

The Holy Bible. The most beloved and best-selling book of all time. According to the magazine, *The Economist*, it is estimated that over six billion copies of the Bible have been printed. No other book or novel even comes close! Author Ravi Zacharias summarizes the influence of the Bible on the world by saying, “No book in history has been so studied, so used and (yet) so abused as the Holy Bible. Millions across history have staked their lives on it. Destiny-defining trust has been placed in it. Graveside hope has been based on it. The charters of nations have been built on it. Extraordinary good has been spread because of it. And wrongheaded zeal has caused untold evil in the name of it.”¹

Now I’m sure that every one of us owns at least one copy of the Bible. And while most of us have probably read some portions of it, there are likely only a few of us who have read all of it, and many who have probably read very little of it. But no matter where we stand on our biblical knowledge scale, I can pretty much guarantee that all of us wrestle with questions and issues when it comes to this holy book. For it contains stories and teachings that challenge the certainties of our 21st century view of the world by giving us a perspective on life and various cultures across the millennia. It is a book in which waters are parted, the sun and moon stand still, donkeys talk, lions are tamed, prophets preach naked, ninety year old women have children, the blind are given sight, five thousand people are fed with a couple fish and five loaves of bread, and so much more. Now my intention during Lent is to take us through the Bible. I’ll be using the book *A Hop, Skip and a Jump Through the Bible* by J. Ellsworth Kalas, as the inspiration for my sermons. Obviously, I will not be able to go through every story in the Bible, nor will I be able to answer all your questions. But what I will try to do is help us come to a deeper appreciation of this book of faith that has captured the attention of humanity for thousands of years.

So let me start by giving you a roadmap of sorts. There are sixty-six separate books in the Bible written by forty-five different authors over the course of fifteen hundred years. The Old Testament, as Christians know it, is slightly different than the original Hebrew Bible. In the Hebrew Bible, the first five books are known as the Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and it’s called The Law. Then come the books of The Prophets. They’re broken out into three separate groups known as the Former Prophets, the Latter Prophets, and then those minor prophets called The Twelve.

¹ “The Story of The Bible” by Larry Stone, Foreword by Ravi Zacharias

The third and final section of the Hebrew Bible is called simply The Writings, and include Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and a few more. The bottom line is that the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, takes many different forms. Law, history - both oral and written, poetry, and wisdom. So it has to be looked at and interpreted as such. Obviously the story of Jonah spending three days in the belly of a whale cannot be given the same significance as Moses meeting God on the mountaintop and receiving the Ten Commandments. Now the New Testament contains the four Gospels, the Book of Acts, the Epistles of Paul, the General Epistles, and Revelation. Here too, interpretation is critical, for it uses imagery, metaphors and symbolism. Jesus' comments regarding cutting off your hand or pulling out your eye if they cause you to sin, is meant to be understood philosophically, not literally. Now I'm going to break out our journey through the Bible over the next six weeks as follows: first, today I'll start with just Genesis. Then on week two, I'll do Exodus up to King David. Week three will be the remaining portion of the Old Testament. Week four, the Acts of the Apostles. Week five, the Epistles. Week six, the Gospels. And on Easter, I'll even touch on Revelation. Phew! That's obviously a lot of material, but hopefully when it's over, we'll be better able to understand that unique relationship that exists between humankind and the divine.

