–28, 44:18–45:3).

Joseph was secure in his understanding of what God had been about: God had sent him to Egypt to preserve their lives, and those of others with them. Joseph was free from bitterness and anger about the difficulties that he had faced (e.g. Genesis 43:26–33). How stunned beyond belief was Jacob when he heard of God's

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wonderful provision for Joseph, and so for himself and his community. God's goodness was seen in the abundant provisions sent by Pharaoh to Jacob. What resolve must have entered Jacob to see his son Joseph and his sons reconciled before he died (Genesis 45:4–28)!

After Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers feared that Joseph would hold a grudge against them. Joseph's response indicated his awareness of God's hand upon all that had happened. God's grace was more than adequate for him. Joseph was gentle with them and told them that they need not be afraid of him and that while they had intended harm him, God had intended it for the family's good, 'in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today'.

So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's household ... Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob' (Genesis 50:19–26; cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9).

Extra notes: On love in the book of Genesis

It may be argued that every narrative in the book of Genesis is one of love. These references to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel, do not emphasise their relationships with other women in their family groups or the considerable difficulties experienced by these other women.

Adam's response to Eve's creation does not mention love, though his delight in his newly found mutual 'one flesh' companionship can hardly be called anything else (Genesis 2:24). Seth and Enoch's wives are not mentioned, and Noah's wife is not named.

Abraham's purchase of land for Sarah's burial and his concern for a wife for Isaac at the same time identify his love for Sarah during their lives together.

While we are not told what Sarah thought of Abraham's plan or even if she knew of it, Abraham believed God told him to take his beloved son

to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you (Genesis 22:2).

Abraham's servant informed Abraham's kindred group that Abraham was looking for a wife for his son Isaac. The servant no doubt also mentioned Sarah's death. Abraham's servant prayed for the LORD to give him success 'today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham' (Genesis 24:12, cf. 24:14, 27). When Abraham's servant returned with Rebekah,

Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death (Genesis 24:67).

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Isaac and Rebekah's marriage became strained because of Isaac's love for game-hunting Esau while Rebekah loved Jacob (Genesis 25:28, cf. 27:14).

Jacob expressed his love for Rachel by serving Laban for seven years, not just once, but twice:

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her ... So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years (Genesis 29:18–20, 30, cf. 17, 32).

Jacob's favouritism of Joseph is clearly identified:

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves (Genesis 37:3ff, cf. 44:20).

God's covenant love is also described in the stories of Abraham (and Isaac), Jacob and Joseph (Genesis 24:12, 14, 27, 32:10, 39:21).

The coming Exodus

Jacob's family

Jacob's family inherited the fruits of God's dealings with him, his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. Many of Jacob's statements mention God and God's blessings. The 'story of the family of Jacob' is in four main sections (Genesis 37:2):

- Joseph's journey to Egypt and promotion by Pharaoh (Genesis 37–41).
- Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers (Genesis 42–45)
- Jacob's move to Egypt (Genesis 46, 47)
- Jacob's blessings, burial and Joseph's death (Genesis 48–50).

Jacob shared his longings for the future with Joseph during his last days. He saw that the Israelites 'were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly' but insisted that Egypt was not their homeland (Genesis 47:27–31, cf. 46:30). He repeated his hope that he would be buried with his ancestors after blessing his family (Genesis 49:29–33). These final events in Jacob's life provide a context for the climax of the book of Genesis as well as for the coming narrative in the book of Exodus. They relate closely to the themes of family, home and land that were outlined in the two creation narratives and then enlarged on and emphasised when God made his covenants with Noah and Abraham.

Jacob's request for burial in Canaan and the abundance of his offspring are linked in his final blessing of Joseph's two elder sons along with Jacob's own family. Jacob told Joseph of God blessing him and promising him that his descendants would be 'a company of peoples' who would inherit the land as a 'perpetual holding' (Genesis 48:1–4).

Jacob based his adoption of Joseph's sons as his own and his preferencing them over Reuben and Simeon on these blessings. This adoption was Jacob's way of acknowledging God's wonderful provision for his family through Joseph (Genesis 48:5–20, cf. 37:1–11; 1 Chronicles 5:1, 2). In nominating Ephraim ahead of Manasseh, Jacob told Joseph that 'God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your ancestors' (Genesis 48:21, 22).

Jacob's faith

Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons was recognised as his primary act of faith:

By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, 'bowing in worship over the top of his staff' (Hebrews 11:21).

Jacob's blessings are enveloped in his testimony to God's faithfulness to him. He spoke of the God of his parents as his shepherd and of the angel of the LORD who redeemed him while remembering and reflecting on his sorrow over Rachel's agonising and untimely death:

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Rachel, alas, died in the land of Canaan on the way [from Paddan], while there was still some distance to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem) (Genesis 48:7).

Jacob's blessings were not fatalistic decrees over his sons and their offspring (Genesis 49:1–28; cf. Ezekiel 18:1ff). They related to his knowledge of his sons and the ways in which he expected his decrees would be evident in the generations ahead – depending on the actions of those identified.

Reuben, for example, failed to be a suitable family leader by committing sexual immorality. Levi and Simeon were cursed for their unrestrained anger and vengeful violence and so would be dispersed throughout the other tribes. Yet while the tribe of Simeon was scattered with no great glory, Levi spread throughout Israel with the honour of being its priestly tribe (Genesis 49:5–7, cf. 34:1ff).

Judah emerged as the royal son from whom a ruler was to come who nations would obey, who would bring peace and who would receive tribute and praise:

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his (Genesis 49:10; cf. Revelation 5:5).

Moses later reversed the prophecy about Benjamin being a 'ravenous wolf' (Genesis 49:27; Deuteronomy 33:12).

Jacob's blessing of Joseph is a reminder of creation's Edenic initial glory and intended abundance (Genesis 49:22, 26). Jacob's blessing of Joseph also recalls Joseph's faithfulness under the fierce attacks and pressures of evil from his family and those he initially encountered in Egypt. Joseph's trust in God was

by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, by the God of your father, [and] by the Almighty who will bless you (Genesis 49:24, 25).

Jacob's burial shows his impact on his family during his last years. This significance is evident in his brothers' concern for themselves after Jacob's death. Their concern revealed their lack of trust in Joseph's assurances and kindness (Genesis 49:29–50:14).

Joseph remained confident about the mystery of God's purposes and left them with no doubt about their future destiny as a people (Genesis 50:15–26; cf. Joshua 24:32; Hebrews 11:22). Despite Israel's prosperity in Egypt, Egypt was not the promised land. The narrative abruptly concludes without explaining why Jacob's family remained in Egypt and did not return to their homeland for so long. The time for their Exodus would eventually come under another Pharaoh who knew neither Joseph nor his God (Exodus 1:1–14).

Extra notes: On the story of Jacob's family

Joseph's journey to Egypt and promotion by Pharaoh (Genesis 37–41).

- Joseph's dreams (Genesis 37:1–11).
- Joseph is sold by his brothers (Genesis 37:12–36).
- Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38:1–30).
- Joseph, Potiphar and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:1–23).
 - God's blessings (Genesis 39:1–6).
 - Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:7–18).
 - Joseph in prison (Genesis 39:19–23).
- Two prisoners' dreams: Pharaoh's cupbearer is restored, and his baker is hanged (Genesis 40:1–23).
- Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams (Genesis 41:1–57).
 - Pharaoh's dreams (Genesis 41:1–8).
 - Joseph's interpretation (Genesis 41:14–36).
 - Joseph in authority over Egypt (Genesis 41:37–45).
 - Seven years of plenty and seven of famine (Genesis 41:46–57).

Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers (Genesis 42–45)

- Joseph's brothers go to Egypt (Genesis 42:1–25).
 - The accusation of being spies (Genesis 42:9–17).
 - Joseph requests Benjamin (Genesis 42:18–24).
 - Reuben blames the others and claims innocence (Genesis 42:22).
 - Simeon is kept in Egypt (Genesis 42:24).
 - Joseph puts money in the bags (Genesis 42:25).
- Joseph's brothers return home (Genesis 42:26–38).
 - They discover bags of money in their sacks (Genesis 42:27, 35).
 - Jacob's grief and refusal to send Benjamin (Genesis 42:36–38).
- Joseph's brothers return to Egypt (Genesis 43:1–33).
 - Benjamin is included (Genesis 43:1–15).
 - Their meeting with Joseph (Genesis 43:16–33).
 - They return the money (Genesis 43:23).
 - Joseph asks about Jacob (Genesis 43:27, 28).
 - Joseph sees Benjamin (Genesis 43:29, 30).
 - Joseph seats them according to birthright (Genesis 43:31–33).
- The brother's aborted return (Genesis 44:1–34).
 - Joseph's silver cup in Benjamin's sack (Genesis 44:1–13).

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- The brothers plead innocence (Genesis 44:14–17).
- Judah's plea (Genesis 44:18–34).
- Joseph reveals himself (Genesis 45:1–28).
 - His disclosure (Genesis 45:1–15).
 - Pharaoh's response and blessing (Genesis 45:16–24).
 - Jacob stunned (Genesis 45:25–28).

Jacob's move to Egypt (Genesis 46:1–47:31).

- Jacob meets Joseph (Genesis 46:1–47:12).
 - Jacob comes to Egypt (Genesis 46:1–27).
 - Jacob settles in Goshen and meets Joseph (Genesis 46:28–33).
 - Pharaoh meets Jacob and some sons (Genesis 46:1–12).
- The famine in Egypt (Genesis 47:13–26).
- Jacob's last days (Genesis 47:27–31).

Jacob's blessings, burial and Joseph's death (Genesis 48:1–50:26).

- Jacob blesses Joseph's sons (Genesis 48:1–21).
 - Jacob reminds them of the covenant (Genesis 48:1–4).
 - Jacob adopts Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48:5–7).
 - Jacob's order of blessing (Genesis 48:8–20).
 - Jacob's second word to Joseph about covenant (Genesis 48:21).
- Jacob blesses his sons (Genesis 49:1–28).
- The death and burial of Jacob (Genesis 49:29–50:14).
 - Jacob's death (Genesis 49:29–33).
 - The burial plans (Genesis 50:1–6).
 - Jacob's burial (Genesis 50:7–14).
- Joseph's final years (Genesis 50:15–26).
 - Joseph forgiving his brothers (Genesis 50:15–21).
 - Joseph's last words (Genesis 50:22–26).

The call of Moses

Remember

The abundance of God's blessings to the Israelites when they had not returned to the land God had promised them and the resultant jealousy of the Egyptian leadership led to an era of ruthless oppression. When this did not succeed in reducing the growth in the number of Israelites, the Egyptians tried to use population control. This, too, did not have the desired effect (Exodus 1:1–22). Even Pharaoh's daughter was sympathetic to their suffering. Her care led her to adopt Moses into her cultural setting as her own son (Exodus 2:1–10).

Moses, however, did not forget his origins and chose violence when rejecting the forceful oppression of the Egyptians on his own people. This response resulted in him being a threat to both his adopted family and his own people. The impact on Moses by being asked 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?' and his reflections on his own anger clearly affected him deeply (Exodus 2:11–25, cf. Exodus 3:11; Numbers 20:1–13).

Moses' behaviour was more appropriate when helping the daughters of Reuel (who was also called Jethro), 'the priest of Midian'. Moses' contact with this family was significant. Not only did he marry Reuel's daughter Zipporah, but Jethro proved to be a beneficial advisor during the Exodus (Exodus 2:15b–22, cf. 3:1, 4:18, 18:1–27; Numbers 10:29).

We read after this that 'God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'. God had not forgotten his people. They had become very numerous, and God was preparing Moses for leadership. God remembering his covenant, and so taking notice of their need, indicated that the time had come for divine deliverance (Exodus 2:23–25; cf. 6:5, 20:24; cf. Genesis 8:1, 9:15, 16, 19:29, 30:22; Psalm 98:3, 103:14). The same thought is in the account of when Pharaoh's cupbearer remembered Joseph (Genesis 40:14, 23, 41:9). Later, Moses frequently exhorted the Israelites to remember what God had done. God's actions are always on time (cf. Genesis 15:16):

Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments (Deuteronomy 8:2, cf. 8:18, 9:7, 27, 11:2, 15:15, 16:3, 12, 24:9, 18, 22, 25:17, 32:7).

Respond

Moses' encounter with God came as Moses was 'keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro'. Moses had arrived at 'the mountain of God', though he may not have known it as such at that time. God called to Moses 'out of the bush' and spoke to him while Moses was noticing that the bush was not being consumed.

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An angel of the LORD also ‘appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush’. Moses’ response in being afraid and covering his face was of someone aware of who was speaking to him, even though he was unaware about the significance of his location:

Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. ... I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (Exodus 3:5, 6)!

Israel’s numeric abundance had occurred while they were in slavery in a foreign land. God was recalling his promises when remembering his covenant. This recall meant freeing his people from their suffering, misery and bondage, and bringing them to an Edenic land. God declared to Moses that he ‘knew their sufferings’, not merely that he knew of their sufferings. God was not merely an observing spectator but a present witness and participant among his people. God had ‘come down to deliver them’ as their cry had ‘now come [up] to me’ (Exodus 3:7–9, cf. 2:23, 24). This *down* and *up* language speaks of temple intimacy and is a reminder of Eden and an anticipation of tabernacle and temple worship.

God’s promise that ‘I will be with you’ is in this context, and confirmation of God’s word was through a sign: Moses and his people would worship God ‘on this mountain’ (Exodus 3:12). This sign would be fulfilled after their deliverance from Egypt. It emphasised that the people were not only coming *out* of slavery but *into* worship. (The people would arrive at this place after journeying for ‘three days’ (Exodus 3:18)).

God identified himself to Moses very clearly. When Moses queried his own credentials and asked concerning God’s name, God expounded the first words of God’s earlier declaration:

I AM WHO I AM. ... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you. ... The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations (Exodus 3:15, 16).

While there is discontinuity with previous events, everything in this narrative is also in continuity with God’s covenant with Abraham and is with a view to the original destiny God established for his people in the creation accounts and then re-established with Noah. However substantial the Egyptian empire seemed to Moses and his people; its season was short compared to God’s eternity. Moses realised from God’s response to Moses’ question to God about God’s name that while he was known by God, he did not truly know God. Moses discovered more of his own identity when God was with him (cf. Exodus 33:12ff).

Bridegroom of blood

Three signs

God gave Moses three signs to show any Israelites who did not believe that God had called Moses to lead them from Egypt. These signs did not convince Moses that he was fit for the task. When Moses complained of not being eloquent, God asked him who gives humans speech in the first place! God would 'be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak' (Exodus 4:12). Moses, still asking for someone to replace him, was told that Aaron would be his mouthpiece. Later, in Egypt, God told Moses that God had

made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land (Exodus 7:1, 2).

God assured Moses on Moses' return to Egypt that everyone who had wanted to kill him was dead. Moses was also warned that Pharaoh would not listen to him until Pharaoh's own son was dead. God explained to Moses, and so to Pharaoh, that Israel was God's firstborn son, and that Pharaoh should let God's son go into the desert to worship him (Exodus 4:18–23). The issue of sonship was significant to Moses, given his adoption by Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2:2, 10).

God was not only the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he was father of them as an entire nation. God's fatherhood was evident in the faithfulness of these first three patriarchs. This dialogue between God and Moses provides a significant commentary on God's relationship with his people, and so with all humanity. God was their father and Israel was God's son (cf. Hosea 11:1). While this calling of Israel relates to the deliverance God was about to achieve for them, the New Testament sees it as also consistent with God's intended relationship with all people (cf. Luke 3:38; Ephesians 3:14–21; note Galatians 3:26–29).

The question that confronted Pharaoh concerning his son also confronted Moses. Fatherhood and sonship would be critical in what was ahead, just as it had been in what had already occurred. Moses knew of its great significance in his own life:

By faith Moses ... refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God ... for he was looking ahead to the reward (Hebrews 11:23–28).

One covenant

We are told that the LORD tried to kill Moses as his family travelled to Egypt. Zipporah, Moses' wife, responded by circumcising their son. Circumcision had been given to Abraham as a sign of God's promise to make him 'exceedingly fruitful' and not as a means of making God's promises happen. It was a sign given by God to recognise that faith was the essence of the covenant life his people were

called to live. To fail to be circumcised was to be cut off from the people and God's promises. How could Moses rescue God's son Israel while his own son had not been given the sign of the everlasting covenant that God had established with Abraham (Exodus 4:24–26; Genesis 17:1–14)?

In understanding this parabolic account, recall the way Moses' adopted father, Pharaoh, had wanted to kill him for murdering an Egyptian taskmaster. Moses needed to learn more about being a father if he was to be ready for what was ahead. The blood of circumcision, like the blood that would come from the water of the Nile, perhaps indicated how seriously God saw the Israelites' plight. It may have pointed to the true gifts of sacrifice that the people of God from Abel onwards had offered by faith. It may also have been a reminder of God's revelation to Abraham that child-sacrifice was not on any divine redemptive agenda (Genesis 4:1–7, 15:1–19; 22:1–19; Leviticus 17:11; cf. Hebrews 9:14, 22, 11:4, 12:24).

Zipporah probably knew why Moses had left Egypt and what was at stake in marrying him. The shedding of blood would impact on them at every point of their lives together (cf. Ephesians 5:23–27; Revelation 1:4–8, 7:13, 14, 19:5–8). The blood of the covenant would need to cover the Israelites if they were to leave Egypt as God had promised (Exodus 11, 12). The nation was to set apart the male firstborn of their livestock as testimony to the LORD's deliverance of them from Egypt (Exodus 13:11–16).

Cain's murder of his younger brother Abel, and God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac become clearer when seen from this view of God as father (cf. Isaiah 63:15–64:12). God's purposes in the coming of Christ as his own Son, and in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection emphasise divine sacrificial giving; giving that does not require the kind of severity easily and falsely attributed to God in the stories of Abraham and Isaac, and Moses and Zipporah (cf. John 3:16).

The people initially believed Moses and Aaron, although their faith was soon sorely tested by the reaction of the Egyptians to Moses' message through Aaron (Exodus 4:27–5:23). God repeated his promise to Moses, but the people would not listen to him 'because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery'. Nonetheless 'Moses and Aaron ... did just as the Lord commanded them'. Despite the evidence of Aaron's rod, 'Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said' (Exodus 6:1–13, 7:1–13).

Let my people go

Celebrating a festival

God's command to Pharaoh to 'Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness' confronted Pharaoh about his treatment of the Israelites. Their slavery meant they could not even go into the wilderness for three days, let alone return to their own land. They were not free to offer sacrifices to God or to worship God and celebrate the LORD's covenant promises. Pharaoh's response revealed his hard heart towards their God:

Who is the LORD, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go (Exodus 5:1, 2)?

The terms of the conflict between God and Pharaoh are outlined in Exodus chapters 3 and 4. Moses knew Pharaoh would reject God's command that they travel to the desert for three days, but when faced with Pharaoh increasing his oppression of the Israelites, he struggled with his own call (Exodus 5:22, 23).

