

Formed in GOD'S STORY

Genesis – Esther

Prepared by Allen Browne

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**RIVERVIEW
CHURCH**

Prepared by Allen Browne for Riverview Church, 2023.

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Introduction

Welcome to this series. We are being *formed in God's story*, discovering our identity and purpose from who God is and what he is doing on earth.

We hope to get to know you better through this time. Please tell us a little about yourself.

Over the next six weeks you'll gain a better understanding of the foundational books of the Bible. The first seventeen books (Genesis to Esther) lay the groundwork for the rest of the narrative, everything else in Scripture.

As our **Creator**, God established the relationship between heaven and earth. As our **Saviour**, God rescues his world from evil, restoring us into his sovereign care and wise governance. As our **Shepherd**, God guides his people through the dark valleys that threaten our existence, so we share in his eternal life in the end.

We live in God's story. From Genesis to Revelation, it's God's rescue mission for the earth. Jesus is the central character, the one who turns everything around at the heart of the story.

Please turn to the *Table of Contents* in your Bible. The **Old Testament** is before Christ (BC). The **New Testament** tells us of Jesus' life and what has changed now he is leading us (AD).

You'll see that the Old Testament (OT) consists of 39 books, arranged in five groups:

Section	Books	Count
Torah	Genesis – Deuteronomy	5
History	Joshua – Esther	12
Poetry	Job – Song of Songs	5
Major Prophets	Isaiah – Daniel	5
Minor Prophets	Hosea – Malachi	12
	Total:	39

We received these books from the Jewish people who recognize them as Scripture. They were written in the Hebrew language (with some Aramaic in Ezra and Daniel).

- The **Torah** describes how God called Israel to represent him in the world, as a nation living under God's wise law. *Torah* is the Hebrew word for *Law*. These 5 books are sometimes called the Pentateuch (meaning *five books*).
- The **History** section records the ups and downs of Israel's life as a nation. While they didn't always follow, God kept leading and speaking to his people.
- The **Poetry** section contains the Psalms and several books of wisdom.
- Prophets delivered God's message when Israel needed correction or encouragement. The **Major Prophets** are the longer books. The **Minor Prophets** all fitted on one scroll.

In this course we're covering the Torah and History. These two sections fit together chronologically to tell Israel's story from Abraham (around 2000 BC) to the time of Esther when they had lost the land and were back under foreign rule (400s BC).

The books in the following sections do not continue chronologically. The Torah and History give you the historical context to make sense of the Psalms and the Prophets.

So here's what we'll cover in the next six weeks, with two sessions each evening.

We've suggested a chapter for you to read in preparation for each session.

Schedule	Reading
Week 1: Why Israel? (Genesis) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> God reigns over all (Genesis 1–11) God chooses a people to represent him (Genesis 12–40) 	Genesis 9 Genesis 35
Week 2: God's nation established (Exodus) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> God saves from oppression (Exodus 1–18) God saves into his sovereignty (Exodus 19–40) 	Exodus 3 Exodus 24
Week 3: When God was king (Leviticus – Joshua) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Devoted to the LORD (Leviticus – Numbers) A Holy Land (Deuteronomy, Joshua) 	Leviticus 19 Joshua 24
Week 4: A king anointed (Judges – 2 Samuel) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Struggling without a king (Judges) Struggling with a king (1 Samuel – 2 Samuel) 	1 Samuel 8 2 Samuel 7
Week 5: Disintegrating kingdom (Kings – Chronicles) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The kings could not save (1 Kings – 2 Kings 17) The kingdoms of Israel and Judah fall (2 Kings 18 – 2 Chron.) 	1 Kings 12 2 Chronicles 36
Week 6: Unresolved exile (Ezra – Esther) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rebuilding after exile (Ezra/Nehemiah, Ruth) Living under foreign rule (Esther, Daniel) 	Nehemiah 8 Esther 8

Please do ask questions, but we won't be able to spend long on any one verse or chapter. Almost every sentence in these notes could be a paragraph or a page. We're just highlighting the parts that form the single story that reveals God in his world.

A handful of dates will help you piece the story together:

Date	Event	Source
2000 BC	Abraham leaves Babel, believing for a nation under God	Genesis 12
1270 BC	Moses leads the exodus; nation of Israel established at Sinai	Exodus
1000 BC	David's dynasty begins	2 Samuel
722 BC	Israel (northern kingdom) falls to Assyria	2 Kings 17
586 BC	Judah (southern kingdom) falls to Babylon (the exile)	2 Kings 25

We'll provide next week's notes a week ahead, so you can come prepared. For more detail on specific texts (especially Genesis and Exodus), see Allen Browne's blog:

<https://allenbrowne.blog/scriptureindex/>

If you want to buy a book with a few pages of background for each book of the Bible, see: - Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book* (Zondervan, 2014).