Because in fact, that's the theme, the overarching plot, that runs throughout the entire Bible. It's the story of a divine, perfect God seeking to be in a relationship with an imperfect people. Let me say that again. The Bible is the story of a perfect God seeking to be in a relationship with imperfect people. A relationship that is sometimes tender, sometimes tumultuous. It is a story of sin and redemption, a story of how we fall down, and how God picks us up. The Bible gives us a realistic picture of humanity. As author Philip Yancey says, “(the Bible) portrays the world as it is, no holds barred. In its pages you will find passionate stories of love and hate, blood-chilling stories of rape and dismemberment, matter-of-fact accounts of trafficking in slaves, honest tales of the high honor and cruel treachery of war. Nothing is neat and orderly. Spoiled brats like Solomon and Samson get supernatural gifts; a truly good man like Job gets catastrophe.”² And we are meant to relate to all this. Because we know all too well, that sometimes this life is neither pretty, nor fair, nor predictable. All, mostly due to humankind's own faults and shortcomings. Yet, apparently, there must be a goodness within our inner being because we yearn for and desire redemption and righteousness. And if we can see the Bible through this lens, we can begin to read the Bible as it is meant to be read. Not so much as to follow in the footsteps of those imperfect men and women of old, but rather, to learn how to be in relationship with a perfect God.

² “The Bible Jesus Read,” by Philip Yancey, pg.11

So let's begin our journey with Genesis. In the beginning, there was God. And that was it. And God, it seems, was not content just "to be." No, God wanted a creation, wanted people, wanted a relationship. And so God, whom I believe is the ultimate scientist, created the heavens and the earth, the vegetation and the wildlife, and humans – man and woman. But humans were special – for God made humans in his own image. And so, as you read and study the Bible – in fact, as you go through this life - always keep that in mind. You are made in the image of God – you were created as a reflection of that which is good and holy and beautiful.

But from here the plot thickens. Because the greatest gift God has given us has also been the cause of our biggest downfall – the freedom to choose. Just think – some of the first words we learn as a child are 'yes' and 'no.' And Adam and Eve, knowing the fruit would make them become like God, chose to eat their fruit, and immediately they knew they had sinned, and they hid from God. One of the most distressing verses in the Bible for me is where God is searching for Adam and Eve in the garden, after their sin, crying out "Where are you?" Where are you? Come back! I want you! How many of us have cried out to someone we love like that? Yet this story teaches us one of the most fundamental truths of life: that the choices we make come with consequences. And what happens in this first book of Genesis is stated again very emphatically forty-seven books later in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, "You will reap whatever you sow." So with Adam and Eve, sin and sorrow enter the story. And as Kalas writes, "The next several chapters of Genesis are heavily overcast with only occasional bursts of sunlight." In fact, things ultimately got so bad, we're told "The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth." Here God had given humankind every blessing, every good and perfect gift and what happened? They turned away. Can you feel God's pain?

So God starts all over again. God's intention was to return the earth to its pre-creation state and then remake it. So he tells a righteous man named Noah to build an ark and fill it with animals. A flood covers the earth and then abates, and a rainbow becomes a promise, the sign that God will never again destroy the earth with water. Thanks be to Noah and his ark. However, like I said, the Bible is all about imperfect people! Noah plants a vineyard on the newly formed earth, gets drunk on the wine from this vineyard and ends up naked, and who knows what else may have happened. But whatever it was, it wasn't pretty. For Noah ends up cursing his son Ham who sees him in this ungodly state. Now generations pass, and some descendants of Noah move to Babylonia, Mesopotamia, today's Iraq, where they try to build a tower, the infamous Tower of Babel. Their plan is to reach heaven – another attempt

to become like God. But God is not pleased with their intentions and arrogance, so he scatters the people, and for the first time, different languages are now spoken. However, God is still at work trying to remake us in his image. And when we get to Genesis 12, roughly 2,000 B.C., things begin to look up once more. God again chooses a righteous man, this time not to build an ark, but to build a special nation. He makes a covenant with Abraham, promising that through Abraham, “all the families of the earth will be blessed.” God's covenant reads, “I will establish that my covenant is an everlasting covenant between me and you and all your descendants after you for all the generations to come.” And indeed, both Jews and Christians claim Abraham as their father through Isaac, his son from his wife Sarah. And Muslims claim Abraham as their father as well, through Ishmael, his son with Sarah’s maid, Hagar. Yes, the three major monotheistic faiths, consisting of nearly four and a half billion people today, claim Abraham as their father and the founder of their faith. And, by the way, Abraham’s part of the covenant was to pledge that every male is to be circumcised for all generations to come as a sign of membership in this special family. Sorry guys!