The people's initial acceptance of Moses' message from God evaporated to the point that 'they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery' (Exodus 6:9, cf. 4:29–31, 5:15–21). This was despite God explaining to them through Moses and Aaron that

by a mighty hand [Pharaoh] will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land (Exodus 6:1, 2).

The detail God then gave them summarised his purposes and promises and gave the people *their* authenticity and identity. They were those with whom God established his covenant, a covenant which included giving them the land God had promised. It was this covenant that God had 'remembered' as he heard their groanings as slaves. God again emphasised *his* authenticity and identity. Although God had made himself known to their ancestors, 'by my name "The LORD" I did not make myself known to them' (Exodus 6:2, 3).

Their ancestors received God's covenant when they 'resided as aliens' and so God's people could be confident that God had 'heard [their] groaning' and had 'remembered [his] covenant'. God would liberate and redeem them from the heavy obligations that they experienced as slaves in Egypt. God would be their God, adopt them as his own people and lead them to the land that God had previously promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God's signature on these declarations was that 'I am the LORD' (Exodus 6:2–8).

The symmetrical, chiasmic pattern of this declaration focuses readers and listeners on five 'the LORD' statements. The first and last ones are linked with references to God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Inside these references are God's memory of God's people and their knowledge of God are mentioned. The central

thesis relates to freedom from burdens, deliverance from slavery and redemption by powerful judgements.

Freedom from burdens

Several themes dominate the events prior to the plagues and the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 3:7–22, 4:21–26, 5:1–3, 6:2–13, 7:1–13).

God was their father and creator. The contrast between God's faithfulness to Israel as his son and Pharaoh's lack of concern for the welfare of the Egyptians is clear. God would faithfully provide for his people, while Pharaoh, in not submitting to God's commands, would fail to fulfil his rule over his nation.

God was faithful to his covenant promises. God's covenant included giving them a homeland and making them into a multitude. Abundance and fruitfulness would be theirs as they lived in these divine blessings. They would enjoy the sabbath rests that God had sanctified and given them. Their vocations in being fruitful and filling the earth would extend to the ends of the earth. Their vocations would include fullness of national life as well as family and community life.

Central to this life was their *personal and national relationships with God*. God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God had revealed himself to Moses as the I AM WHO I AM and so was known as the LORD. All the faithful people who had already lived including Abel, Seth, Enoch and Noah had known this God, even though they had not known this statement of God's name. Their worship was thanksgiving for God's promises – especially for God's mercy and loving-kindness. Their sacrifices acknowledged that it had been, was, and would be God who would provide all that they needed, and that he would do so as creator, father and redeemer (cf. Genesis 22:14).

God is personal and sovereign, but never arbitrary. When God's judgements reverse God's blessings, God is not mechanical in a moral cause and effect reaction nor is God cruel and capricious. God always *remembers* who God is and what God's purposes are for all humanity and all creation. God's *memory* is not only about our own personal rebellion or faithfulness. The story of God's grace in Genesis and Exodus indicates something of who God was, is and will be, and something of the ways in which God acts. The story of the Exodus, with its literary hyperbole and drama, describes the Israelites being led into new depths of God's faithfulness, goodness and mercy (cf. Exodus 19:3–6, 20:1–21, 33:12–23, 34:1–9).

Go, worship the LORD

Nine plagues

Nine plagues follow Pharaoh's increased oppression of the Israelites. His heart remained hardened 'and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said' after the demonstration of Aaron's miraculous rod (Exodus 7:8–13).

The nine plagues are in three groups of three plagues. God sent each third plague without giving Pharaoh any further warning. God's message to Pharaoh was always the same: 'Let my people go, so that they may worship me'. Israel was God's people and not Pharaoh's slaves. They were to worship God as family and not be under tyrannical servitude. God's commands increased as Pharaoh's opposition increased and required the people's complete departure rather than three days respite.

Pharaoh's magicians could duplicate only the first two plagues, indicating something of the level of the spiritual battle. Pharaoh's strategies were simple. He refused to do anything when the first plague came (Exodus 7:14–25). He offered to let them go if the second plague stopped but refused to let them leave when he saw that it had ended (Exodus 8:1–15). He remained unmoved even when his magicians told him that the third plague was due to 'the finger of God' (Exodus 8:16–19).

The land of Goshen, where the Israelites lived, was 'set apart' during the fourth and fifth plagues. Pharaoh was told by Moses that this was so that

you may know that I the LORD am in this land. Thus I will make a distinction between my people and your people.

Once the plague came Pharaoh said they could worship within Egypt, and then that they could only go, but not too far! He again refused once the plague stopped. The sixth plague included action against the magicians (Exodus 8:20–32, 9:1–12).

God told Pharaoh prior to the seventh plague that while no-one would escape the plague, that it would not be of ultimate severity. God told Pharaoh that Pharaoh was 'still exalting yourself against my people', but that God's name would 'resound through all the earth'. Pharaoh sought respite but refused to keep his promise (Exodus 9:13–35).

God informed Moses before the eighth plague that these signs were given

that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them – so that you may know that I am the LORD (Exodus 10:1–20; cf. Psalm 14).

While Pharaoh's advisors told him during the plague to let them all go, he was only prepared to let men leave. Moses rejected this, and Pharaoh ejected Moses and Aaron from his presence:

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The LORD indeed will be with you, if ever I let your little ones go with you! Plainly, you have some evil purpose in mind.

Pharaoh requested forgiveness during the plague and was given respite, but 'the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart'.

Pharaoh said they could go when the ninth plague of darkness came without warning, but that they could not take their livestock! Moses again refused to negotiate, and Pharaoh threatened to kill him if he came to him again (Exodus 10:21–29).

A final plague

God told Moses that one more plague would adversely impact Pharaoh and Egypt and after which Pharaoh would not only allow them to leave but would force them to go. The Israelites were to ask the Egyptians for silver and gold objects when this happened (cf. Exodus 3:21, 22). Pharaoh's authority was greatly weakened by these first nine plagues since God had given the Israelites

favour in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover, Moses himself was a man of great importance in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's officials and in the sight of the people.

The last plague brought death to all the firstborn in Egypt without regard for the status of their families. No firstborn creature in Egypt could be offered as a sacrifice to avert this judgement since even the firstborn livestock died. Moses made it clear to Pharaoh that God would distinguish between the Israelites and the Egyptians, and that Pharaoh's officials would then plead with them to go (Exodus 11:1–10). As for the Israelites, this last plague would only pass over them if they kept the 'Passover of the LORD' (Exodus 12:1–28).

Extra notes: A summary of the first nine plagues

Plague 1: Water turned into blood (Exodus 7:14–25)

God ordered Pharaoh to release God's people so they could worship God in the wilderness.

Pharaoh refused to obey God, his magicians copied the plague and Pharaoh 'turned and went into his house'.

Plague 2: Frogs (Exodus 8:1–15)

God ordered Pharaoh to release God's people so they could worship God.

Pharaoh refused to obey God and his magicians copied the plague. Pharaoh asked for and was given respite but remained stubborn.

Plague 3: Gnats (Exodus 8:16–19)

God stated no further requirement of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh's magicians could not copy the plague and told Pharaoh that the plague was the result of 'the finger of God'! Pharaoh remained stubborn and refused to listen to them 'just as the LORD had said'.

Plague 4: Flies (Exodus 8:20–32)

God ordered Pharaoh to let God's people go so they could worship God. God separated Goshen where God's people lived from where the Egyptians lived so that Pharaoh could realise that 'I the LORD am in this land'.

Pharaoh refused to obey God and initially told them to offer their sacrifices within Egypt. Pharaoh then decided during the plague that they could offer sacrifices 'to the LORD your God in the wilderness, provided you do not go very far away'. God gave respite but Pharaoh remained stubborn and reversed his permission for them to go to a nearby wilderness.

Plague 5: Diseased livestock (Exodus 9:1–7)

God ordered Pharaoh to let God's people go so they could worship God. The distinction between God's people and the Egyptians is repeated.

Pharaoh refused and hardened his heart.

Plague 6: Boils (Exodus 9:8–12)

God stated no further requirement of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh refused to obey God even though 'the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils'.

Plague 7: Thunder and hail (Exodus 9:13–35)

God ordered Pharaoh to let God's people go so they could worship God. Pharaoh was told that the plagues would come on everyone including Pharaoh so that they would recognise the LORD's uniqueness. God stated that the plagues were limited so God's power and character would be universally recognised. Pharaoh was told that he was 'still exalting' himself against God's people by refusing to release them.

Pharaoh initially relented and acknowledged his wrong decisions but then again became stubborn and refused to release them.

Plague 8: Locusts (Exodus 10:1–20)

God told Moses to go to Pharaoh and that Pharaoh would remain stubborn so that the Israelites could tell their descendants that the LORD had 'made fools of the Egyptians ... so that you may know that I am the LORD'.

Pharaoh's advisors told Pharaoh to release them but Pharaoh refused and told Moses and Aaron to go away from him because the LORD would prosper Moses and God's people if they left and that they were contemplating something evil.

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Pharaoh requested forgiveness and respite during the plague, which he was given before becoming stubborn and refusing to release them.

Plague 9: Darkness (Exodus 10:21–29)

God stated no further requirement of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh told them they could go as long as they left their flocks and herds behind. When Moses told Pharaoh that they would not do this, Pharaoh told Moses to ‘Get away from me! Take care that you do not see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die’. Moses’s responded that Pharaoh’s request would be fulfilled and that Moses would never see Pharaoh again.

The first passover

A new calendar

One final plague was needed before Pharaoh would drive the Israelites from Egypt. Although not even ‘a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites’, all the firstborn Egyptian sons would die. There would be no distinction among the Egyptians: this judgement would apply to every household from slave to Pharaoh (Exodus 11:1–10).

The Israelite’s departure from Egypt would mark a new start in their calendar. All families were to select a lamb ‘without blemish, a year-old male’ on the tenth day of the first month, with small households sharing with their nearest neighbours. This lamb was to be killed at twilight on the fourteenth day, and they were to paint some of its blood on the doorposts and lintel of the house where they were eating the lamb.

The lamb was to be eaten after roasting it ‘over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs’. They were to eat it quickly and be dressed ready to leave knowing that it was the ‘the passover of the LORD’. Anything that was not eaten by the next morning was to be burnt (Exodus 12:1–11).

God would bring judgement upon Egypt’s gods during that night. The blood painted on the door frames of the Israelite houses would indicate that those houses would be *passed over* and that no plague would destroy them (Exodus 12:12, 13). This sign was the Israelites’ blood-signature on their households, ensuring God would *pass over* them.

This passover was to become ‘a day of remembrance’ for them which they were forever to celebrate ‘as a festival to the LORD’. When they celebrated future passovers they were to eat unleavened bread for seven days after removing all leaven from their houses. They were to stop working on the first and seventh days.

Their only work was to be in preparing the food that everyone needed to eat during those days. This ‘festival of unleavened bread’ would remind them of the day when God led them out of Egypt. Failure to participate in the festival meant being excluded from God’s people (Exodus 12:12–20).

After receiving these instructions and being told to stay inside until the next morning, ‘the people bowed down and worshiped’ and ‘went and did just as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron’ (Exodus 12:21–28).

Worship the LORD

After the LORD had ‘struck down’ the firstborn Egyptians, Pharaoh ‘summoned Moses and Aaron in the night’ and told them to go and worship their LORD and take their flocks and herds with them. Pharaoh also asked Moses and Aaron to arrange for ‘a blessing on me too!’

The Egyptians urged the Israelites to go quickly so that not all the Egyptians would perish.

The Israelites ‘plundered the Egyptians’ as God had told them. The Egyptians were only too glad to give the Israelites the silver and gold jewellery that the Israelites demanded. The whole congregation set off from Egypt, ‘company by company’, with all their flocks and herds as well as these treasures and their unleavened bread. The author of Exodus emphasised how long the Israelites had been in Egypt and recalled God’s promise to Abraham (Exodus 12:29–42, 51; cf. Genesis 15:13).

The instructions about celebrating the passover are repeated after the account of this first part of the Exodus along with details about the festival of unleavened bread and the ritual consecration of firstborn sons. While uncircumcised male Israelites were not to eat the passover, all of them were to celebrate it, especially ‘when the LORD brings you into the land ... which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey’. They were to tell their children why they celebrate it, and to ensure it was

a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the LORD may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt (Exodus 12:43–13:16).

They were also to redeem their firstborn sons with a sheep as a further reminder of the LORD’s deliverance of them from burdensome slavery in Egypt under a stubborn Pharaoh.

Extra notes: The passover

1. Exodus 11 marks the end of the judgements and the immanent deliverance of the Israelites. A change of emphasis occurs in the story. The narrative now focuses on the release of the people of God from their slavery and their journey towards the promised land.
2. The selection of the year-old lamb without blemish involved sacrificing a prime source for breeding their flocks, and so was an expensive act where God was to be trusted to provide for the future prosperity of the family. The people’s redemption was therefore at the heart of their community life.
3. They were to be mindful for ten days after the new year of which lamb was selected. Then, for a further four days, they knew that the life of this lamb would be taken as a sign of God’s mercy upon their firstborn.
4. The blood on the doorposts and lintels may be a reminder of the closure of Eden to humanity. There was shelter and safety inside their houses from the judgements that occurred outside. There was a great contrast between the quietness and stillness the people of God knew as they celebrated this first passover with the terror that came on the Egyptians.

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5. The passover meal indicated God's acceptance of his people under the covering of the sacrifice, with the unleavened bread speaking of holiness and the bitter herbs of repentance from sin. The use of hyssop relates to cleansing and is later mentioned in Psalm 51:7, John 19:29 and Hebrews 9:19. The burning of anything not eaten indicates that this meal was a holy occasion involving redemption, set apart for God.
6. The eating of the meal and the offering of a blood-sacrifice were central aspects in making covenant. This covenant was unilateral: God was the sole initiator, with the people responding and participating as God directed. They were not merely observers: they were inside their houses together as God's family. God's gift of grace, mercy, love and peace to them established their union and communion with each other and with their God.
7. The explanation that the passover marked the start of a new calendar, that it would be a day of remembrance and that it would be celebrated in the future pointed to the certainty that God would fulfil his covenant purposes and promises. The detailed instructions concerning future celebrations of the festival of unleavened bread, including teaching their children its significance, adds another future focus to this first passover.
8. This passover marked their birth as a nation. It was not an indication of their stature or achievement, but of God's mercy and lovingkindness, signified by their stopping work during the feast. The only acceptable labour was preparing meals which spoke of their communion together with God. God alone was working; they were free from slavery.
9. Liberation from slavery was into God's family as God's firstborn. Their battle with Pharaoh was ultimately about Pharaoh's response to God's fatherhood. They were freed to worship as God's sons and daughters (cf. Romans 9:1ff). This worship, as with their whole vocation and family life, was inside the covering of God's redemptive covenant.
10. Their covenant life was signed with them redeeming their firstborn sons by sacrificing first-born animals. This ritual made the horror of child-sacrifice even worse.

Crossing the sea

The roundabout way of the wilderness

The Israelites thought they were ready for battle, but God's assessment was different, and proved correct. They were to learn that it would be God who would give them victory, in the same way as it had been God who had defeated the Egyptians. The presence of the LORD 'in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night' testified to this. The bones of Joseph reminded them of his prophecy that 'God will surely take notice of you' (Exodus 13:17–22; cf. Genesis 50:24–26; Numbers 13:1–14:45).

The indirect path that the LORD gave the Israelites provoked Pharaoh to pursue them. God was to gain more glory as creator, father, sovereign and redeemer by this further hardening of Pharaoh's heart. God's glory, which is to fill his creation, is the revelation of his holiness and steadfast love. It is his insistence that his grace witness to his majesty, give mercy to his people and bring judgement upon the rebellious (Exodus 14:4, 17, 18, 24:9–18, 29:38–46, 33:12–34:9, 40:34–38; cf. Habakkuk 2:14).

Pharaoh's mind was focused on having allowed his slaves to leave. This decision was his central point of dispute with Moses. Israel, as God's firstborn son, had wanted to worship God by celebrating a festival out of Egypt (Exodus 4:22, 5:2ff, 6:6ff, 7:16, etc., 12:12).

Pharaoh was so confident and so unrepentant even after the death of his people's firstborn sons that he went with his army to recapture the Israelites. The Israelites 'looked back' with fear, believing that being slaves in Egypt was preferable to perishing in the desert. Moses stood firm and told them not to be afraid but to

stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.

God's word to Moses was even stronger: 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward' (Exodus 14:1–18).

A strong east wind all night

With the protection of the angel of God behind them, and not in front, Moses 'stretched out his hand over the sea'. After the LORD had 'turned the sea into dry land', the Israelites crossed over to the other side. The Egyptians followed and then panicked and sought to escape when they realised that the LORD was still fighting for the Israelites against them. Moses, in response to God's command stretched out his hand over the sea again and the Egyptians perished (Exodus 14:19–30, cf. 12:33).

As a result of this final judgement – an eleventh plague – on Pharaoh and his army

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Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses (Exodus 14:31).

This trust was tested in the wilderness and proved short-lived. Just as Pharaoh came under judgement for his hardness of heart, so did Israel (Exodus 17:1–7; cf. Numbers 20:1–13; Psalm 95; Hebrews 3, 4). God's mercy proved greater than human hardness. The next generation did eventually enter the land that had been promised to them – but under the leadership of Joshua and not Moses; still taking Joseph's bones with them (Joshua 24:32).

The troubles that were ahead were not on their minds as they stood on the other side of the sea and looked at their defeated enemies. Israel was now out of Egypt, though Egypt was by no means out of Israel! God would accomplish that, too, in his own time and by his own means. They were there as the people of God despite all these needs and weaknesses.

God had 'triumphed gloriously' over their oppressors. The God of their ancestors had proved powerful and had 'become their salvation'. The waters covered Pharaoh's army and 'they went down into the depths like a stone':

The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name. ...

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them. In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode (Exodus 15:1–13).

This song of Moses is the first song written as such in the Bible. It is their birth-song as a nation. It formed the basis of their faithful festivity in the wilderness and eventually in the promised land. There are strong hints of other songs in Genesis, but this anthem of thanksgiving to God for redeeming his people would form the heart of their on-going worship of God (cf. Genesis 1:27, 2:23, 3:14–19, 8:22, 9:6 etc.).

Into the wilderness

Songs of deliverance

The songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15 are more than a description of the demise of the Egyptian army. They reveal God's relationship with his people and their understanding of the LORD. God had 'triumphed gloriously', God was the one who was 'glorious in power', and God's 'right hand' had 'shattered the enemy'. Their enemy had been defeated and Israel had been preserved by the 'greatness of [God's] majesty'.

While the song does not mention anything that the Israelites contributed to this victory, they received strength and might from God. Whatever divine help they had known in their daily lives in Egypt as they toiled away as slaves, this action of God took them into a new relationship with God. They now sang of God as their salvation as well as their father and creator.

