



# DISCIPLESHIP ON THE MOVE

## The Context of the Story

Genres	Origins	Patriarchs
Nomads	Conquest	United Kingdom
Divided Kingdom	Fall of Israel	Fall of Judah
Exile in Babylon	Return	Intertestamental
NT Judaism	Roman Culture	Early Church

## Introduction

Hello Bridge family,

I've had conversations with many of you in the last six months. Conversations about faith and doubt, conversations about longings and losses, and conversations about the complexities of following Jesus in a busy world that feels more complicated every day.

Through those conversations, I've realized that many of you want to learn and keep going deeper in following Jesus and your understanding of the Bible. Still, schedules are crazy, and consistency in meeting for classes or small groups can often be a challenge.

That's why, for the rest of this year, we're going to bring some mini-teachings to you via email to help you understand scripture better.

If we want to know God and follow God well in the world, we need to know his story, and know his Word, and practice appropriately applying his word to our lives.

So, for the rest of the year, you're going to get one email from me each week. I'll keep it brief, I promise! The e-mails are going to be organized into three parts:

- Reading the Big Story of the Bible: In this section we will explore the important story arcs of God's relationship to humanity through scripture.

## The Big Story



- Reading the History of the Bible: In this section we will focus on what was happening historically through scripture to help us understand different books of the Bible in their context.

## The Context of the Story

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- Reading the Bible Alongside Your Life: In this section, we will explore the kinds of questions we need to ask of the scripture text, it's context, and the context we find ourselves in if we are going to faithfully interpret and apply the Bible to our lives.

## Applying the Story



So, I hope you join me for this journey. If, as you are reading, you have any questions that arise, or want to go deeper, please feel free to reach out to me. I am deeply passionate about helping our church learn about God and explore his Word and then live it out in wholehearted ways in the world – for the glory of God and the good of his creation.

With joyful expectation for the journey,

Pastor Sara Gregory

# Genres

Imagine you sit down to read, and there are six different books in front of you:

1. Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" - a book of poems
2. Snow White and the Seven Dwarves
3. A copy of the U.S. Constitution
4. An 8th grade biology textbook
5. A book about WWII
6. A biography of Martin Luther King Jr.

Since the goal of each of the authors of these books is different, when you sit down to read them, you will have different expectations of what you should take away from each of these books. You would bring different sets of questions to each of those books.

You will not, for example, read "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman and expect to find a set of instructions for how to grow the perfect grass in your yard. Nor will you read Snow White and the Seven Dwarves looking for information about a retelling of an historical event.

Similarly, when we read scripture, understanding the genre of the books we are reading is essential to understanding what we are to take away from it.

If you have never taken time to consider the genres of different books of the Bible, I'd encourage you to spend a few moments reviewing this PDF chart. Some books of the Bible contain multiple genres (like Daniel, which has both narrative and apocalyptic genres within it). Some books of the Bible are disputed on what genre they were intended to be (like Jonah, which some would argue was intended as a prophetic allegory and some would argue is historical narrative).

All of these genres are the word of God. However, the way in which they are the word of God is different for every genre. Psalms is the word of God in a different way than Mark which is a different way than Romans. Reading the books of the Bible mindful of the genre they were intended to be read in will help you read the Bible in ways that honor scripture better- by asking the questions that each author was intending to answer.

Historical Narrative	Law	Wisdom	Poetry	Prophecy	Epistle	Gospel	Apocalyptic
						(sub-group of narrative)	(sub-group of prophecy)
Purpose	Purpose	Purpose	Purpose	Purpose	Purpose	Purpose	Purpose
To describe historical events. Usually to highlight the faithfulness of God and/or the fallen nature of humanity.	To instruct God's people in specific actions for how to live in a way that helps them love God and love their neighbor.	To pass down the collected wisdom of generations of godly people.	To express the emotions and experiences of individuals and groups of people using expressive language and metaphors.	To reveal God's intentions to his people. Prophetic interpretation is often layered-carrying a message to its original audience, and sometimes also to a future audience.	A letter written to instruct a particular person or group of people.	To describe the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and its meaning.	To "unveil" what is and what is to come. This genre uses intentionally extreme metaphors to describe reality in the present and future.
Books	Books	Books	Books	Books	Books	Books	Books
Genesis	Exodus	Job	Job	Isaiah	Romans	Matthew	Daniel
Exodus	Leviticus	Proverbs	Psalms	Jeremiah	1 & 2 Corinthians	Mark	Revelation
Numbers	Numbers	Ecclesiastes	Song of Solomon	Ezekiel	Galatians	Luke	
Joshua	Deuteronomy	Song of Solomon	Lamentations	Daniel	Ephesians	John	
Judges				Hosea	Philippians		
Ruth				Joel	Colossians		
1 & 2 Samuel				Amos	1 & 2 Thessalonians		
1 & 2 Kings				Obadiah	1 & 2 Timothy		
1 & 2 Chronicles				Jonah	Titus		
Ezra, Nehemiah				Micah	Philemon		
Daniel, Esther				Nahum	Hebrews		
Isaiah, Jeremiah				Habakkuk	James		
Ezekiel				Zephaniah	1 & 2 Peter		
Jonah				Haggai	1, 2, & 3 John		
Haggai				Zechariah	Jude		
Acts				Malachi	Revelation		

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What is your favorite genre of writing to read?
2. Have you ever thought about genre when reading scripture?
3. Read the first chapter or two of Ecclesiastes. How might genre help you think about appropriate interpretation of these passages?
4. Revelation and Daniel have parts that are called “apocalyptic” literature. After reading the description of what apocalyptic literature is supposed to do, what questions do you have about interpreting these challenging passages?
5. How might thinking about genre change how you approach reading or applying scripture in general?