We're using the NIV translation of the Bible (*New International Version*, Zondervan, 2011). Please compare with whatever version you like to use, and let us know if it read differently.

Is that what you were expecting? Any questions?

1 Why Israel? (Genesis)

Tonight we're covering Genesis. People today often raise the question of evolution, but Genesis was not addressing our science questions. The Hebrew community that produced the Book of Genesis had never heard of Charles Darwin or the Theory of Evolution.¹

Genesis establishes the relationship between heaven and earth. As the prequel for the rest of the Old Testament, it lays the groundwork for the relationship between God and his people:

- a) **Who is God?** God is the heavenly sovereign who established the world under heaven's authority. God reigns over everything and everyone (Genesis 1–11).
- b) **Who are we?** Israel was the nation God chose to represent him to the nations, so the blessing of divine governance would be restored to all people (Genesis 12–50).

1.1 God reigns over all (Genesis 1–11)

The Bible opens with the declaration that God established the relationship between his realm and ours: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth* (Genesis 1:1).

God gave our world shape and significance (1:2) by *decreeing* how things should be. He organized how our world should function: *separating* light from darkness, sky from surface, water from land, day from night. God put everything in its place, under his care.

The *lights in the sky* serve as *signs* that earth is *governed* by heaven (1:16). And on the ground, humans serve as *images* of God's *dominion*, managers of all the creatures of God's farm (1:27-28). That's **God's identity**, and **our identity** in relation to God.

We were living in God's *garden*, in God's overflowing providence. But God set a boundary: *the knowledge of good and evil* was reserved for the sovereign (2:17). He alone has the authority and wise character to know what's good and what's not.

But God's creatures attempted to take God's authority into our own hands. We were deceived into believing we could *be like God(s), knowing good and evil* (3:5).

This power-grab introduced **conflict** into God's world: enmity between creatures (3:15), anguish with each other (3:16), a struggle to survive (3:18). In disconnecting from our life-source, we **die** (3:19, 22).

Two communities (Genesis 4–6)

Inevitably, grasping power destroys our relationships with each other too. **Cain** realized that death meant he could be rid of his brother (4:8). What kind of world are we living in? Is there no justice? The one who pleases God dies, while the murderer produces the next generation.

But instead of giving Cain the death sentence, God saves him (4:15). Living *apart from God's presence* (4:16), Cain creates the superhero world where the powerful call on **violence** for justice (4:23). Sounds familiar?

Meanwhile, the family waits. In their suffering, they *call on the name of the LORD*. God is less interested in giving death to the killers than giving *life* to those who wait for him (4:25-26).

Through the child God gave them (**Seth**) the family bears God's *image* (5:3), *walks with God* (5:24), and holds to the hope of God restoring his world (5:29). Unfortunately, the **distinction** breaks down between those who rely on human power and those who live as God's children (6:1-4). Then **violence** takes over God's world (6:11).

¹ To explore this question further, see John Walton's books, e.g.: *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Eisenbrauns, 2011) or *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2001).

God's world re-established (Genesis 7–9)

Since God is sovereign, this mess is his responsibility. He acts to remove the agents he charged with caring for his creatures. But he charges one person with caring for the creatures during this time when everything has been corrupted (6:17-21). **Noah** listens. The partnership between God and humans is restored:

- God **saves** humanity, and Noah saves the creatures.
- Noah honours God, and God recommissions Noah (8:15 – 9:3).

Violence remains the big agenda item. In replanting the world, God gives humans **authority over the lives of other humans** for the first time (9:4-6). God is not abdicating: the heavenly sovereign makes a **covenant** with the whole creation that he will never give up on us, no matter how difficult we are to manage (9:8-17).

But as soon as God puts power in human hands, Noah abuses it. He introduces the curse of **slavery** as a reaction to his shame (9:22-27).

This is Israel's explanation of how there came to be nations who don't live under God's authority. When God put the power of life and death in human hands (9:6), he opened the door for **nations** to exist (10:5, 20, 31-32).

Conquest of God's world (Genesis 10–11)

Nations gain territory by *hunting* each other (10:9). They banded together to form the *kingdoms* that eventually destroyed Israel: *Babylon* and *Assyria* (10:10-11).

Babel (Babylon) was trying to take over the world. They were building an administrative centre with a tower designed to tell everyone they'd brought the power of heaven down into human hands (11:4). They may have succeeded if God didn't intervene (11:8).