Their praises were directed to the LORD; to their 'father's God' (Exodus 15:2). They were in no doubt about who had achieved their victory. It was the God who had revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush as 'the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'. God knew their sufferings and had promised not only to deliver them from the Egyptians, but to take them 'to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey'. God's name would be known forever as the LORD, the 'I AM WHO I AM' (Exodus 3:1–22; cf. Revelation 15:1–4).

Although he was the same God who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and had made covenant with them, their ancestors did not know God as God had now revealed himself. God's liberation of them from slavery meant that God would be their God and they would be his people (cf. Exodus 6:1–9). There was, therefore, much depth in their song of exaltation 'to the LORD' who had 'triumphed gloriously'.

Songs about destiny

The gods of Egypt were powerless against God as he 'piled up' the waters to let his people cross the sea and then 'consumed [the Egyptians] like stubble' in his 'fury' as 'they sank like lead in the mighty waters' and 'the earth swallowed them'. This glorious triumph of the LORD was considered without comparison among the gods of the nations. They expected that the impact of what God did in delivering them would include their Philistine, Edomite, Moabite and Canaanite neighbours. The Israelites believed that these nations and tribes would be filled with dismay, trembling, terror and dread, and would melt away, becoming 'still as a stone' when they heard of their escape from Pharaoh's army (Exodus 15:14–16).

The Israelites praised God for being 'majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour [glory], doing wonders'. The central anthem of their songs linked the deliverance

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that was now behind them with God's promises for the future that was ahead of them (cf. Exodus 19:1–8). God's glory, holiness and splendour are identified as being in harmony with God's steadfast love. God's holiness and love had redeemed them *and* would now guide them by God's strength and power to 'your holy abode' (Exodus 15:13, 17).

Their praises declared that this double action of God's deliverance and destiny would overwhelm any nations that opposed them. Witnessing God's people passing by on their way to their new homeland and the sanctuary God intended to establish would confirm that 'the LORD will reign forever'. To be planted 'on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O LORD, that you made your abode' evokes the richness of Eden; of Eden revisited and God's plans and purposes fulfilled (Exodus 15:17, 18).

They travelled 'three days in the wilderness and found no water' after giving thanks and celebrating their Exodus from Egypt. Their complaint that the water at Marah was bitter revealed a lot about their trust in God. There is no mention of them asking God for help, just detail about their complaint! God told Moses that a piece of wood that God identified would sweeten the water. We don't know whether the wood was a reminder of the trees in Eden.

The 'statute and an ordinance' God gave them to test them may read as a works contract. It may perhaps be better understood against the backdrop of the trees in Eden and the sacrifices of Abel and Cain where doing what is right was about trusting God's provisions and purposes as creator, father and redeemer. Obedience is the response of a thankful heart, not a condition by which we can demand God's blessings:

If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you (Exodus 15:26).

The Israelites came to the twelve springs and seventy palm trees that were at Elim after being healed from bitterness at Marah. To camp at Elim was to be refreshed for the journey ahead and to know that God provides all the nourishment that his people would need as they travelled to the land of promise, to Immanuel's land (Exodus 15:27)! This very brief statement about Elim's spring and palm trees suggests many other biblical references to God's goodness and care for his people (e.g. Revelation 7:9–17)!

Manna from heaven

Nourishment

The Israelites ‘complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness’ because they became hungry on their way to Sinai after leaving Elim (Exodus 16:2). God was hardly going to let them perish in the wilderness after delivering them from Egypt!

The writer of Deuteronomy described Moses reminding the people of their need to ‘diligently observe’ Moses’ instructions and to remember their forty-year-long journey in the wilderness. They were not to forget the humility they learnt as God fed and provided for them and taught them to live by the words that the LORD their God had told them:

Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the LORD your God disciplines you.

The people were assured that God would bring them into an Edenic land where they could flourish and ‘bless the LORD’ their God ‘for the good land’ that God had given them – a well-watered and mineral-rich land.

They were not to presume upon these blessings but to remember that it was the LORD their God who ‘gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors’ (Deuteronomy 8:1–20).

The issues about which they were tested by God were not only manna related but whether they would obey God’s instruction. God had told Pharaoh that Israel was God’s firstborn, and now God was disciplining them as their parent. They were to walk in God’s ways, fear the LORD and keep God’s commandments, as God’s extra provision of manna on the sixth day emphasised (Exodus 4:22, 16:1–5).

While Moses and Aaron were pointing out to the people that their complaint was ultimately with God and not Moses or Aaron, the people ‘looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud’. At evening time, ‘quails came up and covered the camp’, and in the morning there was ‘a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground’. Despite being warned not to gather any more than they needed for each day, some of the people did, only to find that what was kept overnight was worm-infested and putrid.

God’s command was that they were to collect only what they needed. When they did this, ‘those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage’ (Exodus 16:6–22; cf. 2 Corinthians 8:15).

Rest

The people were given extra instructions for the sixth day. They were told to collect twice as much as on the previous days and were prepare for the seventh day by baking and boiling what they wanted and by putting aside until the next morning

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whatever was left over because the seventh day was to be a 'day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD' (Exodus 16:22, 23).

This is the first biblical use of the word sabbath; even though the idea of sabbath is implicit in the first creation narrative (Genesis 2:1–3; cf. Exodus 12:15, 16, 13:6). They were to set the sabbath aside for two reasons: they were to worship God as creator *and* redeemer, just as they had celebrated in the songs of Moses and Miriam. Nonetheless, some of them went out for some of these provisions on the day of rest (Exodus 16:23–31, cf. Exodus 15:2, 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15).

Their life was now lived *after* leaving Egypt, just as Noah began again *after* the flood, and Abraham went to the promised land *after* leaving Haran. All God's gifts to his people in creation are only truly known in the grace and mercy of God's redemption. This recognition was central to the sacrificial meal that accompanied the celebration of the covenant and was testified to in the bread and wine that Melchizedek brought Abraham (Genesis 14:18–20, 18:1–22).

The people called this special provision from the LORD 'manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey'. Its significance as God's provision was indicated by the LORD telling Moses and Aaron to keep a jar of it 'before the LORD' for their descendants (Exodus 16:32–36, cf. 24:9–11).

This provision was a double reminder of God's goodness and kindness. The festival of the Passover and the daily provision of food were to leave them in no doubt about the LORD's care for them (cf. Matthew 6:25–34, 26:26–29; Luke 24:13–48; John 2:1–12, 6:1–71; 1 Corinthians 8:1–6, 10:1–5, 11:17–34; 1 Timothy 4:4,5; Revelation 7:13–17, 19:6–9, 21:1–9, 22:1–7). There were many reasons for them to worship God as their creator and redeemer and to celebrate the festival that God ordained for them to share in as his people.

Questions for reflection and sharing

In reflecting on these questions, remember to be alert to different perspectives on the passages covered in these notes, including where significant themes were briefly passed over or not considered.

1. Joseph's life involved times of blessing followed by times of suffering. Reflect on God's blessings of Joseph and the sufferings that followed. What can we learn from Joseph's story?
2. Joseph's brothers were afraid of what Joseph might do after Jacob died (Genesis 50:15). What does this tell us about Jacob, Joseph and his brothers?
3. When Joseph responded to his brothers' on-going fear that he would bear a grudge against them, he said

Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today (Genesis 50:19, 20).

Reflect on Joseph's statement, especially as it relates to his life. You may like to consider other events in Genesis (e.g. Genesis 2–4).

4. Examine Jacob's blessings of his sons and grandsons in the light of the second creation story in Genesis 1 and 2. You may also want to consider God's covenants with Noah, Abraham and Isaac.
5. God described himself as the 'I AM WHO I AM' when he met Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1–22). Reflect on the revelation God gave Moses and the way it prepared Moses for what was ahead.
6. What happened to Moses on his way back to Egypt? What significance did it have regarding the events linked with the departure of the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus 4:18–31)?
7. Reflect on the deliverance of the Israelites in terms of God's message in Exodus 6:2–9.
8. What does it mean for God to remember his covenant (e.g. Exodus 2:24, 6:5)? Describe this covenant, especially as it relates to God taking his people out of Egypt.
9. Moses was told that the

king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go.

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Discuss the plagues in terms of God's 'mighty hand', commenting on the way God related to Pharaoh and Pharaoh's response (Exodus 3:19, 20).

10. What does God reveal about God's-self through the account of the ten plagues and the events that immediately precede them?
11. What does the story of the passover teach us about the mercies and judgements of God?
12. Reflect on the account of the plagues, the passover and the departure of the Israelites from Egypt using the songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15.
13. Select one or more of the events that occurred after the Israelites crossed the sea and reflect on what is said about God, God's purposes, and the people's response.

Nations and covenant – 3

Testing or trusting the LORD

Is the LORD among us?

We may be inclined to sympathise with the people questioning Moses about why he had brought them out of Egypt to perish in the desert. After all, travelling through a dry desert was no easy experience. But their quarrel with Moses at Massah and Meribah centred around whether the LORD was among them (Exodus 17:1–7).

They had forgotten God's judgements on the Egyptians and Pharaoh. Their memories of being delivered from slavery had faded. Their initial passover and their crossing of the sea were not minor or insignificant events.

It seems they were no longer singing the songs of Moses and Miriam which celebrated the LORD's victory over their enemy's armies (Exodus 15:1–21).

They had not remembered that their LORD had made Marah's bitter water sweet, promised recovery from illnesses and provided abundantly at Elim's twelve springs and seventy palms (Exodus 15:22–27). Their complaint against Moses, their testing and quarrelling with the LORD, was also after God's provision of the quails and the manna bread from heaven (Exodus 16:1–36).

God's instruction to Moses to strike the rock at Horeb with the same staff that he used to strike the Nile indicated God's impartiality in judgement. It also demonstrated God's covenant faithfulness to God's rebellious people (cf. Psalms 78:15–20, 95:1; 1 Corinthians 10:4). The mystery of God's mercy, grace, steadfast love and faithfulness is the central theme of the second half of this book (e.g. Exodus 34:6, 7).

This mystery would be revisited in the crisis at Meribah where Moses came under judgement for disobedience (Numbers 20:1–13). Yet the promises and blessings of God evoked expressions of trust in them, even given their failure to enter the land that God had promised to them (Numbers 13:1–14:45, 20:14–21, 21:1–19).

Not even Balaam's failure to curse them, and his subsequent efforts to seduce them into idolatry and sexual immorality could halt God's purposes with them (Numbers 22:1–25:18, 31:8, 16; Deuteronomy 23:4, 5; Joshua 13:22, 24:9, 10; Nehemiah 13:2; Micah 6:5; 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 1:11; Revelation 2:14–17).

The LORD is my banner

Israel's battles were not only with themselves and their own rebellion against the LORD; they were also with the nation-tribes around them. These contests were not very gentle reminders of their troubled past from which God had delivered them. They were also opportunities for them to prepare for when they would enter the

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land that the LORD had promised them. They were not only to conquer those who were in the land who attacked them, they were to protect the land from any enemies that would attack them. There would always be the need to attend to themselves as well as to defeat the attacks from others (cf. Genesis 2:15).

Moses knew that he could not lead them to victory without 'the staff of God in my hand'. It was also apparent that he could not do it alone. Not only were Aaron and Hur needed to steady Moses' hands, Joshua and the people had to be active against their enemy. Their victorious song was that 'The LORD is my banner'. God's intention to bring his people to know and understand who their LORD was and what their LORD was doing was evident to them (Exodus 17:8–16).

Being the people of God

Knowing God's ways

Zipporah had returned with Moses to Egypt with their children (Exodus 4:20ff). Moses had sent her and their children back to Jethro at some time after that, presumably for protection. Jethro's response as 'the priest of Midian' in bringing 'a burnt offering and sacrifices to God' on hearing of the defeat of Pharaoh and the hardship the Israelites were enduring on the way to the promised land led to Moses, Aaron and the elders gathering to have a meal with him in God's presence:

Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians, when they dealt arrogantly with them (Exodus 18:1, 10–12).

While it was short of later monotheism, Jethro's declaration was consistent with the song Moses and the Israelites had sung after crossing the sea:

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders (Exodus 15:11)?

Jethro's advice to Moses was more than helpful – it was a great gift (Exodus 18:13–27). God's promise to Abraham that he would have many descendants was being fulfilled (Genesis 12:1ff, 15:1ff, cf. Genesis 1:28, Exodus 1:7).

Moses was unable to discern all the disputes that occurred among the people. He was acting as judge and teacher by the way he was leading them as well as by what he was saying. Jethro, as priest of Midian, was well placed to see Moses' prophetic and priestly leadership (Exodus 2:16, 3:1, 18:1). Jethro saw the benefits that would come to Moses and the people by Moses having the help of other judges.

The people would grow and mature peacefully, with Moses more able to focus on overseeing the people under God, by Moses teaching these judges the relevant regulations and instructions and by Moses outlining for them the way they were to act and the things they were to do (Exodus 18:17–23). Moses would resolve the most complex cases, but a process would be in place to prepare the people for what they were to be given at Sinai (Exodus 18:24–27).

Being God's treasure

The months of Exodus had proved demanding and difficult times in which the people struggled to trust the LORD. They were told by the LORD through Moses to consecrate themselves and wash their clothes when they 'came into the wilderness of Sinai' after journeying for three months (Exodus 19:1ff). This instruction would have reminded them of Moses' original request to Pharaoh and God's wonderful deliverance of them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 5:1ff).

Travelling Together

They must have seen many eagles hunt food in the desert, but the Israelites were not God's deadly prey; God had rescued them: 'I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself' (Exodus 19:4).

God announced to them

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5, 6; cf. Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2, 26:18).

God was declaring not only who they were, he was promising them who they would become and indicating the way it would happen. The 'if ... you shall ...' language spoke more of invitation than obligation. The bringing of the Israelites to God by God was not the end of the journey. The next stages of the journey would be in continuity and not discontinuity. Every phase of their travels and settlement would be based on trusting God for God's grace and mercy (cf. Exodus 34:6, 7). Their works were to be responses to God's gifts and not conditions for them.

The LORD's word that 'the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' has reminders of the Genesis creation narratives, especially the description of Eden as God's sanctuary, as the royal home of God's people.

The word 'but' is significant in these contexts. God's choice of Israel was an act of divine grace and mercy and was not based on human merit or achievement. It was God's gift of a new national life where human actions could flow from God's love. It was their opportunity to experience something of the pre-fall innocence of Eden. It was their gift to live in the fulfillment of the LORD's covenant promises rather than to seek rewards by obligation-based obedience efforts (Deuteronomy 7:6–11).

Although the people's response probably included some understanding of this, their future responses were contrary to their promise (Exodus 19:8; cf. Exodus 32:1ff; Numbers 13:1–14:45; Deuteronomy 31:16ff; see also Joshua 24:24).

The divine visitation that followed not only consecrated the people; it declared God's holiness. There was intimacy as they stood in the presence of the LORD and there was separation as they kept away from the mountain. This intimacy and separation heralded a significant part of their learning about God's purposes not only for themselves but for all nations (Deuteronomy 4:1–40, esp. 4:6, cf. 5:22ff).

The people arrived at the Sinai desert three lunar months after leaving Egypt. Following three days after preparation for the LORD their God, they were to see evidence of God being present on Mount Sinai.

Travelling Together

The thunder and lightning, thick cloud and trumpet blast heralded their leaving their camp 'to meet God'. The somewhat apocalyptic description continued:

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder (Exodus 19:17–19).

Moses was told by God to ascend the mountain with Aaron without any of the priests or people so that they would not be hurt (Exodus 19:24).

Their encounter with God was different to that experienced by the first couple in Eden (cf. Genesis 3:8). Yet God did not give them a word which was too hard or too remote. His word was in their mouths to speak and their hearts to see and obey. It was their life, it was God's life in them (Deuteronomy 30:1–20; 32:1–14, 39–43).

As the writer of the book of Hebrews later noted, 'mutual love' and showing 'hospitality to strangers' is to flow from offering

God an acceptable worship with reference and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:28–13:2).

It is this God who declared that he would never leave or abandon them, and of whom God's people can reply that this God is their helper and defender (Hebrews 13:5, 6).

Living in the law of God – 1

Instruction

The background to God announcing these ten words includes Israel being brought out of Egypt not simply to escape slavery, but to be the LORD's treasured possession. God brought them to himself to be 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation'. It is this theme that begins God's declaration of the ten words after the people's consecration ceremony: '*Then* God spoke all these words' (Exodus 19:1–20:2, italics added).

Jethro affirmed that Moses, as God's representative to the people – and the people's representative before God – was to 'teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do'. According to Jethro, the best way for Moses to do this was by appointing suitable elders (Exodus 18:17–23). This process helped set the social context in which the words that God spoke at Sinai would be communicated and implemented.

The ten words were part of the 'statutes and instructions of God' (Exodus 18:16, 20). They were God's commandments given to direct God's people in the way the nation was to live as the LORD's treasured possession. The people had all answered with one voice to do 'Everything that the LORD has spoken' (Exodus 19:6). God was now responding with his instructions. God's words were not optional, but neither were they external (cf. Deuteronomy 30:11ff). They were for obedience not observation (cf. Exodus 19:21). Indeed, their whole Exodus required them accessing the water and the manna that God gave them (cf. Deuteronomy 8:1–3). Moses remained faithful as the central teacher of God's instructions to the end of his life (Deuteronomy 4:9–20).

Intention

Just as obedience had been necessary for their deliverance from Egypt, it would continue to remain essential for them to arrive in and inherit the promised land (Deuteronomy 10:12–22). The LORD's intention in bringing them out of Egypt had been made clear to them and to Pharaoh in Egypt. They sang about it after crossing the sea (Exodus 15:11–18). The ten words indicated God's goal for his people. As well as reminding them of the life from which they had come, these words taught them what they were to leave behind. They also revealed what was ahead and the way to reach their destination.

The words were prophetic; they spoke of a time when the people would have no other gods and no idols, when the LORD's name would not be used emptily, and when social relationships would not be dominated by actions against each other. Just as God had brought them out of Egypt, so God would lead them to the goal ahead. God was teaching them the way to live during their travels in the desert and into the promised land (Deuteronomy 8:1–9). As one hymn-writer has put

it: 'Twas grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home'.⁷ They were not to try to obey these words by relying only on their own resources. They were to live in these words as God's people, depending on God as creator, father and redeemer for their every need.

Intimacy

The intention of the LORD's words was clear: 'You shall not ...'. The intended 'You shall ...' of the words was equally clear. God's instructions revealed God's goal that they would know him intimately. This intimacy was seen in God's declaration that they were God's chosen people (Exodus 19:3–6) and in God's self-disclosure in the ten words, explicitly clear in the second word (Exodus 20:2ff; Deuteronomy 5:6ff, cf. Deuteronomy 5:10, 7:13, 10:15).