# Origins

**Where to find this part of the story:** Genesis 1-11

We all have stories that help us understand why things are the way that they are.

Perhaps in your family, you have heard of your ancestors trip to America, and their decision to work with their hands and work with the land to become farmers. This explains why your family so values hard work now.

Or perhaps, you've heard stories about your parents or grandparents who fought in wars to protect your freedom. Their sacrifice explains why your family now proudly flies a flag and stands for the national anthem.

Or perhaps, you've heard stories about the ways that your parents worked double shifts and went without food so that you could have a better life. That explains why there is so much pressure on you now to succeed.

The origin stories we tell help us make sense of the world we are living in now.

Genesis 1-11 provides the origin story for all of humanity. It helps us understand why things are the way that they are.

We learn about how God created, and how humanity rebelled. We learn about humans' resistance to care for each other in the story of Cain and Abel. We learn about the flood- God's justice and God's mercy. We learn about humanity's pride, and the creation of many languages at the Tower of Babel.

All of these stories provide the background for the rest of the narrative. They help us understand why things are the way that they are.

If you want to learn more about the contents of Genesis 1-11, check out this video from the Bible Project.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQI72THyO5I&t=99s>

If you're looking for a new song to worship along to, check out one of my new favorites: "Springtime" by Chris Renzema

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYdkqhnGviE>

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What “origin stories” does your family have? (i.e. what stories do you tell to help explain who you are together)
2. How have you heard the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and the Tower of Babel taught? What were the lessons you were supposed to learn?
3. How do those stories set up the “why things are the way they are” for the rest of the Bible?
4. What other questions arise for you out of the stories listed above?
5. What is one question you could dig deeper into this week to seek out an answer to?
6. What do you do when you have questions about scripture?

# Patriarchs

## Where to find this part of the story: Genesis 12-50

After the origin narratives in Genesis 1-11, we hear all about God's covenant with a family in Israel. The stories that follow in Genesis 12-50 focus on the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's 12 sons - who are often referred to as the "patriarchs."

This part of the biblical narrative happens *before* Israel knows very much about God. They have not been given the law. So they have not been taught much about who God is, or how they are supposed to represent him through their actions.

So it is maybe not surprising then that it is in these chapters we come across some of the most problematic stories about the treatment of women in scripture:

Abraham willingly handed over Sarah to foreign kings (Gen. 20:2)

Abraham's used Hagar to have a child and then Sarah mistreats her (Gen. 16)

Lot, Abraham's brother, offers up his daughters to be raped (Gen. 19)

Jacob is married to two women at the same time and gives one preferential treatment (Gen 29).

We should not try to excuse away the problematic nature of the action of the Bible patriarchs. Instead, when we read scripture, we should carefully note that some of the actions of these patriarchs (and other biblical leaders) are not representative of the desires or the character of God.

In many cases, God scolds and punishes the patriarchs for their actions that harm women. And God in many cases honors the women who have been dishonored by those around them.

It's important that as we read these stories we practice being nuanced in how we understand and speak about the things that are *recorded* in scripture and the things that God *desired*. Otherwise, we can end up attributing things to God that go against his character.

## Action step:

- It's been a couple of weeks since we had an action step, but writing this reflection this week made me stop and pause to think about the many stories of women around the world who have experienced abuse, sexual exploitation, and unfair treatment: both outside the Church and within it. I'd invite you to listen to this song of lament, and pray for these women- that the Holy Spirit would bring rescue, justice, and healing.

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Where do you see the love and kindness of God in the story of the patriarchs?
2. Where do you see things that bother you in the story of the patriarchs?
3. When something bothers you in scripture, what do you typically do with it?
4. What do you think of the idea that there is a difference between what is “recorded in scripture and the things that God desired?” How would you distinguish between those things?
5. Why do you think we tend to gloss over things that are uncomfortable when we read scripture?

# Nomads

**Where to find this part of the story:** Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, & Deuteronomy

After the time of the Patriarchs, the Israelites ended up enslaved in Egypt. After God rescued them out of slavery, the Israelites wandered the desert for 40 years before they settled in the Promised Land.

During that time, the Israelites began to practice observing the laws that God gave to Moses, and they started engaging in their first structured form of worship at the tabernacle.

The word tabernacle is the English translation of the Hebrew word, “mishkān” which means “dwelling place.” This dwelling place of God was intentionally moveable- indicating to the people that the God they worshiped, YHWH, was God of the whole world- not just one place or nation.

This tabernacle was set up with physical reminders of spiritual realities.

