

226 *A game of two halves? No, just one single goal!*

Ignoring the World Cup for a minute, God has only ever had **one single goal**: to have a place where God and humans can enjoy being together, doing things creative together, in love.^[225]

Two halves? Our Bibles are divided into two, but we need them both – they are complementary. We have ‘Old Testament’ and ‘New Testament’ but did you ever think why ‘testament’?! A better word is probably ‘covenant’:

‘Old Covenant’ – ‘New Covenant’

or better:

‘Old Covenants’ – ‘New Covenant’

because the OT tells us about a **number** of covenants that God has made with us (a covenant is a sort of ‘promise agreement’). Indeed, the OT even *includes* the new covenant – in prophetic form, of course – and Jesus came, as he said, ‘to fulfil the law and the prophets’, i.e. as the final fulfilment of all the old covenants, the fulfilment of all God’s teaching in those covenants.^[224]

A couple of years ago, I discovered a very helpful [sermon](#) by John Walton, where he explains how God used covenants, over the centuries, as teaching tools to gradually draw humans away from the view of God (or the gods) as held by the peoples of the ancient Near East – fickle and vengeful, not to be trusted. Starting with Abraham, God gradually moves us closer to knowing the real God, whom we then see in glorious technicolor in Jesus.

I was so impressed by the sermon, that I rehearsed the ideas in a couple of articles,^[135,136] and I’ve reproduced them below (slightly edited), in case you prefer to follow up these ideas as words on a page rather than the spoken words of a YouTube sermon. (Only two articles, but that was before I went to my regime of 500-word chunks, so it’s almost 2000 words, sorry.)

Alternatively, if you like cartoons, there’s the Bible Project, who offer a huge range of very clever and very succinct overviews of all sorts of Bible topics and Bible books. The one on the [covenants](#) is excellent. You read the text, and it gives you a 5 min video, but be warned, it’s an introductory video – there are eight in the series. Then again it’s that or 2000 words of mine or a very packed 19 min sermon!

Trust me, it’s a good investment.

(Today I kept it to 400 words!)

Paul Bev. 14.12.22

135 Purpose, problem and a 2000-year plan

My journey these past months – well, years now – can be summed up as seeing what God has been doing over the *huge span of time* that the Bible represents, and the *huge span and movement of human understanding and behaviour*. (Bit vague, sorry, but read on...)

The important principle I've picked up is that to understand and interpret the Old Testament, we have to start from an understanding of what God is **really** like, i.e. he's like Jesus: 'If you've seen me, you've seen the Father' – a God of unconditional love and inclusivity, but a God of holiness. I expressed this idea last time^[134] as 'Reading the Bible backwards', i.e. understanding the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament.

Secondly, we also need to understand that what the writers of the Old Testament **thought** God was like is sometimes very different from what God is **actually** like – Jesus demonstrates this in his references to the Old Testament.

John Walton's book, 'Genesis One'^[130–133] has been really helpful to me in seeing what creation is really all about (Gen 1–3), and another of his (much earlier) books¹ has recently helped me with the story of redemption – i.e. the remaining 1186 chapters of the Bible!

Given the kind of God we see in Jesus, I have some questions for you (+ some possible answers):

Purpose

- What does God want most of all? (To be in a loving relationship with the people of earth)
- Which people? (**All** people **throughout** the world)
- How can God achieve that? (Difficult!)

Problem

- What kind of people did God have to work with, around 2000 BC, when he started his plan? (Warring tribes, who thought that God was [the gods were] capricious and needed to be appeased.)

As Walton says, 'Israel in particular came from a milieu [ancient Near East] in which the gods were objects of **mistrust**.' (my bold)

Revision questions:

- Whom does God want to bless? (The whole world)
- So how is God going to bless these warring tribes? (Difficult!)
- To enter a relationship, what do you need most? (**Trust** – the opposite of the then current view)
- How does God build trust? (**Makes promises and keeps them!**)

Plan

So here's God's plan (in Walton's view, which I find compelling): Make promises (covenants) and keep them, regardless of how the other party (humans) treat you. God has kept the Noahic covenant, and not brought a universal flood, but the main part of the plan comes in four stages.

¹ 'Covenant – God's Purpose, God's Plan' (1994) – but I don't actually recommend you read it, as it's **very** heavy; I really struggled to understand it!

Stage 1: God looks for someone willing to **trust** him, and he finds Abraham and makes a covenant with him: *I'll make you the father of a great nation, and **through your offspring** I will bless the **whole of humankind**.*

2000 BC: **Abraham** sometimes trusted God but sometimes didn't keep his side of the covenant; nevertheless God kept his promises. (Indeed, the Abrahamic blessing is still available, in Jesus!)

Stage 2: God's people are in bondage, as slaves in Egypt, so God looks for someone to **trust** him and makes a covenant with him: *I will lead you and your people back to the promised land.*

1500 BC: **Moses** sometimes trusted God but sometimes didn't keep his side of the covenant; nevertheless God kept his promises and delivered Israel. (That deliverance is now the archetype of deliverance in Jesus.)

Stage 3: God's people are no longer trusting God to lead them. 'We want a king, like all the other nations!' So God says, 'It'll end in tears!' but acquiesces. They choose Saul, who turns out to be a 'bad king'TM. So God looks for someone who will **trust** him, and makes a covenant with him: *For all time, there will be a king from your house and line.*

1000 BC: **David** sometimes trusted God but sometimes didn't keep his side of the covenant; nevertheless God kept his promises and there is indeed a King for ever, from the house and line of David: Jesus.

Stage 4: God's people are in bondage – under Rome's iron hand – and looking for the promised Messiah. God **entrusts** Jesus to Mary's care, then Jesus lives a life of **trust** in his heavenly Father, and God makes a new covenant with his people: *through the death of Jesus, God himself will come to live in his people (extended to include Gentiles) by God's Holy Spirit of truth.*

2000+ AD: We sometimes trust God and sometimes don't keep our side of the covenant; nevertheless God keeps his promise and the Holy Spirit is with us for ever.

So, how do I (after Walton) now view the purpose and plan of God? Each covenant, in turn, has led the people of God further forwards, by revealing more of what God is **really** like, rather than what people at the time **thought** God was like.

No covenant was ever revoked; each built on the previous one; each showed us more of God; and then we get the final, full, new covenant where we see exactly what God is like – Jesus! Awesome!

So while the covenants ultimately lead to the means of salvation that is found only in Jesus, the **prime aim** of the covenants (according to Walton, anyway) is to reveal more about God, to give us a truer and truer picture, culminating in Jesus.

I hope you find this encouraging.

Paul Bev. 15.11.20

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. As God has turned that negative into a massive positive – it's been (and 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.

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 – that comes 500 years later!). Through Abraham, God wanted to bless and 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, anyway!

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 the 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 repeating cycle.

Aside: 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 – 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