The central heartbeat of Moses' teaching was clear. The people's love for the LORD was their response to God's covenant love for them; a love which was evident in God's deliverance of them from slavery and in God's promise of an abundant land in which they and their offspring would live (Deuteronomy 6:1–16, 10:12–22, cf. 7:6–14, 11:1ff, 13:1–5, 30:1–10). Jesus later summarised the law as one of love (Matthew 22:36–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–27).

God's law is not simply learning about good and evil. The trap in that scenario is that we may seek to control and use this knowledge for our own purposes (cf. Genesis 2:9ff, 3:1ff). Rather, we are to hear about life and death, about the flesh and the Spirit, about fruit and works, about love of God and love of self, about holiness and defilement, about purity and immorality, about the truth of who God is and the devious lie of evil, and about God's grace and human pride. God's law is good because it is God's personal word. A person who removes or detaches it from a personal relationship with God will be tyrannised by it, even as the first couple were overcome by the serpent's deceit.

⁷ John Newton, 'Amazing Grace,' <https://hymnary.org/hymn/AM2013/587>.

Extra notes: The LORD's ten *yes* and *no* words

Two words are 'Yes' words; the other eight are stated as 'No' words:

The LORD's <i>no</i>	The LORD's <i>yes</i>
'You shall have no other gods before me'. ⁸	Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart (Deuteronomy 6:4–6).
'You shall not make for yourself an idol ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing ... to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments'.	Humanity is the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26,27, 9:6). God communicates directly by and through God's word. God is to be known directly and personally, in love. The people saw no form of God at Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:14–40, 8:3, 27:15). This word expands (and is one with) the first word: God is a jealous God.
'You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name'.	A name describes a persons' character and identity (Exodus 3:13–15). The people were to worship and live in the LORD's name (cf. Deuteronomy 10:20, 12:3, 5, 11, 21, 14:24, 16:2, 6, 11, 18:5–22, 21:5, 26:2, 28:10, 58, 32:3).

⁸ There is a difference between polytheism (one among many), syncretism (all combined into one being or system), monolatry (one exclusively among others) and monotheism (only one).

Travelling Together

The LORD's <i>no</i>	The LORD's <i>yes</i>
<p>‘Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work ... For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it’.</p>	<p>These ten words freshly confronted them about God and their life as God's people. The sabbath was blessed and holy. The law <i>from</i> God was not only the law <i>of</i> God for them, but God's own law, the expression of his own being. God is not under his law: it indicates who God is as creator, father and redeemer. They were also to keep the sabbath in memory of being rescued by God from slavery (Deuteronomy 5:15).</p>
<p>‘Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you’.</p>	<p>Humanity is God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:27,28, 4:1–5:2). The LORD is covenant God of their ancestors (Genesis 26:24, 28:13, 31:29, 42, 53, 43:23, 46:3, 49:25, 50:17; Exodus 3:6; Deuteronomy 32:6, 7).</p>
<p>‘You shall not murder’.</p>	<p>God gives life (e.g. Leviticus 17:14; Deuteronomy 30:15ff, 32:39).</p>
<p>‘You shall not commit adultery’.</p>	<p>This goes to the heart of God's purposes in creating humanity (cf. Genesis 2:15–3:24).</p>
<p>‘You shall not steal’.</p>	<p>Every-<i>thing</i> is God's gift, generously given (e.g. Exodus 16:18).</p>
<p>‘You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour’.</p>	<p>God is the faithful witness to God's own true word: God in being one is one being! Faithfulness, holiness, goodness, truth, righteousness, love <i>are</i> who God is (Deuteronomy 6:4, 8:3, 18:15–22).</p>

Travelling Together

The LORD's <i>no</i>	The LORD's <i>yes</i>
'You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, ⁹ or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour'.	They were to be concerned for others in need within their community <i>as well as</i> for strangers (Deuteronomy 10:17–22). They were to rely on God's promised abundance (Deuteronomy 28:1ff).

⁹ This statement suggests the text was written for men only.

Living in the law of God – 2

The people's response to the ten words

The people 'were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance', suggesting an appropriate response to God, as required when they were commanded to consecrate themselves (Exodus 19:10ff). However, their reluctance to let God speak directly to them contrasted with Moses' longing to draw near to God and to be in his presence (Exodus 20:18–21, cf. 33:18). The ten words related to their entry into the promised land as God's chosen people, drawn to himself by his holiness, steadfast love, grace and mercy.

The mention of altars of 'earth and sacrifice' for their 'burnt offerings' and 'offerings of well-being' rather than being made of 'hewn stones' provides insights into and contrasts with later details about building a tabernacle. These altars were to be built 'in every place where I cause my name to be remembered'. They would contrast the ritual distancing the people experienced at Sinai and would be ritualised in the tabernacle since the LORD 'will come to you and bless you' (Exodus 20:22–26). The reference to uncut stones may be linked with the building of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:7).

The book of the covenant

Exodus 20:22–23:33 provides details concerning the ways in which the ten words were to be applied to each situation. To understand these applications better we need to investigate the relevant social and cultural settings in detail and to consider the way that these responses align with and contrast the religious practices of the surrounding people groups. Only some preliminary observations are included in this very brief overview.

Concerning sacrifices (Exodus 20:22–26)

The covenant book starts with details about worshipping only the LORD. They were commanded not to make idols, which they do when making the golden calf so soon afterwards. The offerings were to be free responses to the LORD and his loving-kindness, rather than a propitiatory pagan plea for his presence. God would provide forgiveness and well-being as promised (e.g. Exodus 15:26, 23:23–26).

Any altars were not to be evidence of their technology and skill; they were not to exalt their acts of offering. God had provided clothing since the loss of innocence in Eden and so nakedness defied his care for them and his covering of them in his grace and mercy.

Concerning slaves (Exodus 21:1–11)

These case laws would have been consistent with those given in the situations referred to in chapter 18. They were interpretative of the principles in the ten words, principles whose context indicates that whilst slavery existed, it was not in

the purposes of God. The dignity of each person was to be cherished and treated generously and to reflect their own deliverance from slavery (Exodus 20:1; Deuteronomy 15:12–18).

Concerning violence (Exodus 21:12–36)

These laws were partly unconditional principle and partly case: violence attacks and violates human life as a fundamental gift of God. The severe consequences provided indicate the seriousness of the issues involved, especially for people travelling in a military context through the desert. Verses 12 to 17 deal with violent death, while verses 18 to 27 with quarrelling.

The core moral principle of equity was an advance on earlier accounts of unrelenting and unmeasured human vengeance (cf. Genesis 4:8, 15, 24; Leviticus 24:19, 20; Deuteronomy 19:21, 32:26–43; Matthew 5:38, 39, Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30). Premeditated and unpremeditated violence were differentiated and concern for slaves was identified (Exodus 21:13, 20, 26, 27).

Verses 28 to 36 indicate that life and property were to be recognised as gifts and that fairness must be exercised when settling disputes. Appropriate personal responsibilities must be recognised.

Concerning restitution (Exodus 22:1–15)

The importance of social consistency and personal integrity was emphasised. All these case laws explore the last five words in this social and cultural setting. God had brought them out of Egypt in his mercy, why would they not make appropriate restitution when their failures had brought sufferings to others?

Concerning relationships (Exodus 22:16–31)

Verses 16 to 20 emphasise the central importance of marriage and family to the covenant, as in the ten words. These themes were important in the creation stories and were significant in later events (Genesis 1, 2; Exodus 4:18–26). The reaffirmation of the first three words in the context of sexual immorality, idolatry and the occult indicated the importance of trusting God and not seeking false worship. God would provide for his people: they need not look to anyone else. They were created in his image and were to live accordingly.

Caring for the stranger (alien or foreigner), the widow and the orphan further affirmed God's care for all humanity (cf. Psalm 68:5, 6; 2 Corinthians 13:14). The mixture of absolute command and conditional interpretation is again evident. Severe consequences for ignoring this instruction reminded them of their own misery in Egypt.

People who do not covet, steal or bear false witness, honour, give, share the truth and do not exploit (cf. Deuteronomy 23:20). The divine compassion of those consecrated to the LORD was to be the basis for treating people with decency and

dignity. Blessing leaders, honouring God, giving prompt thank offerings ‘from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses’ and committing families to God were expressions of this way of living (Exodus 22:25–31).

Concerning justice (Exodus 23:1–9)

This section unwraps the ninth word, emphasising truth, fairness and integrity. They were called to be a holy people, living in God’s blessings and promises, and so were not to be partial to the poor or the rich. Those who remembered God’s mercy in delivering them from slavery would not be harsh on others.

Concerning the sabbath (Exodus 23:10–13)

The sabbath was the LORD’s gift at creation and was being restored to them through the Exodus. It was the fourth of the ten words, the first word of response, and was given immediately after instructions to worship only God. All they owned they had received from God, and so thankfulness was to be regular and permanent.

Concerning the annual festivals (Exodus 23:14–19)

The three annual festivals were harvest festivals. The festival of unleavened bread was at the start of the barley harvest, the festival of the first fruits was at the beginning of the wheat harvest, commemorating the giving of the law fifty days later, and the festival of booths, tabernacles or in-gathering was of the grape and olive harvests.

The LORD was reminding them of his promises to them by giving instructions about these festivals while they were still in the desert. Pagan rituals were forbidden, and true worship was to be offered (Exodus 23:19).

Entering ‘the place that I have prepared’ (Exodus 23:20–33)

The book of the covenant, like the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, ends with the blessings and the curses that result from faithful obedience and faithless disobedience.

The emphasis on the angel was a reminder that they would never be without the divine word. God’s message would be clearly given to them. Whether in the fire, the cloud, the ark of the covenant, the law, the tabernacle, the worship or the prophets, God would be their God and they would be his people.

Their conquest would be achieved as their prosperity increased, and this would happen according to God’s promised blessings. Trouble would come if they made covenants with other gods and other nations, did not trust God for their needs and failed to thank God for his goodness and steadfast loving-kindness (cf. Exodus 15:12–16).

Confirming God's covenant

Covenant blood

Entrance into the presence of the LORD was at God's initiative and by God's instructions. The remarkable covenant meal with the leaders of Israel occurred only after the people's affirmation to do what God required.

Before this meal happened, the seventy elders accompanying Moses, Aaron, and Aaron's two sons, were to ascend the mountain and 'worship at a distance', with the people remaining at the foot of the mountain. Moses was to proceed alone from there and be near to the LORD to confirm the 'words of the LORD and all the ordinances' (Exodus 24:1–3).

Moses reported to the people on his return and the people affirmed their intention to do 'all the words that the LORD has spoken'. Moses recorded these instructions, built an altar, set up twelve pillars or standing stones, one for each of the tribes, and appointed some young men to offer burnt sacrifices and 'offerings of wellbeing to the LORD' (Exodus 24:3–5).

The community again declared that they would obey the LORD after Moses had read this covenant book. Moses then confirmed God's covenant with them by dashing 'the blood of the covenant' onto the altar and the people. This would have reminded them of the original passover in Egypt and the blood that they put on the doorposts and lintels (Exodus 12:1ff). It also anticipated the blood of the new covenant (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). Their entry into the promised land and into the fullness of life promised by God as creator, father and redeemer would need his mercy and grace as surely as their deliverance from Egypt (cf. Numbers 11:16–30).

The judgement that Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, later brought on themselves testified to the LORD's determination that God's people were *God's* people (Leviticus 10:1ff; Numbers 3:2–4).

The 'blood of the covenant' was a matter of life and death set in the context of divine forgiveness, love, generosity and kindness. God's covenant would be achieved at God's initiative and realised by the people's affirmative actions. Their words of response and appreciation would be valid and authentic because of God's grace and mercy. They would indicate that God's destiny for God's people was that they do God's will. This covenant book was a covenant-in-operation manual: it outlined God's living covenant with them and was thoroughly permeated in relational terms. Dichotomies between law and grace may easily miss the essence of the teaching assigned to Moses here and in the book of Deuteronomy.

Covenant meal

This section commences with an ascent of the mountain where ‘they saw the God of Israel’ (Exodus 24:9–18, cf. 33:20).¹⁰ All that is recorded of what they saw relates to what was under God’s feet, suggesting that they did not lift their eyes up. The description of ‘something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness’ is like the later descriptions of Ezekiel and John (Ezekiel 1:26; Revelation 4:6). This celestial deep blue pavement under God’s feet was beyond the dark cloud, the thunder and the fire mentioned earlier (Exodus 19:16–19, 20:18). The clarity of the pavement indicated something of God’s eternal tranquillity, peace, holiness, unity, love, truth, faithfulness and goodness.

God had reminded the people prior to giving the ten words about their journey so far. They had witnessed the defeat of the Egyptians, had been carried by God ‘on eagles wings’ to be with God and had learnt that obeying God and keeping God’s covenant meant that they would be God’s

treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4–6).

At least a portion of God’s provision to that point and God’s promise for the future was being fulfilled. The covenant meal was a sealing of the intimate relationship that God had established with his people. Their survival in the LORD’s presence speaks of a fulfilment for us all, beyond death itself.

After this meal, the LORD commanded Moses and Joshua to ascend the mountain again and to receive ‘the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for [the people’s] instruction’. Moses then ‘entered the cloud’ that was evidence of the LORD’s glory and spent the next forty days and nights on Mount Sinai receiving the stone tablets that God had promised. The people saw that ‘the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain’ (Exodus 24:12–18).

These references to clouds and glory and to fire and thunder convey impressions of awe and majesty (cf. Psalm 29). They are accompanied by suggestions of calmness and serenity, of waiting expectantly for what was being revealed to them as God’s people (cf. Psalm 46).

¹⁰ See also regarding their being God’s treasured possession (Exodus 19:3), the giving of the ten words (Exodus 19:20), the giving of the book of the covenant (Exodus 20:21), Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders (Exodus 24:1, 9), the details of the tabernacle, the priesthood and the offerings (Exodus 24:12–18), and the giving of the second set on tablets (Exodus 34:1ff).

Building the sanctuary-tabernacle

Preparation

The sanctuary was to be built as a *thank-offering* to God, as an expression of their relief and delight in God's actions for and among them and of their anticipation that God would fulfil his promises to them (Exodus 25:1–9, 35:4–9, 20–29, 36:3b–7). Their hope was in the LORD's plan to dwell with them (Exodus 25:8, cf. 24:16). Their thankfulness and anticipation were evident in their obedience in making the tabernacle according to the pattern God gave them (cf. Exodus 39:32, 42, 43, 40:16; Hebrews 3:1ff, 8:5).

The abundance of the offerings given to enable the tabernacle's construction testified to God's care for his people, as did the creativity of those working on the tabernacle. The LORD filled Bezalel

with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. Moreover, I have appointed with him Oholiab ... and I have given skill to all the skilful, so that they may make all that I have commanded you (Exodus 31:1–11, 35:10, 35:30–36:3a).

Construction

The *plan of the sanctuary-tabernacle* indicates that it was in two sections: the holy place was 20 cubits deep, 10 cubits wide and 10 cubits high, while the holy of holies was half as deep. These sections were separated by a curtain or veil. The ark of the covenant was in the most holy place. The incense altar was in front of the curtain in the larger section, with the table for the bread of the presence on the north side and the lampstand on the south side (Exodus 35:11–19).

The tabernacle was in the western half of a courtyard measuring 100 cubits by 50 cubits. The entrance to the holy place was at its eastern end and the longer sides of the sanctuary were oriented north-south. The courtyard was surrounded by a 5 cubits high linen screen, with a 20 cubits wide gate in the centre of the eastern end. The bronze altar for burnt offerings was in the eastern half of the courtyard, with the laver/basin between the altar and the tabernacle door.

The *tabernacle structure and the materials used* to make it are described in detail (Exodus 26:1–37, 36:8–38, 38:21–31). The builders were to cover the frames of the tabernacle with 'ten curtains of fine twisted linen, and blue, purple, and crimson yarns; you shall make them with cherubim skilfully worked into them' (cf. Genesis 3:24). The curtains were to be joined into one unit and covered with outer curtains. A special curtain was to be made to separate 'the holy place from the most holy' (Leviticus 16:1, 2; Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45; Hebrews 6:19, 9:3, 10:20).

Travelling Together

The first description of the building of the tabernacle starts with its innermost item: *the ark of the covenant* (Exodus 25:10–22, 37:1–9). The ark contained the covenant God gave them at Sinai. The ‘mercy seat of pure gold’ was on top of the ark, with a golden cherub at each end, integrated into the ark itself. The cherubim overshadowed the mercy seat, facing one another with their wings spread out and looking towards the mercy seat. God would meet with them ‘from above the mercy seat’ and ‘deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites’. The LORD’s promised blessings were known by his mercy (cf. Numbers 10:33–36; Leviticus 16:15, 16; Genesis 3:22–24; Luke 18:10–14, Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2, 4:10).

The *table for the bread of the presence* was made of acacia wood and overlaid with pure gold. The table and the ark had four golden rings to hold the poles used to carry it. The table reminded them that they were not to live by bread alone (Exodus 25:23–30, 37:10–16 cf. Deuteronomy 8:3; Exodus 24:11).

The *lampstand* and its utensils were also made of pure gold. Although its purpose was not stated, they knew the LORD’s presence by fire at night with God’s Spirit leading them towards the promised land (Exodus 25:31–40, 37:17–24 cf. Zechariah 4:1ff; Revelation 2, 3; Nehemiah 9:20; Isaiah 63:10).

The *incense altar* was also one unit, made of gold, and with rings and poles for transportation (Exodus 30:1–10, 37:25–28).

The materials for making the *courtyard*, its altar and the basin, were less precious than those used in making the main part of tabernacle. The structure was also less complex (Exodus 27:9–19, 38:9–20).

The *bronze altar of burnt offerings* was for God’s gifts of atonement (Exodus 27:1–8, 38:1–8; Leviticus 1:3ff, 17:11). The *bronze basin* was because those offering the sacrifices were to first ‘wash their hands and their feet ... so that they may not die’ (Exodus 30:17–21, 38:8).

Consecration

The *priestly vestments* were sacred and were to be for ‘glorious adornment’ (Exodus 28:1–5). Aaron’s vestments were more ornate than those worn by his sons. The *ephod* was waistcoat-like with two onyx stones on its shoulder pieces. These stones were engraved ‘with the names of the sons of Israel’ and mounted ‘in settings of gold filigree’. Aaron would ‘bear their names before the LORD ... for remembrance’ (Exodus 28:6–14, 39:1–7).

The *breast piece* carried sacred objects, including ‘twelve stones corresponding to names of the sons of Israel’ (Exodus 28:15–30, 39:8–21). It was ornate like the ephod. Other vestments included a *blue robe*, with blue, purple and crimson pomegranates and bells of gold between them on its lower hems. A rosette of pure gold was engraved with a signet ‘Holy to the LORD’. Tunics, sashes and headdresses were for ‘glorious adornment’ (Exodus 28:31–43, 29:22–31).

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The description of the *consecration of the priests* included details for washing and anointing, the necessary animal sacrifices, related regulations and for daily offerings (Exodus 29:1–46).

