

136 Emmanuel, God's presence is with us

This past 2½ years, I've had a growing sense of excitement as I've stopped seeing the Old Testament as a problem, and as God has turned that negative into a massive positive – it's been (it still is) a thrilling and faith-building journey.

The most recent helps that God has used in my life (but I realise that God might use others in your life) have been Boyd's *Cross Vision* [124–129] and Walton's *Lost World of Genesis One* [130–133]. Today's insight came courtesy of a sermon by John Walton that I found on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnPQgby8oKI>

Walton says that Genesis 1 pictures how God prepared the universe as a sort of temple in which his presence came to dwell, and so it became a place where God lived in close communion with humans. Heaven!

But, tempted by the evil powers, we made the mistake of wanting to “be like God” (Gen 3) and thus to order our lives around ourselves. God therefore gave us what we said we wanted – to control our own lives – and he withdrew his presence. And what happens when God withdraws his presence? Death happens. Hell happens.

Walton then opened up the story of Babel. From his knowledge of the religions of the Ancient Near East (ANE), he sees them as building the tower to reach up to God and bring God down, for his presence to dwell with them. Why? So that they could “make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11:4), *not* to exalt God's name. God knew it would end in tears, so he confused their languages.

But God *does* want – above all else – to establish his **presence** among the people of the whole earth. And Walton claims (and this is his other specialist subject) that **covenant**, in its various stages through history, is the long-term mechanism that God uses for setting up that relationship; it's the mechanism by which God reveals himself to humans.

So God says to Abraham, “Let's have a relationship” – note there's no mention of needing laws or rituals – and through Abraham, God wanted to bless, to have a relationship with, **all the people of the earth**. So God had to start by wooing Abraham away from his pagan, sacrifice-based ANE religion – a mammoth task!

Probably one of the best ways to give people a chance to change is to take them on a journey, so when Abraham was 75 (slightly older than me!), God asked him to leave Ur and travel to an unspecified promised land.

But that journey, in a sense, continued after Abraham's death. God still had a lot of teaching to do, and so God allowed circumstances to take Abraham's descendants into Egypt, into slavery. God then used those circumstances to teach his people to trust him – well, he tried!

Next, God helped his people to escape from Egypt – a massive learning experience for them! As if that wasn't enough, God then led them through the wilderness and established a covenant with them at Sinai. (Aside: Gosh, mustn't Moses have been incandescent when he came down with the tablets and found that the people had gone back to their old ANE worship ways!)

In Exodus 40, Moses is about to dedicate the tabernacle (not a temple yet). Moses tells the people just how **incredibly** significant this is – finally, God is going to come and bring his **presence** into the midst of his people, which was God’s plan all along.

Then throughout the subsequent history of the Jews, time and again they try to live by the ANE way, not God’s way. So, to bring them to their senses, God withdraws his presence and protection, and disaster befalls them; then they turn back to God, and God’s presence returns and they are rescued – but it was a constantly repeated cycle.

It’s true that the Old Testament writers talked about this as God ‘punishing’ his people, but if you look carefully at those texts, you will see how God inspired the writers to drop hints that the ‘punishment’ took the form of God simply withdrawing his presence and allowing sin to take its natural course (as Boyd points out).

Within that long dark story, we see shafts of sunlight, where God reveals something of his long-term plan. As it’s Advent, we can think of Isaiah’s prediction of the coming of Emmanuel – **God with us**. God’s **presence** was coming to dwell with us! And that was God’s plan all along.

All through this journey, the powers of evil were trying to encourage us in the direction of sin, in the direction of orienting our lives around ourselves. But God had a plan, an ultimate plan, a daring once-for-all plan – the **incarnation**.

When Jesus was a baby, the powers of hell sought to kill him, through Herod. But God’s time was not right, so God protected Jesus through Joseph’s responding to a dream, and taking Jesus – ironically – to Egypt!

Then when God’s time was right, the sin of the whole world was substituted onto the sinless Jesus, and the Father withdrew his protective presence, so Herod + Pilate + the chief priests, egged on by the powers of darkness, were finally able to kill Jesus.

In other words, the “wrath of God fell on Jesus”, where ‘wrath’ means the reluctant withdrawing of God’s protecting presence – hence Jesus’ cry of “Why have you forsaken me?!”

Walton’s sermon then takes us to Pentecost and here again we have God’s presence, this time dwelling **IN** his people! Note how Pentecost is the reverse of Babel, because people can all hear the declaration of God’s praises in many different languages at the same time. This was God’s plan all along.

Finally, Walton moves right to the very end of the Bible. In Revelation 21 and 22, there is no temple! It’s not needed because it’s all 100% God’s presence. And that was God’s plan all along!

As Walton jokes, when you get a sermon about the Old Testament, you have to go right through the whole Bible to see the full picture – it’s all of a piece!

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

Paul Bev. 14.12.20