There was an altar where sacrifices were made by priests to atone for the sins of the people. There was a wash bowl for priests to wash their hands to be made ceremonially clean before coming into the presence of a holy God. There was a lampstand, incense, and a table with “the bread of the Presence” (Ex. 25:30). Inside the Holy of Holies, where the Lord’s presence was said to dwell, was a copy of the law, manna, and a staff that Aaron had carried. All of these were reminders of God’s faithfulness to his people, and were reminders of how the Israelites were called to keep watch and honor the place where the Lord’s presence dwells.

Later, many of these elements continued to be found in the permanent worship structure- the temple- that was first built by King Solomon.

A lot of space in Scripture is given to describing the exact dimensions and contents of the tabernacle, and even more space is given to describe the way that the priests and the people of Israel are supposed to worship a holy God.

## Action step:

- If it has been awhile since you have considered and meditated on the holiness of God in a posture of worship, I would invite you today to take a few minutes to meditate on God’s holiness. Perhaps use the song, “Holy, Holy, Holy” linked below to usher you into worship.
- Similar to the tabernacle, we can also use physical reminders to remind us of spiritual realities. Find an object that you can place in plain sight this week that reminds you of the faithfulness and/or holiness of God.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgHrNNM23p8>

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. How were you taught about the holiness of God?
2. What practices or concepts help you focus on the holiness of God?
3. What significance does it hold that God was mobile in the tabernacle and not confined to one location?
4. The practice of worship was significantly different in the Old Testament than it is in our churches today. Are there things you think we miss out on by how we practice worship in our current context?
5. How might we continue to grow in our worship of God?

# Conquest

**Where to find this part of the story:** Joshua

After the Israelites wandered the desert for 40 years, God told them to go and take the Promised Land. While this book has some popular verses such as God's words to Joshua...

"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1: 9)...

It also raises some of the most challenging theological questions of the entire Bible.

Does God not just allow, but perpetuate and command violence against other humans?

If God is love, and God loves *everyone* he created, why would he command the killing of the Canaanites?

Haven't these passages been used to justify wars and violence against the people that Christians deem their enemies at different points in history?

These and many more questions start rising to the surface upon a close and thoughtful read of the book of Joshua.

If these, or other passages have created tension for you as you read the Bible, you're not alone. God can handle your questions.

God can handle your frustration, your anger, your confusion, and your wrestling.

If you want to dig deeper into some of the specific questions raised by the conquest of the Canaanites, I'd invite you to read this article from the Bible Project.

<https://bibleproject.com/blog/judgement-cruelty-conquering-promised-land/>

If you want to process more personally some of your questions, wrestlings, or wonderings about scripture, feel free to e-mail me, and I'll buy you a cup of coffee. (saragregory@meredithdrive.org)

If you want a worship song to sit in as you wrestle, this song ("Looking for a Savior" by United Pursuit) gave me some peace and grounding during a time of spiritual wrestling I had a few years back. I hope it brings you some stabilization as you wrestle as well.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4YhvfN4\\_Vk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4YhvfN4_Vk)

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Have you ever considered the questions that were raised about the Joshua story in this devotion?
2. Do they create some tension for you? Or have you found ways to have peace with some answer to these questions?
3. How would you interact with someone who was asking questions like this of a passage of scripture?
4. Can we question scripture and continue to be faithful to God?
5. As you wrestle with hard questions in scripture, what truths or realities about God help stabilize you?

# United Kingdom

**Where to find this part of the story:** 1-2 Samuel, & the many of the Psalms

After Israel obtained the land God had promised them, they had a period of time where they were ruled by judges. These leaders made decisions on behalf of the people, but they were not a traditional ruler or king. YHWH set up their leadership structure this way so that the people would remember that God alone was their true leader- not any human being.

After a few hundred years, however, the people started questioning this leadership structure. They wanted a king like the nations around them had. Though God warned them against this decision (see 1 Samuel 8), the people begged, and God gave them their first king- Saul.

After Saul, God appointed David as king. King David was able, for the first time, to bring some kind of unity to the nation of Israel. He set up Jerusalem as the capitol, placed the tabernacle there, and created a governing structure that brought the 12 tribes of Israel together under his rule. Scripture depicts the time of King David and the early reign of his son and successor, King Solomon as sort of the 'golden' age of Israel. Scholars called this period the time of the "United Kingdom."

It was during the reign of King Solomon that the first permanent house of worship was built. The nation of Israel moved from worshipping in a moveable tabernacle, to an immovable temple. It is in the time of David and Solomon that Jerusalem was deemed the one true place to worship YHWH.

For a few generations there was (at least the appearance of) stability, fidelity to YHWH, and the flourishing that God had promised to his people. It is from this period of blessing, triumph, and victory that we get some of our most beautiful praise Psalms- penned by King David.

## **Action steps:**

- Spend some time in the Psalms this week- dwelling on the goodness of God. If you need a starting point, Psalm 116 is one of my favorites.
- If you're someone who worships best with music, the artist Shane and Shane created an album based entirely on Psalms. You can listen to one of my favorites below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOzf0VrDNGU>

## **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Have you ever pursued something that you know probably wouldn't be good for you? What happened?