Other details

Information is also provided for conducting a census and collecting a poll-tax (Exodus 30:11–16). Details about preparing the oils and incense used in the tabernacle are mentioned (Exodus 30:22–37, 37:29, 27:20,21). The people were reminded that the sabbath is a perpetual covenant and sign that it is the LORD who sanctifies them and that he rested on the seventh day of creation (Exodus 31:12–17, 35:1–3).

Completion

The tabernacle was completed, erected and then opened ‘In the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month’. The people made it according to the instructions God gave Moses on Mount Sinai, including ‘the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God’ (Exodus 31:18).

However excellent this tabernacle-sanctuary was, the presence of the glory of the LORD provided the actual and essential covering for the people. God would lead them into the fullness of his promises and sustain them by his great and glorious grace:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ... For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey (Exodus 40:34–38).

Extra notes: A summary of the building of the tabernacle

Section 1

Tabernacle details

The thank-offering (Exodus 25:1–9).
The ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:10–22).
The table for the bread of the presence (Exodus 25:23–30).
The lampstand (Exodus 25:31–40).
The structure and the materials (Exodus 26:1–37).
The altar for burnt offerings (Exodus 27:1–8).
Oil for the lampstand (Exodus 27:20–21).

The vestments and the consecration of the priests

Introduction (Exodus 28:1–5).
The ephod (Exodus 28:6–14).
The breast piece (Exodus 28:15–30).
Other vestments (Exodus 28:31–43).
Washing and anointing for installation (Exodus 29:1–9).
Animal sacrifices for installation of priests (Exodus 29:10–28).
Related regulations about the priesthood (Exodus 29:29–37).

More tabernacle details and other issues

The daily offerings and God's glory (Exodus 29:38–46).
The incense altar (Exodus 30:1–10).
The census and poll tax (Exodus 30:11–16).
The bronze laver/basin (Exodus 30:17–21).
The anointing oil (Exodus 30:22–33).
Incense for the altar (Exodus 30:34–37).
Bezalel, Oholiab and the skilful workers (Exodus 31:1–11).
The sign of the sabbath (Exodus 31:12–17).

Conclusion

Conclusion (Exodus 31:18).

Section 2

Regulations, thank offering and skilful workers

Sabbath regulations (Exodus 35:1–3).
The thank offering (Exodus 35:4–9).
The skilful workers (Exodus 35:10).

Tabernacle plan

The plan of the sanctuary (Exodus 35:11–19).

Thank offering and skilful workers

The skilful workers (Exodus 35:20–29).

Bezalel and Oholiab (Exodus 35:30–36:3a).

The thank-offering (Exodus 36:3b–7).

Tabernacle details

The structure and the materials (Exodus 36:8–38).

The ark of the covenant (Exodus 37:1–9).

The table for the bread of the presence (Exodus 37:10–16).

The lampstand (Exodus 37:17–24).

The altar of incense (Exodus 37: 25–28).

The oil and the incense (Exodus 37:29).

The altar of burnt offerings (Exodus 38:1–8).

The court of the tabernacle (Exodus 38:9–20).

Records of the materials used (Exodus 38:21–31).

Vestments

The ephod (Exodus 39:1–7).

The breast piece (Exodus 39:8–21).

The robe (Exodus 39:22–26).

Other items (Exodus 39:27–31).

Finishing and opening the tabernacle

The work is completed (Exodus 39:32–43).

The tabernacle is erected (Exodus 40:1–33).

The cloud and the glory (Exodus 40:34–38).

Travelling in the presence of the LORD

The tragedy and terror of idolatry

How foolish and illogical to expect self-created gods to provide leadership! How deceitful to declare that Moses and not the LORD through Moses had brought them out of Egypt! The LORD was not Moses' creation: their history was clear back to their ancestors and all the way to creation (Exodus 33:1–6)!

Aaron did as the people requested and identified the idol with the LORD! The people's response was to indulge in unholy revelry. The revelation given at Sinai was quickly abandoned and their rebellion became a permanent warning to God's people (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1–14). What a contrast this was with the response of the people to their final meal in Egypt, to their hearing from the LORD that 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself' and to the meal their elders had with God on the mountain (Exodus 12:1ff, 13:1ff, 19:1ff, 24:1ff)!

The LORD told Moses that *Moses* had brought the people out of Egypt but did not blame him for their rebellion. Moses was to descend the mountain quickly and confront them about their perverse idolatry because God had

seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation (Exodus 32:7–10).

God would exercise judgement, not Moses. Moses was to be with them in the judgement – and would survive and prosper.

This evoked a strong plea from Moses. Moses does not question the appropriateness of God's judgement (Exodus 32:11–14). He personally knew the LORD's mercy (e.g. Exodus 2:6ff, 2:11ff, 3:1ff, 4:24–26), and that this mercy revealed a deeper justice than appropriate righteous wrath – and that it excluded violent vengeance. Moses' appeal was clear: not only would the LORD's name be ridiculed if God destroyed them, but God would be going against his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Israel:

Remember ... your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever' (Exodus 32:11–13).

God's change of mind is described in the context of God's dialogue with Moses. God's sovereignty is very different from fatalism. Moses' fierce anger was to emerge several times, firstly with him violently breaking the 'work ... and writing of God' (Exodus 32:15–20).

Aaron's pathetic response in blaming the people and suggesting that the golden young bull was self-forming indicated the extent of his and the people's rebellion. With the 'people were running wild ... to the derision of their enemies', Moses called for those who were on the LORD's side to re-established discipline in the camp by acts of familial murder.

While Moses' action might appear well short of the judgement that was appropriate, it is worth noting that although Moses claimed divine sanction for killing so many people, God's approval was not explicitly given to him (Exodus 32:21–29). Could Moses' actions be interpreted by his later violent response to the people's defiance which presumed on God's authority and led to Moses being banned from entering the promised land (cf. Exodus 17:1–7; Numbers 20:1–13)? Should Moses have responded as he asked God to respond – based on the revelations of God's mercy that he had received and on which God changed *God's* mind (Exodus 25:22, 30:6, 32:11–14, cf. 20:13, 21:12–14; Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 32:35)? God insisted that judgement was God's not Moses' prerogative:

But the LORD said to Moses, 'Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin' (Exodus 32:33–35).

Whereas the broken tablets spoke of a broken covenant, the brutal faithfulness of the Levites set them apart in Moses' mind as a priestly tribe (cf. Genesis 49:5–7). This merciless initiation contradicted the non-violent message given to Abraham regarding sacrificing his own son (Genesis 22:1ff; cf. 1 Kings 18:40). Neither Moses' violence in the LORD's name nor the people's idol gave life and meaning to God's people. God's final word was not one of judgement but direction: Moses was to lead the nation to their promised destination.

The grace and glory of atonement

Moses personally knew God's forgiveness and rightly sought it for the nation. He knew the wages of sin was death and offered himself as a substitute. Yet replacement-substitution was not enough: identification must be complete – *both* must die, and *both* must be raised (Exodus 32:30–35; cf. Psalm 49:5–7; Ezekiel 18:1ff; Romans 9:1ff; Galatians 2:19, 20).

God's declaration that only God's angel would go with them showed them how dependant they were on God for their survival. God's order that they remove their ornaments (which may have included charms) further reminded them that their true glory was in God and not in their idols or possessions.

The emergence of Joshua as Moses' assistant is now made clear, as is the depth of the LORD's face-to-face relationship with Moses 'as one speaks to a friend'. The

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right ordering of community life was in the people's acknowledgement of God's presence with them – the same presence they had just denied. The battle for true worship was occurring, and the purpose of the tabernacle in that worship was being clarified. Leaving Egypt meant more than travelling across the desert (Exodus 33:1–11; cf. Leviticus 16).

It was Moses' longing to live in the favour and grace of the LORD that led him to ask God to show him his ways, and to remind God that 'this nation is your people'. Moses' humility ends the discussion in these chapters about who led the nation out of Egypt! It also leads to the LORD's response to Moses' question about 'whom you will send with me'. God had told Moses that God's angel would 'go in front of you' since God would consume the people because of their stubbornness if God went 'up among you' (Exodus 33:12, 32:34, 33:5). God's response to Moses' question was that 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest' (Exodus 33:12–14).

The affirmation of divine presence and the vision of sabbath fulfillment were promised. The climactic seventh day of the first creation narrative and the description of the LORD's presence in Eden are woven together in this assurance of God's mercy, grace and steadfast, holy love.

Living in the glory of the LORD

Show me your glory

The significance of Moses' longing for the favour of the LORD by seeing his glory was evident from before they left Egypt (Exodus 34:1–9, cf. 14:4, 17, 18, 16:7, 10, 24:16, 17, 29:43, 40:34, 35). God's glory was revealed in his name. God was the warrior who, in his mercy, grace and goodness, rescued them from oppressive slavery and tyranny. Moses knew God's glory and favour were inseparable and could not be known apart from God's presence. This meant the people could not be God's distinctive nation without knowing God, and without knowing God by God's name.

God's revelation of himself would not be different in substance to that declared to Moses at the burning bush – but it would become even deeper in richness in the context of the Exodus (Exodus 33:15–23, cf. 3:1ff). Just as the mercy seat was the LORD's throne, so God's statement about his own grace and mercy identified that God's sovereignty was not primarily known through legislation, but with God's own self. This revelation of God's holiness in all God's glory was beyond fallen human survival unless the profound depths of God's covering mercy and forgiveness were known by sheltering in the 'cleft of the rock' (Exodus 33:22). The theme of the LORD as the rock was significant in Moses' great song in Deuteronomy 32 (cf. Exodus 17:1ff; Numbers 20:1ff).

The LORD, who used 'to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend' at the tent of meeting, declared that even Moses could not see God's face and live (Exodus 33:11, 20ff). This seeming paradox in God's self-revelation involves understanding the sovereign grace and mercy that is God's alone to give. Inside this mystery is communion and life, outside of it is desolation and death.

The LORD's self-revelation

Only the LORD can reveal the LORD. No-one else can declare him, other than as a witness to God's own self-revelation (Exodus 34:1–9; cf. John 1:1–18, Revelation 1:1ff). This divine self-disclosure is described in continuity with the giving of the law prior to their making of the golden calf. The law of God was not altered by their sacrilege even though Moses needed to bring two new stone tablets to replace the ones that he smashed.

The awesome majesty of the LORD's word to Moses provoked immediate worship and prayer. If this abundance of 'steadfast love and faithfulness', overflowing in forgiveness to 'the thousandth generation', is God's glory and so the radiance of God's holiness and love, then Moses could surely hope that God would work in their hearts to pardon their guilt and sin, and 'take us for your inheritance'. The alternative would be permanent guilt without any promised inheritance or sabbath rest. The richness and depth of the LORD's self-revelation was reason enough for

the people to enter God's rest and live in the current reality and future expectation of God's promises.

The covenant affirmed

Having previously suggested that he would only send his angel with Moses, God now indicated that abundance would replace reticence and restraint!

Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the LORD; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you (Exodus 34:10).

The people were to remain obedient to God and not prostitute themselves in idolatry or make covenants with the nations around them. Their love for God would be expressed by them keeping the festivals and observing the sabbath.

After forty days with God on the mountain, 'the skin of [Moses'] face shone because he had been talking with God' (Exodus 34:28–35; cf. John 1:14ff; 2 Corinthians 3; Hebrews 1:1–4). The instruction in the law indicated God's sure intention for his people – that their God was the LORD and that they were God's people: delivered from Egypt on eagle's wings to live together in intimate communion with each other and God (cf. Exodus 19:4–6, 29:43–46).

As God promised: 'it is an awesome thing that I will do with you' Exodus 34:10, cf. 15:11). God's actions would unveil God's glory – God's steadfast love and faithfulness. They would herald and be the fulfilment of God's covenant promises through the outpouring of God's grace and mercy. They would bring true sabbath rest and true vocation in their new homeland.

The land of promise was to be a new Eden that would be theirs to share with every people group and nation forever living together in harmonious worship. Strangers, widows and orphans were to be cared for in this community since the fullness of the LORD would be revealed by the Spirit of God, and the Son of the living God and his Father would be known in their triune, eternal, holy glory, pure love and everlasting goodness and truth.

Questions for reflection and sharing

In reflecting on these questions, remember to be alert to different perspectives on the passages covered in these notes, including where significant themes were briefly passed over or not considered.

1. The themes of God's covenant and the nations have been central to Genesis and Exodus. In what ways has your understanding grown through these studies?
2. Reflect on Moses' intercessions in Exodus 33 and 34 in the light of the statements by the people and by God that it was Moses who had brought them out of Egypt (Exodus 32:2, 7, 34, 33:1, cf. Exodus 3:17, 6:26, 7:4, 12:41–51, 16:6, 20:1ff, 29:46).
3. 'The theme of Exodus is the presence of God in his sanctuary or tabernacle'. In what ways does this statement reflect the narrative in this second biblical book.
4. In what ways do you understand Exodus 32 to 34 in context of the references to building a tabernacle either side of these chapters?
5. Explore themes in the passages in the second half of Exodus that refer to God's covenant with Israel (Exodus 19:1–9, 20:1–21, 20:22–24:15 and 34:10–28). Consider the structure and content of the covenant.
6. In what ways do the case laws in chapter 18 relate to the unconditional principle laws that follow? What impact does the desert context, their recent past in Egypt and their new neighbours have on these laws?
7. Explore the theme of atonement in second half of Exodus. Consider the role of the mercy seat in the sanctuary-tabernacle.
8. What does the structure of the tabernacle indicate concerning the nature and purpose of God for his people and his creation?
9. 'The law is prophetic in that it indicates God's intention for his people'. In what ways does this statement explain the book of Exodus? Include your thoughts on the ways God indicated these intentions would come to pass.
10. What is the relevance to Joshua's future leadership of the context in which he emerged as an important leader in Israel (Exodus 17:9–14, 24:13, 32:17, 33:11. Cf. Numbers 11:28, 13:16, 14:6–38, 26:65, 27:18–22, 32:12, 28, 34:17; Deuteronomy 1:38, 3:21, 28, 31:3–23. 32:44, 34:9).
11. Reflect on the second half of Exodus using passages of your choice from the book of Deuteronomy.
12. In what ways can the Exodus be understood as being part of God's preparation of his people for a renewed Eden?

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13. Discuss the central elements of the God's covenant and its relevance to the nations in Genesis and Exodus.
14. The LORD's revelation of his glory is a central theme of Exodus 33 and 34. In what ways is this theme central to the whole book?
15. What is meant by the glory of God? Consider its connection with the fire and the cloud that went with them, and God's holiness which was declared to them (Exodus 14:4, 17, 18, 16:7, 10, 24:16, 17, 29:43, 33:18, 22, 40:34, 35. Cf. Exodus 15 and the later descriptions of the sanctuary-tabernacle).

Wonder, worship and work

Worship in the Son

The Son at worship, and worship in the Son

Hebrews 3 and 4 describe the ‘unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God’ as ‘hardened by the deceitfulness of sin’. There is, thankfully, the ‘throne of grace’ where ‘we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’. Our access to this sovereign source of help is through Jesus Christ, the ‘great high priest who has passed through the heavens’. In mentioning his high priesthood, Hebrews 5:1–10 indicates that ‘Christ did not glorify himself’.

Hebrews 6:19–20 states that our hope is in Jesus having entered ‘the inner shrine [presumably where the throne of grace is located] behind the curtain ... forever’ on our behalf. Hebrews 7:15–25 indicates that his priesthood is permanent as he ‘always lives forever to make intercession’ for those he saves. Having established the nature of Christ’s priesthood, the writer indicates the nature of Jesus’ sacrifice: he offered himself – and did this according to the promises which God guaranteed by a better covenant (Hebrews 7:20–28).

The author’s central thesis is in chapter 8:1–2. We have a forever-high-priest seated at the right hand of the divine Majesty in the heavens. He is seated in the inner shrine of the tabernacle-sanctuary where the throne is grace – where grace is enthroned! Jesus’ ministry is in this heavenly sanctuary set up by God. His worship in this tabernacle is current. It is worship based on the new, better covenant and greater promises (Hebrews 8:6–13). Israel’s worship fades as a sketch and shadow before the reality and substance of Jesus at worship in the heavenly sanctuary as a human person. He worships according to God’s law which is in his mind and is written on his heart. He is the person who truly knows God (cf. Hebrews 8:11).

Hebrews 9:8–14 describes the witness of the Holy Spirit concerning the way into the sanctuary not being through ceremonies and rituals but through Christ entering ‘with his own blood’. His priesthood speaks of what is ahead and what is already here! Here we see the essence of true humanity at worship: it is ‘through the eternal Spirit’ that ‘he offered himself to God’. The efficacy of his human priesthood is that it invites us into his communion in the triune God! We are now purified to worship the living God!

All this life and worship is according to the eternal law of God where the shedding of blood is needed for sins to be forgiven (Hebrews 9:22). He appears ‘in the presence of God on our behalf ... once and for all at the end of the age’ having removed sin through ‘the sacrifice of himself’ (Hebrews 9:23–28).

No wonder Luke recorded a woman anointing Jesus with her tears when she learned of her forgiveness (Luke 7:36–38).

The Son is high priest, sacrifice and true worshipper

The writer of Hebrews declared that only Christ's worship can remove sin (Hebrews 10:5–9). Jesus' incarnation is defined by him being priest-sacrifice. Christ delights to do his Father's will: 'your law is in my heart' (cf. Psalm 40:8). The will of his Father evokes his worship and 'we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Hebrews 10:10). This majestic, regal action of grace defeats his enemies. It (ex-)terminates all false, adulterous and idolatrous worship; all worship that is divorced from this triune redemptive action (Hebrews 10:11–14). The Holy Spirit witnesses this liberating truth to us, writing the divine sovereign law of grace and mercy in our inner beings. Any need for sin-offerings is over, and we are brought into the worship of Jesus Christ to his God and Father in this same Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10:15–18).

The work out of this reality is clear (Hebrews 10:19–39). It is access to this 'new and living way' for which the people of faith have always lived and anticipated (Hebrews 11). It is the provision of this pathway that is included in the 'joy that was set before' Jesus Christ when facing the shame of his brutal crucifixion and death (Hebrews 12:1–2). And it is this worship in his kingdom that is 'acceptable', is offered 'with reverence and awe', and is 'unshakeable' (Hebrews 12:22–29)!

We have been purified by holy fire in Christ Jesus. Our self-centred worship with its discordant, angry, warlike, lustful, lecherous whippings and promiscuities has been put to death. Jesus' worship is the harmony of the heavenly hosts in festal gathering with the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven. Their worship, and our worship with this vast community, is in God because of the blood of Jesus.

Hebrews 13 shares some results of this worship: love, hospitality, fidelity, freedom from the love of money and more are 'offerings of a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that praise him' (Hebrews 13:15).

In reflecting on this outpouring of love to God and neighbours, the words of Hebrews 2:10–13 come to mind. Jesus Christ is the leader of the worship, now and forever. He brings us to glory – to the glory of his Father whose family we now are. In him we are crowned with glory and honour and the serpent's authority is crushed. Jesus Christ is our help now because he is the merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God who sacrificed himself in making atonement. By grace he tasted death for everyone (Hebrews 2:5–18)!

