

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN TEN

A ten-session bible study course designed to help people have a clear grasp of the Old Testament story and the most important events and people.

LEADERS NOTES

By Rev Charlotte Gale
stclaresatthecathedral.org

Overview

Year (B.C.)	Story	Where in the bible?	Passage to read.
-	Creation <i>God creates the world, then Adam and Eve and puts them in the garden of Eden.</i>	Genesis 1-5	Genesis 2: 4-25
-	Destruction and Recreation <i>Everyone except Noah ignores God, so he destroys them with a flood. Afterwards he promises never to do it again.</i>	Genesis 6-11	Genesis 9: 8-17
1996 to 1690	Becoming God's Chosen People <i>God calls Abraham to be the founder of a great nation. Abraham & Sarah, have Isaac, who has Jacob who has 12 sons, including Joseph. The family all ends up in Egypt.</i>	Genesis 12-end	Genesis 15: 1-6
1491	The Exodus <i>God's people are now slaves in Egypt, so God raises up Moses to free them. They get away, but then spend 40 years wandering in the desert. It is here that they receive the law.</i>	Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.	Exodus 31: 18 – 32: 1-14
1451	Into the Promised Land <i>God's people finally cross the River Jordan into the Promised Land (Israel) destroying Jericho on the way.</i>	Joshua	Joshua 24: 1-15
1410 to 1050	The first rulers in Israel, the Judges <i>The people spread out into tribes and fight to stay in the Land.</i>	Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel 1-7	Ruth 1-4
1050 to 930	The First Kings and the Temple <i>This is the golden age of David and Solomon and the Temple. Everyone is happy and God blesses them richly.</i>	1 & 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles <i>Also Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes</i>	1 Samuel 8
928 to 587	Two Kingdoms <i>The Promised Land splits into 2 kingdoms, and people start ignoring God. Eventually the Kingdom of Israel is destroyed.</i>	2 Kings and 2 Chronicles <i>Also Isaiah 1-39, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah</i>	1 Kings 19: 1-18
585	Destruction and Exile <i>The kingdom of Judah is taken over by the Babylonians. The Temple is destroyed and the people are taken to Babylon.</i>	2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, Daniel and Esther <i>Also Psalms, Isaiah 40 - end, Lamentations, Ezekiel</i>	Psalms 137
515	Return and Restoration <i>After 70 years in Babylon, the people are finally allowed to go home. They rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple.</i>	Ezra and Nehemiah <i>Also Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</i>	Nehemiah 2

Introduction

In 20 years of ministry both in parishes and now as a pioneer minister, one thing seems consistent. People lack confidence about the bible and in particular the Old Testament. They may know quite a lot of the stories or passages, but don't always know how it all fits together. They may also struggle to know how to read it, or how to cope with the violence in many of the stories.

I put this course together in response to a request from a member of our community, and it is designed to help people have a really clear grasp of the Old Testament story and the most important events and people.

We started it in 2020, so the whole thing was done via Zoom, which worked really well, though it worked best when we had fewer people (no more than half a dozen) as this gave everyone space and confidence to speak. This doesn't mean it couldn't work with more, but that was our experience.

One of the values of St Clare's is simplicity, so I tried really hard not to overcomplicate things. We used the same simple structure for each session, with the same questions.

Session outline

The outline I used for each session was as follows. I made sure that each session was a maximum of an hour and a half, though some weeks we took less than that.

Opening Prayer - A few moments of quiet and a gathering prayer to bring everyone together.

Overview of the topic – Each week we covered a section of the story as outlined in the overview sheet, starting with creation. Participants were given details of which books of the bible this was found in, and the keener ones tried to read the whole section in preparation (for example Genesis 1 -5 in session 1) though this wasn't required. I wrote and gave a short talk each week, covering the topic. Feel free to use them as they are or adapt. On the first week I also gave an introduction to how each session would work, which I then repeated (to some extent) on the second week and then on weeks when new people joined us. At the end of this, I would pause for questions of clarification or thoughts before moving on to the particular bible passage, but tried to resist getting too bogged down in this.

Bible passage – We would then read the particular passage being studied that evening. I included a copy of bible passage being studied with the participants' sheet when I sent it out each week, and encouraged them to read it in advance. This meant everyone easily had it to hand and all in the same translation (I used the NRSV). I haven't included them here or in the participants' sheets document because of copyright.

Context of the passage being discussed – When needed, I would then give a brief explanation of the context and background to the particular passage being looked at.