So what does God do now? The nations have gone their own way. God has promised not to wipe them out. Humans can rule other humans, but they're wiping each other out in their lust for power. How will God ever re-establish his heavenly authority to the earth now?

God will build a nation to represent his authority. We're about to be introduced to **Abraham** (11:26), the grandfather of Israel. The rest of the Old Testament is the story of Israel.

These first eleven chapters are foundational for the whole arc of the Bible's narrative. The story is only resolved when **the nations** come back under God's authority.

That's the focus of the New Testament too, e.g. Luke 2:31-32; 24:47; Acts 2:6-8; 9:15; 10:35, 45; 11:1, 18; 13:46-48; 14:16, 27; 15:3, 12-19; 18:6; 21:19; 22:21; 26:17-23; 28:28; Romans 1:5-6, 16; 2:9-14; 3:9, 22, 29; 9:24, 30; 10:12, 19; 11:1-13, 25; 15:9-18, 27; 16:4, 26; etc.

God's anointed ruler (the **Christ**) is the descendant of Abraham. In raising his Christ out of death and installing him as Lord, God restores the peace and harmony of heaven's management to the earth. In him, everything God intended in the beginning is fulfilled in the end.

Any questions on Genesis 1–11?

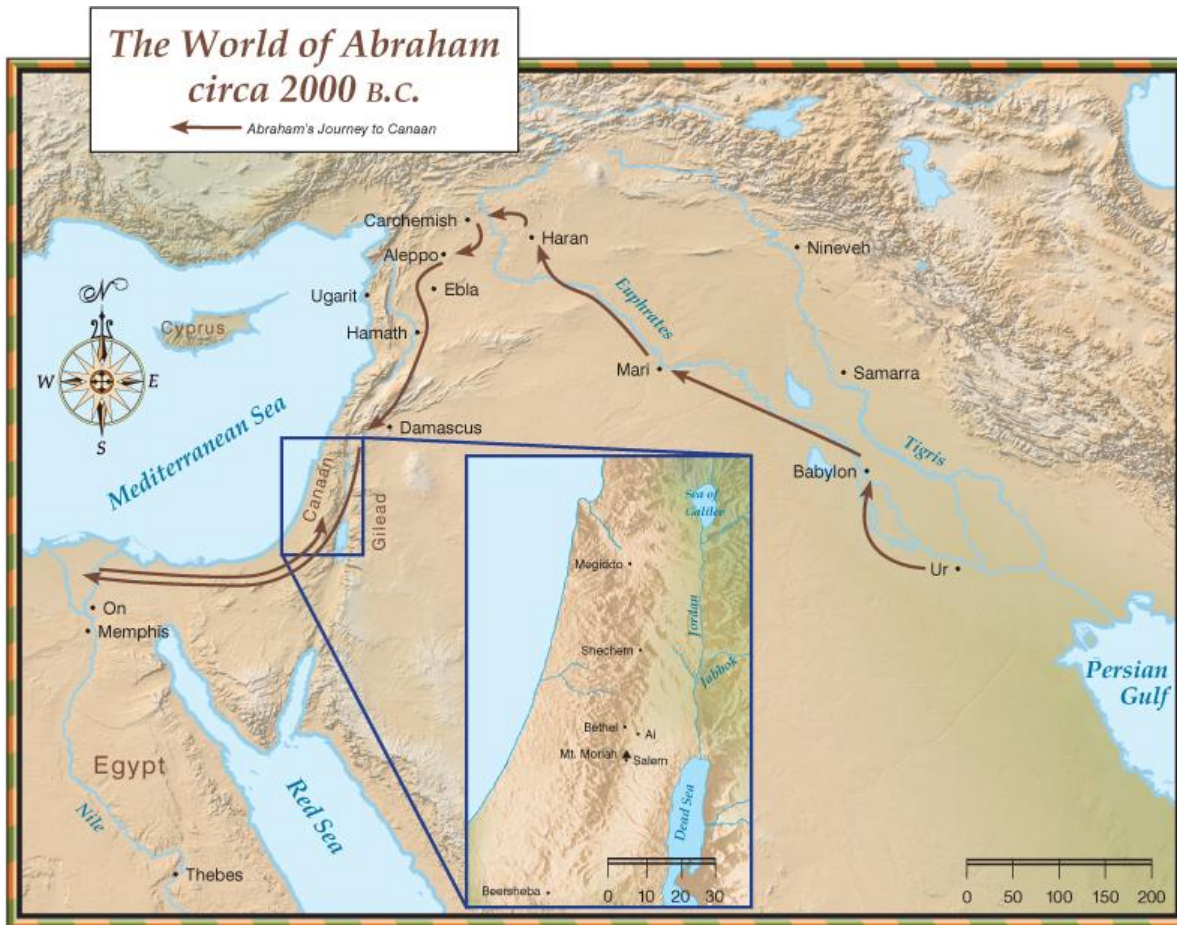
1.2 God chooses a people to represent him (Genesis 12–50)

Jacob was the guy who became Israel. He had twelve sons, the twelve tribes of Israel.

