

A Passion for God's Word

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A Survey of the Bible

In this lesson we will take a quick survey of the Bible - both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Our purpose is to summarize, to abbreviate a timeline of the main players of the Bible's unfolding story. In this way, you will be able to gain insight into the Bible's main characters and historical events.

If you pick up a novel you've never read, flip to a page in the middle of the book and just begin reading, you will have difficulty picking up the story. You will have no idea who the main characters are and what they are seeking to achieve. You will understand neither the plot development to date, nor the plot development as it progresses. You have no sense of continuity, no context for the story.

In many ways, reading the Bible is not that much different. The Bible develops clear themes on a step-by-step basis, building these themes upon the lives of the characters that are portrayed in biblical history. The Bible is not like a textbook or manual, which orders its themes under scholarly categories. It does not have a section labeled "Sin" or a chapter called "Redemption." No, the Bible unveils its themes through the lives of people, and these people each have an historical context.

We will be examining this historical context in this lesson. At the end of this lesson we trust you will have a better grasp on who fits in where. This lesson is not so much a Who's Who of the Bible. It is more of a Who's When.

The Connection of Faith

Read Hebrews 11:1-31

This chapter lists many of the "heroes of faith" – people who populate the pages of Old Testament history. Every single one of these men and women is also mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament:

- Abel (verse 4) – **Luke 11:50-51; Hebrews 12:24**
- Enoch (verse 5) – **Jude 14**

- Noah (verse 7) – **Matthew 24:37-38; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5**
- Abraham (verses 8-19) – **John 8:39-40; Romans 4:1-3; Galatians 3:6-9**
- Sarah (verse 11) – **Romans 9:9; 1 Peter 3:5-6**
- Isaac (verse 20) – **Galatians 4:28-30; James 2:21**
- Jacob (verse 9,21) – **Matthew 22:32; Romans 9:13**
- Joseph (verse 22) – **John 4:5**
- Moses (verses 23-29) – **2 Corinthians 3:7-12; 2 Timothy 3:8**
- Joshua (verse 30) – **Acts 7:45; Hebrews 4:8**
- Rahab (verse 31) – **James 2:25**

These are some of the main players in the unfolding story of faith in the Bible. But there are also many others.

Read Hebrews 11:32-38

Take another quick look at this chapter. Note how many different people are referred to. Take a piece of paper (or open the word processor on your computer) and jot down the names of the people listed in that chapter. Then put a tick or mark next to the names that you are familiar with.

During the course of your studies with the Online Bible College, we trust that these people will become familiar names. That you will get to know them – feel their heart, their love for God, their strengths, their weaknesses, their victories and their foibles.

One of the remarkable things about the Bible is how candidly it deals with the people it portrays. It does not seek to gloss over their mistakes, nor does it glorify their deeds.

God has done this for a reason. When we read their stories, we are able to learn from them, even though they are separated from us by several thousand years. Theirs is an intensely human story, but also a human story touched by the power of God.

Read Hebrews 11:39-40

In these two verses, the writer to the Hebrews wraps up the entirety of chapter 11, then adds your life to their list! Just as we need them (for they are our roots), so they need us (for we are their fruit). It is one tree, one story, one magnificent chronicle of salvation. And you are a part of it! God has included a plaque for your name in his hall of fame “so that only together with us” would all those listed in Hebrews 11 find their hope completed.

This is the amazing reality of the Bible narrative. It is not a distant story. It is not a textbook of dry history that has little if no bearing on your life today. Through your faith in Christ, you are intimately connected with these people. Their faith and your faith makes you co-believers.

Read Hebrews 12:1

This verse follows on immediately from Hebrews 11:40 (remember, there were no chapter or verse divisions in the original manuscripts). The picture the writer is using is one of a massive sports arena where a great track race – a marathon relay – is in progress. The heroes of faith listed in chapter 11 have already run their lap. They are now seated in the grandstands, cheering you on as you begin to run the lap set out for you.