Questions for discussion - We used the same questions each week, designed to facilitate a conversation, not to seek 'right' answers. The questions seek to ensure that we engaged with the passage emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. Some weeks the 'heart' questions were really hard and the 'mind' questions easy. Other weeks it was the other way round. Some weeks we could have talked for hours, other weeks we took half an hour. I made sure I had a bible and a commentary to hand but I tried not to be anxious about questions I might be asked. If I didn't know the answer someone else in the group usually did, we would work it out together, or someone would just google it!

The questions are as follows:

- Heart*
- How does the passage make you feel?
 - What emotions are present in the characters/writer?
- Mind*
- What does the passage make you think?
 - What analytically is going on in the passage?
- Soul*
- Where is God in the passage?
 - What parts of your faith are inspired/disturbed?
 - What does it prompt you to do/pray?

Closing reflection and prayer – I chose to play a piece of music with accompanying images on screen to give people a chance to reflect and pray. Each week I used an image or images by the artist Marc Chagall who did a series of paintings of Old Testament stories. The songs I used are listed below, all of which are available on iTunes. I then drew the whole thing together with a prayer appropriate to the week.

Creation – *God of Wonders (Third Day)*

Destruction and Recreation – *O Love that Wilt not let me go (Chris Rice)*

Becoming God's Chosen People – *The God of Abraham Praise (The Haven Quartet)*

The Exodus – *Guide me, O that great Jehovah (Cerys Matthews)*

Into the Promised Land – *Angus Dei (Karl Jenkins, from The Armed Man – A Mass for Peace)*

The Judges – *I will follow (Martyn Joseph)*

The first Kings and the Temple – *Psalm 19 (Jess Ray)*

Two Kingdoms – *Dear Lord and Father (Nick & Anita Haigh)*

Destruction and Exile – *The waters of Babylon (Don McClean)*

Return and Restoration – *The ransomed of the Lord (Bread without cost)*

I hope you find this useful and would love to hear how you get on.

Rev Charlotte Gale

St Clare's at the Cathedral

February 2021

THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

Session 1 – Creation

Where to find it in the bible: **Genesis chapters 1 to 5**

Passage being studied: **Genesis 2: 4-25**

Leader's Notes

So this evening we are starting right at the beginning with Genesis chapters 1 -11, which is kind of like a prologue to the main story. You could argue that chapter 12 is where the story really gets going, and the first 11 chapters are really just a bit of background setting.

Chapters 1-11 of Genesis tell the story of how the world came into being and is, in a sense, an attempt to try and answer a whole load of questions about why the world is like it is. Think of a child asking endlessly why, why, why? Why don't we like snakes? Why do we have heartbreak in childbirth? Why are men so inclined to dominate women? Why does the land cause such toil and hardship? Why do we all speak different languages? These are just some of the questions, it seems to me, that Genesis chapters 1 -11, is trying to answer.

Looking at the first 5 chapters, which is our focus this evening, the stories in it aren't unique to the bible. If you look at other writings from the same time in the same part of the world, you find unmistakable similarities. There are other stories of cosmic matter and primaevial chaos being transformed into matter (followed by the gods having a rest), there are stories of special life-giving trees, and of snakes. But while the bible stories are very similar to these other stories, and clearly come from the same sources, they are also unique. What makes them so different from all the others, is that they are monotheistic – there is one God, not a load of gods in some sort of cosmic competition with each other, but one God, and the one God in the bible, is the Creator; God speaks and creation happens.

So that brings us on to questions which are always useful to think about when we are looking at the bible; the what, the when and the why? What kind of writing is this? Why was it written and when was it written?

So what kind of writing is Genesis 1-5? Well most people agree that these early writings of Genesis are not historical but they are myth. A definition of myth that I really like is that: *Myths are stories that are based on tradition and which serve a profound purpose. They are sacred tales that explain the world and humanity's experience.* So myths are not factual, but they contain huge amounts of truth.

So when was it written? Well, that's quite tricky, as the stories in the Old Testament were no doubt being passed down from person to person long before anyone wrote them down. But it's thought that much of the Old Testament including this early part of Genesis was written down in a period of time called the exile, which we will get to in session 9. But the when explains the why. When the people of the Old Testament were threatened with annihilation, they started to write down their stories, to make sure they wouldn't forget who they were, and who their God was.

The first 5 chapters of Genesis contains four distinct sections. Chapter 1 is known as the hymn of creation, the 6 days and nights of creation, followed by God having a rest on day 7. Chapter 2 is another account of creation, focusing more on the creation of humans. Chapter 3 is the story of everything going wrong and attempts to explain why life is like it is, and chapters 4-5 tell of how humanity increased, and include the story of the first murder, Cain killing his brother Abel.

THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

Session 2 – Destruction and Recreation

Where to find it in the bible: **Genesis chapters 6 to 11**

Passage being studied: **Genesis 9: 8-17**

Leader's Notes

So last week we started right at the very beginning of the bible looking at the creation stories and the arrival of Adam and Eve. This evening we're looking at chapters 6-11, the second half of what is really a prologue to the rest of the Old Testament, and which contains one of the most well-known stories in the whole bible, Noah's Ark.

You might be wondering why in these first 2 sessions, we'll only have looked at 11 chapters of the bible, when later on there will be sessions covering great swathes of text spread over several books. Well it's because these first 11 chapters of Genesis and maybe especially the 6 chapters we're looking at this evening, set the pattern for the whole of the rest of the Old Testament. It's in these chapters that we first encounter the idea of Covenant, and begin to get a sense from God, of what we can expect from him. So what's in these 6 chapters? Well, last week we had the creation of humankind, starting with Adam and Eve, them leaving Eden and heading off into the wider world that God has created, and beginning to multiply as instructed.

Where we pick it up now, its sometime later, the population has increased, and God isn't happy. Something has gone wrong, these people he created in his image have turned out to be wicked, with only evil in their hearts. God is seriously fed up about this, and decides there's only one thing for it. He's going to destroy everything and start again. It's like an artist unhappy with their picture, so screwing up the piece of paper and starting afresh. Except that God doesn't follow through on his decision – not quite. He doesn't actually destroy everyone and everything. Because he decides to save Noah and his family, and a breeding pair of all the animals. Not so much total wipeout, as restoring the factory settings.

So we then have the story of Noah building his ark, of him his family and the animals going in, and then it raining for 40 days and 40 nights. The whole world floods and everything is destroyed. Eventually as the waters subside, the Ark comes to rest on a mountain, and when things have finally dried out, everyone leaves the Ark to start again.

We talked last week about how these early chapters of Genesis are 'myth', that is, *stories that are based on tradition and which serve a profound purpose. They are sacred tales that explain the world and humanity's experience.* So what are some of the things that this section of Genesis is attempting to answer. What are some of the why questions it answers?

Why are there rainbows? Why do we eat meat? Why do we hate Canaanites? Why do people speak different languages? But maybe the most profound question that the story of Noah in particular addresses is 'Will God destroy us?'

To really understand the importance of Noah's Ark, you need to go to near the end of the story of the Old Testament and think about how and when it written down. At the time that these stories, these ancient myths, were finally written down, God's people, the Israelites, who we will come to know in the following weeks, were in terrible trouble. Things, as we'll discover, go very very wrong, and they are in serious danger of being completely annihilated. They are clinging on to their distinct culture and religion and way of life by their fingertips. They mostly don't even live in Israel anymore. And so they write down a story that reminds them really powerfully that God has made them a promise, God has promised that they won't be wiped out, that however badly they behaved, despite of all they have done to get into this mess, they need to remember and believe that God has made a covenant with them. (*Covenant - an agreement, usually formal, between two or more persons to do or not do something specified*). A covenant that he will not wipe them out.

THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

Session 3 – Becoming God’s Chosen People

Where to find it in the bible: **Genesis chapters 12 to the end**

Passage being studied: **Genesis 15: 1-6**

Leader’s Notes

So this evening for me, is where the Old Testament really starts. The last couple of weeks is just a bit of a warm up really and this is where the story really gets going, as we settle down for an epic drama of one family, spanning 1500 years, and it all starts with one man – Abram. Out of nowhere it seems, God announces to some chap called Abram, probably already a nomad (so used to travelling around), that he is to pack up – him and all his household - and this time move to a land that God will show him. God then tells him that he is going to make him into a great nation and will bless him throughout the earth. Abram does as he is told and heads off (along with his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot as well as a load of other people and probably livestock) and head to the land of Canaan, in what is now modern Israel.

The rest of the book of Genesis is then the story of Abram and Sarai, whose names are changed to Abraham and Sarah, of their son Isaac and his wife Rebekah, of their son Jacob – who is also given the name Israel - and his wives Leah and Rachel, and of Jacob’s son Joseph and his eleven brothers. I read the whole thing this morning (apart from the lists of names) and I’d forgotten just what a good read it is. It’s a really gripping story, worthy of any modern-day soap opera. There’s a lot of humour, there’s manipulation and intrigue, there’s betrayal, there’s incest, there’s trickery, there are fights, there are reconciliations, there’s loyalty, there’s heartbreak, there’s love and there is faith. These stories would have been passed down from generation to generation in the oral tradition, so they needed to be memorable, and they are certainly that. It’s hard to pick a favourite moment, but Rachel pretending to have her period so she doesn’t have to get up, while she is sitting on a bag in which she has hidden the household gods that she stole, always makes me laugh out loud!

