

January 8-14

God's Covenant People - Act 2

Act 1 showed us that broken relationship with God is the central issue of the biblical narrative, which lead to open rebellion and harmful, violent behavior. The initial consequence for Adam and Eve was banishment from the Garden of Eden, so that sin would not be immortalized at the Tree of Life.

Within a ten generations, things got so bad that God had to destroy the world with the Flood as a rescue intervention to keep the word from complete self-destruction and annihilation (Genesis 6:13). These intrinsic consequences are often viewed as imposed punishments. But punishment is not what God is all about. God is into salvation.

Immediately after the first sin, in the midst of the intrinsic consequences of fear, shame and blame, God begins to unfold his plan of salvation by promising a Savior (Genesis 3:15) and instituting the sacrifices to teach the consequences and solution for sin (Genesis 3:21).

After the flood, things go bad again in just almost immediately. As the life spans radically shortened over the next 12 generations, from over 900 years to under 100, God instituted a new plan to keep the truth about Himself alive on the earth and bring the knowledge of redemption to the world. Act 2 is the story of God establishing a covenant people whose purpose was to bless the whole earth with a living example of what life looks like in relationship with God and living life His way. How in the world is the world going to know there is a better way to live, unless someone is out there living it for all to see?

The Settings for Act 2

Unlike Act 1, where the settings were universal or vaguely defined locales on earth, the settings for Act 2 are places we can pinpoint. The main setting is the land of Israel, a land which God promises to give the descendants of Abraham. Within this land, Jerusalem looms large throughout the narrative. And in Jerusalem one building, the temple of Solomon, overshadows all others.

Other locations feature as secondary settings. Egypt at first is a welcoming nest for the fledgling nation, but later becomes an enslaving monster. This land is the location for the events leading up to deliverance of the oppressed Hebrews under the leadership of Moses. Babylon becomes the place of captivity after the Jerusalem temple's destruction. Eventually, however, Act 2 ends with the Israelites back in their God-promised land, where the chastened faithful wait hopefully for the coming Messiah.

Main Characters for Act 2

God remains the central character. He sets events in motion by making covenants and working through persons whom he has chosen to further his purposes.

The central human characters are members of a single family down through the generations. Through this family God sends the Savior in Act 3. The following are examples of important characters in Act 2:

Abraham and Sarah—God chooses this couple to enter a covenant relationship with him. God promises that through their descendants, beginning with their son Isaac, “all the peoples on earth will be blessed.” Abraham and Sarah are noted in Scripture as premiere examples of faith (see Genesis 15:6; Isaiah 51:2; Romans 4:16; Gl 3:9; 1Peter 3:5-6).

Moses—God uses him to bring the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. The first five Bible books are traditionally referred to as “the books of Moses” because he wrote most of this material (with the exception of the account of his death). God uses Moses as the agent for the covenant at Sinai. The central moment in his life is the encounter with God on Mount Sinai and his reception of the Ten Commandments.

David—Nobody expects God to choose a lowly shepherd to rule over Israel. David’s adventures are told in loving (and sometimes lurid) detail. As a brilliant poet, he composes much of the Bible’s hymnal, the book of Psalms. In the covenant God makes with David, David’s descendants are promised an everlasting dynasty of kings. This dynasty culminates in Jesus Christ, as Act 3 will make clear.

Elijah—He stands first as a new breed of prophet, confronting Israel’s political and religious establishment with pronouncements that begin with the jolting phrase, “this is what the Lord says.” The Israelites perpetually struggle with worshiping false gods, and Elijah repeatedly makes it clear that only one God is true—the God who can speak and perform works of power. Elijah is so great that he (along with Moses) appears with Jesus on the mountain of the Transfiguration in Act 3.

Isaiah—As the supreme writing prophet, he foretells Jerusalem’s fall and restoration. More importantly, Isaiah prophesies the coming messianic King, the Prince of Peace. This King is also the Suffering Servant who takes away “the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6).