This is what it means when the writer says “only together with us would they be made perfect.” We are finishing the race they began. The baton that has been passed to you is the same baton they ran with. It is not just you crossing the finishing line. They are “in you” as you run. It is together that we win the race.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders Hebrews 12:1-3 in this way:

“Do you see what this means – all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we’d better get on with it. Strip down, start running – and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it...When you find yourself flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls!”

Reading the Bible is not just an exercise in the study of history. As we have already established, the Bible is a *personal* book, not an academic one. We need to understand that the lives of many of the Bible’s characters, although separated from us by thousands of years, are relevant to each of us personally.

In 1976, Alex Hailey’s book *Roots* topped the bestseller charts. The next year, the mini-series “Roots” based on his book was shown on television throughout the United States. Millions of Americans watched the enthralling drama, tracing the life of a captured slave, Kunta Kinte, and his descendants. This sparked off a mass

“Therefore”

The word “therefore,” when used in Scripture, is very significant. In fact, someone once said, if you see the word “therefore” you need to ask what it is there for.

There were no chapter divisions in the original manuscripts. Hebrews 12:1 flows right on after Hebrews 11:40, building on it. For this reason, you need to temporarily dissolve the chapter boundaries and see the train of thought that flows from one chapter to the next.

In Hebrews 11:40, the writer says that “only together with us would they [the heroes listed in chapter 11] be made perfect.” Now, in Hebrews 12:1, the writer says: “Therefore (for this reason, because of all that has gone on before)...let *us* run with perseverance the race *marked out for us*.”

Have a look at some of these other chapter beginnings that begin with “therefore” and look at the ending of the previous chapter to see what the writer is building upon:

- Romans 5:1 ➔ 4:25
- Romans 8:1-2 ➔ 7:24-25
- Romans 12:1 ➔ 11:30-36
- Ephesians 5:1 ➔ 4:32
- Philippians 4:1 ➔ 3:20-21
- Hebrews 3:1 ➔ 2:18

search for personal roots.

More than anything else, the Bible places your life in context. As you read God's Word, you discover the roots of your faith. So let's take a look at the broad run of the Bible's timeline to see where we fit in.

A Synopsis of the Bible

In terms of its historical setting, the Bible is a twelve-act play. It is divided into twelve clear historical settings. Let's take a brief look at each of these:

The Creation Era

The first part of the book of Genesis describes the creation of the world, the fall of man and the birth of the nations. It is the world-building period, but although it covers approximately 2000 years, only 11 chapters are dedicated to it. This is because it is simply a pre-ambles, the background to the plan of salvation that was to begin in earnest in the next era.

There are two principal players during the Creation Era:

- Adam – the father of the human race
- Noah – the father of all the nations

The Patriarch Era

The Patriarch Era begins when God calls Abraham to leave Ur and “go to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). Abraham responds in faith and this sets in motion God's plan of salvation. God initiates a covenant with Abraham, an “everlasting covenant” – i.e. one without end (Genesis 17:7). This covenant has great bearing on you, as we shall see later in our studies.

Read Genesis 12:2-3

This is the first promise of the Patriarch Era and the foundation of the covenant that God established with Abraham. Note that it had two elements: “I will bless *you*...and all peoples on earth will be blessed *through you*.” This same promise has been extended to you through the New Covenant.

There are four principal players during the Patriarch Era:

- Abraham – the father of promise
- Isaac – the son of promise
- Jacob – the father of the nation of Israel
- Joseph – the son who saves the nation

Jacob had twelve sons, who are also called patriarchs. These twelve sons founded the twelve tribes of Israel – twelve distinct divisions within the nation of Israel.

Read Genesis 15:12-21

In a vision, God reveals to Abraham a prophetic picture of the next four hundred

years – a time span which covers the next two eras.