There are a lot of recurring themes that I spotted; if you read it and spotted others, let me know.

- The most important is the theme of God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants, which we see no less than eight times. God tells Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob, who then tells Joseph, that their descendants will be as numerous as stars or dust and those descendants will become a great nation.
- A theme that goes along with this, is names being changed. Abram and Sarai are renamed Abraham and Sarah, and Jacob is also given the name Israel.
- Barren women feature a lot. Sarah is barren until God blesses her in her old age with Isaac. Rebekah is barren until God blesses her with twins, Jacob and Esau, and Rachel is barren until she has Joseph and then Benjamin.
- There are several pairs of siblings – often at odds with each other. Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel.
- I’m not sure if this counts as a theme or not, but quite often, the behaviour of the characters is appalling, even by their own moral standards, but God sticks with them.
- And finally, God is present and active throughout the story, regularly speaking to them, and sometimes appearing to them as well.

Those are just the themes that jumped out to me, but there are plenty more.

The story begins with one man, Abram and his wife Sarai, who have no children, being called by God to travel to Canaan. It ends with twelve of their great-grandsons and all their families, ending up living in Egypt.

THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

Session 4 – The Exodus

Where to find it in the bible: **Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy**

Passage being studied: **Exodus 31: 18 – 32: 1-14**

Leader's Notes

So last week we really got started on the story of the Old Testament, as we met Abraham and Sarah and journeyed with them to Canaan, then with their son Isaac, their grandson Jacob and their twelve great grandsons including Joseph. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers (haven't we all been tempted to do that to our siblings at one time or another!) and ends up in Egypt, eventually working for the Pharaoh. The book of Genesis ends with the family all being reunited and Jacob (now known as Israel), Joseph and all the family settling in Egypt. Which wasn't quite the plan... they are supposed to be in Canaan, the land that God promised to Abraham.

And so this evening we fast forward about 400 years and discover that the Israelites, or the Hebrews as they are also called, are still in Egypt, but things are not going well. There are a lot of them, and so they are a threat to Pharaoh, so he has enslaved them, getting them to do hard labour, probably building pyramids.

The part of the story of the Old Testament that we're looking at this evening tells how the people get out of Egypt and how they then spend 40 years living in the desert. If last week was really the story of Abraham, then this week is all about Moses.

Moses is famously hidden in the bullrushes in the river Nile as a baby, as Pharaoh has ordered all Hebrew baby boys to be killed. He's found by Pharaoh's daughter, who adopts him, and so he grows up with all the privilege of an Egyptian Prince but is still very much a Hebrew and sees how his people are being oppressed. He ends up killing an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew, and is forced to flee for his life, ending up in Midian, where he gets married, has a son, and settles down to life as a shepherd.

Then one day, he stumbles upon a burning bush in the desert and has an extraordinary encounter with God, who tells him to go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go. Moses is not at all keen on this plan and keeps finding excuses not to do it. God sends his brother Aaron to help him and eventually the two of them head back to Egypt and there we have the story of the ten plagues of Egypt, culminating in the Passover, and the people escaping. Pharaoh gives chase and it seems that the Hebrews are trapped by the Red Sea, but God blows the water out of the way and they cross on dry land. When the Egyptian army try and follow, they are swept away and drowned. If you haven't seen it, then the animated film, 'The Prince of Egypt' is a really good retelling of this story.

This story of the Hebrews getting out of Egypt takes up the first 14 chapters of the book of Exodus. What happens next, the time spent in the desert, fills up the whole of the rest of Exodus, and the book of Leviticus, and the book of Numbers and the book of Deuteronomy. Almost four whole books.

So what are they doing for nearly four whole books of the bible? Well, they are moaning a lot. Almost within hours it seems of being free of Pharaoh they start moaning. *Oh no, this is so awful, there's no water and no food. We were better off in Egypt as slaves, at least we got fed there...*

God is pretty upset about the moaning, but mostly he responds by giving them what they need. Early on in the story we have two miraculous discoveries of water, and the provision of food in the form of manna and quail.

The somewhat reluctant Israelites, having left Egypt, make their way to Mount Sinai, and there they receive the law, starting with the ten commandments, handily written on two tablets of stone. The law is a bit like their constitution, telling them how they should live together as a community of God's people.

As well as the 10 commandments, God also gives Moses very precise instructions to build him a portable home, called a tabernacle, which is basically a very fancy tent. The book of Exodus concludes with them building the tabernacle and ordaining the first priests to serve in God's new house.

Then we get to the book of Leviticus, which is a challenging read to say the least, and the point where a lot of people give up, if they are just trying to read the bible from beginning to end. It's basically a whole lot of rules and rituals about the Tabernacle, and how the people should live, and needs handling with great care.