2. Do you think having a king ended up being a good thing for Israel?
3. What makes a good leader of God's people?
4. David is often talked about as "a man after God's own heart." What qualities do you think earned him that designation?
5. How do leadership models/ government models in the Old Testament relate to leadership or government models in our current context? How would we apply principles faithfully to our current context?

# Divided Kingdom

**Where to find this part of the story:** 1 Kings 12 - 2 Kings 24, all of the Old Testament prophets

For about 120 years, the 12 tribes of Israel continued to be united under one king and the nation of Israel flourished. However, after Solomon's death, the time of relative peace and unity ended.

After his death Solomon's son, Rehoboam, became king. He was a cruel and unjust leader. Though Solomon had already started to force harsh labor on the people, Rehoboam made it worse. So, the Israelites rebelled against him and crowned a different king to rule over the 10 northern tribes named Jeroboam. Rehoboam continued to rule over the 2 tribes in the south.



After this point in history, when Old Testament passages use the term "Israel" they are usually referring just to the 10 tribes in the north, and when they use the term "Judah" they are usually referring to the two tribes in the South. (This is an important thing to note especially when you are reading the prophets in the Old Testament. Usually, the prophet is speaking to *either* Israel *or* Judah—not both. It's helpful to find out which one is being addressed before you start reading.)

One of the big problems that arose as a result of this division was that the temple to worship YHWH was in Jerusalem, which was part of the southern tribes. Those who wanted to continue worshipping YHWH in the northern tribes decided to create different ways of worshipping God in places other than Jerusalem since they no longer had access to the temple.

While the initial intention of the northern tribes to continue worshipping YHWH was not entirely bad, their forms of worship quickly combined with idol worship and various practices that YHWH denounced.

Israel and Judah had both, again, started pursuing things that were not what God wanted, and so God set another plan in motion to bring them back.

### **Actions steps:**

- The people of God have had conflict and division for about as long as they've existed. The conflict and division we experience now is not something new, but it *is* something that we should actively work against. Spend some time praying this week for unity in the Body of Christ and for us to keep learning how to love each other well. If it's helpful, you can pray alongside this song: "By Our Love" by For King and Country.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOH6DNo67D0>

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What do you think it was like to try to focus on worshipping and following YHWH in a time when there was this much division amongst his people?
2. What types of things cause division among the people of God?
3. This division was obviously caused by some sinful ambition. Is all division amongst God's people caused by some kind of sin?
4. What kinds of things help us love others well and remain faithful to God in times of division and turmoil?

# The Fall of Israel

**Where to find this part of the story:** 2 Kings 17, Amos, Hosea, 2 Kings 1-16

As I mentioned last week, after the nation of Israel split in two, a lot of things started going downhill. Both Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south) had a string of leaders who wavered in their commitment to follow YHWH faithfully.

The north in particular, however, started intermingling their worship with other people groups who lived in the region and started to adopt some of their practices. They built temples for YHWH, but placed statues of other gods in the temple alongside YHWH. They started practicing things like witchcraft and child sacrifice.

The Lord sent prophets like Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea to the northern kingdom to try to encourage the people to repent of their idolatry and their unjust treatment of their neighbors. He reminded them of his love and mercy if they would only change their ways and come back to the Lord. But the people refused.

So, the prophets record that the Lord allowed Israel to be overthrown by Assyria. The conquest was violent and total. Unlike Babylon (who later overthrows Judah), Assyria did not extend mercy or the offer of assimilation to those they conquered.

Stories like these, those where God allows violence and punishment for his people, are hard to read and even harder to understand. I'm not going to try to tackle all those theological questions here, but I think one of the bigger points of this portion of scripture is the reminder of the seriousness of idolatry.

Idolatry is sneaky these days, because we don't often build statues of idols and place them in a temple. But we all have things that compete with God for our love, fidelity, attention, and passion. Like the nation of Israel, we often need God to send messages to us to call us back and remind us to remain faithful to him alone.

## Action steps:

- Spend some time reflecting on what idols might be competing with God for your love, fidelity, attention and passion. If it's helpful, you can start by considering this list below.
  - Maintaining your reputation
  - Social media
  - Financial security
  - Political affiliation
  - A relationship

- An addiction
- Maintaining your busy schedule
- Job success
- Other?
- Confess those things to God and ask for God to help you surrender those idols to him.
- Ask God to help you determine 1 action step that would help you release attachment to that idol this week.

**Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What factors do you think led the Israelites to be tempted towards idolatry?
2. What factors do you think lead the American church to be tempted towards idolatry?
3. What idols do you think we nationally tend to worship?
4. What factors lead you to be tempted towards idolatry?
5. What idols do you tend to worship?

## Fall of Judah

**Where to find this part of the story:** 2 Kings, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Isaiah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Micah, Nahum, Obadiah

What do we do when something we believe God has anointed and promised to protect falls?

That was the question that rattled the people in the southern kingdoms of Judah as they watched the city of Jerusalem and the very temple of YHWH fall into the hands of Babylon.

About 130 years after Israel fell to Assyria, Babylon invaded Jerusalem. The people of Jerusalem- place where God chose for his presence to dwell in a special way- so easily fell prey to the same sins that captured the North. The people of Jerusalem turned to idolatry and sought provision from places other than YHWH, and they also perpetuated injustice against the most vulnerable in their midst.