The Exodus Era

This era spans from the beginning of the oppression of Israel in Egypt right up to when they are about to enter Canaan, the land promised to Abraham. While the book of Genesis spans the first two periods – the Creation Era and the Patriarch Era, the next four books of the Bible – Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – all fall within the Exodus Era. During this era, God not only rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the doorstep of Canaan. He also established the Covenant of Law with them, a covenant which spanned the 15 centuries between Moses and Jesus.

The principal player during the Exodus Era is:

➡ Moses

The Conquest Era

The Conquest Era is fully contained in one Old Testament book – the book of Joshua. In Joshua we read the history of how the twelve tribes of Israel possessed the land that had been promised to them in the covenant God made with Abraham.

The principal player during the Conquest Era is:

➡ Joshua

The Judges Era

The Judges Era is contained in two Old Testament books – the book of Judges and the book of Ruth. This period, following the initial conquest of Canaan, was one of settling down into the promised land. It was a chaotic era that spanned about 330 years. Time and again, the people of Israel forgot God, only to reap the consequences of breaching their covenant with God.

The book of Judges has a 5-step cyclic theme:

1. Israel would forget God and begin worshipping idols.
2. A wave of foreign invasion and oppression would begin.
3. The people would cry out to God for deliverance.
4. God would send a deliverer, who would through God's help defeat the invaders and for a time rule over the people as "judge."
5. Back to step 1.

One of the key expressions found often in the book of Judges is the phrase: "In those days Israel had no king" (see **Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25**). The book of Judges records twelve judges in all, but there are five main players:

- ➡ Deborah (**Judges 4-5**)
- ➡ Gideon (**Judges 6-8**)

- Jephthah (**Judges 10:6-12:7**)
- Samson (**Judges 13-16**)
- Ruth (the book of **Ruth**)

Note that Ruth is the only main player during the Judges Era who was not herself a judge. Her significance is that she is the great-grandmother of David (as well as an ancestor of Jesus) and thus the seed of the Kingdom Era.

The Kingdom Era

This period of Israel's history, which spans most of the books of the Old Testament, can be divided into two sections:

The United Kingdom Period

This sub-period of the Kingdom Era is recorded in the two books of Samuel and in 1 Chronicles (together with the introductions to 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles). During most of this time, all twelve tribes of Israel were united under one monarchy. The United Kingdom Period has three main players:

- Saul – the people's choice
- David – God's choice
- Solomon – David's successor

The Divided Kingdom Period

After Solomon's death, the kingdom of Israel was divided along tribal lines. Ten tribes refused to acknowledge the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, while two tribes remained loyal to Solomon's successor.

The two tribes – Judah and Benjamin (with the tribes of Simeon and Levi also absorbed) became known as the (southern) kingdom of Judah, centered in Jerusalem. The kingdom of Judah was ruled over by David's descendants.

The ten remaining tribes became the (northern) kingdom of Israel, centered in Samaria. Another name used for the northern kingdom was Ephraim, so that the term "Ephraim and Judah" is often used to describe the two kingdoms together.

The events of the Divided Kingdom Period span many generations, involving many different players, both major and minor. Some of the major players are kings, such as Jehoshaphat, Joash and Hezekiah. Others are prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

But apart from the many players, there are two major themes that run through the entire Kingdom Era:

- The throne of David
- The temple of Solomon

Both these themes culminated in Christ. For Jesus is "the son of David" and heir to David's throne (see **Matthew 21:9; 22:41-45; Isaiah 9:1-7**). And he is also the fulfillment of the temple, the container of God's glory (see **John 2:19-22**).

The Exile Era

The Exile Era spans approximately 70 years, during which the kingdom of Judah had been taken into captivity by Babylon, exiled away from the promised land. The books of Ezekiel and Daniel cover this period, giving us the two main players:

- Ezekiel
- Daniel

The Restoration Era

This era covers the closing history of the Old Testament and its events are chronicled principally in three books: Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. The last three prophetic books of the Old Testament – Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi – were also written during this era.