The book of Numbers then picks up the story after the Israelites leave Mount Sinai and start heading for the Promised Land and the book gets its name from two censuses that are taken of all the people.

I've already mentioned that one of things the people do a lot is moan, the other thing they do is blatantly disobey what God says, both with little things and big things. They are a stiff-necked people as Moses keeps telling God. They are constantly lacking in faith and questioning the authority of Moses and Aaron, and we see this time and again in both Exodus and Numbers.

Because of this God destroys a lot of them, and several times has to be talked out of destroying all of them. The Hebrews who had been slaves in Egypt make it to the borders of the Promised Land, but then they are too scared and too lacking in faith to enter the land. They just won't trust God. And so their punishment is that they spend 40 years wandering around in the desert. The generation of people who leave Egypt, including Moses, never get to enter the Promised Land. That is left to a new generation, which we get to next week.

Although the books themselves are ascribed to Moses, it's generally thought that these books were all written in the Babylonian Exile. They are hugely important because they set out what it means to be the people of Israel, what their defining characteristics are. The Exodus story tells of a past marked by hardship and escape, a binding covenant with God, who chooses Israel, and the establishment of the life of the community and the guidelines for sustaining it. It is a story which gives hope to a people who are once again in slavery and waiting for God to save them.

THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

Session 5 – Into the Promised Land

Where to find it in the bible: **Joshua**

Passage being studied: Joshua 24: 1-15

Leader's Notes

So last time we saw the Israelites miraculously escape from Egypt only to then spend the next 40 years wandering around in the desert moaning and struggling to really trust God. But now a new generation have grown up, who don't remember life as slaves in Egypt, and who are ready to enter the land that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses has promised them.

Moses is dead and his successor is Joshua, trained and ready for battle, and told by God to be strong and courageous. The book named for him (he's the first person to get a book of the bible named after him) is the story of the Israelites entering, conquering and settling in Canaan. It's a completely all or nothing kind of story. God will only give them the land, will only bless them if they trust him absolutely, and give him everything. Any doubt, any hesitation, any hedging your bets and its game over.

The people of Israel are made up of 12 tribes, each descending from and named after one of the twelve sons of Jacob, who was also called Israel. They work together to conquer the land, then each is assigned their own territory to live in.

The story begins with them miraculously crossing the river Jordan – God once again dries up the water for them. This miraculous river crossing is nothing like as well known as the crossing of the Red Sea, but there is something very tidy about the way these crossings top and tail this part of the story.

Next comes the much more famous battle of Jericho. The Israelites follow God's crazy sounding instructions to the letter, delivered to Joshua by what appears to be an angel, and after lots of marching round the city carrying the Ark of the Covenant and blowing of rams' horns, the walls collapse, and their victory is absolute. Every living thing is destroyed – people and livestock. The only exceptions are Rahab and her family, who are saved because Rahab had helped the spies sent from Israel to escape.

All the gold and silver and bronze is gathered up and essentially given to God. The one person who disobeys, hanging onto a fancy cloak and some silver and gold, is hunted down, stoned and burned, along with his family and his livestock. As I said, its an all or nothing kind of book. Dedicate yourself entirely to God and you will be blessed. Hesitate or step out of line and you will be destroyed.

This is the tone of the rest of the book as city after city is destroyed, the people are slaughtered and the Israelites take over. The land is then divvied up among the twelve tribes. The book concludes with the renewal of the Covenant. The same Covenant that God made with Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob, then Moses. I will be your God, and you will be my people.

Joshua lives to a ripe old age and is then buried in the Promised Land. The last few verses of the book read like the end of a fairy story, "and the Israelites lived happily ever after. The end".

THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

Session 6 – The First Rulers in Israel, the Judges

Where to find it in the bible: **Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel: 1-7**

Passage being studied: **Ruth 1-4**

Leader's Notes

So last week we looked at the book of Joshua and heard about how the Israelites miraculously crossed the river Jordan into the Promised Land, destroyed Jericho, then spread out across the land conquering city after city. Then at the end, land is given to each of the tribes to settle in. The final chapter of the book is Joshua doing a great inspirational speech, renewing his commitment to the Covenant, proclaiming that he and his household will serve the Lord, and encouraging everyone else to do the same. We said how it feels like the end of a great fantasy drama, with the baddies defeated and everyone finally settled and on the right path.

So surely it will all be plain sailing now. Surely the people have learned their lesson. They just need to serve God and not get tempted into worshipping foreign gods and all will be well. Pretty straightforward you'd think.