The chosen people of God were not impervious to corruption.

God, again, sent many prophets to warn the people and to try to draw them back to following God's ways, but when they refused, God allowed punishment to come.

The Babylonians invaded, destroyed the city, and carried off some of the best and strongest leaders from Israel into exile.

...

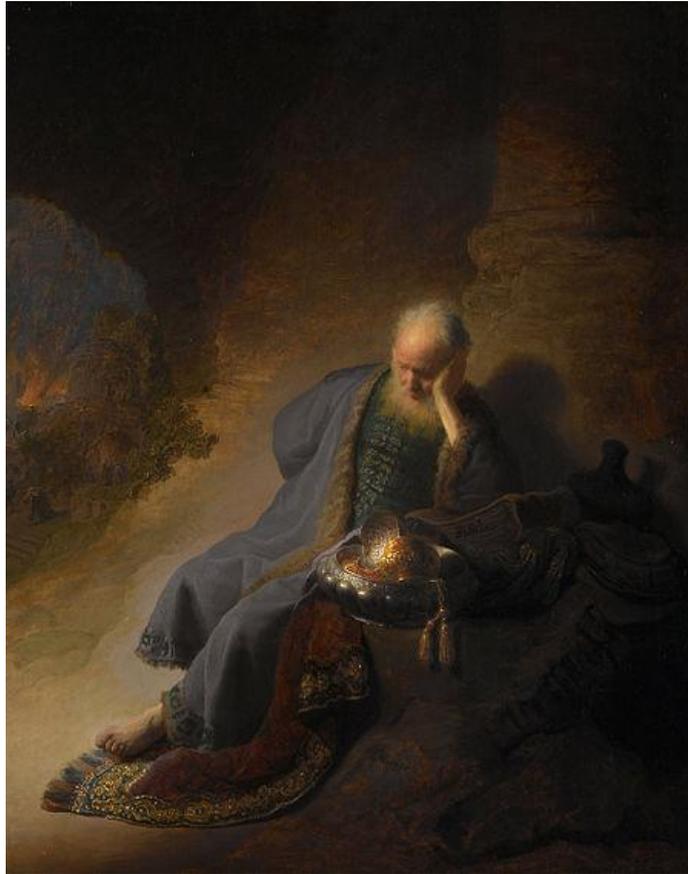
There are those in the Church today who believe we are living in a similar time to this part of the biblical narrative. Some believe that because of the church's idolatry and turning away from God, the church or the nation is experiencing God's punishment and potential destruction. Others believe that the Church's complicity in injustice and refusal to repent for the ways that they have mistreated the vulnerable is bringing God's punishment and a destruction of the current form of the Church.

I do not think it's possible to fully know if either or both of these scenarios are true. We see in part and we know in part, and all of our opinions about this matter are likely flawed.

But if it is true that there is something to be learned for our time in this part of the biblical narrative, we can glean wisdom from how the people of God responded. So the next 3 weeks, we are going to look at how, during their time in exile, God's people: lamented and repented, engaged with kindness and courage, and innovated.

**Action steps:**

- Below is a Rembrandt painting called, “Jeremiah lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem.” Spend some time with this painting. What emotions does it stir for you? What are you lamenting right now?



**Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What do you think it was like for Judah, the nation who believed they had God’s blessing, to be conquered?
2. What do you think stopped the people of Judah from listening to the prophets God sent?
3. How do you interpret the space that the current church in America is in? Do you see parallels to this biblical story? How?
4. How do we discern who the true prophets of our time are? How do we remain open to their words that call us back to God?

## Exile: Kindness and Courage

**Where to find this part of the story:** Daniel, Ezekiel, Esther, Jeremiah 29, Nehemiah

The Israelites who found themselves exiled in Babylon were probably shell-shocked for a number of reasons.

- They had experienced trauma.
- The God that they thought would always protect them allowed them to experience that trauma.
- They were now in a land where the things that they had always been instructed to avoid surrounded them constantly.

Thus...

Their emotions had been shaken up.

Their theology had been shaken up.

And they had to figure out what faithfulness looked like in an entirely new context.

Daniel, Esther, and Nehemiah are three figures that we get to observe from this period in time.

All of them interact with kindness and respect to the leaders and the culture that they are in, but all of them also courageously and creatively engage the leadership they are under in order to be faithful to YHWH.

Daniel, early in the exile, was instructed to eat food that had previously been designated unclean by YHWH. Rather than either adamantly refusing to eat the food or unquestioningly doing as he was told, Daniel suggested a third way that helped him both love and care for his neighbors *and* be faithful to God's commands. If you're not familiar with the story, check it out in Daniel 1.

Esther, later in exile (after Persia overthrew Babylon), found herself in a position to advocate on behalf of God's people. Rather than either staying silent or manipulating the king to get her desired outcome, Esther humbly asked for the king's intervention on behalf of her people. She was able to do this effectively because of how she had patiently built a relationship and trust with the King before this moment came.