Freed for worship

By God's Son, in God's family

Jesus offered relief and rest from carrying heavy burdens. He spoke of the unrepentant responses of Galilean cities to God's revelation of his purposes. Infants, Jesus declared, see what wise and intelligent people miss: infants recognise the true essence of God's work in and through his Son. Babies and young children worship God while the 'enemy and the avenger' miss out (Psalm 8:2). Only God the Father knows the Son and only the Son knows and reveals the Father (Matthew 11:25–30, 18:1–5, 19:13–15; cf. Luke 10:21–24)!

Jesus shared these insights as he worshipped the Father. He indicated that the yoke of his sonship is easy to bear and its burden light to carry. He invited people to learn humility and gentleness from him and to live in his restfulness. His Father is 'Lord of heaven and earth' and had handed over everything to his Son. True worship is learned in the Son who is Lord. He is the true worshipper and true worship is only known and authentic in him in God's family (Matthew 11:25–30; cf. Psalm 8; John 3:1ff).

Jesus spoke of his sonship as an invitation to others (John 8:31–38, especially 8:32 and 8:36). He contrasted the people's slavery to sin (which they did not want to recognise) with the freedom he gives to those in whom there is room 'for my word' (John 8:37). They had heard this word 'from the Father' through the Son (John 8:38, cf. 6:45, 15:15). The word of slavery brings death and is full of lies, hateful and murderous (John 8:44, 45), while the word of freedom is life (John 8:51), truth (John 8:32, 45) and love (John 8:42). Those who are free cry out to God as Father in the Spirit that God has sent. Freedom is known because God sent his Son so that Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free-people, men and women, and rich and poor might be adopted into God's family (Galatians 3:26–28, 4:4–7).

Meanwhile humanity is in bondage to its efforts to live according to the flesh, and so in slavery to sin and to the devil, and the whole creation is subjected to futility until it obtains 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' or the 'glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:14–21 NRSV and KJV; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:17, 18). The rest of Romans 8 describes how the intercession of the Spirit and the Son effect our freedom and enact our glory in the Father's love, with God working everything together for the best outcome (Romans 8:28 NRSV and NIV).

In and through Christ, our great high priest

Jesus is the 'exact imprint of God's very being', radiating God's glory as he sustains creation and makes 'purification for sins', so taking up authority over all creation – including where evil had held sway (Hebrews 1:1–4, 8:1ff).

Jesus makes holy those who are unholy. He replaces shame with glory and gives life to those 'held in slavery by the fear of death' (Hebrews 2:10–18). He entered the Holy Place as priest and sacrifice 'with his own blood' and 'through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God'. His ministry purifies 'our conscience[s] from dead works to worship the living God' (Hebrews 9:11–14)!

He is sanctifier in the heavenly sanctuary and from his throne of grace leads God's family in true worship. As he leads this worship, he declares his Father to God's family and leads their worshipping responses to the Father from the midst of the congregation (Hebrews 2:10ff, cf. 4:14ff, 8:1ff).

The Holy Spirit's witness in this worship is clear: God's law is written on our hearts. God's law is no longer a source of terror and bondage but expresses how we live in God as his worshipping people. This law of life comes to us with the forgiveness of our sins. As forgiveness arrives, we find ourselves oriented to true obedience (Hebrews 8:8–13, 9:11–14, 10:5–17).

As the temple of God, in God who is the temple

Jesus declared himself to be the true temple (John 2:19). He brought new worship even to the old temple (Matthew 21:12–16)! Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, all those who are assembled, and Jesus, are closely identified in Hebrews 12. This city is the home of the Lamb and the bride and has no temple 'for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb' (Revelation 21:22). This dwelling of God with his people in the new heavens and the new earth precipitates the passing of the first heaven and the first earth.

We are Spirit-temples, dwelling places of God, both as persons and as God's people. God has proclaimed peace to us personally and as a community in Jesus. Through Jesus, we have access in one Spirit to the Father. We are no longer strangers and outcasts; we belong in God's household (Ephesians 2:11–22; 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20; 2 Corinthians 6:14ff).

Who will be free to enter this holy city? Who will be at the marriage supper of the Lamb and his bride? Who will be liberated from slavery in Babylon to worship in the new Jerusalem where God is the sanctuary? Who will know no more accusations and curses, shame and disgrace, degradation and defilement? Who will be pure and holy? Who will be free from evil and its filthiness? Who will no longer hunger or thirst as they worship God day and night and are guided by the Shepherd-Lamb to 'springs of the water of life' while God wipes every tear from their eyes (Revelation 7:14–21)?

True worship begins when prodigals turn towards home (Luke 15:17ff) and thirsty people begin drinking from 'a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:23). Jesus' message was that

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the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23, 24).

The biblical metaphors stretch beyond human sociality to give us glimpses of an eternity that not only awaits us but into which we already enter as worshippers of the living, loving, triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

The word of the Father is love in his Son;
communion of Spirit, holy threesome all one.
From before beginning all shared one sure goal,
that only creation could fully unfold.

The Father of family – abundant and free –
released us from evil by one on a tree.
God's family has riches of life in God's home,
who made and redeemed us and to us did come.

O Christ who has loved us, who woos us as bride,
received from the Father to be at your side,
we love and adore you in Spirit and learn
abundance of your grace which no-one can earn.

O Spirit who fills all that heaven has planned,
who floods our dry deserts, makes gardens from sand,
you sing us your new songs from eternity
within the communion known to holy three.

O Father of family, of Lamb and his bride,
of blessed communion one cannot divide,
new heavens and new earth your people you give
forever and within your fullness to live!

So, freed from our shame and released from our strife
we praise and adore you – you are our new life.
Our songs rise forever more fully to bring
all honour and glory to you who are king.

The Lord's prayer – living in the reign of God

Context

The Lord's Prayer is recorded in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels. Matthew included it in the Sermon on the Mount while Luke placed it after Jesus' disciples were on ministry (Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:1–4).

The Sermon on the Mount is an affirmation of the reign of Father-God, of his provision for and presence with his people, and of the nature of their participation in Jesus' life and ministry. It is because 'your Father knows what you need before you ask him' that they were told to 'pray then in this way' (Matthew 6:8, 9).

Jesus' command that we primarily strive for God's reign and righteousness confident of his care and provision further develops this theme. The 'things' that are given are the 'good gifts' Father-God gives abundantly to creation and humanity. These gifts are best known when in relationship with Father-God as his family, and when living in the Holy Spirit under Jesus' lordship (Matthew 6:33, 7:7–10, 21–27).

Luke recorded Jesus affirming the Father's promise to be faithful to those who ask, search and knock (Luke 11:5–8). The Holy Spirit is the focus of the Father's provision for his people. The coming of God's kingdom asked for in the Lord's prayer connects with the 'heavenly Father [giving] the Holy Spirit to those who ask him' (Luke 11:9–13).

This tri-personal action is evident from beginning to end in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon begins with an outpouring of pre-Pentecost-blessings, reminding the crowd of Isaiah's prophecy about the 'spirit of the LORD God' anointing God's servant and sending his servant

to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and ... to comfort those who mourn (Isaiah 61:1ff; cf. Luke 4:18, 19).

The Sermon on the Mount, with its numerous references to 'your Father in heaven' and 'the kingdom of heaven', concludes with the crowd being 'astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes' (Matthew 7:27, 28).

The Beatitudes were more than propositions; they immediately impacted those for whom they were most relevant. The 'poor in spirit' and the persecuted received the heavenly kingdom, mourners were comforted, meek people inherited the earth, spiritually hungry and thirsty people were filled, mercy was given to the merciful, the pure in heart saw God, and peacemakers were called God's children!

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This outpouring of blessing clearly brought much joy and gladness to many people that day (Matthew 5:3–12, cf. 7:27, 28).

Just as Jesus' ministry that day was a pre-Pentecost Pentecost, so his baptism was in some sense a pre-transfiguration transfiguration (Matthew 4:16, 17). His temptation similarly pre-empted his crucifixion (Matthew 4:1). The devilish accusations questioned Jesus being the Son of God and the nature of Jesus' sovereignty over this world's regimes.

Jesus proclaimed God's heavenly reign and called his disciples after these temptations and before the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:12–25). This new 'dawn from on high' breaks open in a similar way to the events of Jesus' resurrection, appearing and ascension (Luke 1:78; cf. Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20, 21).

Content

Some simple summary themes relating to the Lord's prayer include:

'Our Father in heaven' pointing to God's presence in his creation.

'Hallowed be your name' asking that Babel-like towers are re-built as temples in Father-God's realm and that each human person is honoured with integrity and truth and treated with decency and dignity.

'Your kingdom come' paralleling the prayer for sanctity of God's name by asking for the Father's sovereignty to rule by grace and mercy over all for all. It requests God to fill his people with his Holy Spirit in order that they live faithfully.

'Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' identifying the axis around which the whole prayer runs. Harmony, reconciliation, peace and joy are to flourish as love, freedom, goodness and truth flow person to person and people to people.

'Give us this day our daily bread' recognising our relationship with and dependency on creation as creatures and our vocation to nurture and respect the environment we inhabit in sustainable and renewable ways.

'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors' reminding us that while we live with anticipated but not always realised reconciliation, our disposition and orientation is to be one of forgiveness and reconciliation.

'And do not bring us to the time of trial' affirming our on-going need for deliverance and redemption, often when we least expect it and are perhaps not wanting it.

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‘But rescue us from the evil one’ insisting that our environment is larger than our own narrative. In paralleling the prayer about trials, this request points to our ultimate sanctification and glorification.

Communion

We are to see in the Lord’s prayer the heart of Jesus’ communion with his Father, and of their invitation that we, in and by the Holy Spirit, share in their communion. Jesus’ prayer taught the way we share in the reign of God and receive the abundance of the blessings of heaven outpoured through the Beatitudes. Like those who first heard these blessings on that mountain side, these blessings come to us in times of difficulty and suffering to restore us and teach us of God’s plan and purpose with creation and humanity.

Our learning and living unfold to us what the reign of God means for us. This revelation happens as our eyes are opened to what it meant for Jesus to be crowned sovereign in and of history by his life and death. As John the Baptist declared, Jesus is the one who ‘takes away the sin of the world’ and who ‘baptises in the Holy Spirit and with fire’. Those who see these truths know that the ‘kingdom of heaven is at hand’ and that the king has come (Matthew 3:1–12; Mark 1:1–8; Luke 3:1–18; John 1:29–36). They know that the consummation of his kingdom will come as surely as his coronation as its Lord and Saviour. We live in the context of the first coming knowing his current coming in the Spirit and awaiting his final coming! He is not absent from us but is with us with all authority (Matthew 28:16–20; cf. John 14:18, 16:16ff).

What in the world is God doing?

God is caring for all people

Deuteronomy 10 describes God giving ten ‘words’ to Moses for the second time. Rather than destroying Israel, God was sending them into the promised land. The stones on which these words were written were to be carried by the Levites in the ark of the covenant. The Levites had no land entitlement or inheritance apart from the LORD and the LORD’s promises to them. They were set aside ‘to stand before the LORD to minister to him, and to bless in his name’ (Deuteronomy 10:8, 9).

Israel was – for their own well-being – to respond to the ‘great and awesome things’ that God had done for them by fearing, loving and serving God (Deuteronomy 10:12, 13, 21). This response would acknowledge that while all creation belonged to the LORD their God, that the LORD had uniquely set ‘his heart in love’ on their ancestors and had selected them to be his people from among other nations (Deuteronomy 10:14, 15).

They were to live aware that their awesome and majestic God was impartial and not open to bribery, was concerned that orphans and widows received justice and was focused on them loving and caring for strangers since they were strangers in Egypt.

You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear (Deuteronomy 10:17–20).

God’s interest in orphans, widows and strangers is enlarged on elsewhere in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 14:29 we are told that the Levites were not to be neglected because they were not allocated land or inheritance like the other tribes. This meant that they,

as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

In Deuteronomy 24:14ff the people were not to ‘withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers’ – including those who were strangers. They were not to ‘deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice’, nor were they to ‘take a widow’s garment in pledge’. This would remind them that God had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt.

Likewise, at harvest time they were to leave some sheaves ‘for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings’. Similarly, their tithing was to care for the ‘Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns’ (Deuteronomy 26:12ff; cf. Ruth 1:1–4:21).

God is revealing who God is

God's care for the Israelites and strangers living in their communities was not simply so that their society would be prosperous, harmonious and at peace. It was so they would learn who God is. God's people were to praise the LORD with joyful songs and

be exultant before him. Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity (Psalm 68:4–6, cf. Psalm 94).

Here was the true worship of God's people as they trusted God for his care and knew his kindness – even in distress (Psalm 146:5–10).

The prophets warned against oppressing the alien, the orphan and the widow. They identified this oppression with violence, murder and idolatry, and indicated that trusting in having worshipped in God's temple would not save them from the consequences of abandoning the needy. Their existence as God's people was linked with providing for these people (Jeremiah 7:6, 22:3; Ezekiel 22:7). The prophet Zechariah made this clear (Zechariah 7:8ff) and Malachi wrote on this theme (Malachi 3:1ff).

This judgement was intended to refine God's covenant people, so bringing them into full participation in the blessings that God had for them.

God is fulfilling God's purposes

Mary's song of praise to God and Zechariah's prophecy on John the Baptist's birth are wonderful expressions of the longing of the faithful people of God (Luke 1:46–55, 68–79). They summarise not only the above prophecies but reflect God's concern for people who are impoverished; for those who are lame, blind, deaf and unable to speak (e.g. Isaiah 35, 42, 54–58, 61).

Jesus' concern for the poor – including widows, orphans and strangers – is clear. He told the disciples that they would not be left as orphans (John 14:18) and that they would not be widowed since he was the true Bridegroom (Matthew 9:14ff). He reminded them that the Holy Spirit would comfort strangers and outcasts and would call them his friends (John 15:13ff, 15:26ff).

Paul wanted the Corinthians to 'know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9). For Paul, this was the essence of Jesus' life and death and the basis of authentic community (Philippians 2:1–11). Paul wrote of God's fatherhood (Ephesians 3:14ff; Galatians 4:1ff), of Jesus as husband (Ephesians 5:21ff) and of the community of the Spirit (Philippians 2:1ff; Ephesians 2:11–22).

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Peter wrote that God has powerfully provided everything we need to live godly lives by giving us ‘the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness’. These gifts of God’s ‘precious and very great promises’ enable us to escape from worldly decadence and to ‘become participants of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:3, 4).

The story of the people of God – including Ruth and Naomi, Hannah, and countless others – is found in these ‘precious and very great promises’. Here we come to know that God was personal caring for his people in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The cross was his demolition of the empires and ambitions of a proud and sinful humanity. It was the revelation of God’s triune communion and the drawing of us to share in this holiness and love by his mercy and grace. The cross is humanity’s entrance into the paradise of God, into his eternal temple, the new Jerusalem where all sorrow and alienation will end and an unfolding of abundance beyond compare will occur as God is God to his people, and his people are the people of their God (Revelation 19–21).

To hear and obey the word of God through the prophetic testimony of the people of God, and to live in Jesus’ love for all humanity, whatever our needs, is to taste the ages to come and to share in God’s promises (1 Corinthians 2:6ff, 10:11; 1 Peter 1:3ff).

What, then, is God doing in the world? Caring for people, revealing who God is and fulfilling God’s triune purposes. Those who know the generosity of God proclaim God’s Messiah-Son, Jesus Christ, and are confident that the Holy Spirit opens fountains within God’s people enabling them to be generous to all those among whom they live (Hebrews 13:1ff). This outpouring of generosity is the love of God, which the New Testament authors speak of in polyphonic harmony as a symphony of abundant and amazing freedom and joy (cf. John 13:1ff; 1 John 3:1ff; Revelation 1:5b; 1 Corinthians 13:1ff; 1 Peter 1:8).

Reflections

Exploring covenant

Some covenant themes

- God created God's image as man and woman from the dust of the earth, filled with God's spirit. Their calling together was for the earth to flourish with fruitfulness flowing from their communion with God. Creation was freely and abundantly given to them as their family home, to be nurtured and sustained by their work and rest.
- Humanity was alienated from God, dislocated from creation, and embittered in human relationships by choosing death rather than life. Its functional structure and vocational calling remained, but came under evil delusions, deceit and denial rather than stay in the dignity and delight of knowing God and God's ways.
- Cain and Seth profiled this choice through Cain's rejection and Seth's acceptance of God's covenantal grace and mercy.
- Just as God was humanity's God and humanity was God's people by creation, so God worked to renew, revive and redeem humanity by God's covenants so that the hearts, souls, minds and strengths of God's family would be reformed to know and love God and each other, and care for creation.
- God's covenant taught about creation and the role of God's people in it through God's law and declared God's promises and plans for God's people to be God's family in creation as their family-home.
- The blessings of living in harmony with God by obeying God were God's personal actions as the creator of the world in which they lived.
- These blessings testified to God's people of God's presence in holiness, steadfast love and mercy, and to God's calling of God's people to be a priestly and royal community living in God's prophetic word. Israel was to be God's priest-nation to all nations including by God's deliverances.
- God's saving covenantal actions were not because of human merit, or because other nations were worthy of God's mercy. God's salvation declared God's goodness, love, kindness, generosity and holiness as the redeemer who intervened of God's own initiative to bring creation to its appointed goal.
- God's covenants were designed according to God's intentions to renew creation as well as God's people. Creation rejoices in the revelation of these covenants.
- God's covenantal faithfulness was in harmony with God's faithfulness as creator. God forgives, and freely gives again, in grace just as God gave

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abundant life in creation. God's covenants proclaim God's renewal of God's people *and* the restoration and fulfilment of God's creation.

- God's covenants declared God's unilateral intention to rescue and restore God's people. God brought them out of slavery by redemption to take them into freedom and sanctification.
- God's covenant promises were fulfilled by God's anointed Messiah, who was the prophet Moses anticipated and the priest-king who correlated with Melchizedek. This anointed one was God's Davidic ruler, God's righteous Branch, true shepherd and messenger of covenant peace. Isaiah's suffering servant prophecies and the vision of the human being in Daniel also link with the outpouring of God's Spirit and the restoration of God's kingdom.
- This Messiah's majesty was in his faithful identification with God's rebellious people, including by his own death under their curses, in order that the blessings of the God who sent him in the power of his Spirit might be shared with God's humanity.
- The life of holiness and love of the covenant community was to reflect God's character as the one who makes his sanctuary among them. This would be evident in their relationships, and especially in their care for widows, orphans and strangers, and in true righteousness and justice as they trembled at God's word and walked humbly in God's presence.
- Central to God's sovereignty was God's atoning work, illustrated in the sacrificial cultus and the washings. God's Holy Spirit revived God's people in their judgements, where they learnt that their religious cultus was given to demonstrate God's mercy and forewarn them of God's judgements.