Or not. Last week we commented on how the Israelites would just go and worship a tree at the drop of a hat, and as we move into the next part of the story, it gets even worse. It seems that they are entirely and utterly incapable of staying away from those pesky foreign gods, and that is very bad news for them. A refrain we see time and again in the book of Judges, is that the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

The Israelites are now living in Canaan, but as separate tribes without one clear leader. The book of Judges is a series of stories of various characters who are called by God (usually following a conversation with the Angel of the Lord) to lead Israel for a time. They are called Judges. If they serve God, it goes well, if they don't it all goes horribly wrong. They are a very mixed bag of characters including a woman, Deborah, a young man from the weakest tribe, Gideon, and a total psychopath, Samson. There are some truly horrible stories of people being killed in any number of horrendous ways.

The era of the Judges ends with Samuel, who is the last and the best Judge and also a prophet, and who has two books of the bible named after him, even though he dies before the end of the first of them.

Through all of this murky, bloodthirsty part of Israel's story, a clear theme remains. The Israelites do not keep to their side of the Covenant, and this makes God very cross. But nonetheless God keeps giving them fresh opportunities to get it right.

THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

Session 7 – The First Kings and the Temple

Where to find it in the bible: **1 & 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles**

Passage being studied: **1 Samuel 8**

Leader's Notes

So, a quick recap of where we've got to so far. The Israelites have escaped from slavery in Egypt, spent 40 years led by Moses, wandering around in the wilderness. Then Joshua takes over and they move into Canaan and go around fighting and killing and conquering, then spend the next 500 years or so living in the land, ruled by a series of Judges, some of whom are god-fearing men (and one woman) and the others range from bad to downright evil.

And that's when we get to the beginning of the first book of Samuel, where we find a woman called Hannah, who thinks she is barren. God blesses her with a son, who she calls Samuel, and she is so thankful that as soon as he is old enough she dedicates him to God, and he goes to live with Eli, a priest. When he is still a boy, God calls Samuel in the night and speaks to him, and so Samuel grows up to be not just a great Judge but also a prophet.

So far, so good, but at the beginning of our story Samuel is getting old, and he appoints his sons to be Judges, but they were evil and corrupt and the people are frankly fed up with it, and fed up with being ruled by Judges. So they go to Samuel and say that they want to be like everyone else, like all the other nations around them, they want to have a King.

We will be looking in more detail in a bit about how that comes about, but for now, just to say, that God agrees, and so in due course a chap called Saul (who is described as an impressive young man, and very tall) is anointed as King.

Things go ok for a bit, but Saul is soon disobeying what God (via Samuel) has told him to do, and so God is not happy with him, and Samuel gives up on him and starts looking for a new King.

Which is when David enters the story. He is the youngest son of a man called Jesse, who is the grandson of Boaz and Ruth and Samuel is very surprised that God picks him, as he is so young. However, he is described as ruddy and handsome, and he does a fine turn on the lute. Samuel anoints him, but Saul is still the King.

King Saul first encounters David in the story of David and Goliath, when David takes out a giant Philistine soldier, using just a slingshot.

Saul keeps David close, but gets increasingly jealous of him. He's practically perfect in every way and everyone seems to adore him. David forms a deep friendship with Saul's oldest son, Jonathan, and Saul's daughter Mical falls in love with David and they get married. Saul can't take it, so tries to kill David, who runs away, devastated to be parted from Jonathan, but not so fussed about Mical.

David is then in exile, during which time Samuel dies, and David marries wife number two, Abigail. Saul meanwhile is gradually unravelling, gets injured in battle, and finally takes his own life, falling on his sword. That ends book 1 of Samuel.

Samuel 2 is mostly the story of David as King, David who everyone talks about as the greatest and most amazing King that Israel ever had. But he was far from perfect.

His treatment of women, in particular, leaves a lot to be desired. He was awful to Mical when they were reunited, and then he took a fancy to another man's wife, Bathsheba, had sex with her (it doesn't say what she thought about this) and then arranged for her husband to die on the battlefield.

God is outraged, and sends a prophet called Nathan to rebuke David, who is then properly repentant. His punishment is twofold. The son he has had with Bathsheba dies, and God tells David that he will never be the one to build a temple. The dream of Israel is to have a proper temple for the Ark of the Covenant to live in, and David had wanted to be the one to build it, but God says no.

The rest of the second book of Samuel is the story of David's reign. He eventually dies and his son Solomon (whose mother is Bathsheba) takes over. Despite all his flaws and questionable morals, David is considered to be the greatest King of Israel. Why? Well, unlike pretty much everyone else, the one thing he didn't do was disobey God. He stayed faithful to God and worshipped him his whole life. He is described as a man after God's own heart.