But there nearly wasn't an Israel! His parents—**Isaac** and **Rebekah**—had twin sons. The rivalry between them was so bad that the stronger one (**Esau**) wanted to kill Jacob.

There nearly wasn't an Isaac either! His parents—**Abraham** and **Sarah**—couldn't have children. Without divine intervention, Isaac would not have been born.

Genesis introduces us to Jacob through his parents (Isaac and Rebekah) and grandparents (Abraham and Sarah). This is the backstory for the nation of Israel.



“Map 2” *Standard Bible Atlas* (Standard Publishing, 2006), 4.

Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12–25)

Why did God choose this family? It sure wasn't about the survival of the fittest! It's more like God was choosing the underdog, the least likely, those who wouldn't survive without his help.

They're not the obvious choice, but they are responsive to God. God called Abraham to leave the region of the Babel-builders, to start a new nation under God's leadership:

Genesis 12:1–5 (NIV)

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

²“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he set out from Haran. ⁵He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, ... and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

(Note: *Abram* = Abraham, and *Sarai* = Sarah. God “upgraded” their names later.)

This is how God will set right all that's wrong with the world. Through Abraham, God will build a nation to show the nations what they're missing (namely, living under God's reign). “Go Abraham!” And he goes!

The trouble is, Abraham is living in a world that's already gone wrong. Don't underestimate the **obstacles**. Immediately, it all starts going pear-shaped:

- The land is in famine (Genesis 12:10).
- Abraham is dishonest (12:13).
- Pharaoh takes Sarah (12:15).
- Lot moves in with the Canaanites, for their wealth (13:10-13).
- The kings from the land of Babel join forces to take the land (14:2).

Abraham and Sarah despair. Since they still have no heir, they think God's promises will die with them (15:2; 16:2; 17:17; 18:11). The heavenly sovereign makes them his **covenant** people, guaranteeing the promise (15:18; 17:7).

But it will take hundreds of years, while God's people are **suffering** (15:13). The people of Canaan are also suffering if God doesn't intervene (18:20; 19:24). Abraham contributes to both the suffering and the healing of the nations (20:9, 17).

Once Abraham and Sarah finally have Isaac, they mistreat their servant Hagar (21:10). Now that they have dynastic power in their grasp, **will they rebel** against God like the rest of humanity? God tests Abraham (22:2). Abraham is willing to let everything go and trust God. In the process Abraham discovers that God did not want Isaac to be sacrificed (22:12).

That's how Abraham became the father of faith. In a world that always seems to be grasping for God's power in human hands, Abraham and Sarah left that power-base and lived as servants of God. They trusted God to re-establish heaven's reign on earth through their descendants. They pegged their life on it.

Isaac (Genesis 26–27)

God's promise to Abraham now passes down to Isaac: descendants, in the promised land, under God's governance.

Genesis 26:2–5 (NIV)

²The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. ³Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. ⁴I will make your **descendants** as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these **lands**, and through your offspring all **nations** on earth will be **blessed**, ⁵because Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees and my instructions."

Despite Abraham's efforts to establish things well for the next generation (Genesis 24), Isaac and Rebekah's family proves dysfunctional.

It isn't only violence that damages God's world. **Deceit** destroys relationships too. Esau was physically stronger, but Jacob was the schemer. Jacob cheated Esau out of the family birthright. Esau wanted to kill him (27:42). Jacob fled, living with relatives far to the north.

Jacob (Genesis 28–35)

Was this the end of God's promise to establish a nation through this family in this land? As he fled, Jacob had a **dream**. He saw an open portal, a connection between heaven and earth where the angels from heaven were entering this world to do God's bidding. That's when Jacob realized the significance of the promise God had made and land he was leaving: **Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it** (28:16). He vowed to return (28:20).

Twenty years later, Jacob did return. He was married, with children, and quite a wealthy herd. He separated a huge part of his flocks as a gift to make peace with Esau. Alone in the dark, Jacob was attacked by someone **wrestling** him all night. In the morning, he realized he'd been wrestling with God (32:28-30). All these years, he thought he was fighting people—his father, Laban, Esau, All along, he'd been fighting God.