Now I’m going to quickly summarize Genesis, chapters 13 – 36, which tell the stories of Israel’s patriarchs. Here are some highlights: Abraham and Sarah leave their homeland in Mesopotamia as God told them, and head west into Canaan and Egypt. God announces that Sarah will bear a son... at ninety years old. There's a very playful exchange where God makes this announcement and Sarah laughs, probably thinking back to those wonderful past pleasures in making a baby. So the Lord asks, “Why did you laugh? Is there anything too wonderful for the Lord (that he cannot) do?” Sarah, I imagine somewhat blushing responds, “I didn't laugh.” To which God replies, I can imagine, shaking his finger, “Oh yes you did!” This passage reinforces for me that we should be thankful for all those earthy pleasures God has given us, and that our God has, indeed, a sense of humor.

However, God can also get angry, because prior to this came the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sinfulness. That wasn't a pretty sight either. In due time, Sarah's son is born... Isaac. Then comes a controversial passage where God tells Abraham that Isaac must be sacrificed, and Abraham obeys, and begins to build an altar for the sacrifice. Remember this happened some 5,000 years ago when child sacrifice did often occur by pagans worshipping other gods. But just as Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac, God cries out, "Do not lay a hand on the boy, do not do anything to him!" You see, God had no intention of sacrificing Isaac in the first place. Now many people are disturbed as to why God would require such a test of Abraham. And today, we may wonder why God tests us.

Perhaps our testing has to do with knowing our rightful place in our relationship with Almighty God. That we are to trust the Almighty, even when we don't understand. That's hard for many of us. But we must always keep in mind that God does indeed loves us first and foremost and we have to trust his plan for our lives.

Now Isaac becomes a man, marries Rebekah and has two sons, Jacob and Esau. And if you ever wanted an example of someone who was both saint and sinner – look up Jacob. His shenanigans finally bring him to a point where he steals his father's blessing, which is meant for the oldest son, in this case, Esau. So Jacob has to flee to a distant land so Esau doesn't kill him. This is where he has a dream of a ladder ascending to heaven. Jacob's ladder, where God again assures Jacob of his promise to Abraham. In this new land he marries both Leah and Rachel, the daughters of Laban. But in order to get Laban's approval to marry them, Jacob had to work fourteen years for Laban. During this time, Jacob stayed busy, having twelve sons and a daughter with Leah and Rachel, and some slave girls. That's an interesting definition of marriage! And he also does some cooking of the books, so to speak, and becomes wealthy gaining large flocks of sheep and goats at Laban's expense. So again he has to flee. But now Esau enters the picture again, and Jacob fears the outcome, that he might be killed. Jacob's life is in shambles at this point. And just before having to meet Esau, while alone, Jacob meets a man and they end up fighting. It's God, as Jacob later learns. And haven't we all be there - arguing and fighting with God. Why is this happening to me, why is my life a mess, why do I have to change? Apparently Jacob is willing to change because he won't let go of God unless God blesses him, which God eventually does after an all night battle. God tells Jacob his name will now be called "Israel," a name that is with us still today in what is arguably one of the most strategic countries in the world. But as a permanent reminder of their struggle, God wrenches Jacob's hip out of joint so that he walks with a limp. And don't we sometimes walk away from an encounter with God somewhat "out of joint" but in the long run knowing that we have been blessed?

Now Jacob/Israel's twelve sons were hereafter referred to as the "twelve tribes" of Israel. So maybe it wasn't by chance that Jesus chose twelve disciples. And, as in many families today, there were sibling rivalries, jealousies and some questionable parenting. The youngest son, Joseph becomes the obvious pet, and after receiving a specially made coat of many colors from Jacob, all the older sons devise a scheme to get rid of Joseph. And that's where we will pick up next week. Amen.