That brings us to the books of Chronicles and the reign of Solomon, who is renowned for his great wisdom, is hugely wealthy, gets a visit from the Queen of Sheba, has hordes of wives and concubines, and most importantly builds a huge and splendid temple in Jerusalem, the first temple. This is where God lives, and where the people come to worship.

Next time, we will hear how sadly, things begin to unravel again, but for now we'll stop and just be happy with the people of Israel for a moment, who have a wise and god-fearing King, they are in good standing with the nations around and about, and they finally have a permanent temple for God to dwell in – their wandering days are over.

THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

Session 8 – Two Kingdoms

Where to find it in the bible: **2 Kings & 2 Chronicles**

Passage being studied: **1 Kings 19: 1-18**

Leader's Notes

So in our last session, for a very short period around 1000 years before Christ was born, Israel seemed to have finally got things sorted. Kings David and then his son Solomon were not perfect, but they served God, they got Jerusalem set up as the capital city of the nation of Israel, and Solomon built a magnificent temple for the people to worship in, where the Ark of the Covenant lived.

The part of the story we are looking at this evening actually starts at chapter 12 of the first book of Kings, but to understand what happened, we need to look at the end of the reign of King Solomon.

It was all going so well. His reign was both peaceful and prosperous. But then Solomon got a bit too much of a taste for the good life, and probably enjoyed his power a bit much, so started acquiring foreign wives, something that again and again God warns the Israelites against. These women brought their foreign gods with them and we read in 1 Kings chapter 11 that 'his wives turned his heart after other gods and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been'. So once again, the leader of Israel is not fully committed to God, God is cross about it, and things begin to go wrong.

When Solomon dies, his son Rehoboam becomes King, but instead of lightening the heavy tax burden which Solomon's extravagances had forced on the people, Rehoboam decides to increase it. The ten tribes that live north of Jerusalem are so fed up about this that they decide to choose a different King (who is confusingly called Jeroboam) and separate from the two remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin who stick with Rehoboam. So now we have King Jeroboam in the north in the kingdom which is still called Israel, and King Rehoboam in the south in the kingdom which is now called Judah.

The southern kingdom of Judah includes Jerusalem and the temple. Jeroboam in the north doesn't want his people going to Jerusalem to worship, in case they're tempted to start following Rehoboam again, so, somewhat unbelievably he starts up worship of a golden calf in the north. This really is the beginning of the end for the northern kingdom of Israel, who drift further and further from God.

Most of the rest of the books of Kings and 2 Chronicles tells of the many kings that come and go in Israel and Judah, most of whom are not devoted to God, and it is quite hard to keep track of who is who.

But there are three people whose story does stand out in the middle of all this. They are the archvillains King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and the prophet Elijah. Ahab and Jezebel are remembered for just how wicked they are, and Elijah is remembered for his fiery zeal and courageous efforts in the service of God.

Jezebel is determined to destroy Elijah and the other prophets of God because they keep telling her how wicked she is. She subsidises a cult of heathen prophets who worship a god called Baal and there is an amazing story of Elijah having a huge show down with these false prophets, which results in them all being slaughtered. Jezebel is furious and is determined to kill him. An exhausted and depressed Elijah then turns to God in desperation, and that is the story we will be focusing on in more detail this evening.

Elijah recovers, and after Ahab's death, Elijah hands over to Elisha as prophet, and Elijah doesn't die, but is taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire, (which is where the phrase in both the famous poem by William Blake, and the film title comes from).

The rest of the book of Kings then tells of the rest of the Kings of Israel and Judah, there various ups and downs and then their eventual destruction, but that's a story for next time.

THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

Session 9 – Destruction and Exile

Where to find it in the bible: **2 Kings & 2 Chronicles, Daniel and Esther**

Passage being studied: **Psalm 137**

Leader's Notes

And so we come to the penultimate part of our story, and things really begin to unravel. From the end of Solomon's reign, Israel, and then the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah go through a series of ups and downs with more bad kings than good ones, and a general steady decline away from God.

The prophets try to warn them. The other main type of writing in the Old Testament are the books of the prophets, men who bravely speak God's words, and who try again and again to warn the people that if they don't turn back to God they will be destroyed. Occasionally they succeed. After a spell inside a whale avoiding God's instructions to go and tell the people of Nineveh to change their ways, the prophet Jonah is somewhat put out when everyone in the city repents and God doesn't destroy them.