The LORD is your life

Moses taught the Israelites that 'the LORD is your life' (Deuteronomy 30:20 NIV). The commandments had come to them when they heard God's voice 'out of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire'. They had approached Moses and told him that the LORD God had revealed his glory and greatness to them and that they had heard God speak out of that fire. This for them was proof that it was possible to still be alive after God had spoken to someone (Deuteronomy 5:22ff).

They implored Moses to be their intermediary with God. While their fear may have been appropriate, it was not sustainable from their own resources. Moses spoke of a time when the blessings and curses he had described would happen. He told them that God promised their re-gathering and prosperity, circumcising their hearts and their descendants' hearts after they disobeyed God 'so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul and live' (Deuteronomy 30:1ff).

In the apparent impossibility of all this, God's word 'is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe' (Deuteronomy 30:14). Moses

urged them to see that ‘they are not idle words for you – they are your life’ ... ‘no trifling matter for you, but rather your very life’ (Deuteronomy 32:47 NIV, NRSV). They had, after all, been dramatically delivered from Egyptian oppression.

God was setting ‘life and prosperity, death and destruction’ before them (Deuteronomy 30:15). They were the people of the perfect rock, the faithful God, the creator-father ‘who made you and established you’ (Deuteronomy 32:6). God declared through Moses that only their LORD was God and that life ultimately depends solely on God: ‘I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand’ (Deuteronomy 32:39).

Moses taught atonement was God’s gift and that it did not involve humanity appeasing divine wrath. This atonement centred on sacrificial death, according to God’s provisions. It was an accounting of human failures that lead to death.

These truths were reminders of Moses striking the rock at Horeb and then again at Meribah, contrary to God’s instruction to command the rock (Exodus 15:22–27, 17:1–7; Numbers 20:1–13; Psalms 95:1–11, 105:38–41, 106:23, 32–33; 1 Corinthians 10:1–11). They heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire (Deuteronomy 4:22 to 6:25, especially 4:32–40, 5:1–5, 23–26, 6:1–9). The Lord was their life (Deuteronomy 30:1–32:52, especially 30:1–6, 11–20, 32:39, cf. Deuteronomy 4:1, 5:33, 8:1, 32:47; Jeremiah 21:8; Romans 10:5–11). Life was precious and human failure not lightly atoned (Genesis 2:9, 9:1–7; Leviticus 17:10–14; Numbers 21:4–8; Deuteronomy 12:23, 21:22, 23; cf. Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24; Hebrews 9:11–28; 12:18–28).

God’s Messiah-Priest-King

Profile

God’s covenant with Noah was testimony to the grace Noah was given and to which Abel’s sacrifice and Seth’s family had borne witness. God’s faithfulness to creation indicated God’s intention to overcome evil without destroying humanity. The animal sacrifices and the survival of Noah’s family in the flood prophesied of life beyond the death wickedness deserved.

Abel’s sacrifice was a statement about resurrection. Every Old Testament sacrifice was about being raised from death, a message about life beyond deserved death. The primary problem was not death but sin, as the narrative about Enoch illustrated. God’s covenant with Noah was also about resurrecting humanity (cf. 1 Peter 3:18–22).

While appearing to focus God’s concern to Abraham’s family, the story of the priest-king Melchizedek provided a context for God’s promise to bless nations through Abraham and his offspring. This covenant with Abraham formed the background to God’s covenant with Moses. Abraham’s descendants, rescued from

Egypt, became God's holy nation and royal priesthood. They received God's law, anticipated a prophet with life-giving messages, and looked forward to God's Spirit being poured out on all God's people (cf. Numbers 11:29; Deuteronomy 18:15).

The Davidic covenant's Messiah-Priest-King correlates with Melchizedek's royal priesthood and Israel's calling under Moses' leadership; themes which are richly developed by the later prophets. These themes are considered under headings such as righteous Branch and true shepherd.

God's covenants are as secure as God's creation – which is as secure as God's covenants. God's covenant of peace comes through God's messenger who is God's Davidic servant and who purifies God's people.

Later prophets spoke of a new covenant where God's law would be in their hearts and on their minds. God's redeemed people would be sanctified through, by and in the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 60; Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 36; Joel 2). God's suffering servant would bear the people's sins (Isaiah 42–53), and the coming king on a foal of a donkey would command peace to the nations (Zechariah 9). Daniel's vision of a human person at the right hand of the Ancient One in heaven being given 'dominion and glory and kingship' is most likely linked with the prophesied Davidic king (Daniel 7).

It may be seen that from Abel who 'received approval as righteous' to the end of history, God's people find 'favour in the eyes of the LORD' (Hebrews 11:4; Genesis 6:8). God's covenants reveal the riches of this grace to sinful humanity, as well as the judgements that come with the refusal to live in communion with God and in harmony with his creation. The covenant with Noah indicates that God's salvation has the whole creation, its function, purpose and goal in mind; and hence the sanctity of the life God has created. The covenant with Abraham details God's blessing of the nations through Abraham's offspring. This offspring is both the nation of Israel, given identity and vocation in God's covenant with Moses, and Jesus whose calling was detailed by the prophets.

All the covenant promises focus from creation to Abraham's descendants, the children of Israel, to and in God's Messiah and then to include God's people. Through, by and in him all these promises find their true fulfilment. Jesus is the passover sacrifice in his death, after which he pours out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to Israel and Samaria first, and then to the ends of the earth. This outpouring of God's Spirit heralds the ultimate eternal festival of tabernacles with the coming home of God's family and the renewal of God's creation.

Reflections

Some descriptions, like those of the suffering servant in Isaiah or the human being in Daniel, appear unclear whether they refer to one person or the whole nation. The reason they appear blurred is because they are blurred! Using New Testament language, *we* are body of Christ; he has borne *our* sins in his body on the cross;

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Christ has taken *us* into himself and has so identified *us* with him and him with *us* that *we* receive his righteousness, and he takes *our* guilt into himself and destroys it!

Out of that great redemptive action, the bones of dry and desolate humanity come together and stand up alive as God's Spirit is poured out and the words of God's prophets are fulfilled. The breath of God given to humanity at creation is given to humanity again. God's Spirit is poured out until mountains shout for joy, trees blossom, wolves lie next to lambs, children play safely near snake-holes and deserts becomes fertile fields and fertile fields becomes forests as the Spirit of the LORD is poured out from on high!

At the start of Jesus' ministry, he said that Spirit of the LORD was upon him to heal broken hearts, set captives free and proclaim the year of the LORD's grace – because God will again be in God's sanctuary, the capstone will be in place, the guilt of God's people will be taken away in a single day and they'll say grace again and again. The poor in spirit are blessed for the reign of God is given to them and those who are living in the peace of the covenant are God's precious and blessed family. As Jesus came and proclaimed that word in and by the Holy Spirit, he transformed curses into blessings and so prophesied his own death and resurrection (cf. Revelation 1:9–20).

References

These reference sequences help identify some significant passages:

The Messiah-Priest-King of the Davidic covenant: 2 Samuel 7:11–16; Psalms 2, 78, 89, 110, 132, 144; Isaiah 9:6–7, 16:5, 22:9–22, 55:3; Jeremiah 13:13, 17:25, 21:12, 22:2–23:5, 30:9, 33:15–26, 36:30; Ezekiel 17:22–24, 34:23–24, 37:24–25, Hosea 3:5; Amos 6:5, 9:11–12; Zechariah 12:7–13:8; cf. Acts 15:6ff.

Related terms for this Messiah-Priest-King: Isaiah 11:1, 60:21; Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15; Ezekiel 34:5–23, 37:24; Zechariah 3:8, 6:12; cf. Ps 78:71; Jeremiah 23:41, 31:10; Micah 4:5; Zechariah 11:7ff, 13:7ff; see also Genesis 48:15, 49:24; Numbers 27:17 2 Samuel 5:2, 7:7; 1 Kings 22:17; Psalms 23:1, 28:9, 80:1; Isaiah 40:11, 63:11.

Everlasting covenant, peace and creation: Isaiah 54:10, 55:3; Ezekiel 34:23–25, 37:26; Malachi 2:5ff, 3:1ff; cf. Numbers 25:12.

Firstborn: Psalm 89:27, cf. 2:7; Luke 2:7; Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15ff; Hebrews 1:6, 12:23; Revelation 1:5.

The living God and fullness of life

God is life's true fountain

Paul up-ended idolising rationales by declaring to the Athenians that the true creator-God is all-sufficient and does not rely on human worship and service since it is God who provides everything for everyone – including breath for human beings (Acts 17:25).

David had previously sung of the LORD's unfailing love and justice; of the way

All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light (Psalm 36:7–9).

Another Davidic psalm depicts God's help as a 'river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High' (Psalm 46:4). God's provision related not only to material bounty but to those times 'when we were overwhelmed by sins' and God 'forgave our transgressions' (Psalm 65:3 NIV; cf. 'When iniquities prevail against me, you atone for our transgressions' (ESV); 'When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions' (NRSV)).

The book of Isaiah describes God gathering 'Israel to himself', and that 'he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them' (Isaiah 49:5 NIV, 49:10). The final section of Isaiah ends with declarations of the LORD's provisions for God's people and for every nation. God's people will know the full comfort promised at the start of the second half of Isaiah:

As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem (Isaiah 66:12, 13, cf. 40:1ff).

Jeremiah, faced with a nation who had exchanged God's glory 'for worthless idols', recorded God's verdict:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:11 NIV, 12, 13).

Later, writing of the incurable and irrational deceit of the human heart, Jeremiah noted that those who trust God will flourish like trees near rivers and streams. They will not be afraid during heatwaves, they will not be anxious in drought, and they will continue to be fruitful (Jeremiah 17:7, 8).

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By contrast, Jeremiah believed God cursed those who trust only themselves and their energy and who reject the LORD. These people will be like desert shrubs and will not recognise relief when it arrives (Jeremiah 17:5, 6).

Jeremiah's prayer recognised that these alternatives were not predictable binaries occurring because of some rationally explainable formula. Jeremiah was clearly troubled about the inexplicable mysteries regarding what he saw unfolding and personally experienced. He looked in anticipation for God to act in God's ways at God's times according to God's revealed essence:

O hope of Israel! O LORD! All who forsake you shall be put to shame ... for they have forsaken the fountain of living water, the LORD.

Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved; for you are my praise (Jeremiah 17:13, 14).

Humanity is created for purity and prosperity

While humanity was created from dust, it was not made to be desolate, dry, parched or polluted. The abundance of moisture in Eden indicated that the garden was not a desert, and so although its inhabitants were made of dust, they were not left dusty! Their significance came from God's breath filling them as living, breathing beings created in the image and likeness of their creator's breath. As a psalmist wrote, we are 'like grass that is renewed in the morning' until death enacts God's command, and while 'in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades [dries] and withers' and returns to the dust from which it was made (Psalm 90:3–6).

The LORD God's verdict to Adam that 'you are dust, and to dust you shall return' suggested that God had planned another destination beyond dust for humanity; a goal that would be accomplished because of, by, in and through the breath God had given them. This divine purpose related to God's creative intentions and restorative judgements, and to the continually liberating giving of God's Spirit. Elihu, Job's off-key counsellor understood this theme:

If he should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together, and all mortals return to dust (Job 34:14, 15).

Job had lamented the rapid passing of time, that his life was but a breath, that he would not see good times again and that he would soon die. He loathed life and wanted to be left alone, away from God's severity:

What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment? Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle (Job 7:6–21, cf. 4:9)?

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Since God is the authentic fountain of life, people, created as mirrors to reflect God's magnificence, are called above everything else to guard, protect and preserve their hearts for they are the fountains and wellsprings of life (cf. Proverbs 4:20–27).

When Jesus taught that 'what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart', his message was that people are judged by what they say because our words reveal who we are (Luke 6:43–45; Matthew 15:17–19).

As a proverb has it: 'The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence' (Proverbs 10:11). There is, according to Jesus, a final result in breathing words that are against the Holy Breath of God (Luke 12:10; cf. Hebrews 10:29).

True wisdom 'is a fountain of life' that fears the LORD and aims to turn people from the 'snares of death' (Proverbs 13:14, 14:17). This wisdom, personified in Proverbs as the Wisdom Woman, fears the LORD as creator, father and redeemer and teaches faithful children to trust God, so identifying straight paths for them that leads them to life and favour with God. Adulteresses, by contrast, want to pervert the righteous into muddied streams or polluted wells by seducing them into giving way to the wicked (Proverbs 3:1–4:27).

Jerusalem, according to Jeremiah, had so given way that God described her as ready for judgement: 'As a well pours out its water, so she pours out her wickedness. Violence and destruction resound in her; her sickness and wounds are ever before me' (Jeremiah 6:7 NIV). The father-son-wisdom narrative in Proverbs and the story of Job provide powerful parabolic representations of the faithless and the faithful people of God during their descents into exile, their exilic life and their eventual return and resettlement in their homelands. These poetic dramas build on Exodus and other early deliverance themes.

Creation is for fullness and flourishing

The latter sections of Isaiah echo the Genesis creation accounts by profiling creation as being made for abundance and fullness, rather than for emptiness and futility (e.g. Isaiah 42:5, 45:18, cf. 43:1ff, 45:12, 48:6, 7, 66:1ff).

The prophet was not only referring to the size of the earth's population or to the vastness of the created universe, but to the exultation or shame that will come when 'before me every knee will bow' (Isaiah 45:23). Those, according to the prophet, who quarrel with their maker will be disgraced by their idols, whilst those fashioned by the divine potter will know righteousness raining down and salvation springing up. They will be those who acknowledge the uniqueness and sovereignty of the LORD who forms the light and creates the darkness, who brings prosperity and creates disaster (cf. Isaiah 45:5ff, 64:8; also cf. Matthew 7:24–27).

Travelling Together

Why did the prophet believe that God creates woe, calamity and disaster in a universe intended for well-being (weal) and prosperity? Isaiah indicated that this was part of God's plan to declare His integrity and that it was necessary to achieve ultimate everlasting fullness. The earlier part of Isaiah declared a coming ruler whose reign would be righteous and would bring relief from natural disaster and human folly and ungodliness (Isaiah 32:1–8). His justice would lead to the demise of fools and villains and the dismantling of activities and securities in which 'the scoundrel is highly respected' (Isaiah 32:5 NIV).

Desolation was understood as the innate consequences of evil which in turn were considered as the necessary judgements that ensured pure revivals would prosper. Those renewals were seen as the work of the breath of Eden, the Holy Spirit who reverses desolations and turns deserts into fertile fields, and the fields to forests. When God's spirit is poured out, quietness, trust and confidence flourish forever and this flow of healing goodness leads to righteousness, peace, security and liberty for everyone (Isaiah 32:14–20).

Glancing at these passages might lead one to conclude that God is a dualist who creates light and darkness. That is, that God is a mixture of good and evil. The context, however, makes it plain that the desolation God creates is the action of his generosity, justice and purity. The same divine goodness that refuses to sanction evil is the goodness that recreates after the pattern of the original creation.

Laments that the 'earth dries up and withers' because it 'lies polluted under its inhabitants' are overtaken because 'From the ends of the earth we hear singing; "Glory to the Righteous One"' (Isaiah 24:4, 5, 16).

The preacher in Ecclesiastes provides a personal description of fullness and futility. The result of great enterprises left him hating everything 'in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish'. He despaired of the futility, meaninglessness and vanity of life. He could not escape the truth that we can achieve nothing good that is not, in the final analysis, 'from the hand of God' (Ecclesiastes 2:4ff, 18ff, 24ff).

He declared that amidst all of life's transience and uncertainties,

I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

One key to understanding this preacher is to realise that he wrote about human achievement by one's own efforts using what appears to be one's own resources. From this vantage point 'under the sun', no one has an advantage over anyone else as everyone returns to dust (Ecclesiastes 3:20).

Travelling Together

The best advice that the writer had was that since death and defeat prevail everywhere and days of joy are few and numbered, that each person should

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, ... before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath [spirit] returns to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:1–7).

The final verdict was that only in the light of God's sovereignty is fullness of life to be found. Humanity was created to flourish and searches incessantly for fullness and abundance, but these are only known in obedience to God, and then only via fleeting glances. The constant references to eating and drinking seem but signs (even, perhaps, sacraments) of the truth being emphasised: The 'golden bowl' requires divine supplies beyond, through and with those in community around us. We never live alone – or by bread alone.

Everything has its own seasons and while nothing, of itself, is sustainable, God

has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

The best thing, we are told, is to be happy and content with what God provides (Ecclesiastes 3:1–13).

Restoration and fullness of life

According to a psalmist, the victory of God means not only the scattering of God's enemies but that

Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land (Psalm 68:5, 6).

This Exodus, like the first one, involves God marching through the wilderness, giving abundant showers, refreshing his languishing inheritance, giving homes to his people and generously provided for the needy. When God declared this message, everyone shared the good news!

Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation. Our God is a God of salvation, and to God, the Lord, belongs escape from death (Psalm 68:19, 20).

Other psalms describe God's plans for abundance, including forgiving sins and restoring health. God has in mind our coronation as regal creatures of love, holiness, mercy and grace. Recalling 'that we are dust' is part of God's action to fulfil God's majestic and regal purposes. Creatures of clay are structured for fullness. The incredible generosity of God is that God's righteousness renews and

restores and does not annihilate or alienate, and that God's final goal for creation will be realised, even though this requires God redeeming our lives 'from the pit' (Psalm 103:4, 14).

For God to remember 'that we are dust' is for God to redeem us. His remembrance sends the wind and breath of the Holy Spirit a second time for re-creation – not just across unformed and unfilled creation but across desolate and disrupted creation. The psalmist's vast understatement in referring to God's steadfast love, righteousness and goodness was that God 'does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities' (Psalm 103:1–14).

God's provision is not limited to creaturely nourishment; our breath is ultimately God's breath and our beings are because God's spirit births and renews us (Psalm 104:27–30).

There are Gospel accounts which relate to these themes. Matthew's account of the departure from a person of an evil spirit described the futility of being awry, of self-achieving and having things 'swept clean and put in order'. Self-redemption can leave us in a worse, not better, condition. The fullness and reign of God that eliminates impure spirits comes by the Holy Spirit of God (Matthew 12:43–45).

Luke's record of the story of the lavishly rich man and Lazarus, the beggar, illustrates Jesus' command to 'sell everything you have and give to the poor' (Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). The plight of the rich man in this parable was such that he longed for his torment to be relieved by the beggar he had denied crumbs from his table (Luke 16:19–31).

Paul warned us against pagan ignorance and futility (Ephesians 4:18, 19). This alienating futility involves 'hollow and deceitful philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ' (Colossians 2:8). God's disapproval is evident where suppression of the revealed truth of God is active (cf. Romans 1:16ff; Ephesians 2:1ff).

It is futile to oppose the creator's will and purpose, not only because it is unnecessary, but because God will empty false imaginations of their pretended substance as part of his plan to 'fills everything in every way' in and under Christ (Ephesians 1:23, cf. Ephesians 1:8b–14).