That's what the name Israel means: *wrestling with God*.

Now that Jacob is back, God confirms the same promise he'd given to Abraham and Isaac:

Genesis 35:10–12 (NIV)

So he named him Israel. ¹¹And God said to him, "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A **nation** and a community of nations will come from you, and **kings** will be among your **descendants**. ¹²The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this **land** to your descendants after you."

Are you seeing the theme of Genesis here? Descendants, a nation, the land, with kings appointed by God—it's not just for Israel's sake. It's for the sake of the world. Through this family God will restore heaven's reign to the earth.

The twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 35–36)

While Esau's descendants became the Edomites (Genesis 36), it's the descendants of Jacob who become the twelve tribes of Israel:

Genesis 35:22–26 (NIV)

Jacob had twelve sons: ²³The sons of **Leah**: *Reuben* the firstborn of Jacob, *Simeon*, *Levi*, *Judah*, *Issachar* and *Zebulun*.

²⁴The sons of **Rachel**: *Joseph* and *Benjamin*.

²⁵The sons of Rachel's servant **Bilhah**: *Dan* and *Naphtali*.

²⁶The sons of Leah's servant **Zilpah**: *Gad* and *Asher*.

We may be shocked that Jacob had two wives, and also slept with their servants. God is accommodating a world that's far from his ideals (Matthew 19:4-6).

There's a big difference between what the Bible *describes* (what is) and what it *proscribes* (what should be). Men dominated women, and daughters were not even worth mentioning when it came to inheritance (compare 34:1). But sexism, slavery, and ethnic superiority have no place when God sets all things right in Christ (compare Galatians 3:28).

So, these twelve sons of Israel become the twelve tribes of Israel, with a bit of adjustment:

- Levi (the priestly tribe) received no land.
- Ephraim and Manasseh (Joseph's sons) became tribes in their own right, since Jacob gave a double-blessing (inheritance responsibility) to Joseph (48:14-20).

With Ephraim and Manasseh (instead of Joseph and Levi), the land of Israel was made up of twelve tribes.

Joseph (Genesis 37–50)

Like the rest of humanity, the twelve were flawed servants of God:

- Reuben so dishonoured his father that Jacob never trusted him (35:22; 49:3-4).
- Simeon and Levi slaughtered an entire town in revenge for the rape of their sister, so Jacob never trusted them (34:25; 49:5-7).
- They even plotted to kill one of their own, selling Joseph for financial gain (37:18, 27).

Seriously, can God save the world through a family that will sell each other into slavery?

Yes! God uses the slave—the one they rejected—to provide God's insight to the most powerful person they ever heard of. Pharaoh listens, and prepares for the famine.

And Joseph tells his brothers:

- *It was to save lives that God sent me here ahead of you (45:5).*
- *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives (50:20).*

Unlike Cain, Joseph is not seeking revenge. Forgiveness restores the family, because God is saving the family through the one they rejected, and then the world through them all.

1.3 Summary and significance

So what's crucial to remember from Genesis? Two things:

1. The LORD God is sovereign over the whole earth. It belongs to him. All people are agents of God, designed to care for his world as God does. God takes responsibility for us when we don't do that, when we treat each other violently. However, God doesn't force his authority on the nations. He is our sovereign, but he has allowed the nations to set up their rulers as they fight to gain power over each other.
2. Instead of forcing his authority on the nations, God called a people to represent him as his nation. God established this nation through Abraham (the grandfather), Isaac (the father), and Jacob who became Israel through his twelve sons.

By the end of Genesis, a descendant of Abraham (Joseph) has begun to fulfil the mandate God gave them: a blessing to the nations, saving the peoples of the earth.

So, we're all good now? The Pharaohs of this world will listen to the leader God appointed so the whole world comes back under God's authority?

Not so fast! Although Pharaoh listened to God's wisdom in Joseph, he did not give up his lust for power. By charging inflated prices during the famine, Pharaoh ends up owning all Egypt. The Egyptians sell their land—and ultimately themselves—to Pharaoh to survive: *Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh (47:19).*

Think about that. If Pharaoh enslaves his own people, what will happen to Jacob's family? That's the plot twist at the end of Genesis, setting us up for the next episode of the story.

In Exodus, God must rescue his people from oppression under Pharaoh (Exodus 1–18) so they can be a nation under his sovereignty (Exodus 19–40). It the beginning of the rescue mission that runs right through Scripture.

Questions or comments?

In preparation for next week, please read Exodus chapters 3 and 24.