But mostly their warnings fall on deaf ears and bit by bit the kingdoms lose their distinctiveness as worship of foreign gods and intermarrying with people of the nations around them becomes normal. The power of the kingdoms begins to wane, and eventually the northern kingdom of Israel is invaded by the mighty Assyrians and essentially destroyed. Judah hangs on for a bit longer until they too are invaded, this time by the Babylonians, who ransack Jerusalem, kill a lot of the people, and take the rest of them as captives to Babylon. They are there for 70 years.

It is likely that most of the stories that we have heard about over the last 8 sessions were written down during this time, as the people finally grasped the importance of their distinctive religion with one God, and made sure they wrote down all the stories, the laws and the traditions. There are also a couple of great books in the Old Testament set in Babylon during the exile. The book of Esther tells of a young Jewish woman, married off to the Babylonian king, who risks her own life to prevent a genocide of her people. The book of Daniel tells of how he and his friends again risk their lives by refusing to bow down and worship the king. God stops Daniel from being eaten in the lion's den, and his friends Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego don't die when they are thrown into a fiery furnace. The king is so amazed that he turns to God and employs Daniel as a trusted advisor.

But most of the writing about the exile is that of deep desolation. The book of laments, probably more than any other, tells of the absolute devastation of the people at all they have lost. Some of the psalms, including the one we'll be looking at this evening, are also despairing. But there are also glimmers of hope. New prophets begin to speak words of hope, there are promises of a return to Israel and the restoration of Jerusalem. But that's for the next generation. For no one taken into captivity will survive to return. 70 years is a biblical lifetime. A signal that for this generation, who so abandoned God, they will never return to their beloved promised land.

THE OLD TESTAMENT STORY

Session 10 – Return and Restoration

Where to find it in the bible: **Ezra, Nehemiah**

Passage being studied: **Nehemiah 2**

Leader's Notes

And so we have finally made it to our final session, the end of the Old Testament story, when the people finally get to return to the Promised Land and rebuild Jerusalem.

This story is found in two books of the bible, Ezra and Nehemiah. Interestingly, these are one book in the Hebrew bible, and no one is quite sure which story comes first. I'm going to go with the order they are in the Old Testament and start with the book of Ezra.

The Babylonian Empire has now been conquered by the mighty Persians, and its 70 years since Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews taken into exile. The story of Ezra begins with Cyrus, who is the King of Persia, who decides to 're-establish and restore the house of the Lord at Jerusalem'. A chap called Zerubbabel, who is a descendant of King David, then leads about 50,000 people from Persia back to Jerusalem. Cyrus is very helpful and gives them back the vessels of the temple and other provisions.

The book of Ezra focuses very much on getting the law and the temple up and running. They begin by celebrating an important festival, the Feast of Tabernacles, and building a new altar on the site of the destroyed temple. Then they get started on laying new foundations.

But they quickly run into trouble, as the people who are now living in Jerusalem and around offer to help, but when Zerubbabel refuses, saying they'd rather do it on their own, things get nasty, and work on the temple stops for six years while legal wrangling goes on among various kings and peoples.

Eventually King Darius (who is now King of Persia) digs out the original edict of King Cyrus giving the people permission to rebuild and work gets started again. When the new temple is finally finished, they all celebrate with the Passover. This gets us halfway through the book.

The second half of the book is then about Ezra, a priest, who the book is named for. He is chiefly concerned with making the temple beautiful and with making sure that the people are following the law. He is horrified to discover that the people who have returned from Persia, are once again intermarrying with the locals, and demands that everyone repent and that those men with foreign wives and children get rid of them. The people agree and there is a great deal of weeping and wailing and a determination to do better. That brings us to the end of the book of Ezra.

Then we have the book of Nehemiah, and this is mainly the story of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. This story starts in Persia, where Nehemiah is a cupbearer in the court of King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah hears reports of what a terrible state Jerusalem is in, and is really upset and spends several days fasting and praying about the situation, asking God to help him rebuild. He bravely takes up an opportunity to talk to the King about how upset he is, and the King encourages him to go to Jerusalem.

The local Canaanites are not best pleased to see him, so Nehemiah discretely gets on with surveying the ruined city, being careful not to stir up any trouble. He then gets everyone started on rebuilding the walls, focusing in particular on the 10 gates into the city. Each household works on the gate nearest to where they live. However, the Canaanites start to taunt them and make death threats against the leaders, so a guard is set up to keep people safe as they work. Nehemiah stays faithful and prayerful in the face of all sorts of challenges and eventually the walls are rebuilt, and they gain the respect of surrounding nations when they see the hand of God at work.

Once the walls are finished the people are encouraged to move back into the city. The story then sort of merges with the book of Ezra, who now appears again and the focus is on the spiritual renewal of the nation. The story ends with the people committing afresh to following God and his laws.

All this takes place roughly 500 years before Jesus is born.