Thirsting for the living God

These lists of passages under various themes relating to *Thirsting for the living God* are provided for further reflection and meditation.

The living God is the fountain of life

Living water: empty cisterns

God is the true fountain of life:

- Psalms 36:8, 9, 46:4, 65:9
- Isaiah 49:10, 66:12
- Jeremiah 2:13, 17:8–14
- Acts 17:25.

Humanity is created of dust, but not for dryness or pollution:

- Genesis 2:6, 7, 3:20; Job 34:14, 15; Psalm 90:3–6
- Proverbs 4:20–27, 8:22–36, 10:11, 13:14, 14:27, 25:26; Jeremiah 6:7
- Matthew 12:30–37

Creation is for fullness and abundance, not emptiness and futility:

- Genesis 1:28
- Isaiah 24:1–6, 14–16, 32:1–20, 45:7–10, 15–25
- Ecclesiastes 2:4–9, 17–26, 3:9–21, 5:15, 7:13, 29, 8:11, 9:11–17, 12:6–8
- Psalms 68:4–10, 103:13–19, 104:10–18, 27–30
- Matthew 12:43–45; Luke 1:50–55, 16:19–31, 18:18–30
- Romans 1:18–32; Ephesians 1:22–23, 4:17–24, 5:6; Colossians 2:8

True thirst, streams in the desert:

- Nehemiah 9:16–21
- Psalms 1:1–6, 23:1–6, 42:1–43:5, 63:1–5, 105:38–41, 107:1–9, 33–38
- Isaiah 48:21

Promises of times of refreshment:

- Isaiah 12:1–6, 32:1–20, 35:1–10, 41:17–20, 43:19–21, 44:3–5, 48:16–22, 49:8–10, 55:1–13
- Ezekiel 34:17–31, 36:24–37:14, 43:1–12, 47:1–12
- Joel 2:21–32, 3:18; Zechariah 9:11, 13:1, 14:3–6
- Acts 3:11–26
- Revelation 7:9–17, 21:6–8, 22:12–21

The spirit of the LORD and God's servant:

- Isaiah 11:1–16, 42:1–9, 61:1–3

Travelling Together

Living water: earthen vessels

Jesus came in the fullness of time, filled with God's grace and truth:

- Luke 9:17, 10:21–24, 24:27, 44; Acts 10:38
- John 1:14–18, 3:31–36, 12:3, 15:10–11
- Colossians 1:19–23, 2:9; Galatians 4:4

Jesus offered that people need never again be thirsty because of rivers flowing with living water:

- John 4:1–42, 7:37–39

Jesus thirsted, knowing that he had reached his goal as he died:

- John 19:28–30; cf. Matthew 27:45–50

The dust of death:

- Psalms 22:13–18, 25–29, 68:6, 69:1–3, 14–21; Philippians 2:5–11

The struck rock:

- Exodus 17:1–7; Numbers 20:1–13; Psalms 95:1–11, 105:38–41 106:23, 32–33; Isaiah 48:21; 1 Corinthians 10:1–11

Living water: healing for the nations

Filling us now

Hungry and thirsty for righteousness:

- Matthew 5:6

Jesus, full of his Father's joy, pours out God's promised Holy Spirit on his awe-struck disciples and sends them to the ends of the earth:

- Acts 1:5–8, 2:4, 18, 26–28, 33, 43

Living in fullness:

- Ephesians 5:18; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Philippians 1:9–11, 4:10–13; Colossians 1:9, 24
- 1 Peter 1:8
- 1 John 1:4

The washing of regeneration:

- Titus 3:3–7

Abundantly fruitful:

- John 15:8, cf. grace: 1:16, love: 13:1, teaching: 14:26, peace: 14:27, joy: 15:11, truth: 16:12, 24, 17:13, unity: 17:23, Spirit: 20:22, God: 14:15–23

Travelling Together

Filling us forever

At home with God, in his presence; scattered in this world but not orphaned:

- John 14:1–4 cf. 16:32–33, 17:4, 10, 19:30

Seasons of refreshment as Christ restores everything:

- Acts 3:17–20

Spirit-enabled boldness:

- Acts 4:31–33, cf. 9:17

God's plan for the fullness of time:

- Ephesians 1:10, 22, 23, 2:22, 3:19, 4:7–16; cf. Psalm 68:1ff

When everything is completed and full, nothing will be added or removed:

- Revelation 7:15–17, 21:6, 22:12–21; cf. Ezekiel 47:1ff

Filling all things with God's glory

Milk and honey, or desolation:

- Numbers 14:21; 2 Chronicles 7:1; Ezekiel 10:4, 8; Psalm 95:1–11
- Isaiah 11:1–12:6, 35:2; Habakkuk 2:14

God's coming glory:

- Luke 2:9, 9:29, 24:4
- John 12:27–33, 17:1–5

Coming to the city of the living God:

- 2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 3:17–21
- Hebrews 12:22–29
- 1 John 1:1–3
- Revelation 21:11, 22–27

The living God and the people of God

The living God

The living Father:

- John 5:26, 6:57, 14:10
- 1 John 1:2

The Son of the living God:

- John 1:4; cf. Matthew 4:4, 16:13–18
- 1 John 1:2; cf. Hebrews 4:12
- Revelation 1:12–20

Travelling Together

The crucified living Son:

- Matthew 20:28
- Mark 10:45
- Luke 9:56
- John 10:11, 15:13
- 1 John 3:16

The life and death of the living Son:

- John 5:21–40, 6:33–68, 10:10, 17, 28, cf. 20:31
- Luke 24:5
- Romans 14:8, 9; 2 Corinthians 4:10; Colossians 3:4; 2 Timothy 1:10
- Hebrews 10:20, 7:25–27; 1 Thessalonians 5:9, 10

The Holy Spirit of the living God:

- John 6:63, 7:37–39
- Romans 8:2, 11; 2 Corinthians 3:1–6; 2 Timothy 1:14

The tree of life

Life in Eden:

- Genesis 2:9; 3:1–12, 24; cf. Luke 23:43

Righteous people:

- Proverbs 3:18, 8:35, 11:30, 13:12, 15:4
- Matthew 12:33
- Luke 23:47

Life in the new creation:

- Revelation 2:7, 22:2, 14

Freedom from death and curses:

- Galatians 3:10–14
- 1 Peter 2:24

The people of the living God

Life from death:

- Luke 8:55, 15:32
- Romans 5:9–21; Galatians 2:19, 20, 5:15, 25, 6:7, 8; Titus 1:2, 3:3–7
- 1 Peter 2:24
- 1 John 3:24, 4:9–12

Living by faith:

- Habakkuk 2:4

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- Romans 1:17; Galatians 2:20, 3:11
- Hebrews 10:38

Living in hope:

- 1 Peter 1:3

Life renewed:

- Psalm 119:25, 37, 50, 77, 88, 107, 116, 149, 154–156
- Matthew 10:39, 12:22ff, 16:24ff
- John 12:33ff

Life eternal:

- John 3:16, 36, 17:3
- 1 John 5:11–20
- Romans 6:22–23

Serving the living God:

- Acts 14:10,15–17
- 1 Thessalonians 1:7–10
- Hebrews 9:14

The family of the living God:

- Romans 9:26
- 1 Peter 2:10

The temple, church and city of the living God:

- 2 Corinthians 6:14–16
- 1 Timothy 3:15
- Hebrews 12:22
- Revelation 19–22

The book of life:

- Hebrews 12:23
- Revelation 13:8, 17:8, 20:11–15, 21:7

Ten commandments

The ten commandments are often off-limits. Placing of them on church, school and prison walls is now rarely seen as appropriate. Their use as a literalistic and prescriptive moral code masked their original context and their original purpose.

The ten commandments are not simply instructive orientations, they are prophetic promises. The people's conquering deity is informing them that just as God's mercy and grace rescued and redeemed them, so God's mercy and grace will establish and enable them. The commandments are narratives about the vicious and violent nature of past slavery, of the delight and deliverance of present Exodus and of the abundance and adequacy of future destiny.

They are set in the Exodus narrative of the LORD's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and Pharaonic domination. The LORD had brought them out of Egypt and towards their promised land and had somewhat conquered their hearts as well as their previous ruler's armies. Conquests are followed by covenants with their power differentials.¹¹ These covenants establish peace between rulers and ruled and indicated how power would be used, presumably to bring prosperity to rulers and ruled.

The first five commandments are about the LORD who has been victorious. The LORD required the people's sole loyalty, they were not to make idols representing this God and they were to honour God's identity and reputation. They were to set aside one day each week to remember their God's creation and their God's liberation of them, and their future prosperity was directly related to their honouring of those who preceded them.

The second five commandments reminded them about these themes by outlawing the vicious and violent way that military conquest usually happens from any presence in their community lives. Predatory and perverse affections, termination of participation in community life, theft of identity, integrity and intellectual and intentional property were unacceptable and unwelcome. False narratives about people especially by those who dominate religious and social institutions where testimony was formally given were specifically excluded as being violations of human decency and dignity. Summarising these four commandments (and all nine) is the declaration that greed, presumption, power and arrogance underline the previous nine commandments.

Where leaders rule by coercive, ego-centric domination, where they determine access and privilege according to their own ambitions and where they generate false narratives for their own sense of fame and glory at the expense of those who serve them then they do not honour God or the communities they lead.

¹¹ Cf. Tremper Longman III, *Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel*, The (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 168.

The song of Moses and the Lamb

Write a song

Towards the end of his life, Moses is said to have urged Joshua to be ‘strong and bold’ in leading God’s people into the land they had been promised:

It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed (Deuteronomy 31:7, 8).

It was in this context that God called Moses and Joshua to present themselves at the tent of meeting for Joshua’s commissioning. We are told that ‘the LORD appeared ... in a pillar of cloud; the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the tent’ (Deuteronomy 31:15). The LORD commanded Moses to write a song ‘and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites’ (Deuteronomy 31:19). The reason for this witness was made abundantly clear: God did not trust the people’s descendants to keep his covenant (Deuteronomy 31:20, 21). The message of this song is rather different to the one Moses sang with the people after the Exodus (Exodus 15:1–21)!

The song of Moses names God, their LORD, as ‘the Rock’ whose ways and works are perfect and fair, who acts in faithfulness and righteousness (Deuteronomy 32:4). He was their father and creator and called them to be his inheritance. Yet they ‘were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth’ (Deuteronomy 32:18 where God is described as their mother). Judgement would come when they sought other gods (Deuteronomy 32:39, 43).

Paul believed that the rock who was with them in the wilderness was Christ. Although everyone had the same spiritual nourishment from this rock, God was not pleased with their craving for immorality and idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:1–7). Paul urged his readers not to complain like some of those people had done but to remember them as examples intended to teach those

on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall (1 Corinthians 10:11, 12).

The author of Hebrews wrote of Jesus leading God’s people to ‘the coming world’ (Hebrews 2:5ff, 3:1ff). As God’s family, we are not to harden our hearts as Israel did in the wilderness. We are to make sure that we ‘do not refuse the one who is speaking’ (Hebrews 12:25) because we have come

to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new

covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:22–24).

Moses' tabernacle was built 'according to the pattern' he saw on Sinai (Hebrews 8:5). The author of Hebrews indicated that God's covenant with Moses has been surpassed by a new covenant, with a new high priest who brings us into the heavenly tabernacle by his blood and in the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 9:11–22). Christ's death mediates this new covenant and brings us to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:14–16, 10:1–18).

Sing a new song

Paul wrote of the transforming glory of the new covenant as the Holy Spirit writes a testimony to the liberty of the glory of God in our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:1–4:6). No wonder we are urged 'not to neglect so great a salvation' and 'not to accept the grace of God in vain' (Hebrews 2:3; 2 Corinthians 6:1). We can see in history how churches and nations have come under the lordship of Jesus Christ. We can see something of a new Exodus of the people of God which is presented in the book of Revelation where the song of Moses and the Lamb is mentioned as being sung (Revelation 15:3, 4, cf. 4:8–11, 5:9–14, 7:9–17, 14:1–4, 19:1–8, 21:1–4).

This song is in harmony with the one attributed to Moses in Deuteronomy 32. It accords with the worship of the living creatures, the twenty-four elders and the countless conquerors. They are described celebrating the judgements of God that rescued his people from the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. This anthem of praise and thanksgiving is present throughout the book of Revelation with the final plagues precipitating the opening of 'the temple of the tent of witness in heaven' and the filling of the temple 'with smoke from the glory of God and from his power' (Revelation 15:5–8).

The victory of God and the Lamb is the source of the worship which is the testimony of the people of God. Hannah had sung this song in an earlier generation well after Moses's era (1 Samuel 2:1–10; cf. Exodus 15:20, 21; Luke 1:46–55). It is in this worship that the people of God live in the new creation. The fullness of Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwelling among us, 'the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband', and God's family with God as their Father, will then be transparent, for we shall see God face to face (Revelation 21:1, 2; cf. 1 John 3:1–3). The joy of divine victory won 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit' will be pure and harmonious – and without the legitimate concerns indicated in Deuteronomy 32 (Zechariah 4:6; cf. Revelation 19:6–8)!

The songs of the people of God testify to the redeeming grace and mercy of God. They also witness against us if we become short-sighted and blind and forget our purification from sins and our calling to partake of the divine nature (cf. 2 Peter 1:3–11; Ephesians 5:15–20).

Spirit of Christ the Lord

*Spirit of Christ the Lord –
Father's holy Dove –
You heal us from evil's pain
And free us to live in love.*

From the dawn of history,
Through the cross of Calvary,
You sent your Spirit forth
Over all the earth
To fill our hearts with peace and joy.

*Spirit of Christ the Lord –
Father's holy Dove –
You heal us from evil's pain
And free us to live in love.¹²*

¹² *New Creation Hymn Book*, (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, <https://www.newcreationlibrary.org.au>, 2010), 287.

Sabbath rest

Be tired – it is a gift.
Be weary – it is from grace.
Refreshment will come.
Be patient.
As Christ is to Father
and Spirit to both,
Oneness overflows
making us
with all creation to long
for the bridal communion
to burst into praise.
Humanity enters divinity's days
and shares in their love
and their glory and grace –
holiness full flowing
in worded adoration
as we in their image
return and
come out from our bondage
deceit and disgrace
away from our mischief
and self-centred ways
drawn by God's Son
on a leafless tree
to receive of his fullness
and forsake vanity
to enter his presence –
abandoning shame –
never to call on another
to be who he is.
Be human.
Be at home.
Be in family.
Be in his sabbath.
Be in his marriage.
Be in his vocation.
Be.

Who knows what God will do?

Joel 2:14

Who knows what God will do?
Who knows his deep love flow through?
Who knows his wondrous grace –
His compassion for our race?

Who knows what God can do?
Who knows of his mercy, true?
Who knows his faithfulness –
His intention us to bless?

In holy love he gave his life
To redeem us from all evil's strife
His arms were stretched out wide,
Blood and water flowed from his side,
When for you and me he died
On that cruel tree.

Who knows what God has done?
Who knows the vict'ry won?
Who knows the darkest hour –
His defeat of evil's power?

Who knows this loving Lord?
Who'll spread his word abroad?
Who knows the holy One –
His living, precious Son?

Up from the grave, he rose again,
To the highest throne in heav'n,
Each day now his Spirit giv'n
'Til eternity.
When the holy Three
Embrace their redeemed humanity.

Who knows his Spirit strong?
Who knows release from wrong?
Who knows their warring cease –
His patient, perfect peace?

Who knows what God will do?
Who knows his deep love flow through?
Who knows his wondrous grace –
His compassion for our race?

Who knows?
Who knows?

The silence

After the beginning came the silence. And the silence hid itself, and seeing darkness come back over the face of the deep said nothing and did nothing. And flesh thought of each other, your problem is not my problem, your concern is not my concern, and those who attack you do not attack me, so I will not help you. Anyway, the flesh mused, my problem is worse than your problem, so you should be propping me up, pitying me for my situation and praising me for my struggle – no matter that I care nothing for you, now you no longer do any of this for me!

For not even the silence is God, I am god. I know what is best for you. I know the deep secret knowledge. I make decisions for you, and in my silence, I do not consult with you or talk with you. I just act as I see best, with my passive team of helpers. They do not speak about issues, only murmur vagaries and meditate on how they can proclaim their silence and maintain their power with mutual looks of admiration as they drift further into oblivion and darkness themselves, believing that light is darkness and darkness light.

Meanwhile a Voice proclaims, a Poet writes, and a Singer sings the true Word in and with the Spirit. This Voice is not alone but is Community and Love. This Voice sees the dereliction and the deceit and decrees its steady demise by exalting the rejected, the powerless and the destitute, and by tending to their wounds and feeding their souls with living bread and living water.

Meanwhile, the silence is not listening or looking and continues its sad and sordid proclamation of nothingness, all carefully cloaked in educated and pious language that sounds like it is sound but is unsound and speaks its perennial and perpetual silence to others not listening but nonetheless nodding assent to its godless god-speak.

Travelling Together

Conversations along the way

Conversations along the way records ideas and perspectives exploring biblical themes written over many years as rough drafts or more revised documents. I hope my thoughts may be enriching and encouraging. Where my writing suggests ideas and frameworks that vary from those held by other Christians, our common faith can keep us in community and help us explore and reconcile our differences. I hope readers with non-theistic and/or secular understandings can find some helpful common values, even though I have used what might seem to be merely a discussion of literary narratives, symbols, and imaginations. Those with other religious belief systems may find fresh insights by sharing in my journey of faith-seeking-understanding, including where collisions of thought and practice emerge. To all readers, please forgive my short-comings and my inevitable and unhelpful biases, and may your reading bring you peace, joy, and hope.

In this series

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Meditations on Hope and Peace

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Towards Eternity

Redefining

On Earth as in Heaven

Joys and Sorrows

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References

This list covers references footnoted in this book. More comprehensive reference lists are in *Living in Love and Freedom*, *Learning to Love Wisdom* and *Redefining*.¹³

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¹³ Don Priest, *Living in Love and Freedom* (Printed by Openbook Howden, St Marys, South Australia, 2017); *Learning to Love Wisdom* (Printed by Openbook Howden, St Marys, South Australia, 2019); *Redefining* (2022).

Travelling Together looks at aspects of the ways God's self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ informs our journey of endeavouring to live in love and hope by faith, and with joy as the people of God.

Travelling Together was written in the belief that the stories recounted by the Bible's authors provide valuable insights into trusting God and living meaningful and fruitful lives in ever-changing communities.

Travelling Together includes study series and some additional reflections. They are invitations for further exploration of their thoughts and themes by considering social, historical and theological contexts, forms of narrative and literature, and the reader's own experiences of life and faith.

The living God looks at passages using this or similar descriptions and explores some related ideas. *Nations and covenant* considers God's covenants and presence through the tabernacle worship that is anticipated from the start of Genesis and detailed at the end of Exodus. *Wonder, worship and work* reflects on aspects of daily life.

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