Esther—A Jewish beauty in a Persian king’s harem seems an unlikely biblical heroine. The book about her is the last narrative in Act 2. Esther’s courage is decisive in sparing the Jews from extermination by a cunning enemy. God is working, yet there is no resolution to the overall conflict. Humanity’s rebellion against God continues.

Plot Summary for Act 2

The plot for Act 2 can be summarized in three phases:

- *Rising action*
- *Falling action*
- *Sustaining action*

The rising action lasts for about a thousand years. It begins with Abraham and Sarah, whose descendants grow into a nation-sized multitude in Egypt. The action continues to rise as God redeems his people from slavery through Moses and gives them his laws. Then the people enter their promised land under Joshua’s leadership. Despite the setbacks of the period recounted in the book of Judges, the action moves ahead decisively to the establishment of the kingdom of David. The climax of Act 2 is the reign of Solomon, when David’s wise and wealthy son rules a glorious Jerusalem, where the Lord’s temple is at the center of Israel’s worship.

Then there is falling action for some four hundred years. The kingdom of Israel splits. The northern kingdom (with its idolatrous kings) falls to the Assyrian Empire around 722 BC. The southern kingdom (with its Davidic dynasty of kings, some faithful and some idolatrous) falls to Babylon in 605 BC and the 70 years of captivity begin. In 586 BC the temple burns, Jerusalem is completely destroyed, and captivity becomes complete, just as the prophets had warned.

Finally there is sustaining action, lasting hundreds of years, rather than the denouement (wrapping up the story) that might have been expected. After the return from captivity, the people are seemingly stuck in a period of waiting. They are in Jerusalem with a rebuilt temple, but the story is not finished. As you read, use the lens of “God’s covenant people” to help interpret the story as it develops in Act 2.

Week 2

It would be hard to overstate the importance of this moment in biblical history. This week's readings take us halfway through Act 2, Scene 1 in the story of the Bible. This scene introduces Abraham as the father of the Jewish people and the patriarch with whom God made a foundational agreement (covenant). In the Old Testament stories, covenant is often at the heart of what is going on. Notice how God advanced and developed the covenant through Abraham's son, Isaac, and his grandson, Jacob, and how God challenged each man's faith through moments of crisis that defined who he would be as God's representative. As you read, also notice the prominent role God played in the developing story. He was the main actor, moving the story along according to his grand design.

Scene 1

The People: God calls a covenant people

In this scene, we follow two parallel accounts.

First is the narrative of Abraham and his descendants until they all enter Egypt. We call these the patriarchs. The covenant God initiates sets in motion what will become the nation of Israel. More important, he begins building the channel for the Savior.

The second account is the book of Job, which helps us reflect on "the problem of evil:" Some ask, If God is powerful enough to stop evil but doesn't do so, he must not be good; or if God is truly good, he must be unable to stop evil since it exists. This wisdom poem profoundly grapples with the human struggle to understand evil, and proclaims God's righteousness in the gripping conclusion.

Day 1

Read Genesis 12-13

Act 2 - Scene 1 - Reading 1

Genesis 12 tells the story of God's calling Abram (whose name would eventually be changed to Abraham). Abram was born during a violent time in which nations constantly fought with their enemies. The aspects of God's promise to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 seem very counter-cultural for that time: God's people would be a blessing to other people groups!

How might this promise lay a foundation for the biblical emphasis on the way God's people should treat their enemies, a theme developed in both the Old and New Testaments?

Whom might you bless today? How will you do so?

Notice the movement from place to place and the importance of geography. Abram's relocation lays a foundation for the importance of the land of Canaan in the Bible's story. Look at a map in your Bible or in a Bible dictionary to trace Abram's journey.

Day 2

Read Genesis 14-16

Act 2 - Scene 1 - Reading 2

Genesis 14 recounts the rescue of Lot and the blessing given to Abram by Melchizedek. Notice that when the covenant with Abram was established in chapter 15, this encounter with God placed a greater emphasis on Abram's children and faith than we saw in chapter 12.