The Restoration Era focuses on two main acts of rebuilding:

- The rebuilding of the temple
- The rebuilding of the city

And behind the major events of the Restoration Era, there are four main players:

- Zerubbabel
- Nehemiah
- Ezra
- Esther

The Silent Era

From the close of the book of Malachi to the first events of Matthew there is a span of 400 years where no prophet uttered the words of God. This inter-testament period is often called the Silent Era.

Read Amos 8:11

Although there was “a famine for hearing the words of the Lord” during the Silent Era, this did not mean that there was dearth of activity. Much was happening on the political scene. It was during the Silent Era that Greek became the dominant language of the region (due to the conquest of the Levant by Alexander the Great). And it was during the Silent Era that Rome later rose to power, setting the scene for the coming of Jesus.

The main sects of Judaism in Jesus’ day – the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes and the Zealots – all had their roots in the centuries prior to the birth of Christ. It was, if you like, a pregnant period. God was preparing to bring his Son into the world.

The Messianic Era

The preamble of the Messianic Era is found in the angelic visit to the shepherds and the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. But the Messianic Era really begins with the

ministry of John the Baptist, who heralded the era and prepared the hearts of the people for the coming of the Messiah. The Messianic Era was the shortest of all the twelve eras, lasting only about three and a half years. Yet it is the pivotal era, the dividing line between the Old Testament and the New Testament, between the Old Covenant and the New.

The events of the Messianic Era are chronicled in the four gospel accounts – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The main player and focus of the Messianic Era, of course, is:

➔ Jesus

The Pentecost Era

The Pentecost Era starts with the birth of the Church on the day of Pentecost and covers the period where the Church was centered primarily in Jerusalem. The first seven chapters of the book of Acts covers this era.

The main player, among many, in the Pentecost Era is:

➔ Peter

The Expansion Era

The rest of the book of Acts records the beginning of the fulfilment of Jesus' commission to "go and make disciples of all nations" (**Matthew 28:19**). All the epistles of the New Testament were also written during this period.

The main player, among many, in the Expansion Era is:

➔ Paul

When we take a look at Essential Church History in a later module, we will see that since the Expansion Era there have been a number of other eras. But you and I are still part of this broad period of continuing expansion of the Gospel into every corner of the world. As we stand at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium, we are still very much connected to what has gone on before us.

Pivot Points of History

The Bible records three pivot points in human history:

- ➔ Adam
- ➔ Abraham
- ➔ Christ

The first pivot point – Adam – launched mankind into sin and separation from God. The second pivot point – Abraham – initiated God's plan of salvation and founded the nation of Israel. The third pivot point – Christ – fulfilled God's plan of salvation and brought us into a New Covenant with God.

Each of these pivot points are separated by approximately 2000 years. There are

about 2000 years between Adam and Abraham. Another 2000 years (approximately) span between Abraham and Christ. Now here we are, some 2000 years on. Many Christians believe it is possible that the fourth pivot point in human history is just around the corner – the second coming of Christ.

Although no one should attempt to pinpoint the return of the Lord to a particular date on the calendar, one thing we can be sure of: The plan of God begun in Abraham and fulfilled in Christ will be carried through to completion before the Lord's return. Ah, but that's a subject that will have to wait for another time!

Getting a Handle on the Bible

To properly understand the Bible, you need to establish a sense of context for each event and each saying. This is the purpose of the study of God's Word – to mine the richness of God's Word out of its depth.

You will find that the more you study the Bible, the more you will understand the Bible. This is because you are building precept upon precept, concept upon concept. It is like the making of a net. At first, there are just a few strands, but as the weaver continues to weave the net, strand upon strand, a thick mesh of fibers begins to emerge. The more the craftsman weaves, the thicker the intermeshing net becomes.

In the same way, as you progress in your study of God's Word, you will discover more and more that verses tie together in surprising ways. You will find that people and events do not stand on their own but are intricately related. And, most of all, you will learn that as much as you think you may know about a subject in God's Word, there are always greater depths to be plumbed.

Read Romans 11:33

Welcome to the wonder of God's Word!