Nehemiah, towards the end of Israel's exile, had rose to the position of cupbearer of the king. He, similarly to Esther, had honored the leaders he was under in exile to the point that he had earned this position that required deep trust. When he then heard about the state of the temple in Jerusalem, he was in a position to ask for the king's blessing to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. Rather than remaining apathetic or harboring cynicism and bitterness towards Babylonians and Persians, Nehemiah honored them and established trust that God then moved through to restore his people.

All of these people worked to remain faithful to God, while actively loving their neighbors- even in exile. To do so, they had to be creative, kind, and courageous.

**Action steps:**

- Reflect on the questions below.
- In what ways do you feel like you are living in exile?
- How is God calling you to be kind?
- How is God calling you to be creative?
- How is God calling you to be courageous?

**Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. In what ways do you feel like you are living in exile?
2. Which one of the characters in exile do you resonate with the most? (Daniel, Ruth, Nehemiah)  
Why?
3. How is God calling you to be kind in your context?
4. How is God calling you to be creative in your context?
5. How is God calling you to be courageous in your context?

## Exile: Innovate

**Where to find this part of the story:** Daniel, Ezekiel, Esther, Jeremiah 29, Nehemiah

Last week, we talked a little bit about how the Jewish exiles in Babylon responded to the culture around them with kindness and courage. This week, we're going to look at how the Jewish people creatively engaged their relationship with YHWH while they were in exile.

If you'll remember, YHWH had asked the people to keep covenant with him and worship him by doing a number of things. First, they were to keep the law in the Torah which included purity codes and instructions for keeping Holy Days as well as other morality based laws. Second, YHWH had instructed the people to worship only at the temple in Jerusalem through priests who made ritual sacrifices on behalf of the people.

As you can imagine, being in exile, in a new culture, under the authority of Babylonian rulers complicated their ability to do any of these things the way they had always done them.

So, the people of God had to get creative. Many scholars believe that this period of time is what led to the formation of the synagogue worship structure that Jewish people use for worship today. Forms of worship shifted, the way they kept holy days looked different, and their ability to follow every law looked different than it had in Jerusalem. The Jewish people found a way to cling tightly to what was essential about their worship of their God, but get creative in how they lived out their faith in a new context.

The church today similarly finds itself in a new context. As Scott Cormode, the senior leadership fellow at Fuller Theological Seminary, puts it:

"The church as we know it is calibrated for a world that no longer exists."

The world around us is changing fast, and part of our role is to acknowledge that reality and work to *faithfully* adapt so that the world we are in right now might know Jesus.

### Action steps:

- If thinking about faithful adaptation in the church is interesting to you, I'd strongly recommend this interview with Scott Cormode  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRFdmWojm8A&t=51s>
- Cormode also has a book out called, "The Innovative Church: How Leaders and their Congregants can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World."

- Pray for faithful, creative, and effective adaptation in our church as you worship to “New Wine” by Hillsong.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbJaM\\_EneMw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbJaM_EneMw)

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What do you think was hard about innovating how they worshiped for the Israelites in exile?
2. What is hard for us as we think about innovating how we worship, evangelize, and love the world around us?
3. As we innovate, what values do we need to hold on to?
4. As we innovate, what things can we let go of?
5. In our congregation, where do you see places that we could adapt better to the world around us (while holding onto our core values) so that more people might know Jesus? \*If you come up with some ideas, please pass them along to our pastoral staff! We would love to hear your ideas.\*

## Return from Exile

**Where to find this part of the story:** Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

After 70 years of learning to practice courage, kindness, and innovation in Babylon, the Lord prompted the Persian king, who conquered Babylon, to allow any Israelite who wanted to return to Israel.

As they returned, the people had to rebuild and restore the city. They had to rebuild homes, rebuild the temple, and repair the wall that surrounded the city to protect it from hostile neighbors.

Rebuilding and change are hard.

The rebuilding of the nation of Israel experienced opposition from outside the city and from within. There were those in surrounding nations that opposed the Israelites return to the area and actively worked to subvert their building project. There were those in the nation of Israel who remembered the way things used to be who complained and were disappointed about the change and the comparative simplicity of the new temple. But eventually, the temple and the wall around the city were rebuilt.

Immediately after that was finished, the people gathered to listen to the Book of the Law of God. They listened to the words written, and they listened to their leaders (the priests) explain and interpret the meaning of the word for their particular moment in time, and they let the law recalibrate their community (Nehemiah 8: 5-8). After hearing their leaders explain the law, they named particular pieces of the law that they and their ancestors had failed to keep, and they committed to behave differently going forward.

And then... they continued to follow the law imperfectly.

### Action Steps:

1. What have you had to reconstruct in your walk with God in the last decade? What parts of that have caused disappointment or grief for you?
2. Have you created space to listen to the Word of God as you reconstruct? If it has been a while since you have recalibrated yourself to the Word of God, a great place to start reading again would be the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 5-7 or Luke 6: 17-49)
3. Here's a (pretty unrelated) song I've been listening to on repeat this week.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qexh7DOtrsl>

Wait for the chorus: "I don't know the end, or tomorrow's story/  
But I have found the One who gives me rest.  
I will make my bed in his promises/ for He holds true when nothing's left."

### Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. As change happens, there is inevitably loss and grief. What are you grieving right now as change happens around you?
2. How do we keep creating space for grief and lament even as we lean into change?
3. Have you had to reconstruct any areas of your faith lately? What has helped you do that?
4. How do we cultivate gratitude for *what is* instead of getting stuck remembering *what was*?

## Intertestamental Period

So after the Israelites returned to Jerusalem, reestablished the temple, and tried to return to their normal life in Israel, there were a number of cultural and historical changes that happened.

First, though the Israelites perhaps hoped that their time of adapting to other cultures' influences ended when they left Babylon, it was not long after their return to Israel that Alexander the Great and his spread of Greek culture (Hellenization) entered the scene. The Israelites were again forced to rethink the practice of their faith, and how they could remain faithful to YHWH when the world around them was changing. Here are some of the things that happened during this time period:

- Though protestants typically refer to this time period as 400 years of silence from God, because there were no new prophets on the scene, it is during this period that many of the books the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox church accept as scripture were written.
- Synagogues were established in Israel.
- The common language of the people changed from Hebrew to Aramaic.
- The Old Testament was translated into Greek (called the Septuagint).
- The Maccabean Revolt happened (I'm not going to go into it here, but it's interesting. You could Google it if you're a nerd like me).
- Different sects of Judaism formed (we know this from the historian - Josephus):
  - The Essenes: A group of mystic Jews who left Jerusalem to live in the desert. They viewed themselves as purists and practiced asceticism. Many think John the Baptist was raised in this sect of Judaism.
  - The Zealots: A group of activist and sometimes violent Jews who encouraged the Jews to rebel against Roman occupation. It is possible that one of Jesus' disciples- Simon the Zealot- was a member of this group (though some scholars disagree).
  - The Pharisees: A group of Jews who were committed to strict moralism and commitment to following the law- to the point that they added requirements to the law. Rabbinic tradition flows from this sect of Judaism.
  - The Sadducees: A group of Jews who tended to cooperate with the Roman Empire. They differed significantly in their theology from the Pharisees. Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife or bodily resurrection, and they had a looser interpretation of the Law.
- Around 32 BC, the Roman Empire started to grow and overthrow the reign of Alexander the Great. However, many of the cultural norms established in the Hellenistic period continue to be the backdrop to Jesus' life and the life of the early church.

So... next week we get to the part of history where Jesus enters the scene. But the historical and cultural scene that Jesus enters is significantly different from where the Old Testament story left off. The Spirit of God knew and planned for the perfect place in time and culture for the Messiah to arrive.

**Additional learning:** If you're a nerd like me, you can learn more about this time period with the video below!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IBfhgJNdIo&t=24s>

**Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What had you heard about this time period before you read?
2. Had you heard about these four sects of Judaism? Does that make you think differently about Judaism at the time of Jesus?
3. Do you see any similarities between those sects of Judaism and current "sects" of Christianity?
4. How do you see the Holy Spirit at work in this time period preparing the way for Jesus and his message?

## NT Judaism

It's helpful when we start reading the New Testament to just acknowledge that there are layers of meaning happening in every text that we likely do not understand. Even those of us who have been reading the Bible our whole lives and have been trained to understand context and scripture well are not going to read the text with the mindset and understanding of a first century Jewish person.

As a rabbi, Jesus was teaching his followers to understand the Torah and the God they pointed to. He often quoted and reinterpreted the stories and the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Jesus participated in the holidays and celebrations in the way that the Jewish people of his day participated in them. He kept sabbath (though not as rigorously as some would have liked him to). He celebrated Passover. He knew and prayed the Psalms. He fulfilled the Jewish law - rather than abolishing it completely (Matthew 5:17). Many of the names and roles that the New Testament attributes to Jesus (the son of Man, prophet, priest, king, etc.) have a long standing history of interpretation in Jewish culture.

As we read and apply the gospel stories, we must keep reminding ourselves to keep situating the stories not in our 21st century American context, but in the context of the Jewish people in the first century. Referencing commentaries and studying the Old Testament can help us do that, but more than anything, approaching the text humbly, realizing there are things we may not see perfectly clearly, is a posture that will help our reading of the stories.

### Action steps:

1. Read John 14: 1-4.
2. Learn: In Jewish culture, when a man got engaged, he would go, build a room onto his father's house for his fiancée. When the room was ready, he would go get his fiancée, marry her, and bring her back to that new room in his father's house.
3. Re-read John 14: 1-4 and consider what new depth, nuance, and meaning that knowledge brings to the understanding of this passage.
4. If this topic is interesting to you, check out some of the writings of Jewish New Testament scholar- Amy Jill Levine.

### Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Read John 14: 1-4.
2. Learn: In Jewish culture, when a man got engaged, he would go, build a room onto his father's house for his fiancée. When the room was ready, he would go get his fiancée, marry her, and bring her back to that new room in his father's house.

3. Re-read John 14: 1-4 and consider what new depth, nuance, and meaning that knowledge brings to the understanding of this passage.
4. How might you continue to learn about Jewish culture alongside your scripture reading?

## Roman Culture

Just as we need to understand the Jewish background of Jesus and his disciples, we also need to understand the prevailing culture at the time the New Testament was written to understand the full meaning of scripture.