Yet the story of the birth of Ishmael in chapter 16 showed the results of a lack of trust in God when Abram faced a delay in God's fulfillment of his promise. Rather than affirming polygamy and the sexual use of concubines, God subverted these institutions in the book of Genesis, showing that they are not the divine pattern. Nevertheless, God was gracious to Hagar and Ishmael, and he worked through the cultural patterns of the ancient Near East.

With what delay are you presently trusting God?

Worship God for his grace as you struggle to trust him with your wait.

Day 3

Read Genesis 17-19

Act 2 - Scene 1 - Reading 3

In Genesis 17 God reiterated the covenant, changing Abram's name to Abraham, meaning father of a multitude, and giving him the sign of circumcision. Genesis 18:19 emphasizes that God would fulfill the promises he had made to Abraham as Abraham's children lived out God's commands (see Genesis 12:1-3).

Meditate on how today God also uses the concept of circumcision as a sign of covenant (see Romans 2:28-29), and God uses our obedience to his commands to fulfill certain promises to us today. In other words, God is able to bless us as we live according to his ways because His ways ARE life and blessing. Living any other ways are curse and death.

Is there any situation in your life now for which you are requesting God's blessings although you are not living according to his ways?

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 presents a clear picture of the ultimate consequences of sin, while his rescue of Lot depicts God's compassion and desire to rescue.

Do you grasp the seriousness of sin? What evidence supports your answer?

Day 4

Read Genesis 20-23

Act 2 - Scene 1 - Reading 4

One subplot in the book of Genesis is the choosing of the younger son instead of the older. In the ancient Near East honoring the rights of the firstborn son was a dominant cultural practice. In Genesis God subverted this aspect of the culture by consistently blessing the younger son. God traced his covenant promise through Isaac instead of Ishmael because Isaac was the son of God's promise; Ishmael, on the other hand, was the product of human ingenuity.

Notice the expressions of faith in God that are found in Genesis 22:3-10.

With what sacrifice are you currently being asked to trust God?

How does this part of the story of the Bible underscore God as the hero?

What details of the story seem most significant to you?

Day 5

Read Genesis 24-26

Act 2 - Scene 1 - Reading 5

A new character enters the story today: Rebekah, who would become Isaac's wife. Chapter 24 presents a beautiful story of God's providence. Notice that the story of Rebekah focuses on God's sure guidance and Rebekah's willingness to follow God's lead. This was a significant moment in the development of God's people.

At the end of chapter 25, Esau sold Jacob his birthright, which was the right of the firstborn son to a double portion of the inheritance from the father. Consider what this tells us about Esau (see Hebrews 12:14-17): he was oriented to physical wants, undervaluing spiritual realities. Perhaps this is the reason God planned for his people to come through Jacob.

How might you demonstrate that you value the truly important things or people in your life?

Day 6

Read Genesis 27-29

Act 2 - Scene 1 - Reading 6

Biblical families sometimes provide prime examples of dysfunctionality, showing us that God works with and through very imperfect people and their imperfect cultures. Read Genesis 27:5-13, about Rebekah's role in Jacob's theft of Esau's blessing, in light of the broader context of today's reading (especially Genesis 25:19-27).

How does the context help you understand Rebekah's actions?

Take a moment to praise God for your family, warts and all, and to pray that God will work in and through you as a family in spite of your weaknesses and problems.

Day 7

Reading Summary for Week 2

We've read this week about three generations of people with whom God made a covenant: Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob and his wives. God revealed himself as gracious (in reaching out to the barren Sarah and the conniving Jacob). He asked for unquestioning obedience (in asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac). What a tribute to God's faithfulness that millions around the world are worshiping this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob some four thousand years later.

Prayer/Meditation

Lord, I am no more worthy of entering a covenant relationship with you than Abraham and Sarah were. Yet just as you invaded their lives and they responded in faith, so too I enter a covenant relationship with you through faith in their distant descendant, your Son, the Lord Jesus. Help me faithfully to pass on the divine revelation to the next generation, just as these ancients did. Thank you for the examples of their lives, both in their faith as well as in their faults. Amen.