There are a number of things it could be helpful to know about Roman culture at the time of Jesus, but here are some highlights that may help you have context for the gospels and the letters in the New Testament.

- The Roman Empire was intent upon building roads that made travel easier within cities and between cities. These roads encouraged the sharing of goods and services, but it also encouraged the sharing of ideologies and religions. The presence of these roads enabled the quicker spreading of the gospel, and the sharing of letters between churches in different parts of this region of the world.
- The Roman Empire's philosophy was a big proponent of "religious syncretism," which meant that they believed a lot of religions could live alongside each other *as long as* everyone was willing to proclaim Caesar as Lord alongside whatever other gods they worshiped. Early Christians were always asking questions about which cultural practices it was ok for them to engage in, and which practices crossed the line into idol worship.
- There were many different schools of philosophy that permeated conversations in the Roman Empire and the apostles often were walking the fine line of using language that their contemporaries would be familiar with, while differentiating Christian theology from the different philosophies of their day: like Stoicism and Epicureanism.
- One of the Christian heresies that was perpetuated by the prevailing philosophies of the culture around them is called gnosticism. Gnosticism taught that there is a separation of the physical and the spiritual. It taught that the spiritual was inherently good, and the physical was inherently bad. It also taught that to receive true salvation, you needed to have a special, divine knowledge (or "gnosis") imparted to you, beyond the work of Christ.

As we read the gospels, and especially as we read the apostle's instructions to churches living under the Roman empire, it's helpful to remember that the writers of these books were probably responding to some cultural realities and some philosophical questions that are different than the context we live in today. Study bibles and commentaries are helpful tools to use to help us understand parts of the conversation that we may not intuitively understand on our own.

### **Action steps:**

1. One of the problems of gnosticism is that it ended up causing people to reject the idea that God (Jesus) came in a physical body. Spend some time reflecting on the reality that Jesus took on flesh and became like one of us. How does the humanity of Jesus impact your picture of God and your relationship with God?
2. Just as the early church and early apostles walked the line of relevance to culture and differentiation from culture, we are called to walk that line in the world now as well. Spend some time reflecting: What principles do you use to help you think about where to fully engage and where to differentiate?
3. It's been awhile since I studied this, and I need to brush up on the content. Most of the information I shared was refreshed for me by this article:

H. Carey Oakley, "The Greek and Roman Background of the New Testament," *Vox Evangelica* 1 (1962): 7-23.

This article is available in PDF format if you search for it on Google. If you're a nerd like me and want to learn more, there is a lot of helpful information there!

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Where do you see the practice of "religious syncretism" in our cultural context?
2. Where do you see versions of gnosticism in our culture?
3. The apostles both understood and differentiated themselves from their cultural context, but often used language that was familiar to their audience. How well do you think you understand the broader cultural context around you?
4. How do we as Christians both speak into our culture in ways that resonate with the world around us while differentiating ourselves from the culture?

# Early Church

**Where to find this part of the story:** Acts & the New Testament letters

If you were in church this past Sunday, you heard Carl Boersma preach on Acts- the stories of God's movement in and through the early church.

Often when we think of the early church, we are reminded of Acts 2: 42-47 and Acts 4: 32-37. In this part of the story, everyone is getting along. They are eating together. They are telling others about Jesus' resurrection. They are sharing what they have. They are growing in numbers. The Holy Spirit is moving in miraculous ways. It's beautiful.

And that is certainly a part of the early church's story, but as time went on, the early church faced a lot of big questions.

- Do Gentile converts to Christianity need to get circumcised and follow Jewish law?
- Are Christians allowed to eat meat sacrificed to idols?
- Is every Christian required to sell what they have and bring it all to the apostles' feet?
- If we are free and there is grace and forgiveness, does it matter how we live?

The apostles were trying to provide theological instruction and practical instruction to a bunch of new Christians via one letter to an entire community every year or two. They would receive word about what was happening in a given community and then write a response to that situation with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And Christians couldn't even sit down and study these letters because most Christians couldn't read. They would hear these letters read aloud by a messenger a few times in a large group of people.

Eventually the letters and the early church history were canonized as inspired scripture for the church in all times, but they started as the responses to a small community's theological questions and wonderings about how to faithfully follow God in their context.

Whenever I think about this time in the church, I think about how deep a dependence on the Holy Spirit these apostles and the followers of Jesus must have had. They did not have someone around them to immediately answer their questions. They did not have a fully formed theology, or a canonized scripture (other than Old Testament texts) to read. They just knew that Jesus had risen, and the Holy Spirit would show them the way.

## **Action steps:**

1. Read Acts 1-4 and then try to place yourself in the shoes of a believer in the early church.
  - a. What would seem most important to you about following Jesus?

- b. How would you learn about God? How would you primarily practice your faith?
2. What would it look like to be more aware of your dependence on the Holy Spirit in your day-to-day life?

**Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What do you think would have been the most exciting and the most challenging parts of being in the early church?
2. In what ways do you think we are called to be like the early church? Are there any ways that we are different?
3. How do we maintain passion and excitement about the fact that Jesus is risen?
4. How do we cultivate a deeper dependence on the Holy Spirit?
5. How do we cultivate a greater sense of boldness and expectation as we follow Jesus in the world around us?